

**Shki Kinoomaagozi - New Learning**  
**Re-Imagining Special Education For Indigenous Children**

by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

INDIGENOUS STUDIES

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **SHKI KINOOMAAGOZI - NEW LEARNING RE-IMAGINING SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR INDIGENOUS CHILDREN**

**Shelley Knott Fife**

This dissertation focuses on the special education of First Nation students in Ontario. The primary researcher is an Anishinaabekwe with decades of experience in special education. Taking an Indigenized qualitative research methodology drawing on the Two-Eyed Seeing Framework (TESF) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) exploring disability discourse, this study explores what ‘special education’ means in First Nations communities in Ontario and how special education can be reimagined to better meet First Nation children’s needs. Thirty-one research participants, all involved in the education of First Nation students in Ontario with special education needs, provide data that is referred to as researched stories. Organization of the research includes using the elements within a medicine wheel framework to guide the analysis of the literature review and the stories of the participants. Adherence to the 7 original Anishinaabe (Grandfather) teachings is the heart of this research. This research offers the realization that a Holistic Education System may be the most effective system.

**KEYWORDS:** First Nation Education, Special Education, Indigenous, Critical Discourse Analysis, Two-Eyed Seeing Framework, Special Needs, 7 Grandfather Teachings, Medicine Wheel

## Acknowledgements

I want to acknowledge this land of my ancestors that I am privileged to still call home. I acknowledge my peers I am humbled that I was be able to call on Elders, educators, parents, and students as they unguardedly trust me with their stories, opinions, and knowledge. My path in education involved passionate, committed individuals including unyielding and unheralded First Nation education professionals who tear down barriers and dare to reimagine. I am grateful to provide one venue for the collective voice of First Nation education, and our allies. I hope I have done that voice justice. I acknowledge my parents, sisters, extended family, and my dearest friends who assisted and allowed me to do what I needed to do. Chi miigwech n'dedam, my dad, for igniting in me the need to find out 'why us?' and 'what do we need to do?' since I was very small and for being steadfast in the directive of 'You're going to university'. Gdi'zaagan.

We said g'waabmin to our mom in 2020. I know how to care for children because of her. My childhood warmest memories are of our little three-room house, with no plumbing and just a woodstove for heat. I remember feeling safe, warm when that cold winter wind blew, and loved. And that house's heart was my mom's. Miigwech nmamaanh, Gdi'zaagan.

Chi miigwech to Dr. Nicole Bell who has paved the road to Indigenous Studies PhDs in medicine wheel colours. Chi miigwech to my PhD Advisory Committee, Dr. Barbara Wall, and Dr. Candace Brunette-Debassige. To Dr. Luigi Iannacci, chi miigwech for your diligence in keeping me on task and your deep understanding of this amazing field of education for which we share an equal passion.

My story in special education began when I became a mom so the greatest share of thanks, gchi miigwech, goes to D.J. and Jaime, who allowed me to, again, invade their privacy and let me share their stories. Any good I do, is only because of you both, Gdi' zaagan. All my relations.

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## **ACRONYMS AND DEFINITIONS**

- EA Education Assistant who provides support to a Classroom Teacher and often works one on one with students who have special education needs.
- IEP Individual Education Plan – Students in Ontario are required to have an IEP if their education program requires accommodations, modifications, alternative programming, and support services. It is a working document that schools develop for students with exceptionalities (EDU, 2024).
- IPRC Identification, Placement and Review Committee – the identification and placement of exceptional students is determined by this committee according to identified exceptionalities (EDU, 2024)
- ISP Intensive Support Program
- SEP Special education Program
- SERT Special education Resource Teacher – more recently known as the Special Education Teacher has a multitude of duties in a school related to special education but primarily monitors a student's progress using the IEP and assists in providing educational.

## CHAPTER 1

Boozhoo, Ngwaagan n'dizhnikaaz. Oshkigomong n'doonjibaa mii odi endaayan. Michi Saagig Anishnaabekwe n'daaw, mkwa ge migizi n'dodem.<sup>1</sup> In English, I am Shelley Knott Fife, of Curve Lake First Nation, where I am from and where I live. This dissertation is about Shki Kinoomaagozi, New Learning. Literally, it means she/he just learned this. While this could be the title of any dissertation or research paper, it is most appropriate here and defines the spirit of this study that is present as I explore what I see as new learning about special education for the children of First Nation communities in Ontario.

While references to Indigenous students and people are frequently used throughout this dissertation, the research focuses on First Nation students of Ontario, living on reserve in Anishinaabe, Cree, Oji-Cree and Haudenosaunee communities. For the purposes of this research, Indigenous refers to the original people of a land, and for Turtle Island, otherwise known as Canada. It encompasses those who are of First Nation, Inuit or Métis heritage. When points are specific to First Nations people throughout this study, First Nation will be the reference. Indigeneity, particularly through my voice as an Anishinaabekwe, a First Nation woman, is the primary footing of this study. Using an Indigenous qualitative research methodology, the aim is to begin by using the lens of theoretical frameworks such as the Two-Eyed Seeing Framework (TESF) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to understand how First Nation schools, administration and educators can not just Indigenize but can also decolonize western-based constructs or discourses about disability and subsequently, reconceptualize special education.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a traditional greeting in Anishinaabemowin where I've given my spirit name, Rainbow, where I am from (Curve Lake) and my clan(s), Eagle, and Bear.

My experience has revealed that funding tends to be central in many local, regional or national conversations regarding First Nation special education. While I heard about funding in participant responses, this study unveils issues specific to the experiences of First Nation children, administrators and educators of First Nation children, and of their families when it comes to special education programming. There are distressing consequences deeply rooted in colonialism emerging from the literature and the stories, that are often the result of the issue of inadequate funding, but wonderfully, the rewarding perseverance of Indigenous spirit also prevails and becomes apparent as well in this study.

With First Nation special education issues being so complex, based in historical factors and often distorted social and cultural understandings, the intention of this study is to provide a foundation that inspires change in the special education programs of First Nation students. A reconceptualization of special education will be more wholesome for the student. The focus of reconceptualization will be less medical in origin, culturally significant, responding to the understanding of our children as gifts and to First Nation and Indigenous worldviews.

### **Benefits of Research**

The intent of this research is to benefit the development of special education policy, practice, and pedagogy for Indigenous education communities at local, regional, and national levels. An additional benefit is to inform parents and caregivers of Indigenous children with special education needs with new information that will be helpful when advocating for their children in any education systems. There are also suggestions for changes suggested by the study participants in local First Nation special education policy. A guidebook on special education for First Nation students that sets out the best practices in special education program delivery might be developed.

This research reveals that reconceptualizing special education for First Nation students is possible and can lead to positive outcomes for First Nation students. Therefore, this research is

necessary to educate the colonial, scientific and western community to become more supportive of such positive intervention for change.

### **Mii o'nake gaa-zhi-maajtaamgak – This is How It Started**

There is more than one re-creation story in Anishinaabeg teachings. Embarking on this journey in First Nation special education research reminds me of this well-known version. The story includes Nanaboozho, the first 'original man'/Anishinaabe. While I have personally heard creation stories several times during various times of teachings, for now, I am referring to the version in "The Mishomis Book" (Benton-Benai, 1988), because it is a printed version and therefore can be and was meant to be shared readily. Mii o'nake gaa-zhi-maajtaamgak. Gchi Manitou decided to purify the earth with water in the form of a flood to wash away the darkness growing in peoples' hearts. No land could be seen at all. Nanaboozho found a floating log to rest on, and other surviving animals joined him on this log to figure out what to do after the flood. First Nanaboozho tried to dive deep enough to grab some earth to create new land but could not reach the bottom. Loon, mink, the otter, and even turtle all tried. The small voice of the muskrat (Wa-zhushk) said "I'll try". He dove and was gone so long that they thought that he did not make it but finally he floated to the top and within his paw was some earth. There was enough for Nanaboozho to put on the back of turtle who volunteered to bear the weight of this new land. The four winds blew the new earth until it became the size of what we now know as Turtle Island. Today, muskrats build their homes in the shape of little balls of earth.

This re-creation story brings many life lessons, and I provide it here as an introduction to the process of moving forward in a way that is founded in Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin, Indigenous Knowledge. Nelson (2008) explains Indigenous Knowledge, as those original instructions within diverse teachings shared in story, incorporating natural laws that could have natural consequences. Reciprocity is taught to us to allow us to live in relation with all of our seen and unseen relatives.

Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin is the term for Indigenous Knowledge in Anishinaabemowin or Ojibwe language. I use Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin and Indigenous Knowledge interchangeably in this dissertation. Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin is a deep foundation to this dissertation. In the spirit, of Shki Kinoomaagozi, the motivation for my research is the new learning, then the 're-creation' of special education as it relates to the education of Indigenous children, specifically First Nation children in Ontario. This research dives deep into understanding special education and how Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin in its varied forms, across varied Nations, can guide the pedagogy of students with special education needs. By reminding us of the attempts to acquire life-producing earth by the animals, this re-creation story gives one example of how First Nation teachings offer guidance in relational proceedings and respect for individual abilities. Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin through the use of story is used throughout the dissertation. The use of story is incorporated within the methodologies of the research which will be described in a subsequent chapter.

In the next section, I outline the research purpose and gaps that my study aims to address. Further, using the medicine wheel, I give a description of the theoretical framework, and an historical outline of the story of special education as it relates to First Nations students in Canada. I also share my life and professional work experiences as a way for me to bring an Indigenous, specifically Anishnaabe, lens to special education and question how it can be improved and informed by Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowins, including the teachings of Nanaboozho.

## **Rationale And Context**

Indigenous experiences in Canada are still not understood or appreciated by most of Canadians population. School boards and educators in Ontario have begun to incorporate knowledge of First Peoples of Canada into curriculum or learning events (Ontario, 2021-2024). However, after delivering many professional development presentations on the educational experiences of Indigenous students, I am staggered at the shocked expressions of disbelief on

listeners' faces. My opportunities to make these presentations over the last twenty years, have provided me with many teaching opportunities to educate audiences that were diverse in age, heritage and background. These teaching opportunities were primarily on the subject of Indigenous cultures, histories and perspectives. These audiences included capacity development for provincial school educators, clergy orientation, and various public interest groups. There is still a void in Settler Canadians'<sup>2</sup> understanding of the decades of despair experienced by Indigenous families and children and how a restoration of pride and self-worth of a people is essential to achieve a place of parity in any Canadian societal sector. There will be reference throughout this study, of examples of how First Nation people in Canada have been held at the starting gate of Canada's nation building with no acknowledgement of the contributions that we as First Nations can or have brought to this current place called Canada. I was born in 1960. I am the first generation of Status Indians or First Nations to be born as a 'Canadian' with voting rights, the ability to buy land or live as an 'Indian' off reserve. At 63, I am the first member of my own First Nation community to study in a PhD program. All of this speaks to the systemic discrimination and purposeful disadvantage that First Nation people have and continue to experience. I have been asked 'why do you not all just participate in Canadian society like the rest of us'? In response, if participation in colonial society was even a First Nation goal, my people have been held back from participating equally or fully in Canadian society.

In my role at Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) for fourteen years, I was the ISC representative on the First Nation Special Education Working Group, managed by the Chiefs of Ontario. Prior to the 2019 implementation of an Interim Funding Formula, this working group

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<sup>2</sup> Settler Canadian is used here according to Lowman's (1980) definition of settler society. A Settler society arises from shifts in identity, whereby people now identify with constructs of new land rather than a land of migration origins that is not Turtle Island. For example, an individual of Polish descent may not identify at all with ancestral Poland but totally as a Canadian.

gathered frequently to monitor the Ontario landscape in special education. The Working Group's advocacy for program and funding resulted in program policy changes such as budget increases and changes to service delivery constraints. Even with access to government systems, accurate and current data on special education student numbers is challenging to obtain. My research relied on information or data from First Nations.

Throughout my career in education, I have found that there is a common belief amongst school board personnel and some First Nation education personnel, that Indigenous children are disproportionately deficient in their academic abilities than non-Indigenous children. A provincial public-school board director told me several years ago, that "First Nation students came into board schools with a deficit". Those were his exact words. His remarks and the dominant discourse that informs them, moved me to do this research in special education regarding Indigenous students and to critically examine disability discourse and the cultural and social construct of disability. The impact of such assumptions has been felt by Indigenous Peoples of Canada. Research in special education and Indigenous communities, requires further examination, not only from the perspective of individuals with specific disabilities, but also Indigenous Peoples who have experienced dominant disability discourse.

Through my previous research at Purdue in the Master of Science in Education program and through my work over twenty-five years in the field of Indigenous education, I realized the deficiency in academic information about the education of First Nation students, particularly with respect to special education. Purdue University's Master of Science in Education program was specific to special education, and I came to understand that there was a gap in research on special education in the context of North American Indigenous students. At the time, in 2016-2017, I found very little research based on minority populations and none on Indigenous students alone (e.g. Artiles 2003, 2010; Bal, et al 0(2014; Khalifa, 2016). I wanted to be part of filling this gap in research

by understanding what exactly the experience of First Nation students in special education has been and what it could or should look like.

As an Education Specialist with Indigenous Services Canada (formerly Indian and Northern Affairs - INAC) from 2009 to 2023, I learned that millions of federal dollars get allocated directly to First Nation communities for special education of First Nation students on reserve in Ontario. Since 2016, each year the federal government has allocated at least \$46,000,000 (Nokiiwin, 2018) for the Ontario region High-Cost Special Education (HCSE) program. However, in any conversation I have had with and among First Nation education managers and directors, they maintain that this sum is questionable regarding sufficiency of funding for special education. The research does not examine the sufficiency of this funding or how these monies are currently being spent. To reach an answer to the first research question, “What has been the ‘special education’ experience of First Nation children in Ontario?”, federal funding is an important part of the conversation but gets overshadowed by factors such as culture, infrastructure and capacity development, which affect the delivery of special education programming for First Nations in Ontario. These factors are revealed in the findings within Chapters 5 and 6.

## **Research Contribution**

This research provides insight into First Nation communities, specifically how students with special education needs are progressing. Until my research, there was no data on the outcomes of special education for First Nation students. I listened to individuals with specific disabilities, their parents and educators in the communities working with First Nation students to gain an understanding of what is working and what needs to change. The dominant disability discourse negatively impacts First Nation communities, and this study brings awareness of this influence to light. The intent and achievement of the research was to provide information that could be a catalyst for change. Knowledge of the remnants of historical discourse is information that educators

can use to appreciate the origins of student behaviour, for example. I am optimistic that reconceptualizing disability and special education in First Nation communities can transform the lives of First Nation children and shift the paradigms of how special education is viewed in First Nation education communities. It has the potential to improve the lives of children with special education needs.

There are many opportunities to awaken traditional teachings where they may still sleep, especially those regarding the gifts that our children, and all of us, bring when coming into being and to align them with special education programs. Building on the contribution of knowledge through the sharing of the stories by the research participants, this research provides useful information that helps First Nation education communities think about special education as a means to uncover and develop students' strengths, their assets, their ways of knowing, and their innate ability to 'know'.

### **My Story in Special Education**

My whole life has been dedicated to doing my part as we rebuild our nations. I am humbled that my stable family setting allowed me to objectively distinguish what resonates for me in terms of cultural teachings. I also appreciate that my privilege was in the ability to test the depths of life to see how far I could dive knowing that I always had the safeguard of family to fall back on. I never remember feeling like it was not okay to be who I am, but I do know those injustices that I have felt throughout my life when I have thought, 'that would be different if I or they were not an Indian'. This is the beauty of growing up in my community. The specific generation that I grew up with understood this and rarely made choices that did not make sense, knowing that it was not necessary. Ironically, the cost of not knowing our language or ceremonial practice at formative ages was subtle, as we did not really understand that colonization was occurring.

I live in my home community, Curve Lake First Nation reserve with most of my extended family including one of my two adult children. I am the oldest of five Anishinaabekwewag, Ojibwe

women, born of and raised here by two influential Anishinaabeg who were both born on the reserve and lived here all their lives. My parents are both Grade 8 graduates of Curve Lake Indian Day School. In addition to the federal residential school system, Indian Day Schools were also tools of assimilation, but children remained in their communities and went home to their families at the end of day. Though reasons are not quite clear, there were also many children taken at random from my community and sent to the residential schools even though there was a day school. My father's older four siblings were taken to Shingwauk residential school in Sault Ste. Marie 700 kilometres away. As in residential schools, Indigenous culture and language were discouraged, often cruelly, at day schools, resulting in generations losing our ability to speak our own language. The threat that their children could still be taken legally by the government black car roaming the village roads, discouraged families from passing our language down to children. The last residential school in Ontario, Poplar Hill Development School in Red Lake, was closed in 1989.

First Nations in Ontario began taking on the management of their schools, from federal and sometimes provincial management, to become First Nation operated schools, beginning in the early to mid 1990's during the federal government's 'devolution' of federal operation of reserve (First Nation) schools (Hall, 1992). While they are still federally funded, policy and processes including curriculum are determined by the First Nations who run their own schools while under the Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) national program guidelines for education (ISC, Education, 2024). While ISC national program guidelines for education have become more flexible over the years, ISC and its guidelines are still the colonial arm of Indian education within the *Indian Act*<sup>3</sup>.

Because of the impacts of colonialism and the resulting real-world influences of life in post-contact Canada, First Nations People know that education is a critical means to navigate in today's world. During the devolution of school operation, First Nations often took on more than

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<sup>3</sup> Indian Act, R.S.C., 1985, C.I-5, as amended

community administration capacity allowed (Hall, 1992). First Nations often go through periods when community confidence in their ability to educate students in a manner that prepares them for today's society is very sensitive. It is challenging to satisfy community needs particularly when First Nation citizens expect delivery of education programming that is responsive to their community's historical realities. Community members and caregivers often have complex and delicate relationships with school experiences as a result of the oppressive, colonial legacies of the residential school system and the Indian Day Schools (Taylor, 2010). Communities generally want their children, their students, to be able to transition in and out of Indigenous and western education systems with strong education skills, abilities and accomplishments. This ability to transition is also based on growing community need for strong foundations in Indigenous identity. The research findings that appear in Chapters 5 and 6 show that the need to increase Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin and cultural practises is on the upturn.

I attended the Curve Lake Indian Day School from Grades one to three, in the 1960's and was bused to the provincial school in a nearby town, 30 minutes by bus, for grade four onward. The Day School on reserve, was a federally operated school until the early 1980's when staffing and curriculum became provincially managed. Our First Nation took over the operation of the school including staffing and curriculum in the early-1990's. While federal funds are still provided for the First Nation's education, the school is not federally operated.

At 88 years young, my father is currently the Gimaa (Chief) of Curve Lake and has been periodically over several decades. He was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Laws from Trent University and is a member of the Order of Canada among many other honours. My late mother was one of the first graduates of Lakehead University's Native Language Teacher Program and was a revered Anishinaabemowin Kinoomaage-kwe (Language Teacher) for most of her professional career.

I have the honour of being mom to a daughter, Jaime, who has Down Syndrome and a son, D.J. who had been unofficially deemed as 'gifted' by his primary teachers. Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as a diagnosis is somewhat rampant in my family. According to Heller (2009), in education, ADHD is common and is considered to consist of predominantly inattentiveness, impulsiveness or a combination of both. My sisters and I understand this completely as we can, drop everything, pack our bags and hop a plane to an unknown destination with just a few hours' notice. D.J. never had a formal assessment but understands these descriptors and even suggested that this aligns with our Indigeneity. Culturally, we would have to be attentive to a myriad of different things on the land like weather patterns and other habits of the natural world. This could be seen as inattentive to one thing when in fact, we are attentive to all things. My son has given me something to consider.

Parents often swoon about their children, and I am no different. I am truly awe-inspired by my two, and they have led me to my path in education. Jaime has taught me much about removing the stigma associated with the 'dis' in disability. My journey through their education required that I become quickly versed in special education needs and in academic advocacy, first, as a parent.

It is this beautiful gift of motherhood that was the beginning of my creation story as a Special Education Specialist, and crusader for First Nation education matters. My son, D.J., was born first and being his parent has been a privilege as he responded well to encouragement and stimulation, being especially demonstrative of interests in many varied things. I often reminded myself to just get out of his way. When Jaime was born in 1996, I was not at all swayed in my excitement of being gifted with another child. I say this because to my confusion, social workers, and medical staff hovered around me in the hospital in the days following her birth. No one came right out and told me that she had Down Syndrome. I could clearly see that she did. At the time of her birth, even our paediatrician only vaguely implied it saying "If I was a betting man, I would say

so” until he confirmed it after genetic testing several weeks later. My thoughts were, just let me out of here to begin the exploration of who this captivating, tiny being would reveal herself to be. Friends and some family members were sympathetic, saying things like “better you than me”. I would humbly respond, “she will be great”. I viscerally felt the honour and confidence that Creator had bestowed upon me in allowing me to be her mom and I absolutely believed in all that she could achieve. Not surprisingly, my Anishinaabe family were unflinching and so welcoming as they recognized that this little girl is another of the amazing gifts that our family had been given in terms of grandchild, niece, and cousin.

When I reflect back on how I moved through the process of raising Jaime, I can see how my own biases and observations shaped the way I saw people with visible disabilities and influenced my perceptions of how others viewed their first impressions of Jaime. Being Anishinaabe, you are always aware of being side-eyed or skirted around or not given chances that others may get in society. To be seen at first glance as disabled is something that I was very cognizant of in how Jaime was seen or more importantly not seen. I still remember my mother scrubbing us clean before going to town to ensure no one saw us as “dirty little Indians”. So, in reflecting on my own biases, I am reminded of the way I would prompt Jaime to keep her tongue in her mouth. Tongue protrusion is common proclivity of not only Down Syndrome but in societal vernacular regarding impressions of intelligence. Whatever the origin, I understood that this was a personal bias, that I did not want that people’s first impression people of Jaime were that she was ‘other’. Having her respond so well and so quickly to gentle, verbal reminders to do this, triggered my understanding of how well she responded to prompts and that she would need them from time to time.

Given the distances that I have traveled in the world of education and special education, this may sound like a very simple and somewhat ignorant step, but it is the beginning of my journey in understanding special education. I did not lower my expectations for Jaime in her development, I

knew every milestone in her childhood would take time but eventually they would be reached. One of my advisors, Dr. Brunette, (2024) observed that one could say “raising Jaime has offered people around her, deep insight and learning about life and humanity itself, exposing our own taken for granted social and cultural norms around the primacy of intelligence in society”.

My reflection is from my perspective alone. My children’s father and I separated while I was pregnant with Jaime. We reunited when she was about two years old but later divorced when Jaime was ten. We remained good friends, and he has since passed away, but he gave me the gift of his belief in my visions for our kids. In the last year before he died, he enjoyed his children and acknowledged how amazing they were and thanked me that he never had to worry about them. Thank you, miigwech Darren.

Jaime was four when I became the Education Manager of our community’s Education Department which included a primary school. The department and school staff were very skilled and more than proficient in their positions. My management style was much like my parenting in that I just got out of their way. My son had attended the school earlier but had to move on to the provincial school system as did the other community children in Grade 4 and beyond. While my professional role was largely administrative, when it came time for Jaime to attend school, I gained the perspective of a parent who has to navigate special education in the school system.

In the discussion about support for Jaime, I remember being asked what my desire is for her. I remember feeling confusion about the ramifications of my choices. What were my choices? What would be the impacts of my decisions? So began the deep dive into understanding special education in the school systems. I chose to have her be part of every aspect of student life that was possible in the school and to have the service of an Education Assistant where necessary. Curve Lake School was the best foundational place for Jaime. She was given all the opportunities to learn as were afforded to all the students, a foundational understanding of herself as an Anishinaabe and

she graduated Grade 3, reading at an early Grade 2 level. In his quest to really understand his sister's abilities, her brother, five years older than her, once privately asked me at report card time, "Is this the best she can do Mom?" I replied to him that yes, her report card is amazing! It was showing legitimate C's, and he praised her profusely. Jaime's foray into junior grades was also exceptional with her provincial school board teacher working hard to maintain and increase her reading level. She would proclaim "Jaime...is the light of my life!" What parent does not want to hear that.

By the time Jaime entered secondary school, I had moved on to working in positions in the provincial and then the federal government. The Learning and Life Skills (LLS) class that she was in was brand new in the school and unfortunately, it was merely a program of busy work. An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is the record that teachers develop, and schools keep of the plan for how to address a student's special education needs. Greater detail of the IEP is given in Chapter 5. I never signed any Individual Education Plan (IEP) while she was there as there were no goals within them. Conversation after conversation with the staff was fruitless. I hired a tutor to enable Jaime to maintain her reading levels. All I will say is that this period of time was disappointing, but it did give Jaime a social life.

I offer to parents that when their child cannot voice their own goals, we are their vision carriers. I had always hoped Jaime would one day graduate from college. I can proudly say that Jaime is a Fleming College graduate with honours including a letter from the Dean for academic achievement. The Community Integration through Co-op Education program (Fleming, 2024) is an exemplary model of individualized learning and I am proud that Jaime is a graduate of that program.

My son, D.J., did not present as requiring assessments to determine special education needs throughout his public-school education until his last year of secondary school. In fact, he was an A/B+ student. Even at this time, his needs were not special education needs in the conventional sense. He just lost the motivation to engage. He was absolutely done with following along with

academic expectations. He was content to go to class but no longer to absorb or deliver. As his goal was not to attend post-secondary education, I let him ride it out even though it broke his teachers' hearts as he graduated with just a passing grade average.

Despite his disengagement, D.J. embodied a deep desire to learn his language and from the age of 15, taught himself to be a fluent speaker of Anishinaabemowin, primarily during the summer months. He has taught several semesters in the Anishinaabemowin program at Georgian College and in his former high school when he is not in his regular role as park warden of over ten years at Petroglyphs Provincial Park. To me, my son's experience lends credence to the importance of First Nation culture within the academic curriculum. It is important to encourage the inclusion of language and culture into the program beyond the 40-to-60-minute time slot for language every other day or a limited amount of time per semester. The importance of the inclusion of Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin within curriculum is explored within this research.

Raising my son also brought to my attention the interesting notion of how important it was for some parents to have their children identified as being "gifted"<sup>4</sup>. Here, the gifted term is in the context as understood in the provincially defined academic abilities. When their child is deemed as 'gifted', I got the sense that some parents were relieved and assumed that their child would master school so their efforts regarding parental roles or duties when it came to schoolwork or other student engagements, might not require that much of their involvement. What I comprehend about the western version of 'gifted' is, okay, that child has, maybe, Lamborghini car power in his brain's 'garage' but that also means he or she could hit a wall ten times as fast than say, a KIA could. Our work as parents and educators is to ensure our children, become an all-round healthy and kind human being, to ensure that their medicine wheel stays strong.

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<sup>4</sup> "Ontario Ministry of Education defines gifted as "an unusually advanced degree of general intellectual ability that requires differentiated learning experiences of a depth and breadth beyond those normally provided in the regular school program to satisfy the level of educational potential indicated." (Bennett, Dworet, Gallagher, & Somma, 2019)

In contrast to this western connotation of ‘gifted’, this research draws on the Anishnaabe teaching that children come to this physical existence with gifts, or what it is that will be their contribution to share. This teaching is given in the findings of chapter 6 by an Elder from a northern community.

As a parent of a child with Down Syndrome, I have a sensitivity with respect to how students with special education needs respond to various classroom approaches and peer relationships as well as a sensitivity to how parents require plain language descriptions of educational possibilities. This is particularly true in terms of the role parents can play in fore-grounding those possibilities in relation to academic achievement, goals, and life course options.

### **My Professional Experiences and this Research**

Beyond my experiences as a parent, I have dealt with special education issues from perspectives as a teacher, as a First Nation education manager, and as an Indigenous education official at both provincial and federal government levels. I facilitated professional capacity development for provincial school boards, First Nation Education staff and federal government personnel, as well as recommendations for national policy, and the distribution of resources, including funding for special education. Special education has been a dominant portfolio within all of these duties.

My personal, academic, and professional journey has generated questions such as how First Nation students have fared in the field of special education. I have witnessed the predominance of students identified as having exceptionalities in First Nation communities in my professional roles and I wondered how this predominance was being addressed in the classroom and how programming was being addressed to meet these needs.

This research recognizes the term *exceptional* as used by the Ontario Ministry of Education, “An exceptional pupil is a student who has behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical or

multiple exceptionalities that require them to have a special education program or service” (Ontario, 2021-2024).

I have witnessed, particularly as Curve Lake’s Education Manager, how students have benefited from programming that has a focus on Indigenous content. Educators should be supported in their focus on effectively managing the demands of the changing profile of our classrooms of learners today. I was interested in the relationship between culturally responsive educational practices and how they affect achievement and classroom challenges. I have had education publications in two journals, specifically, the Canadian Association of Principals’ Education Journal (Fife, 2004) and the Canadian Centre for Alternative Policy’s “Our Schools/Ourselves” Journal (Fife, 2002). Both featured the juxtaposition of First Nation or Indigenous peoples in education and that of mainstream education.

### **My Research Approach**

As an Anishnaabekwe with access to Indigenous communities of Knowledge Holders and Elders, it was important that guidance using an Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin, Indigenous Knowledge (IK) lens, as transmitted through the generations, be at the core of this research journey. Indigenous philosophy provides great foundational methodologies in how we should approach learnings with and for all Indigenous students. Students who have been identified as having learning exceptionalities that require special education, may have acquired extra challenges in the process of being colonized. The colonial labelling based on Indigeneity within special education compromises personhood as it further ‘others’ these students. This research project considered this additional othering and its impact on decolonization.

As a researcher, I consider myself to be a researcher with both an insider and outsider position, although I am predominantly an insider. Insider researchers are of the community of participants with an understanding of the activities of that community while outsiders are not

(Hellowell, 2006; Dwyer, 2009). I am an insider as an educator, an Anishinaabekwe and a parent of a child with special education needs. I am an outsider only in that I have not had special education needs. As an insider, I am mindful of the assessment and instructional demands classroom teachers face in addressing the diverse needs of students within a classroom or educational context. As a former education department manager and for over a decade, a government education policy specialist, I am attentive to funding parameters, systemic structural barriers, and how one works to remove those barriers in order to make change. This research has allowed me to synthesize the observations and experiences over twenty-five years wearing many hats focusing on First Nation education, particularly special education. For example, I have worked with representatives from all the First Nations in Ontario to make sense of varied community experiences and understandings of special education as a co-lead/facilitator of an Ontario Regional Special Education Task Team. Together we conceptualized a foundational holistic education system concept founded in Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin.

### **Western Education and Philosophies in the Context of this Study**

Much of the work of First Nation education communities in the last few decades has been juxtaposed against the dominant western education systems which have been the largest pedagogical influence on First Nation education. In the context of this study, western based pedagogy and education philosophy, or the western education system, is based on defining western thought as coming from Eurocentric value systems. Specific to education, these value systems focus on written word, assessments as knowledge validation, and strict parameters about what knowledge is (Bouvier, 2023). Further, the western knowledge system is a construct within a “scientific materialistic view... or separate and distinct...” (Regnier, 1995, p. 384) in contrast to First Nation concepts such as, all things are related, unity, or that components make up a whole, as illustrated in a medicine wheel (Benton, 1988; Bell, 2006; Battiste, 2013; Johnston, 2003; Porter, 2008). Throughout this dissertation,

‘western’ is used as a descriptor of linear education program delivery rather than that of First Nations’ circular and relational modes of understanding knowledge.

### **The Existence of Special Education for Ontario First Nations Students**

I am inspired by the words of David Newhouse (2019) who has stated that research methods do not just describe social realities, they also help to create them. The research in this dissertation will show that the reality of special education in Ontario First Nation communities is that the experiences are not consistent among communities and deserve exploration. Newhouse’s statement informs my research that it is possible to change the social reality of special education for Indigenous communities. I have looked at the big picture of what is going on in the formal, western-oriented learning experiences that First Nation students are exposed to and have witnessed and heard what those experiences are for Indigenous children using an Indigenous lens, with Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin, Indigenous Knowledge systems. This research helps bring the social reality of special education oriented in First Nation ethos into focus.

### **What is meant by Special Education and Disability?**

I begin with the assumption that the terminology used in special education, is an invention of western based pedagogy and is not based in Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin or Indigenous thought processes. Dr. Jean Graveline Fyre is a Metis (Cree) who writes about circle as a methodology in Indigenous research and about holism in Indigenous teachings in her much-cited book “Circle Works: Transforming Eurocentric Consciousness”. As Fyre (1998) points out, there were no special schools in First Nation children education. For the purposes of this research, the definitions of special education are used as set out in the Ontario’s Education Act<sup>5</sup>. The Act states that a special education program is:

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<sup>5</sup> Education Act, R.S.O. 1990, C.E.2, as amended

...an educational program that is based on and modified by the results of a continuous assessment and evaluation of a student and includes a plan (now referred to as an Individual Education Plan) containing specific objectives and an outline of the educational services that meet the needs of the exceptional pupil. (Ontario, 2021-2024)

School boards implement procedures for the early and ongoing identification of learning abilities and needs of students and to define students' exceptionalities as well as to determine what services will be needed to meet the needs of these students. Some students have special needs, such as physical or mental health needs that require supports beyond those ordinarily received in the typical school setting. In Ontario an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) can be used to determine if a student is an 'exceptional pupil', who needs a special education program.

Throughout this research, 'special education' will refer to a systemic, either school-based or government-defined, program while 'disability' will be in reference to a student's official exceptionality as determined through an Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) Process or First Nation defined process informed in most cases by educational psychological or medical assessments. Increasingly, it has been my experience that First Nations are using their own identification process. The IPRC process is used by all Ontario school boards.

Another means of identifying disability is the Federal Disability Reference Guide of Canada (FDRGC) (Canada, 2013). This Guide refers to how definitions of disability contain conflicting, non-harmonious, traditional, bio-medical views of medical or health disabilities conflated with social views of disabilities that generate societal inaccessibility due to attitudes, stigmas, and prejudices. Given this lack of consistency across definitions, the FDRGC defers to the World Health Organization as providing the most widely accepted definition:

Disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual involvement in life situations. (Canada, 2013, p.2)

In 2006 the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution<sup>6</sup> that recognized that,

...disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others... (UN, 2006, p. 2)

With these definitions of disability in mind, this dissertation will consider disability as defined by the education system where a student is currently enrolled.

### **Federal Government Definitions and Funding**

In Ontario, any conversation regarding special education and First Nations is incomplete without mention of Indigenous Services Canada (ISC). For background and information purposes, this is the only section that will detail funding for special education for First Nation (status Indian) children. Since the onset of the *Indian Act*, education for Indians who live on reserve has been governed by the federal government, which today is managed by the federal department, ISC. Unlike provincial school board schools that are funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education, ISC (ISC, 2024) funds special education services for First Nations students, specifically, status Indians living on reserve, identified as having mild to profound special education needs. Funding is provided for programming, remedial instruction, clinical services, and resource teacher staffing through the ISC's High-Cost Special Education Program (HCSE).

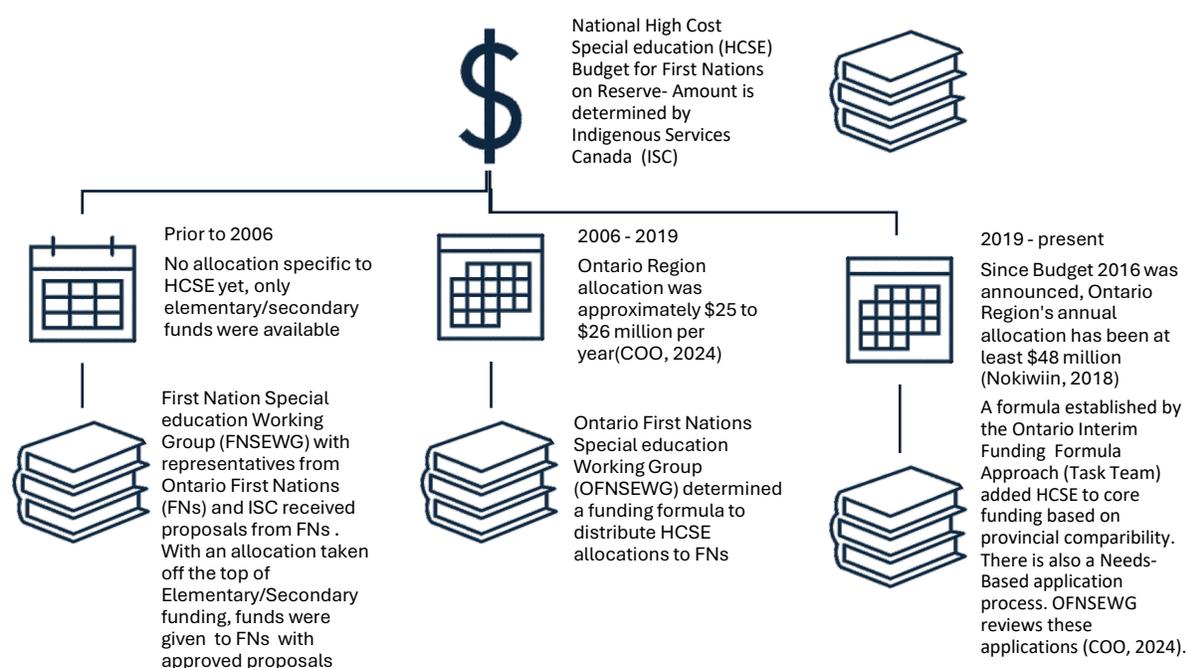
Devolution, or the transfer of power, of education service management from Indian Affairs, now ISC, to First Nation bands' operation, occurred in the 1990's, including special education services. Now, all education services are delivered by First Nations through their own funding arrangements with ISC (Rae, 2009). First Nation education authorities or education departments

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<sup>6</sup> The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), December 13, 2006; Canada ratified CRPD in 2010.

deliver education programs based on federal government funding and national program guidelines (ISC, Education, 2024). Three First Nation communities in Ontario did not opt into the devolution process with some having federal schools on reserve still managed by ISC (ISC 2024). It should be noted that the term ‘High-Cost Special Education’ (HCSE) is used only by ISC, not the provincial education systems. By default, as ISC is an education funding source, First Nations also use the term High-Cost Special Education. HCSE refers to students with moderate to profound special education needs that cannot be met within a regular classroom program (ISC, 2024). I was the regional lead for the HCSE program for Indigenous Services Canada, Ontario Region, from 2009 to 2023. Annual applications and formal identifications are not required from First Nations in Ontario to obtain these funds. Instead, each year funds are allocated using a formula ratified by the Chiefs in Assembly<sup>7</sup> with a modification in 2010 (COO, 2024, p. 11).

*Figure 1 (High Cost) Special Education Funding in Ontario*



<sup>7</sup> Chiefs-in-Assembly Resolution 13/11 (June 2013) and by Resolution 12/15 (2015 All Ontario Chiefs Conference)

I have outlined in Figure 1 how the HCSE funding has been allocated and how the formula been developed in 2006 with one transformation in 2019. It is now calculated as part of the ISC Interim Funding Formula largely based on an Ontario provincial funding model where a projection of need is calculated using the student nominal roll<sup>8</sup> (COO, 2024). As part of the efforts of the First Nation Special Education Working Group (FNSEWG), as managed by the Chiefs of Ontario, the group found that formula-based funding is more desirable by First Nations according to their representatives, as it allows for more predictable funding and allows for the Ontario Region to use an intervention-based approach to HCSE. The intervention-based approach was included into the High-Cost Special Education National Program Guidelines in the mid 2010's due to the advocacy and hard work of the FNSEWG. It meant that students could now receive special education services without first having to be formally identified as having a specific exceptionality or disability. Simply stated, intervention can occur immediately without waiting for the formal identification processes (COO, 2024).

The modern education experience of First Nations students has been a classification of student ability according to the terms within the provincial or federal government funded special education system using provincially or federally determined definitions of disabilities. My research findings in Chapter 5 show that systems such as these have not taken into consideration generational trauma, the complicated educational and social backgrounds of First Nation students, and the assets they bring to the classroom. These considerations will be used in the literature review and throughout this research.

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<sup>8</sup> The nominal roll is the ISC registry of all eligible elementary and secondary students funded by ISC to attend a band-operated, federal, provincial or private school. Criteria for nominal roll student eligibility is determined by ISC.

## Research Overview

### *The research questions:*

- 1) What does ‘special education’ mean in First Nations communities in Ontario?
- 2) How can special education be re-conceptualized or reimagined to better meet children’s needs?

The sub-questions that were foundational to the interview scripts are:

- What does special education for First Nation students in Ontario currently mean for an academic program or formal learning environment?
- What are the special education needs of First Nation students in Ontario?
- What influence does the efficiency and efficacy of resources, including funding, have on the ability to meet the education requirements of Ontario’s First Nation students with special education needs? (Addressed in Appendix A, Interview Script, Question 10)
- What should be the goals of a program that meets the needs of First Nation students in Ontario that have been identified as exceptional or receiving special education support?
- What should be the program strategies used to advance the progress of First Nation students in Ontario with special education needs?

### *Stories Gathered versus Data*

This research focuses on the delivery of special education in First Nations communities in Ontario. I hesitate to use the term *data* as the term has clinical connotations and seemingly discards and minimizes the very human element, vulnerability and ceremony in the sharing that occurred during the gathering of stories for this study. To decolonize and maintain the Indigeneity of the valuable information within the stories gathered in the 31 interviews that I conducted, the richness from these interviews will be called ‘stories gathered’ or ‘research stories’.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

In summary, this research is a study of special education for First Nation students in Ontario. Using an Indigenized qualitative research methodology, I examine what ‘special education’ means in First Nations communities in Ontario and how it can be re-conceptualized or reimagined to better meet First Nation children’s needs. Along with my perspective as a parent, I have worked

for decades, in policy, curriculum and program development in First Nation and government schools and education departments. While I am a teacher, I have very little classroom experience.

The study begins with a critical examination of how societal perceptions or discourses have shaped special education paradigms, and the experiences of Indigenous students who have received special education services. The crux of the study is within the researched stories gathered from conversational interviews with participants involved in the education of First Nation students with special education needs across Ontario. A medicine wheel framework guides the analysis of the literature review and the stories of the participants leading to a re-imagining of special education for Indigenous children. We see that a holistic education system may be a viable solution.

This dissertation is organized into 8 Chapters. After this introductory Chapter 1, Chapter 2, the Medicine Wheel, provides information on how the medicine wheel is used as a framework to organize the larger story of education and special education for First Nation students within this dissertation. In Chapter 3, a Literature Review walks the reader through the available literature according to the four stages of the medicine wheel that outline the history of education and special education for First Nation students. Chapter 4, Methodology, explains the Indigenized Qualitative Research Methodology as centred in the Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin of the Seven Grandfather Teachings with the theories of the Two-Eyed Seeing Framework and Critical Discourse Analysis guiding how the gathered stories were processed. Stories were gathered using interviews based on the research questions. Chapter 4 also includes details on how participants were chosen under “Participant Selection” as well as the methods of analysis of the information gathered under “Analysis and Process”. Additionally, within Chapter 4 are details on the approach to this research and the ethics involved. Chapters 5 and 6 are the Findings chapters, parts A & B and are the platforms for all of the brilliant stories as told by the study participants. The conclusion, key findings of the study and an epilogue are presented in Chapter 8.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Medicine Wheel

The medicine wheel is an Anishnaabe teaching with instructions on how to live *mino bmaadzowin*, in a good life with guidance coming from the Seven Original (Grandfather) Teachings. This is Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin. Absolon (2011) describes *kendaasowin* as “...a process of how we come to know, of acquiring knowledge (p.10). I use the medicine wheel in this study to organize and frame literature and findings, to guide my journey of learning. It is a ‘Circle of Existence’ organized to contain teachings (Bell, 2006). Because medicine wheel is the English term through which I have received teachings in the past, and because it also refers to motion and is fluid, it is the term I use in this dissertation. This chapter describes how the medicine wheel framework is used to situate and organize the collected information from literature and research within this study.

I use the medicine wheel as a systematic structure for the literature and research approach. My first introduction to this teaching began when I was an education manager, in the early 2000’s, and I attended a “Youth at Risk” workshop facilitated by a Mi’kmaw social worker, Robert Johnson-bah, now passed, who shared these wonderful teachings. His words on the medicine wheel still resonate with me. His insights were one of the first of many teachings describing the four quadrants of a basic personal medicine wheel. In the eastern quadrant, yellow represents the mind/intellectual. The south, red quadrant houses the physical/body. The west, black quadrant holds the social/emotional components while the north, white quadrant is of spirit. His teachings emphasized that if one of the quadrants had a chink or a fragment missing, then the wheel doesn’t turn smoothly (Johnson, 2003). Anishnaabe Elder Edna Manitowabi (Bell, 2006) teaches the foundational concept of wholeness and balance among the quadrants in the medicine wheel to ensure its smooth turning. Bell (2006) further describes medicine wheels as mirrors that give meaning through reflection of connectedness,

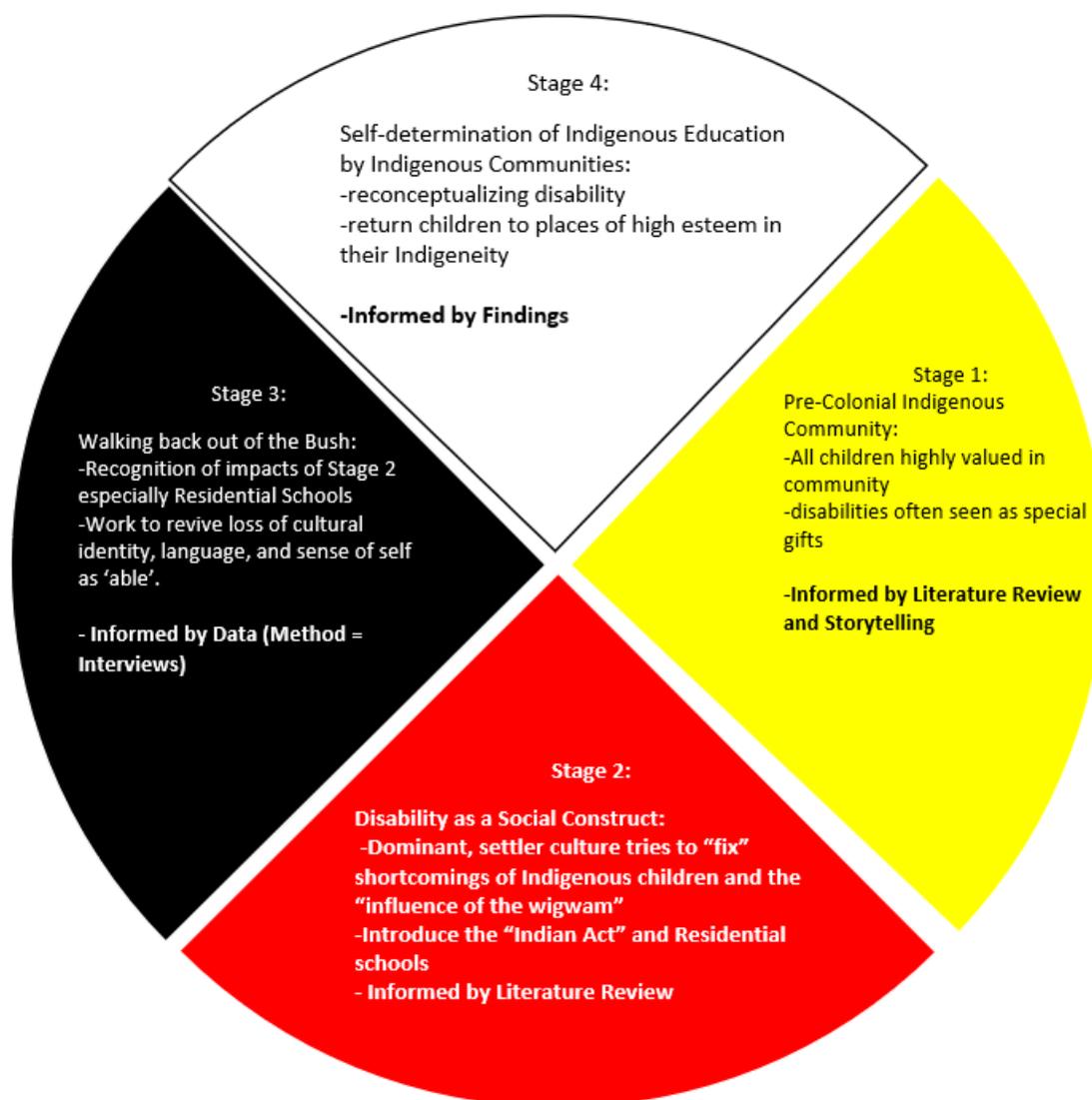
harmony, and the aforementioned balance among the components and beings effected within the medicine wheel. Bell (2010) provides foundational examples of how to use the Anishinaabe medicine wheel when working to understand concepts or experiences. It is from Bell's examples and from teachings from Elders that I have received, that I draw on medicine wheel instruction as an illustrative tool and structural foundation for my research. Within the medicine wheel there are countless teachings such as those of the seasons, to stages of life, and to steps in healing. The quadrants of a medicine wheel can contain any kind of issue where one is trying to find meaning. I generally use the Anishinaabe teachings starting with the four directions represented in each colour of quadrant. In this research, the medicine wheel reflects a teaching from Edna Manitowabi regarding wholeness (Bell, 2006) and a teaching of n'dinawemaaganag, that everything is related. The medicine wheel for this dissertation reveals a whole story of special education for First Nation students. All parts are connected. The story of education for Indigenous students as it relates to special education within this research project is divided into four components as illustrated in the medicine wheel shown in Figure 2. The research findings are organized into four components or stages of discourse and sets out what the education structure for First Nation students is or has been. 'Disability' and the educational experiences within First Nation communities are examined using this chronological framework.

All things start in the east quadrant. This special education story begins in Stage 1 in the east. Stage 1, the Pre-Colonial Indigenous Community and Stage 2, Disability as a Social Construct are addressed in the literature review of Chapter 3. Chapter 5 sets out what Elders, educators of First Nation students with special education needs, parents/caregivers, and students know about what is happening now in Stages 3, recovering from colonialism and what could happen in Stage 4, where we work to reimagine the future of special education for Indigenous students.

Using the medicine wheel four-part framework, I visually organized information as it related to the stages of special education over time in Figure 2, Research Structure within the Medicine Wheel.

*Figure 2*

*Research Structure within the Medicine Wheel*



As illustrated in Figure 2 the medicine wheel is used in this research to explain the history of special education of First Nations children and how it has been reconceptualised over time. Mapped out is a chronology of social, political, and epistemological situations that has influenced how

Canada's First Nation students have been educated. The four illustrated stages of the education landscape for First Nation students includes exploration of 'Disability' and the evolution of special education for First Nation communities. Disability is often a requisite condition to being identified as having a special education need (Ontario, 2021-2024). The medicine wheel model in Figure 2 shows changes in Indigenous education inspired by a similarly chronological medicine wheel framework used in the report on the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996). The first quadrant or 'Stage 1' begins in the east, where all beginnings are. This stage, along with Stage 2 is discussed and explained in the next chapter, the literature review. Stage 1 has pre-colonial Indigenous communities as its focus. All children were highly valued by everyone in the community and are still, today. Disabilities, if seen at all, were viewed as special gifts.

Stage 2 in the medicine wheel was the time of settler contact, the onslaught of colonialism and the origins of disability as a social construct. The burgeoning influence of legislation like the *Indian Act* and subsequent tools of the *Act* such as residential schools begins in this era. Like most systems created to 'deal with' the Indian problem in Canada, the deficit focused special education system was based on racism and genocidal efforts in government and subsequently in society. This stage is the scaffold of the research analytic methodologies of the Two-Eyed Seeing framework (TES) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) materializing in the literature review chapter. Stage 2 is a time when the settler culture tries to 'fix' the perceived shortcomings of Indigenous children and the 'influence of the wigwam'. It was not intended that personal dark and angry undertones be prominent throughout this paper, as those feelings come and go but are transformed into fertilizer in the cultivation of good work to change these systems. More important to me is the conveyance that work to help advance Anishinaabeg means more to me than my anger at a past that I cannot change. Circumstances today need my concentration to be not clouded in anger. I have found that being able to share how I care for my people has been more effective than anger in getting people to

listen. Anger has sometimes become too sensational and again, I recognize my privilege in my stable upbringing especially in knowing who I am as an Anishinaabekwe, that I do not have to harbour readily accessible anger. This stage and stage 1 primarily use the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methodology.

Stage 3 is the time when Indigenous people work to come out of the darkness of colonization. Indigenous communities have been working to regain their cultural, spiritual, and communal footing. Ontario Provincial Police Cultural Advisor, Sargeant. G. Couchie, once said, if it takes an hour to walk through the bush, it will take an hour to walk out of the bush (Couchie, 2008). Stage 3, *Walking Out of the Bush* speaks to how long it will take to come out of the effects of residential school, of colonialism itself. To expand on the metaphor, that if it takes an hour to walk in the bush, it will take an hour to walk out, with as many as five or six generations affected by colonialism, it could take at least that many generations to come completely back into our Indigeneity. Sgt Couchie was referencing the residential school system, colonial economic practices, and bans on cultural practices among many other consequences of colonialism, and the countless effects of ‘contact’, that has affected several generations of Indigenous people (Hanson, 2020). We are just barely out of the first generation of non-Residential school attendees. It could take another four or five generations for Indigenous communities to regain the embodiment of a healthy medicine wheel. Much must be overcome such as, the horrific experience of residential schools that ensured abuse, trauma, and failure in the minds of these students, their families, and their communities. In this stage, we recognize the impacts of the events of stage 2 in the illustrated medicine wheel. There is work to be done to revive the loss of cultural identity, language, and the sense of self as “Indigenous” and ‘able’ and untangle this loss from the discourse of special education. How can traditional Indigenous education methodologies or ideologies be brought forward into the contemporary context? Stories have been collected using interviews as a method.

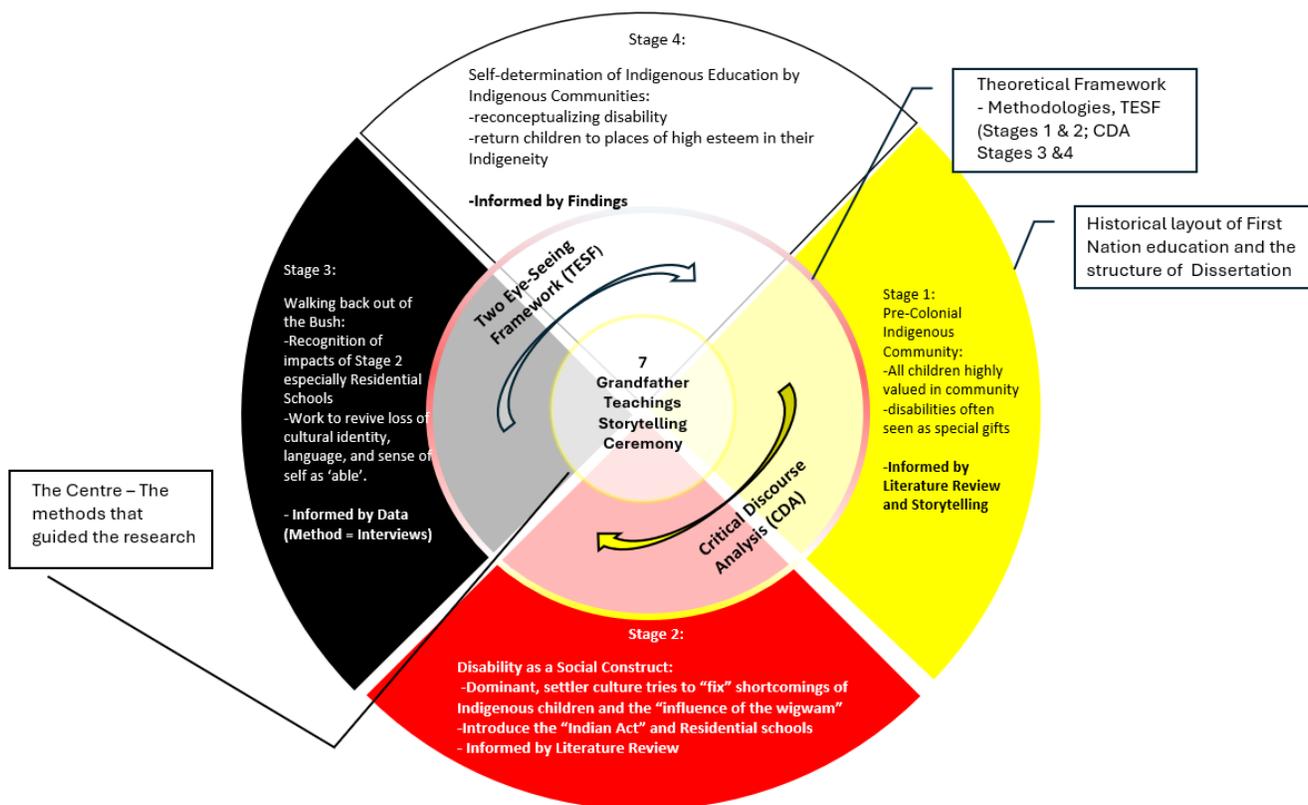
Educators, caregivers, students, and Elders of today were called upon to discuss what is now going on in special education and what can be done. Today, First Nation people are now in Stages 3, coming out of the darkness of the bush. This stage directs the analysis of research stories using the methodologies of TESH and to a lesser degree of CDA.

Stage 4 will set out the emerging vision of what reconceptualized special education could be. Using story as the linking thread incorporated within and throughout the research methods, methodologies, and theoretical framework, the landscape of special education as it relates to First Nations students in Canada will unfold.

## Indigenous Qualitative Research Methodology

*Figure 3*

### *Indigenous Qualitative Research Methodology*



Indigenous Research Methodology is described by Wilson as the consideration of the relational accountability by answering to ‘all your relations’ (Wilson, 2001, p.177) and Smith (2012) talks about the implications of the research on Indigenous individuals and communities. In my study, Indigenous Qualitative Research Methodology (IQRM) is not only accounting for all my relations but also, for the understanding of Indigenous Knowledge, Gikendaaswin, as a necessity for the future benefit of First Nation individuals with special education needs or who are in the field of delivering special education programs. It is qualitative in that the information within the gathered stories are not quantitatively measured but valued for the quality of individual experiences within the sharings. IQRM can be translated into various methodologies of research currently used in the academy by adhering to intentions that honour relationality and Gikendaaswin. How I have done that is defined using Figure 3, Indigenous Qualitative Research Methodology.

I have prepared Figure 3 to depict the medicine wheel that represents the whole Indigenous Qualitative Research Methodology. Included are the theoretical frameworks and grounding centre of the Seven Grandfather Teachings. This medicine wheel builds on the earlier version and shows how the research approach and CDA theoretical framework intersect in Stages 1 and 2, to answer the first research question ‘What does ‘special education’ mean in First Nations communities in Ontario?’ The second question, ‘How can special education be re-conceptualized or reimagined to better meet First Nation children’s needs?’, is explored in Stages 3 and 4 within the TESH. Completing the Indigeneity of the methodology are the methods utilized to gather stories and information as guided by the principles of the Seven Grandfather Teachings, the storytelling within interviews and the understanding that all we do as Anishinaabeg, is ceremony. The methodologies of TESH and CDA form the theoretical framework of this research, or the strategies and rationale of

how this research took shape within the four quadrants of the medicine wheel is ultimately shown in Figure 3, Indigenous Qualitative Research Methodology.

The medicine wheel also allows for identification of the missing or disrupted fragments of understanding and knowledge regarding special education of First Nation students. Through this process, chapters 5 and 6 relay the voids and disruptions that have contributed to silencing Indigenous voices in special education which, in turn cause the medicine wheel to not turn as smoothly as possible. An example of the resulting imbalance is within a deficit focused special education system that is described in the section on Stage 1 in Chapter 3's Literature Review.

In summary, this dissertation is organized and guided by the medicine wheel framework (Figures 3 and 4) that outlines four stages of education in the discussion of disability and discourse within educational experiences of First Nation students in Ontario and in outlining where the methods (interviews) and methodologies and theoretical frameworks are used (Figure 3). Regarding the existence of special education, its origins as it relates to First Nations is depicted in Stages 1 and 2 in the medicine wheel (Figure 2 and 3). Research findings as discussed and summarized in chapters 7 and 8, will document what is going on now and what can be done during this present time in history that is Stage 3, as First Nations endure, and work to recover from colonialism in anticipation of Stage 4. Stage 4 is that time of reimagining the future of special education for Indigenous students. Stages 1 and 2 of the medicine wheel framework, namely, the pre-contact terrain of First Nation education and the scenario proceeding contact are explored in the literature review within the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### Literature Review

There is an abundance of literature about special education in the context of classrooms based in western curriculum. Several scholars are named throughout this dissertation (Artiles 2003, Baker 2002, Bal2014, Bennett 2019, Dolmage 2014 and Iannacci 2018). There is a growing body of literature addressing curriculum and education for Indigenous students with many sources appearing in this dissertation (Anderson 2002, Battiste 2013, Bell 2006, Castagno 2008, Geniusz 2009 and Pete 2013). There is very little research that speaks to special education and First Nation students and practically none that include Ontario First Nation students or a reconceptualization of what special education for First Nation students could look like. This chapter defines special education in the context of this research and provides an exploration of the literature that does exist and provides background to how special education has grown out of discourse and historical events.

While literature will be incorporated throughout this paper where required, this section outlines literature related to foundational information illustrated in Stages 1 and 2 of the First Nation Education medicine wheel (Figures 3 and 4). A search for academic sources that had a focus on special education in the context of North American Indigenous education, specifically of First Nation students is the basis of the literature review's search approach. Material specific to North America was minimal and there was even less about Ontario. Therefore my search criteria extended to South America, Australia, and New Zealand. I have searched for academic works regarding what a First Nation student's experience with special education involves and how it could be reconceptualized. Literature searches in the "Trent plus Omni" libraries search engine, "Academia" website, as well as Google Scholar were based on the search words, "Indigenous special education Canada", "culture and special education;" "overrepresentation;" "Indigenous students"; and simply

“special education”. I found approximately twenty samples of research based on special education for minority populations in general and I have referenced sources relevant to the discussion of special education and First Nation children. I have had an alert on the “Academia” website since 2018, for research regarding special education and Indigenous students. This alert and other search results revealed a growing number of research papers with a focus on the education of Indigenous students, with a specific focus on the relevance of culture. A gap exists for research concentrated explicitly on Indigenous students in special education, the focus of my dissertation. I found only nine sources that spoke specifically to special education for Canadian First Nation students and an additional four sources that are publicly available ‘grey literature’ directly from ‘in-house’ or contracted research within aggregate First Nation organizations such as the Assembly of First Nations (AFN, 2010), the Chiefs of Ontario (COO, 2024), First Nation Education Steering Committee (of British Columbia) (Auerback, 2007) and the Independent First Nations (of Ontario) (IFN, 2023). This literature review focused on the discussion of special education largely based on the written material available as well as a fulsome discussion of how discourse plays a role in the existence and delivery of special education for First Nation students.

***Stage 1: Pre-contact First Nation Community – existing research regarding disability***

In keeping with the pre-contact theme of the first quadrant of the medicine wheel in Chapter 2 Figure 2, this research is informed by Indigenous worldviews originating in an era beyond living memory or from time immemorial. We begin with the truth that children come to us with their gifts (IFN, 2023) and this will be a prevalent theme throughout this dissertation. Current literature suggests that with this view, there is no *special* education (Bevan-Brown, 2013; Dion 2017). Many Indigenous understandings across Indigenous Nations in the world speak to what is *special* about children, however, this dissertation primarily focuses on Cree, Oji-Cree, Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee First Nation students living on reserve in Ontario.

In this stage, we come to understand that all children were highly valued in the Indigenous community and that disabilities were actually seen as special gifts. We will discover in the findings chapters 5 and 6, that this belief is being brought forward into the present time. What does traditional Indigenous Knowledge say about special education and Indigenous children deemed “disabled”? I have learned from teachings and ceremony that the Indigenous world is a unity of all things and all beings (Johnston, 2003; Porter, 2008; Simpson, 2017). Childcare meant the provision of core cultural caring of children. Indigenous communities are focused on the child as a valuable member of the community. This is why the Indian residential school system that removed children from their communities, was such an effective way to disrupt the passing on of Indigenous ways of teaching and knowing. While this research concentrates on the First Nations of Ontario, many Indigenous Nations include a foundational respect for children. For example, the Māori of New Zealand demonstrate the high value placed on children as integral components of society and even give distinctive power and prestige or ‘mana’ to their children with varied disabilities, intellectual, physical, or otherwise (Bevan-Brown, 2013). Like most Canadian First Nation communities, Māori are group-oriented with a holistic worldview based on quadrants like the Anishnaabe medicine wheel. To the Māori, the four dimensions are: taha wairua (spiritual side), taha hinengaro (thoughts and feelings), taha tinana (physical side) and taha whānau (family). Excluding community or family because of the existence of a disability would be to the detriment of the dimensions and therefore to one's or the community's own well-being. (Bevan-Brown, 2013). Persons with disabilities within Indigenous communities, are considered to have special gifts that enable them to communicate with the spiritual world. Dion (2017) demonstrates how the traditional teachings of the Cree First Nations guide beliefs and values which ensure that children born with disabilities are understood as possessing special gifts:

The old man said, to have been born imperfect was a sign of specialness... The old man carefully explained that in the old days, if a child came with a hare-shorn lip, it

wasn't a terrible thing or a hurtful thing; it meant the child's soul was still in touch with the Spirit World. (Dion, 2017)

Anishinaabe child raising involved participation by all within the extended family and community in a holistic social context and underscored the gift and value that each child has, as an important addition to the whole community (Battiste 2013; IFN 2023; Phillips 2010). From birth, everyone is part of the relationships and life activities of the community that are foundational to First Nation education. Children come to us as gifts and with gifts to be realized with our help, as their caregivers, to help them uncover the reason that they are here (Battiste, 2013; IFN, 2023; Phillips, 2010). Contrary to non-Indigenous education philosophies of starting with the tangible, the visible, the countable, then moving to intrinsic personal benefits of learning, Indigenous children were instilled with more innate messages within the "big story" and one's sense of place. Benton-Banai describes this innate sense, "children are born with fully developed senses and are aware of what is happening around them. They can even communicate with the Spirit World" (Benton-Benai, 1988, p. 61). Teachings or child-rearing strengthened a child's abilities to listen, to observe and to understand how a whole community worked as a group in order to uphold its very existence. Elders, mothers, fathers, and grandparents were honoured and respected. With exposure to many abstract ideas, children gained an understanding of their place as valuable beings of Creation, of community, of family, and the importance of meaningful relationships. Without such foundations Indigenous children are without self-control or appreciation of their surroundings and join that western grab for more (Anderson, 2002; Cajete, 1994). Traditionally, transferring knowledge, skills, values, and morals were primarily through oral instruction and modelling. Storytelling was a means to relay expectations in behaviour and societal roles (Bell, 2015). Children were given as much time as needed to achieve success when attempting a new skill. Progress and achievement were not

measured in percentages or numerical values. One of my Elders, Merritt Taylor baan<sup>9</sup> of Curve Lake, once said that he would hate to see the student who only learned fifty percent of how to paddle his canoe across the lake referring to western passing marks of fifty percent as a sign of knowledge or skill achievement.

Ali (2009) reinforces the significance of Indigenous instructional upbringing by describing education where persons "...progress, evolve, and gain a greater understating of themselves ..." (p.11) as instruction that is a function of caring. Ali (2009) further speaks to the importance of caring, specifically parents' caring where it nurtures a sense of self, a sense of growth. While Ali (2009) was referring to immigrant parents, First Nation parents who went to residential school experienced the same loss in their social, emotional, cultural, and economical existence and ultimately their loss in their belief in their parenting skills. As highlighted by Ali (2009), the experience for First Nation parents was comparable to the experience of recent immigrant parents who are criticized for their child rearing practices that differ from western norms.

Asset-oriented (Heydon & Iannucci, 2009) or strength focused approaches have been typical of First Nation communities that look to shape all children as having not just value but high esteem as the light givers of the family. Lindblom (2014) draws attention to the way that culture can affect the portrayal of disability regardless of whether that disability is a result of genetic or environmental factors. For example, "in Nicaragua it appears that autism is not acknowledged, and people are considered the same and embraced in society regardless of disabilities. Some expressions of autism such as avoiding eye contact may not be problematic in Ghana" (p. 1255). Evidence of how this has carried over into a current context has been witnessed in my immediate family in our First Nation community. My siblings and I gave my parents twelve grandchildren that all grew up pretty close

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<sup>9</sup> I pay homage, gratitude and great respect to this amazing Kinoomaaga-nini, my Elder and teacher, Anishinaabe Nini baan g'dizhnikaazho. He passed on to the next world as I was completing this dissertation. Gchi Miigwech Merritt baan. G'waabmin baa maa pii.

together. If ever asked about how it was having a child with special needs in the family, grandparents and aunties would just look around as if to ponder which one of these children is any more or less ‘special’ than the other? My daughter, Jaime, with Down Syndrome, was a part of the gang, spoken to as would be to any of the other children and was just another one of the younger kids that would be helped by the older kids if the situation called for it. In community activities such as dance classes, pow-wows, drama club, Jaime was given her parts to contribute. Community expectations were always high, and she delivered whether that was having a speaking part in a play or learning how to hoop dance with six hoops. Jean-Paul Restoule (Rolheiser, 2011) offers:

Indigenous Knowledge and Anishinabek education is meant for everybody. Anishinabek traditional teachings and stories reveal not only Anishinaabek culture but also the nature of life and human nature. In its most complete sense, [I]ndigenous education is inclusive education and makes possible the integration of all learners in relation to all life and in pursuit of full human development. (p. 1:18)

Traditional Indigenous educators may say that there is no ‘special’ education or instruction that is different from the education, instruction and guidance given to each Indigenous child. As Simpson (2017) states,

...they learned to trust themselves, their family, and their community. They learned the sheer joy of discovery. They learned how to interact with the spirit of the maple [as an example]. They learned both from the land and with the land. They learned what it felt like to be recognized, seen, and appreciated by their community. (2017, p. 150)

In current education context, this is considered a differentiated, responsive asset-oriented and care focussed approach on epistemologies that view disabilities differently, namely as gifts.

Culturally Responsive/Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) will be explored in this chapter under Stages 3 and 4, to understand the importance of culture, specifically Indigenous culture, and how can we intensify the immersion of culture into today’s learning. Before the discussion of CRP, we learn in the next section, Stage 2, how disability has become a social construct and how Indigenous people and subsequently students, have been affected by the emergence of disability discourse.

***Stage 2: Disability as a social construct***

Western-based education systems have been known to be prescriptive and adhere to rigid curriculums that may not give opportunity for children's gifts to emerge, as discussed in Stage 1, but rather view students as empty vessels to be filled (Rodriguez, 2012). In contrast, this dissertation focusses on wholistic Indigenous understandings of learning which includes the potential in all persons, and their gifts and talents. Contrasts between Indigenous concepts of learning and western tendencies for deficit-based perspectives of disability emerge in the researched stories. Decolonizing disability discourses requires this understanding of contrasts. Battiste (2013) sets out Canada's past and current discursive mindset.

The public image of First Nations governance and peoples have generated self doubt in students, leading them to discount their inherent capacities and gifts, their elders' wisdom and knowledge, and their tribal values and teachings. No educational system is perfect, yet few have been as destructive to human potential as Canada's, with its obsession with paternalism and assimilation and racialized discourses. (Battiste, 2013, p. 65)

Indigenous peoples of Canada have been the recipients of the effects of imposed colonial constructs. For many years, "Stage 2" in Figure 2 in Chapter 2, is an illustration of how Indigenous students have experienced disability discourse, another derivative of colonization which as Moreton-Robinson (2009) states, still exists but may come in different experiences from our ancestors.

In the available literature, scholars support the assertion that Indigenous students are overrepresented in special education classes or requiring supports in education along with the understanding that further research is needed to examine why this is occurring (Artiles et al 2010; Auerback 2007; Bartlett 2019; Graham 2012; Zhang et al (2014). Community income level and the percentage of minority students in a community appear to be related to overrepresentation patterns, and there is even emerging evidence about the role of how language is spoken in the home (Artiles, 2010). Artiles et al (2010) notes that while special education is supposed to elevate student success, disproportionate placement of students from historically underserved populations is still a problem

as special education services continue to fail to narrow the achievement gap between students with and without disabilities. In short, if underserved populations continue in special education programs, the programs will not actually meet their needs (Artiles et al, 2010). Zhang (2014) looked at five racial groups in the United States, American Indians/Alaskan Native, Asians/Pacific Islanders, African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites, and found the representation rate of each group in special education was as it had been ten years prior. Thus, nothing has changed in the past ten years regarding overall over-representation of minorities in special education and their levels of achievement.

In another study, Graham (2012) used student registration data, school location and school-type data from government special schools in New South Wales, Australia, to obtain more detail about the type of special education programs where Indigenous students are likely to be overrepresented. Graham's (2012) study determined that Indigenous students were overrepresented in terms of being identified as having behaviour disorders and were placed in related behaviour classes or programs. Graham (2012) highlights cultural differences as a contributing factor to insufficient service delivery giving an example of this difference as Aboriginal English, which is the English spoken in Aboriginal homes, with a vernacular specific to their experiences in their Aboriginal community. Teachers, however, speak standard Australian English resulting in problematic communication scenarios. This research provides a critical perspective on how paradigms influence the social construction of disability and the resulting systemic discrimination of Indigenous students including a critical examination of inclusion in the classroom. Besides the example of how the absence of more prominent Anishinaabemowin opportunities in school disengaged my son, parallels to student experiences in Ontario become evident throughout the analysis of the stories in Chapter 5 and 6. The conversation about social paradigms determining how Indigenous students are viewed in school continues in the CDA discussion.

Bartlett's (2019) research examines literacy, numeracy, and achievement gap data from the Manitoba school system and suggests that major changes to systemic and structural special education practices need to happen to ensure equity and responsiveness. She offers suggestions of models of funding but does not provide specific details about what these models would look like in practice. Bartlett (2019) speaks to the personal gifts of Indigenous students and as such, champions an asset-oriented approach, as continues to be a prominent theme in this dissertation.

Reviewed research affirmed that the overrepresentation of Indigenous students within special education still exists today and has not really changed. Findings within this literature review demonstrated that unfortunately, there is not much research that has explored issues regarding the special education experience for First Nation students in Canada to inform the development of a better system to change this current situation. Existing research is based on analysis of quantitative enrolment based data. This literature review revealed that there is no research findings based on data from stakeholders of special education systems, such as students, educators, program leaders, parents, or other community members. This affirms the importance of this dissertation and the type of data that was sought to address this gap.

McDermott (1995) explains that culture is a collective understanding or knowing of what people need in order to live with each other in terms of goals, rules, expectations, and other complexities. His research demonstrates how much influence and power the dominant culture has in disabling and identifying who is disabled. By understanding the influence of culture, we see that disability is heavily influenced by human perceptions and sociopolitical/economic variables.

In understanding special education as it relates to First Nation students, it is necessary to explore disability and discourses about disability in order to understand it as a cultural or social construct. CDA is a methodology used in this research to reveal how a colonial mindset has informed special education practices and positioned Indigenous students in special education. Such

understandings underscore the effects of colonialism and how such discourse continues to affect Indigenous students with disabilities. CDA examines language with the assumption that language and power are not predetermined, nor influenced only by one voice, or are occurrences that have to be permanent, formally stated, “Discourse Analysis is the study of language at use in the world, not just to say things but also to do things....in social, cultural, and political terms” (Fairclough, 2013, p. 1). Analysis is about finding out how partial and malleable language is and when discourses arise within and affect social contexts and constructs. Discourse results from the interaction between language, world views, values, and context often resulting in political or social actions and processes of power. Briefly, several research papers convey how CDA explores the power of discourses or instances where language influences social structures including the longevity of that influence (Conway 2023; Fairclough 2013; Paugh 2011; Rau 2018). For example, teachers often held a lower level of expectation for Indigenous students in classrooms similarly as they would for poor students (Castagno, 2008). Paugh (2011) describes how teachers tended to use language that positioned students and families either within binaries of ability or even normality. “Once positioned, students’ identities were enduring and resistant to re-evaluation, even when teachers were presented with confounding evidence” (p. 821). The literature reviewed also reveals the connection between eugenics discourse, a historical move to engage genetic engineering discussed in the following paragraph, including its impact on First Nation students.

Colonial culture tends to want to fix biological, intellectual, or environmental shortcomings to solve challenges with students at school. This need to fix very much informed why Indigenous students were sent to Indian Residential Schools and “educated” in ways that would ensure their assimilation. Deficit-oriented thinking not only adversely affected Indigenous children and Indigenous communities but negatively affected the trajectory of this demographic for generations. While certainly not as horrific as the residential school experience had been, “...‘deficit’ constructs

of learners and learning continue to dominate how students' environments are organized, and how assessment and instructions are implemented (Paugh, 2011, p. 819).” Factors like heredity and race are still prevalent in decisions today made in the diagnosis or engineering of, or search for different forms of disability, a perception of undeveloped or underdeveloped attributes, and reasons to not service students in general classroom programming. The Indigenous community is still mired by eugenics. Black (2003) brings our attention to Galton's description of eugenics “as the student of all agencies under social control which can improve or impair the racial quality of future generations” (p.18). Baker (2002) points out how eugenics presently informs the everyday classifying, dividing, and sorting practices of today's school systems. The more one digs into the discourse of disability, particularly in terms of being a social construct, the more prevalent are the eugenic beliefs in a hierarchy of human races/nations and these characteristics remain intact in school systems and societies. Baker (2002) offers several terms to describe the consequences of eugenics in present society such as “quality control of national populations”, “hunts for disability”, “outlaw ontology”<sup>10</sup> and “ableist normativity” (pp. 664-674).

The tyranny of the norm has ensured the creation of the disabled person which translates into policy language such as that exhibited in “speconomics” (Iannacci, 2018, p. 56) where public schools are driven to identify special education needs of students if they wish to receive funding. The ‘norm’ is less about the human condition but rather a feature of a dominant society. Industrialization and the ramped-up search for ‘more’ in the competitive nature and focused obsession of capitalism brought practices and discourses that are linked to late eighteenth and nineteenth century understandings of nationality, race, gender, criminality, and sexual orientation among other things. This was also the time of neoliberalism, as described in Mitchell's (2012)

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<sup>10</sup> According to Baker (2002, p.674), ‘*outlaw ontology* refers to a way of being or existing that is thought outside the normal’ such as the ‘unacceptable rogue outlaws’ of the movies.

Biopolitics of Disability, or the onset of “hyper-market-driven societies that organize identities largely as consumers” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015, p. 4). This was the beginning of the ‘paradox of support’ era where inclusion in society for people with disabilities seemed to be in place but supports would be hollow in its intent, specifically a destabilization of such supports would follow shortly after announcement of their introduction.

Canada introduced the *Indian Act* in 1876, which was the blueprint for apartheid, in line with those laws of England such as the British bill introduced to control people with intellectual disabilities including the sterilization of persons with disabilities to improve the human stock (Baker, 2002; Davis, 2013). One of my cousins, now deceased, told me that she went to her doctor about fertility issues about forty years ago. He had asked her if she had any operations under anyone else’s care and he showed her a letter that the government had written to all doctors encouraging them to sterilize any “Indian” woman that they have had on any operating table for any procedure, without her authorization. Fortunately, this doctor did not agree and refused to perform such unethical practices.

In examining the experience of the residential school and day schools on Indigenous children and the following generations, one must look at what that experience was especially in terms of eugenics or demographic engineering. In their 1869 report to Canada’s Minister of the Interior, Inspector E. McColl and N.F. Davin recommended “aggressive civilization”, assimilation or genocide as it were, after President Grant directed this in the United States. They argued that a school in the community was not working, stating:

...because the influence of the wigwam was stronger than the influence of the school... [Nothing can be done with an unschooled Indian more than to be taught to do a little farming, and stock-raising]...The child, again, who goes to a day school learns little, and what little he learns is soon forgotten while his tastes are fashioned at home, and his inherited aversion to toil is in no way combated. (pp. 1-2)

Davin (1869) goes on to recommend boarding schools. At best, families were deceived by the promise that their children would be educated in a meaningful way and in a healthy environment. Very few received that. At worst, children were abducted at the promise of a meal or a treat. The premise of the schools was based on Sir John A. MacDonald's focus on taking the Indian out of the child (Lemann, 2018) by punishing the use of original languages, contact with siblings in the school, and cruel consequences to non-compliance to school rules and expectations. These generations of children were deprived of nurturing parenting, their language, their culture, and often, basic humanitarian care. A very CDA question is, was this assimilation, cultural genocide or bluntly, genocide? Steven Harper, as Prime Minister, acknowledged that the government viewed residential schools as an attempt at assimilation in his official apology on June 11, 2008:

Two primary objectives of the residential school system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions, and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption that Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, "to kill the Indian in the child." Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country. (Art, 2008)

Deficit discourses focus on what students cannot do and in the case of Indigenous students, this has dominated conversations in schools about Indigenous students who are not performing at the levels of non-Indigenous students. As demonstrated by the school board director in his comment to me about First Nation students entering school with deficits. Titchosky (2007) defines disability as,

...a process of meaning-making that takes place somewhere and is done by somebody. Whenever disability is perceived, spoken, or even thought about, people mean it in some way. The ways that disability comes to have meaning have something to teach us about our life-worlds. (2007, p.12)

In recent research and literature, emphasis is placed on meaning making. Titchosky (2007) emphasizes the consequences of this definition and how culture can produce meaning by elevating what is meant by disability. Examples of meaning making are evident in how the Māori took a

disability as simply to be one of a person's characteristic while the Cree accepted a disability such as the hair-shorn lip as being a gift in that it is a sign of connection to the spirit world.

Fraser (2010) emphasizes three examples of discourse, the medical discourse, the lay discourse, and the charity discourse. Medical discourse sees disability as an illness requiring treatment and becomes all about the pathology and diagnosis of a condition. This is present in Stage 3 of the medicine wheel and has seeped into current issues. Heydon and Iannacci (2009) explore the de-pathologizing of childhood in order to allow room for student agency and asset-based understandings of abilities. They theorize about the complexities and societal constructs of disabilities and how disabilities are juxtaposed against ability.

The lay discourse, (Fraser & Shields, 2010) or discourse from the average person or 'lay' perspective assumes that life must be awful and tragic for those with disabilities and that those affected should be institutionalized or removed from society. This could describe how the dominant society may have felt during the time of the *Indian Act's* development. Being an Indian was seen as a dreadful tragedy and while Indians had to be tolerated due to this tragedy, they were not part of the community. When initiated, the *Indian Act* included government initiatives like assignment of an Indian agent to a 'reservation' where Indians were restricted to living, ensuring that a dependency on the dominant culture was cultivated and maintained, at times a financial dependence or simply adherence to the new laws as interpreted by the agent. Opportunities for engagement with the external communities were blocked, such as not being allowed in restaurants where alcohol was served. This alienation often led non-Indigenous peers to see 'Indians' as not desiring external relationships. Non-Indigenous residents were not encouraged on reserves and living off reserve was only allowed if 'Indians' gave up their status as 'Indians' (Canada, 1985).

Charity discourse (Fraser & Shields, 2010) occurs where people with disabilities, in this case, 'Indians,' are viewed as weak and powerless and in need of care and attention. The *Indian Act* made

Indians ‘wards of the state’ to be cared for and protected from a world in which they could not cope regardless of whether or not this new world was a construct intentionally alienating Indigenous communities from their cultural practices and beliefs (Canada, Indian Act, 1985). There was no acknowledgement of Indigenous agency or even presence as a distinct people during this time. For centuries Indigenous voices were rarely sought or heard in policy debates. Indigenous people were considered victims with conditions manifested because of terrible suffering, incapacity, and, at times, helplessness of being swallowed up by a foreign system. European settlers in Canada brought with them the assumption that their civilization was the pinnacle of human achievement. They interpreted the socio-cultural differences between themselves and Indigenous peoples as proof that Canada’s first inhabitants were ignorant, savage, and—like children—in need of guidance (Art, 2008). Even today Indigenous people or students are assumed to not have opinions or presence. I often hear that ‘Indians’ should be grateful for what is being ‘handed’ to them in terms of assistance.

As a result of the charity discourse, Indigenous students with disabilities are not considered responsible for their behaviour or decisions and require help all the time. In contrast, Indigenous people are now regarded as being responsible for whatever pitfalls or challenges they encounter despite the fact previously, they were deemed to always need guidance. The *Indian Act* provided that guidance and has been a vehicle for the dominant culture to control the narrative about Indigenous people and how to deal with their perceived deficits.

The introduction of the *Indian Act* in 1876 was an astounding demonstration of how text, as a form of action, excluded and made the Canadian Indigenous “Indian” community the “other” in so many disabling ways. The Indian Act practically declared the disability of “Indians” by making it illegal for Indians to retain a lawyer to access their rights in the *Indian Act*. Status Indians’ only access to (western) education was through the residential schools or day schools. Until 1960, they could not attend a university or college where they could access the legislation without renouncing their

status as an Indian. Had they done so, they would have been evicted from their communities (Canada, 1985). According to the *Indian Act*, they could not congregate in public in groups of three or more or acquire the services of a lawyer.

Many changes were made to the Act in the 1950's. Until 1954, a person was anyone other than an "Indian". Indians only received the right to vote in federal elections in 1960. My father remembers that until the 1950's, he could not enter an establishment if there was alcohol on the premises as we were not allowed to consume alcohol. He now muses about his ability to sit in the same restaurant in the next town. Titchosky (2007) articulates that text is used to bring forward and organize issues of concerns. The *Indian Act* was a classic formulation of how to disable Indians. An Indian's literacy in English would have been sparse especially in legalize. This ensured that laws that affected Indigenous people were not accessible to them. "Texts then [are] a tricky matter inasmuch as they are produced things, are forms of social action, and are occasions or sites for self-regulation and, even, self-assertion" (p. 26). This is also indicative of the 'God trick' coined by Donna Haraway (Haraway, 1988) where text is used to project knowledge ominously and with authority, seemingly unbiased, to appear magically, without hint of the author's pen. Conway (2023) uses textual analysis when implementing CDA to better comprehend how the actions of government, educational, and Indigenous stakeholders were framed in the context of a particular goal. The onset and continued existence of the text of the *Indian Act* still indicate governments' intent to control the social construct of Indian life and maintain the imbalance of power.

In discussing disability myths, and in challenging disability as a deficit or defect, Dolmage (2014) coins the term 'normate' to,

...designate the privileged subject position of the supposedly (or temporarily) able-bodied individual and the culture that valorizes this position. Normalcy is used to control bodies primarily through ableism. (p. 22)

By ensuring that “Indians” could be tossed out of a restaurant and even arrested for being there is a cruel spin on ableism and normalates the treatment of Indians.

The isolation of disability is intentionally extracted from social contexts. “Normal” is the myth that is parent to all other disability myths within the broad scope of ability (Baker 2002; Dolmage 2014; Fraser 2010). The exploration of special education needs of disabilities, as they relate to Indigenous students, includes a need to understand pedagogy, especially one that rejects binary foundations like good learners/poor learners and segregation-based methodologies. The unfortunate legacy of this disability myth, of ‘normalcy’, as it pertains to Indigenous people is that it marked and constructed disability in ways that positioned Indigenous people as ‘lesser’ or the ‘other,’ creating stereotypes that were narrow, inflexible, and untrue. A wide range of narratives such as ‘the drunken or lazy Indian,’ has stood the test of time. Today that stereotype is no longer tolerated by the Indigenous community. I recall a summer that I spent in Banff in 1980 where people said that I “didn’t act like an Indian.” It shocked me to hear this. These comments were a reminder of my ‘other’ness that in my naivety of youth, and credit to my strong upbringing, had not had to digest at such frank, and in your face, levels. “These rhetorical schemes or myths tell familiar stories about disability from an ableist perspective” (Dolmage, 2014, p. 32). Fortunately, thanks to enlightened scholars such as Dolmage (2014), Baker (2002), Fraser and Shields (2010)), consistently linking disability and being “Indian” are being challenge. The ableist today continues to have power and feel better about themselves through giving, sometimes further disabling Indigenous cultures. Ableists and dominant settler culture can maintain power by feeling charitable in ‘helping’ Indigenous people advance or ‘pick themselves up’ acting from a position out of pity, which continues the charity discourse.

Current practices in education will endure if the status quo of assumptions about the nature of schooling and the respective roles of educators and students remain unchallenged. Negative

assumptions continue to be made about Indigenous people's behavior and capabilities. We are constantly reminded of who are the dominant groups and who holds the power and decision-making. The continued existence of an *Indian Act* in Canada is an astonishing example of dominance to this day. Section 115 of the Act speaks to how Canada still regulates education for Indians (Canada, Indian Act, 1985).

### **Critical Disability Theory (CDT)**

Critical Disability Theory (CDT) interprets disability as a social construct or cultural fabrication as opposed to inherent flaws as dictated by deficit models, sometimes laced with medical references. Baker (2002) articulates social constructs clearly; specifically claiming that dominant or 'normal,' 'able,' cultures or communities position disabilities as undesirable and therefore have a negative connotation. Titchosky (2007) states that disability is "made by culture" and reads as a negative ontology as has been demonstrated by how the dominant/settler society has for centuries, ensured that First Nation students are assumed to come into class with a need for special education because of their perceived deficits.

Discourse contextually embeds social practice into language and as we have seen, in action. Rae (2018) highlights that it is both "socially constituted and socially constitutive" (Rau, Elliker, & Coetzee, 2018, p. 90). The colonial legacy of deficit discourse regarding Indigenous communities is a Canadian story and as such can be viewed as the responsibility of Canadian society. The work for Indigenous communities and for Canadian society at large is to de-contextualize and remove meaning from the negative discourses used in reference to Indigenous people and ultimately First Nation students. Dominant discourses about the disabilities of First Nation students must be reconceptualized because the current discourse does not serve the progress of First Nation students.

### ***Stage 3: Walking Out of the Bush***

Indigenous communities have been working to gain their cultural, spiritual, and communal footing. In stage 2 of the medicine wheel, (Figures 3 and 4) I outline the colonial and genocidal impacts of colonialism on Indigenous communities and the ways disability discourses have been imposed on communities. In this stage, I describe how traditional Indigenous education methodologies can be brought forward into the contemporary context, to decontextualize the reigning negative discourse.

First Nations have fallen under the influence of western culture and have been forced to simulate foreign, touted as superior, western practises, particularly curriculum. Thankfully, there is greater and growing appreciation and confidence within First Nation communities to return to the original ways. Fear and shame that our ways are not valid is diminishing. Now the work is to increase the connection of dominant culture education systems to “the lives and worlds of the learners they are meant to serve” (Ali, 2009, p. 23).

Yee and Butler’s (2020) Canadian literature review reveals questions very similar to those being explored in this dissertation research. Their review draws on a decolonizing perspective to gain understanding as to why Indigenous students are overrepresented in special education programming (Auerback, 2007). Yee and Butler (2020) question how ‘(re)imagined’ special education systems and teaching practices in provincial schools could address the needs of Indigenous students, not just Indigenous students with special education needs. Their review highlights examples of the environmental impacts on the special education needs of an Indigenous student such as inadequate housing and the need to move away from community to access special education.

To turn the tide on the negative effects of this deficit discourse regarding special education and Indigenous students, we do what would work for all students with disabilities. Paugh and

Dudley-Marling (2011) advocate for the asset-oriented approach to teaching students with disabilities. This approach does not help teachers with an asset-oriented approach but instead assists them in convincing their colleagues to focus on what the students ‘can do’ rather than what they ‘cannot do’. It can be argued that a teacher’s personal epistemologies will shape how successful a student’s learning will be (Paugh, 2011). Asset oriented approaches and social constructivist theories are models that focus on enabling student-centered learning. There remain many teachers who still adhere to a teacher-centred approach. Brownlee (2011) uses Hofer ideas to define epistemic metacognition as a “set of beliefs, organized into theories, operating at the metacognitive level, that develop due to interaction with the environment and are influenced by culture and education” (p. 6). Brownlee (2011) further voices that while teachers with sophisticated personal epistemologies are better equipped to problem solve, there is still much work that could be done at the teacher education level to further develop teacher epistemology leading to effective teaching through meaningful approaches to learning, for example, where connections are made between new and prior knowledge. In contrast to rote learning, meaningful approaches to learning involving critical thinking and goal setting that consider a student’s culture and background, can engage all learners regardless of classification of ability (disability) or what may be perceived by settlers as the baggage of heritage.

Ultimately, the search is for educators who do not believe that disabilities mean learning cannot happen. Rather, when we engage educators with exogenous beliefs who look at the whole child and take an active role in supporting children with disabilities to learn, we are more likely to find student success and advancement (Brownlee, Schraw, & Berthelsen, 2011). “Well calibrated teachers know what they do and do not know and can therefore seek knowledge in areas that need improvement” (Brownlee, Schraw, & Berthelsen, 2011, p. 15). That calibration, if viewed from the perspective of the First Nation lens would ideally mean teachers who come with their original

Indigenous teachings, Anishinaabe or Haudenosaunee, for example, or non-Indigenous teachers who have understandings of those teachings. Anishinaabeg originally understood the spiritual realm, in that all things are of a spiritual nature. There is a sacredness and vigour to all things. Reciprocity is especially foundational to original teachings in the relationships between all beings, plant or animal including human. This reciprocity is a primary basis for the relationship between teacher and student. There are many teachers who have learned much from their students.

Many of us had the experience where classroom teachers or school administrators, often unknowingly, maintain discourses that result in further disempowering, even dehumanizing those with special needs. While my daughter, Jaime, attended an intensive learning and life skills program, in a segregated classroom in secondary school, I had many meetings, sometimes monthly, with the special education resource teacher leading the program to try and convince this teacher that Jaime was capable of learning. I could not make her understand that Jaime was not just the assessment results that I was constantly being shown, and those results were not where she had to stay. It was unfortunate in terms of time lost, that this classroom's staff could not comprehend that learning could still occur. I was frustrated but not undaunted. Through our own perseverance, initiative, and with the assistance of a tutor to maintain her reading level, Jaime graduated from Fleming College with a letter of achievement from the Dean. She succeeded in academics after all, and on the Dean's list.

Had there been a calibration to greater sensitivity to Indigenous worldviews, there may have been more advanced outcomes for Jaime in terms of how to progress as an Anishinaabekwe within the school. Culturally relevant/responsive teaching or pedagogy (CRP) according to Chang (2022), encourages academic success and cultural competence. While having Down Syndrome is an initial explanation for Jaime's placement in the class for students with special education needs and not directly a result of cultural implications, simply being Anishinaabe in a system long derelict of

Indigenous content warrants expectations that Jaime's education could have benefited from such cultural inclusion.

Paradigm shifts are necessary to take students with special needs away from being the observer or non-participant outside the parameters of the classroom. Inclusion is not a spectator sport that is accommodated by simply allowing a student to 'sit-in' on the learning within a classroom. Disenfranchising still continues despite formal policies of inclusion (Paugh, 2011) . The learning experience of students labelled with learning disabilities would change, if a paradigm shift occurred and instilled pedagogy that recognized what students were capable of and could do. To be so inclusive in the real sense of the word would require us to devalue negative labels. Dominant discourse perspectives are typically negative and imply that disability is the opposite of normal with descriptors that tend to use derogative terms such as impaired, defective, faulty, damaged, deficient, incapacitated, or broken. Positive discourses or asset-based approaches recognize difference as being unique and distinct. Positive approaches emphasize that all children should be honoured and respected and "have a place as valued members of classrooms, schools, and communities" (Fraser & Shields, 2010, pp. 7-8).

#### ***Stage 4: Self-determination of Indigenous Education by Indigenous Communities***

Several reports and reviews on disabilities in First Nation communities, specifically on Ontario First Nations' special education have been completed over recent years with one of the most recent dated May 2017 as chaired by Peter Garrow (2017). The foundational principle stated in this report is reflective of nearly all reports that had been written prior. Essentially, "First Nations [must] have the opportunity to achieve full and complete First Nations control of First Nations education, including in the special education context" (Garrow, 2017, p. 2). First Nations children deserve to attain the same levels of educational success as other children. No new conclusions have been drawn in these reports. The reports reflect the harmful effects of colonialism where original

languages, Indigenous values and beliefs are or have fallen to attrition. Urgency is in the air within First Nation communities who are trying to overturn these effects especially to the traditional knowledge system. There is a sense of urgency not only to reclaim language and spiritual practices but to reverse discourses of disability that have been imposed based on the culture and heritage of Canada's original people.

There is some good news in that optimal places of learning are being carried out in many First Nations today. While many communities do not have the desired physical structure that will house all that they dream of within their desired learning lodge, communities have worked with what they have at hand and have strived to manifest the journey of meaningful lifelong learning. There is a misconception that a place of learning is based on a desire to return to the past when actually, it is a desire to bring the meaning of who Indigenous people are at a foundational level to the present and for that meaning, that reconceptualized discourse, to be established for tomorrow. For too long, the original cultures of this land have been suppressed and not celebrated as a contributing presence to the modern-day culture of Canada. It has not been understood that Canada is the homeland of the original people of Turtle Island, and I stress, the homeland. This is the only place in this world where Anishnaabe, Haudenosaunee, Dene, and Inuktitut languages, among others, still live or can ever hope to be practiced. This is the land where the Seven Grandfather Teachings and the Great Law of Peace originated. First Nation, Métis and Inuit people exist because of this land, and in this place (Fife, 2004).

Indigenous people know this belonging, to the land, to this place, as the very heart of their being. The struggle has been to rise above the systemic efforts to eliminate this knowing. The struggle has involved retrieving the tools of our knowing. These tools originated where we thrived, in community, in extended family and on the land. A learning place for tomorrow would be an extension of that sense of place surrounded by the family and community. Often when non-

Indigenous people hear of the desire of our communities to become decolonized, they think that it means a desire to return to living in pre-contact conditions without today's technologies or conveniences. While the return of a pristine, natural environment is desirable, the overall assumption that we would want to live unlike others in society is a broad overstatement. Smith argues "at the heart of such a view of [Indigenous] authenticity is a belief that Indigenous cultures cannot change, cannot recreate themselves and still claim to be Indigenous. Nor can they be complicated, internally diverse, or contradictory. Only the West has that privilege." (Smith, 201, p. 77). Ultimately, it is desired to have our worldviews, life principles, established constitutions acknowledged and in coexistence or even incorporated into today's societal norms. It could be said that Indigenous communities simply want their value systems to have agency and not have identities and societies based in myths or folklore. The contribution of Indigeneity to today's world and the establishment of enduring Indigenous education systems depends on us advancing beyond preservation mode: studying then 'storing away' our culture and viewing it as not having viability in everyday life. Instead, our original knowledge needs to be revitalized, nurtured, and instilled in our young generations and in those to come. We have had vital knowledge to understand the natural world and how to best live with it (Andersen, 2014; Geniusz 2009).

This returning to ourselves, or "Biskaabiyang" (Geniusz, 2009; Simpson, 2011) reminds us to put our Indigeneity at the centre of all we do. To remember who we are in our teachings. Remembering brings back our belief in our connectedness to each other, to all things, to the land. Anishinaabe, as with most Indigenous communities highly revere each person born into the community recognizing that each child is not only a gift but is borrowed from the Creator. When current education processes and systems do not value an Anishinaabe child's abilities, Anishinaabe children understand that they are not being honoured and will disassociate from this system. Anishinaabe learning structures honour our children's spirit (Anderson, 2002).

In my position as Education Specialist with the federal department of ISC, I facilitated a discussion with a special education task team of fifteen representatives from First Nation communities in Ontario or regional political/territorial groups such as the Anishinabek Nation and Nishnaabe Aski Nation. Our discussions and work were based on the vision of an education system that is centred in asset-oriented learning, understanding that students need to be met where they are in ability, knowledge, and skill levels. Comparability with provincial systems has become a common approach to federal funding of Indigenous education and arguments are being formed as to why this must be viewed in more relative terms.

Provincial school board students have access to infrastructure such as good roads to travel to school, adequate housing, health, safety and basic hydro and internet connectivity. First Nations do not enjoy the same level of basic services critical to a child's well-being and ability to learn. Government commissions have stated that this access often does not compare to First Nation experiences therefore funding must include creating the infrastructure of all of First Nations (RCAP, 1996; Quebec, 2019).

Stage 4 framed the purpose of this research. In this stage, we are striving for self-determination of Indigenous education by Indigenous communities. This research will focus on how to reconceptualize disability and return children to places of high esteem in their Indigeneity. Despite these efforts, Indigenous communities still face high incidences of students identified as having an exceptionality (Auerback, 2007). There are also Indigenous students who have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that range from only mild accommodations to complete program modifications. The encouraging news is that since 2011, there has been a ten percent increase in graduation rates from secondary school of First Nation students who live on a reserve. The rate is now 58 percent for First Nations on reserve who graduate from secondary school compared to the national average of 92 percent in Canada (AFN, 2023).

The continued existence of such high incidence indicates that attention to equity discourse in program is required. The gap may indicate inappropriate or misidentified programming. Several scholars speak to the importance of CRP, specifically how it begins with teachers who can be challenging, analysing, and monitoring their own personal and professional assumptions, behaviours, and values about diversity and even unrealized view on latent classism (Rolheiser, 2011; Barrio, 2021; Richards, 2007). By understanding culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, teachers can better grasp ways to teach students with diverse value systems. Richards (2007) identifies three components of CRP as being institutional, personal, and instructional where personal and instructional are those that most effect teachers' work and includes those self-reflective requirements previously mentioned. Ultimately, when these three components are compatible with First Nation students' cultural realities, revitalization in social justice terms, the opportunities to meet the needs of all First Nation students are increased.

This research examines how the deficit model dominant in education shapes how Indigenous students living with disabilities are treated in the education system. The foundation of my research methodology is built on my relationships and interactions with Indigenous education communities across Ontario. This includes Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers and support staff who instruct Indigenous students. As an Indigenous educator, it is imperative that research is conducted within the Indigenous community and not on the Indigenous community. Indigenous control of Indigenous education, a national Indigenous aspiration (AFN, 2010), is not an individual pursuit but must be collectively led and in line with Indigenous worldviews. It must adhere to the understanding that all those within community are vital members and the results must be of benefit to all in the community.

The next chapter, Chapter 3, details the theoretical framework for this study, the importance of ceremony, the meaning of storytelling and demonstrates how my work is guided by the Seven

Grandfather Teachings. The theoretical framework consisting of the Two-Eyed Seeing framework and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and how these inform and guide the analysis of the stories researched is also explained. This next chapter outlines the method involved in obtaining the research stories in the research as well as the ethical adherence to a commitment to research with, and not on, Indigenous communities and participants.

## CHAPTER 4

### My Methodology

In this chapter, I provide an in-depth look at my research methodology and demonstrate how I have focused intentionally on maintaining the Indigeneity in the search for the stories through an Indigenized qualitative research methodological approach. This approach was further enabled by the application of theoretical approaches of the Two-Eyed Seeing Framework (TESF) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and guided by the Seven Original (Grandfather) Teachings. How the research participants were assembled and how the research was ethically conducted are also included in this chapter.

#### *Indigenized Qualitative Research Methodology (IQRM)*

The significance of the medicine wheel is detailed in Chapter 2 but this chapter describes the remaining components of the IQRM that includes how information was gathered, who the participants were, the influencing theories of TESF and CDA and the ethics involved in this research. The Indigeneity of the methodology lives in the ways that are utilized to honour the information gathered through storytelling and ceremony, primarily those ways that are guided by the principles of the Seven Grandfather Teachings. The theoretical structures of TESF and CDA aided in making meaning of this research and provided the strategies and rationale for this research to take shape within the four quadrants of the medicine wheel. TESF and CDA informed the analysis of the literature review, and the gathered stories obtained in interviews. Finally, this chapter talks about the inner workings and logistics of how this research and the findings came to fruition.

My IQRM approach is influenced by several Indigenous scholars (Battiste, 2020; Bell 2010; Castellano, 2020; Smith, 2012; & Wilson, 2001). Wilson (2001) states that Indigenous methodology speaks to relational accountability which means the work is performed with the awareness that we

are answering to n'dinawemaaganag, all my relatives or commonly known as, All My Relations. Awareness of the understanding of All My Relations comes to us through teachings by Elders and I have had the privilege of understanding this principle through the words of several Elders over the course of my life. What I share about n'dinawemaaganag is paraphrased from written words of different scholars (Archibald, 2008; Benton-Benai, 1988; Wilson, 2008). It is a brief understanding all of the laws of relationships, nature, sacred life, mutual support, of sharing and generosity, of harmony and unity, and even the importance of humour and mutual support as can be found in these writings. Anishinaabeg and many other First Nations people have similar n'dinawemaaganag teachings foundational to our way to live life. The Anishnaabe Creation Story teaches that the first beings to be created were the plant people. The plant beings are our eldest brothers and sisters. The next creation was the animals, the winged, the swimmers and the two legged. The last in creation were the human beings. This teaching tells us that we are all related, we are made of the same energy and should respect each and every one of Creator's creations. This includes mountains, lakes, trees and Noos Giizis (Father sun), and Nookmis Dibiik Giizis, (Grandmother moon). Since we are all made from the same energy, the Anishnaabemowin saying n'dinawemaaganag, references every human being on Mother Earth. This means that we are all related no matter what race or colour we are. Without our eldest brothers and sisters, the plant beings and all the animal beings, we could not survive but the plant beings and animals could survive without us. So, it is essential that we respect and honour all of Creation and be grateful for those gifts given to us. If you happen to look up in the sky and see an eagle or look on the ground and see an animal, pay attention because they are trying to tell you something. They look out for us. N'dinawemaaganag reminds us that we are all in relationship with one another and we need to nurture these connections. This adherence to the knowledge that we are all related is fundamental to the conduct of research involving First Nation people. In conducting research, this teaching guided the respectful relationship between me

as the researcher and participants and reinforces the strength and endurance of the knowledge gathered as both were involved to co-produce that knowledge.

Remembering teachings is emphasized in Shawn Wilson's (2008) exemplary work, "Research is Ceremony". The title of this book validates what Indigenous people know, that life, including research, is ceremony. Inherently, we, Anishinaabeg, First Nation people, hold all things sacred. Our teachings tell us to proceed intentionally, with thought to reciprocity, to those generations that are now our ancestors, and to how our steps will affect the coming generations. All of this is ceremony. Reciprocity using the offering of tobacco and gifts recognizes the back and forth of the relationships required of the research. Ceremony is personal to me, but I will share that the tobacco offered to my research participants was prepared in ceremony with intentions that remembered all of the generations. My personal preparations before beginning each session included personal ceremony and the presence of medicines, gratitude, and intention.

In her iconic book, "Decolonizing Education", Battiste (2013) speaks of education as the belief in possibilities and in this vein, this research speaks to what is possible in the academic life of First Nation students with special education needs. Battiste also speaks of Indigenous methodologies as being alternative ways of thinking about research processes and have their own ethical guidelines, which are accountable, again, to our relations. Ethical guidelines must be clear when working with First Nation communities and peoples. Battiste places emphasis on the use of mutually engaging dialogue and ensuring that a Nation's voice is represented accurately and authentically. Battiste's guidance aligns with the goals of this research in the deconstruction of curricular or program knowledge and reframing or reconceptualizing education emphasizing the embodiment of Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin. Smith (2012) suggests that we look at our own history through western eyes to be able to transform our views in a way of coming to know our past calling

this the “critical pedagogy of decolonization” (p. 36). Smith also provides excellent guidance when approaching communities and how the possession of a “good heart” (p. 10) will be the primary concern of those First Nation members who are approached. Conscientiously respectful, I have drawn on my experience in First Nation education and life as an Anishinaabekwe, mother and educator and felt with honour and humility, time after time throughout the research process, that my heart was welcomed by my research participants.

### *A Two-Eyed Seeing Theoretical Framework*

Understanding varied perspectives gives way to exploring Indigenous content to accommodate change in established institutions affecting Indigenous people especially in terms of progress in education. Simply, it is wise to utilize a modality or methodology that considers Indigenous and western perspectives. Battiste (2013) lays out a blueprint for understanding TESH modality by suggesting that we consider assumptions underlying the foundational perspective of each view and notes where merging could work, lending to neither one nor the other as being the sole arbiter of the pedagogy and allowing for competency in the use of both modes of thought.

Wright (2019) indicates that there is no uniformity in the literature or a distinguishing explanation of what “Two-Eyed Seeing” actually is, but it can be described as viewing the world or a scenario with one eye based in Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin, Indigenous Knowledge, while the other eye is focused on westernized knowledge. Researchers have seen that there is merit in using this framework to inform Indigenous research. Murdena and Albert Marshall, Mi’kmaw of Nova Scotia (Bartlett, 2012), are credited with initiating the concept of “Two-Eyed Seeing” as a guiding principle. Marshall wanted to ensure that educators remained true to the ways of knowing and the knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples. His unease lays in the inclinations of people to make it up with questionable authenticity of Indigeneity (Bartlett, Marshall, & Marshall, 2012). Marshall’s original

intent was to entwine authentic Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin with mainstream knowledge in science to form an “Integrative Science” (p. 332). This intent to interlace western modalities and Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin is why the TESH resonates. There is merit in exploring both practices in delivering formal education. This exploration has merit for educators, who wish to have the knowledge and skill set to move from Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin-focused classroom programs to those classrooms where more western focused pedagogy exists and vice versa. It also serves First Nation students who have to transition back and forth between schools of different pedagogies in First Nation schools and provincial schools. TESH has gained popularity among research funders because it is deemed to address one of the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission where research is to be culturally safe, and with rather than on Indigenous peoples (Canada, 2012). Wright (2019) explains that TESH is the exploration of worldviews in an ethical and respectful coming together of people with differing perspectives.

As the sole researcher, I have witnessed educators in Indigenous education communities who see the binaries when looking to education or classroom strategies, namely Indigenous and non-Indigenous (generally western) modes of thought. While Indigenous teaching strategies could alienate non-Indigenous educators not familiar with the Indigenous worldviews, including such strategies could invite greater engagement of Indigenous students. Simply providing curriculum materials containing Indigenous perspectives in western elementary /secondary classrooms such as books with illustrations, themes and main characters that are Indigenously produced in all grades is a beginning. The western practice of written or printed material is accompanied by content provided by Indigenous sources. While this provides opportunity for engagement of Indigenous students when they can see themselves in the material and opportunities for non-Indigenous students to learn of Indigenous cultures, Smith (2012) encourages decolonization that is beyond deconstructing western frameworks by suggesting that Indigenous education communities build strength to insert

who they are as a people into all aspects of teaching students, “..to assert and claim humanity...”(p.27). The complexity of western power structures has been amplified by the dehumanizing of Indigenous people within those structures, “...Indigenous societies...were not civilized enough to have systems, they were not literate, their modes of thought were inadequate” (p.29). The message that Indigenous people ‘are inadequate’ has long seeped into Indigenous communities and instilled a hesitance in Indigenous educators to incorporate Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin into our burgeoning self-determined education systems. Many Indigenous communities are convinced that they have to follow western based systems in order for their children to succeed and even survive in today’s landscape. TESH in this study is not a Venn Diagram focused on where the commonalities are. Rather, TESH is very clearly two different lens with the Indigenous lens being a larger one in the context of this research. For First Nation students, there is more emphasis on seeing education through the Indigenous lens as that perspective has been lacking in the current colonized system. However, both eyes are focused on special education for First Nation students, within this research.

While still not perfect in definition, TESH has elements that are useful in this research. There are opportunities in this methodology, to explore western education practices with a lens on Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin when critically examining special education and the nature of how each perspective sees disability. Considering western education practices critically is needed to advance the seamless transitions between First Nation and western systems since this is the reality for First Nation students.

In considering discourses of disability, First Nation communities have been impacted by Western perspectives on how children with special needs are viewed. In the literature review of Chapter 3, the history of how settler culture regarded the capacity and academic potential of

Indigenous students was explored, including how historically based discourse resolutely stunted Indigenous children from achieving academic success due to dominant perspectives based on assumptions of deficit.

By studying the history and outcomes of special education in Indigenous communities, First Nation educators can take the message of Vine Deloria Jr. to heart as he “challenges Indigenous educators and students to be more like ‘scouts’ by using their observation skills to inform and guide future decisions” (Corntassel, 2011, p. 1). Indigenous educators and students are gaining agency and can question the structure and intent of classroom pedagogies. No longer do we need to accept the status quo. I have witnessed First Nation school communities gain confidence in their ability to determine what will be included in their schools’ curriculum, and asserting the need for culture and especially original language in Indigenous education.

TESF may be regarded as ‘mediating’ between two worldviews, rather than Vine Deloria’s ‘warrior of the truth’ stance. As with Smith (2012), who tells Indigenous people to start “writing back...[while]...writing to ourselves”(p.38), Deloria (Corntassel, 2011) calls for us to challenge dominant colonial discourses and reveals the instability of TEF because the lens are not of equal size. Keeping in mind Deloria’s warning, this research was carried out with a focus on Indigenous thought as the key factor when reviewing the results of the research. Interview questions were formed to allow participants to include their vision for culture and Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin within education strategies. Corntassel (2011) provides guidance on how to navigate those places where one should insist on infusing Indigenous thought and being vigilant so that Indigeneity does not disappear under the dominant Western influence:

It is about raising awareness of Indigenous histories and place-based existences as part of a continuing struggle against shape-shifting colonial powers. Insurgent education entails creating decolonizing and discomforting moments of Indigenous truth-telling that challenge the colonial status quo. It does this by

questioning settler occupation of Indigenous places through direct, honest, and experiential forms of engagement and demands for accountability. Insurgent educators exemplify Indigenous forms of leadership by relating their daily struggles for Indigenous resurgence to broader audiences using innovative ways that inspire activism and reclamation of Indigenous histories and homelands. (Corntassel, 2001, p. 1)

Choosing to use an Indigenous perspective is a challenge in and of itself when considering methodology, especially considering the number of First Nations in Canada each with different dialects, perspectives, traditions, protocols in ceremony, general etiquette, and basic ways of life. One may be hard pressed to find perfectly matching practices, pedagogies, policies, and protocols even among the different Michi Saagig Nations in the Peterborough area. The complexity in understanding the 'Indigenous lens' or what it means to have an eye on Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin, Indigenous Knowledge, exists because there is no pan-Indigenous Knowledge or even Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin. One simply cannot use broad strokes (Antoine, 2018; Toulouse, 2015). There are contextual cultural considerations in terms of the design of the research through clarification of the source of particular teachings and protocols.

It is appropriate in the discussion of TEF to include an understanding of "ethical space" (Ermine, 2007, p. 193). Ermine (2007) states that there is a need for an ethical space between Indigenous and Western societies, with disparate worldviews, to be poised to engage with each other in ways that do not fall into privileging Western norms and support dialogue across individuals in different communities. The ethical space can be used to examine the diversity, similarities, and positions of two peoples: Indigenous peoples and those of Western society. Ethical standards as have been recognized by the Supreme Court of Canada's rulings which called for a new approach to Indigenous-Western dealings<sup>11</sup>. Ermine (2007) says that the rigidity of boundaries is clearly marked in these forms and there is now more sensitivity to worldviews in order to avoid antagonistic

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<sup>11</sup> Constitution Act 1982 affirmed Aboriginal and treaty rights; R.v Van der Peet (1996) acknowledged these rights as does the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (source Ermine, 2007)

dialogue outside of the ethical space. Such ethical space became apparent in this research when considering the sensitive nature of student needs and parent/teacher experience in special education. The space was one where trust prevailed as educators communicated their truths about working with First Nation students within either First Nation schools or in provincial schools. Parents and students told about their family's experience in the school systems. This ethical space was particularly important for First Nation participants to be able to speak their truths of their experience as educators or as caregivers and to examine their perspectives from whichever perspective they may have favoured. For example, a First Nation caregiver I sat with wanted only western objectives in the education of their child. As the researcher, I opened an ethical space between us to allow them to freely convey this perspective in our conversation.

I also applied a decolonizing approach to my TESH. This was an audacious endeavour, not easily achieved but necessary given the colonial history of research on Indigenous peoples. Indigenous research was for many years, largely conducted by non-Indigenous researchers about Indigenous people. To claim that a methodology is decolonizing requires assurance of the prominence of Indigeneity in the research and the application of decolonization principles. Colonialism complicated our connections to land and our Indigenous identities by removing the stories, teachings, languages, and agency of our people (Moreton-Robinson, 2016). Decolonization is more about ensuring that what was lost is re-introduced rather than about removing something like colonialism (Pete et al, 2013). Tuck and Yang's (2012) important work, "Decolonization is not a Metaphor", features the vital occurrences necessary to achieve decolonization which are not only paradigm shifts in how Indigenous people see themselves but if not as importantly, in how non-Indigenous peoples view Indigenous peoples. The influence of such views leading to damaging discourse was evident throughout the literature in Chapter 3. Regaining self-defining views, and education strategies, is what Smith (2012) sees as the process of decolonization where Indigenous

people are divested of the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological colonial power. TESH shows us that allies and alliances are vital to the decolonization process as allies help provide agency to Indigenous presence and all that it means in values, ideals, and worldview. Lowman and Barker (1980) are exemplary as such allies and recognize that there is no “Indian” problem, there is a ‘settler’ problem (p.13). Lynn Davis’s “Alliances” (2010) peels back the moss to reveal how important these alliances are and how they would look if directed from Indigenous leads. We see evidence of this in the findings of Chapter 5 where non-Indigenous educators have been influenced by the First Nation communities where they teach and became inspired allies. The journey to decolonization involves an interaction of the survivor, the thriver, the settler, and the ally.

### **Two-Eyed Seeing Framework (TESF) and Special Education**

This research looks at special education through the lens of current Western practices in special education in the classroom and through the lens of Indigenous understandings of education and where special education may exist in those Indigenous philosophies. Two-Eyed Seeing allows for increased understanding and the recognized agency of Indigenous epistemologies and knowledge systems across a vast community of educators. This approach seeks to provide a revelation that Indigenous approaches do not have to be restricted to Indigenous communities, but are accessible to all school communities which include Indigenous students, and to ensure good teaching.

An example of using TESH can be illustrated in the examination of an Individual Education Plan (IEP). IEPs are used in current western practices and need to be critically examined regarding its relevance to First Nation students. How can strategies developed using an Indigenous lens fit into an IEP? Are there other methods of record keeping that fit better? With an Indigenous focus on gifts or asset-based approaches to students, can the IEP process be reconceptualised? The structure of the IEP may still be useful, but the information in it may appear quite different from that

normally viewed by educators. An IEP includes student goals, strengths, accommodations and/or modifications to a program. Accommodations bring accessibility to the program or curriculum without changing anything in it. Modifications provide actual change to the program expectations, standards, and sometimes, materials. For example, a student with a learning disability may be provided a literacy program that is modified to include reading materials at a level that is not at the level of the typical grade expectation. An IEP in a classroom based on Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin may stress more orally presented stories which may provide the student with the potential to achieve grade level expectations. CDT interprets disability as a social construct or cultural fabrication where 'ability' is defined in comparison with the *ability* of other students (Baker, 2002). McSorley (Baker, 2002) states "... 'white' rules and dominant codes of power...[where]...skills are based on a white frame of reference and fail to question the consequences of this form of gatekeeping"(p.683). Caution should be raised that IEPs must not be instruments of the social construct defining undesirable characteristics.

TESF can inform asset-based teaching that builds towards a system based on the development of gifts. Configuring learning scenarios according to goals that are set with a focus on student strengths, Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin or cultural practises based on mastery of skills would encourage student well-being, self-esteem, and self-motivating skills. Mastery of skills and scaffolded knowledge-based intellectual development fosters the notion of education as a public good rather than solely as developing a labour market. The notion of balance and relationality has been the basis of Anishinaabe communal life, and not a notion frozen in the past but a time-honoured principle that can be carried forward to today (Monchalin, 2016). Is there room for a system that is not so focused on achievements marked according to numerical or alphabetical scales recorded minutely but rather based on assessments that are responsive to what the student brings to the classroom. Instructional strategies such as children being given time to achieve success when attempting a new

skill is a concept that has been explored in the research and is not new in the realm of special education (Bennett, Dworet, Gallagher, & Somma, 2019). For First Nations, the competitiveness of progress and achievement were not measured in percentages or numerical values but rather on developing their assets, or skills or talents to promote cooperation and interdependence. Time and measurements are western values. In Indigenous practises, our work is to ensure that students, when it comes to learning and in the words of Nicole Bell, that we give them the time so they can ‘just do it’ (Bell, 2006).

Two-Eyed Seeing Framework used in the comparison of western modalities of addressing special education needs to be compared to Indigenous understandings of special education. Philpot (2007) suggests that the western diagnostic/prescriptive medical view of special education is outdated and, instead, classroom teachers should be empowered with the “knowledge and skills to identify the authentic needs of students and to differentiate instruction to respond to those needs” (p. 1). A deficit-based model results in children becoming stigmatized and results in the perpetuation of a hierarchical system of who gets what level of good educational instruction. Philpot (2007) proposes addressing the displayed needs of students versus the prescribed labels. Indigenous practices are timely responses to the need for student focused, asset-based modalities in classroom program organization, especially in Indigenous learning environments like First Nation schools that search to address the growth of the whole child. If implemented, this approach could transform existing education practices for all children. It illustrates how relevant and important Indigenous practices are to education. Education can be reviewed with the Two-Eyed Seeing method as it has contributed to the “subjugation and marginalization of aboriginal people but is regarded as a critical agency for their future social, economic, and political success....” (Philpott, 2007, p. 9).

Reconceptualization of special education for First Nation students will require delivering programs that have one eye on a student’s needs and identity as First Nation people, and the

understanding if this is done, that there will be social, economic, and political contributions to society by all First Nation students.

### *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a second theory and another focus that I employ in this study to further explore the effects of colonialism on Indigenous students with disabilities. CDA is a qualitative analysis method that, as discussed in Chapter 2, draws meaning from language.

Terminology that is used in discussions about First Nation students with special education needs and is a result of colonization will be considered a dominant discourse in this research. Deficit discourse origins focus on what students cannot do. Rau (2018) offers that rules regarding discourse are normative in that discourse provides approval or conversely prohibits ways of thinking leading to an establishment of social norms that can become deeply entrenched. In doing so, rules of discourse construct social reality. In this research, CDA is used to investigate, review, reveal, and clarify how power and discriminatory values arise and are utilized in disability discourse regarding First Nation students. CDA research explores the power of discourses or instances where language plays a role in shaping a social event (Paugh, 2011). Today, deficit discourse and medical models are the dominant ideologies in special education. The dominant Eurocentric society has for centuries held that First Nation culture automatically means that First Nation students come into class with a deficit. This negative view of culture was used by teachers in 1910, to segregate classes in Toronto (Ellis, 2019) on the basis of ethnicity and race, which, in their view were factors that limit "...genius, institutions and national life cannot by any tour de force be made to understand..." (p. 40). These deficit views often remain ingrained in how educators understand First Nation students' abilities and influence the ways in which the students are placed in special education, and what forms of pedagogy First Nation students experience in these programs. Therefore CDA is essential as a

methodology for this examination. to critically examine language and ideas that are taken for granted.

Rau (2018) explains that three fundamental traits lie within critical discourse analysis, and they fit beautifully in the discussion of First Nation students and disability discourse. These traits are “(1) The role of power in the social (re)construction of reality; (2) Interrupting social inequities; and (3) Reflexivity and critique” (p.5). Fairclough referenced by Conway (2023) similarly speaks to how to approach CDA by focusing on a social wrong, by looking at the obstacles to combating that social wrong and to question whether society needs that social wrong. Finally, how can these obstacles be removed or circumvented?

The role of power, a social wrong, as a discourse in discussions about special education or disability is quite evident throughout the research in this dissertation. Historically imbalanced relationships have been and are represented in the extreme case of laws such as the *Indian Act*, down to provincial curricular documents over the years that lack Indigenous content. Since the onset of the Indian Control of Indian Education (ICIE) movement documented as policy by the Assembly of First Nations’ predecessor, the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) in 1972 (Pidgeon et al, 2013), First Nations in Canada have been working to interrupt these social inequities in education, and to remove the lack of Indian control over much of our lives in Canada. Since 1972, First Nations have been calling for unity to work to ensure Indigenous language, ways of knowing, being, values and overall culture exist in education of First Nation students that is equitable if not better than any other Canadian education system. Conway (2023) talks of the ‘power of discourse’ and the ‘power over discourse’ (p. 4). This power has been the challenge of First Nations regarding education since contact. Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators have worked to understand the difference between Indigenizing education and decolonizing education for First Nation students.

Conway (2023) reminds us that Indigenizing education with approaches that simply insert Indigenous content and worldviews into curriculum without changing practices or pedagogy does not result in transformative education. The only benefit may be that students are introduced to content they otherwise would not encounter. Decolonizing education at all levels, must move beyond curriculum or pedagogy towards system wide transformation. Sheldon (2020) states that “Decolonization must be the unique goal of anticolonial education projects because it is the goal that meaningfully imagines and honors Indigenous people’s liberation and resurgence” (p.11).

Further to Conway (2023) and Sheldon’s (2020) points, without decolonization of education, Canadians will remain ignorant of the histories and current realities of Indigenous Peoples. Canadian opinions continue to be shaped by the dominant discourse which leads to a construct that Indigenous People are lesser than their Settler counterparts. Dominant discourses highlight the traumatic aspects of Indigenous history and identity without regard for Indigenous communities who celebrate strength, growth, and creativity. Examples of what can be celebrated can be found at the graduation ceremonies of First Nation schools across Ontario and the success of those students especially those who come through with a strong sense of their Indigeneity and a growing command of their language.

A prevalent theme within this research is the view that First Nations see all children as having gifts, as being able to contribute, rather than using terms like ‘disability’ that imply a deficit because of the ways in which disability has been socially constructed. While disabilities are legitimate personal conditions experienced by some students, and require specific attention in the classrooms, CDA assists in developing our understanding of the roots of oversubscribed identification of students who have been deemed to have ‘disabilities’. Exploring Indigenous epistemologies reveals

examples of those gifts and further explores the effects of misinterpretation of these gifts and how this has fuelled the pathologization of Indigenous students.

The combination of CDA and TESF compliment each other in this exploration. Three assumptions have surfaced from the literature findings, the research participants and from my experience given throughout this research of special education using these methodologies.

1. Special education for First Nation children is exacerbated by historical, racist, genocidal, societal and policy realities in relation to public education for First Nation children.
2. First Nation ideology and epistemology place children as gifts and with gifts in their relationship to community and their contribution to that community.
3. There are legitimate physical, cognitive, and learning disabilities amongst First Nation children requiring special education, that would be better serviced through asset-based program delivery.

The relevance and validity of these assumptions will be further explored throughout analysis of the research stories.

### **Research Approach**

This dissertation uses an overall Indigenized Qualitative Research Methodology to explore the special education experience of First Nation children in Ontario and how it can be reconceptualized or reimagined to better meet their needs. Castellano (2020) advised that the research question being asked and the context where clues to an answer lie should guide the choice of research method. My research questions are:

- 1) *What does 'special education' mean in First Nations communities in Ontario?*
- 2) *How can special education be re-conceptualized or reimagined to better meet First Nations children's needs?*

With specificity in Ontario, these questions must be answered by going to the source, interviewing,

and hearing the stories from First Nation Elders, educators, caregivers, and students in Ontario. The methods of gathering stories from these sources are interviews. I also drew on ceremony, storytelling, and reflecting on the Seven Grandfather Teachings to support me as the primary researcher in preparation and analysis. Archibald's (2008) story work research provides excellent guidance in understanding the power of storytelling in research and to remember Kirkness and Barnhardt's (Archibald, 2008) four R's, "respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility" (p.1).

A secondary focus of the research is looking at the delivery of special education programs and resources (financial, material, and human) available to educators and communities. Statistics available from the Assembly of First Nations and Statistics Canada has been reviewed to provide contextual information and to determine the prevalence of Indigenous students with special education needs.

### **Participant Group**

While the original intent was to interview a small number of participants, interest grew provincially, by word of mouth, and 31 interviews were conducted from October 2023 to January 2024. Participants were selected based on their special education and First Nation education experience and were within my professional network. The intent was that they could identify what special education for First Nation students encompasses as understood by those who are delivering or who have experienced the programs and those who can directly contribute to reconceptualizing these programs. Fifteen open ended interview questions led the conversations and are provided in the Interview script found in Appendix A.

My primary research involved conducting interviews with Indigenous, individuals who are of First Nation, Inuit or Métis heritage, and non-Indigenous educators, all of whom were educators of First Nation students; Elders with experience in education as identified by their community as

having earned that title through respect and experience; Knowledge Keepers; First Nation parents within Ontario's First Nation communities; and First Nation students, both in urban settings and on territory. There were two students interviewed, one 12 years old whose parent strongly encouraged me to interview her, which was done with the parent present and one former student over 18 years old.

### ***Participant Identity***

Due to the sensitivity of student needs and situations, participants remain anonymous in the research findings. Pseudonyms were originally to be assigned to all participants and places, if names were to appear in the findings but the sheer number of interviews that occurred meant pseudonyms were an impractical solution. Participants are identified in this dissertation only as First Nation, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, by type of school (First Nation or provincial) and by position. Sometimes a participant can be all of the mentioned positions and will show as either one or a combination of the following, Elder /teacher /SERT/(and) administrator. In the findings, there is intentionally no means to link stories to the same individual as the subject matter of individuals and their very personal classroom experience is to remain private and unidentifiable. Anonymity is important as trust between me, the researcher, and the participant, must be maintained. The full protocol for addressing the interview process is included in the Consent Form for Research Participants offered in Appendix B.

Generally, participants had to be over the age of eighteen (18) years old and as follows:

1. Participants who self-identify as First Nation Educators;
2. Participants, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who are First Nation Community Education Administrators or First Nation Education Department Managers;

3. Participants who are non-First Nation Educators with experience teaching First Nation children;
4. Participants who are First Nation parents or primary caregivers of First Nation students who have been identified as having special education needs;
5. First Nation Indigenous students (or former students) currently over the age of 18 who were placed in special education programs. I did, however, have a conversation with a student under 18, at the strong encouragement of the parent, while in the presence of the parent, and a written consent of the parent and student.

The following tables shows the composition of the participant group (Table 1), and the number of First Nations represented by geographical placement and road accessibility (Table 2) as well as representation of provincial school board (Table 3) within the research. The terms educator and teacher are used interchangeably and for the purposes of this paper, means a teacher with the Ontario teaching qualifications.

*Table 1 Composition of Participant Group*

Participant	Number of Participants (31 Individuals in total)
Elder *all were educators	7
Parent / Caregiver * 3 were educators	5
Educator/ Administrator	24
Student (or Former)	2
Indigenous Person	24
Non-Indigenous Person	7

*Table 2 First Nation Representation by Accessibility (Geography)*

<b>First Nation Access</b>	<b>23 communities represented</b>
Fly-In communities. (no Road Access, maybe winter ice road)	4
Road Accessible	19
North of Thunder Bay	7
Mid Ontario Region (Between Thunder Bay & Sudbury)	5
Southern Ontario	11

*Table 3 Ontario Provincial School Board Representation*

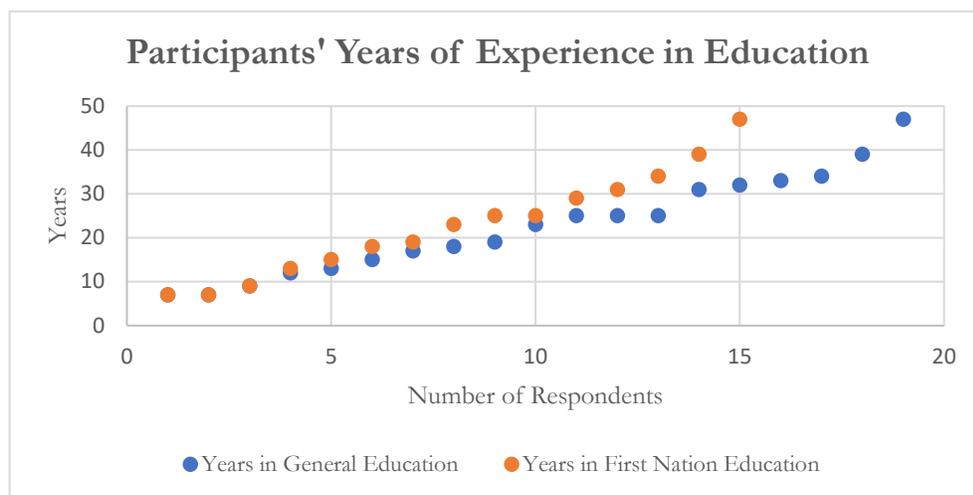
<b>Provincial School Board</b>	<b>2 Provincial school Boards represented</b>
Southern Ontario Provincial School Board	1
Northern Ontario Provincial School Board (North of Thunder Bay)	1

### ***Participant Education Experience***

The interview question of how many years of experience did the participant have in education including First Nation education resulted in the values as depicted in the graph in Figure 4. Figure 4 shows a range of seven to 49 years of experience in education for the 18 educators that responded to the question, not necessarily all in First Nation schools but all with experience with First Nation students. Of these respondents, 15 indicated years of experience in First Nation education ranging from seven years to 15 years. Of the participants interviewed who were educators, they were very experienced in the classroom or in delivering education services. Figure 4 illustrates the vast experience of the participants and through that, one can conclude that they have seen change, successes, and challenges in education throughout the years.

***Figure 4***

***Participants - Years of Experience in Education***

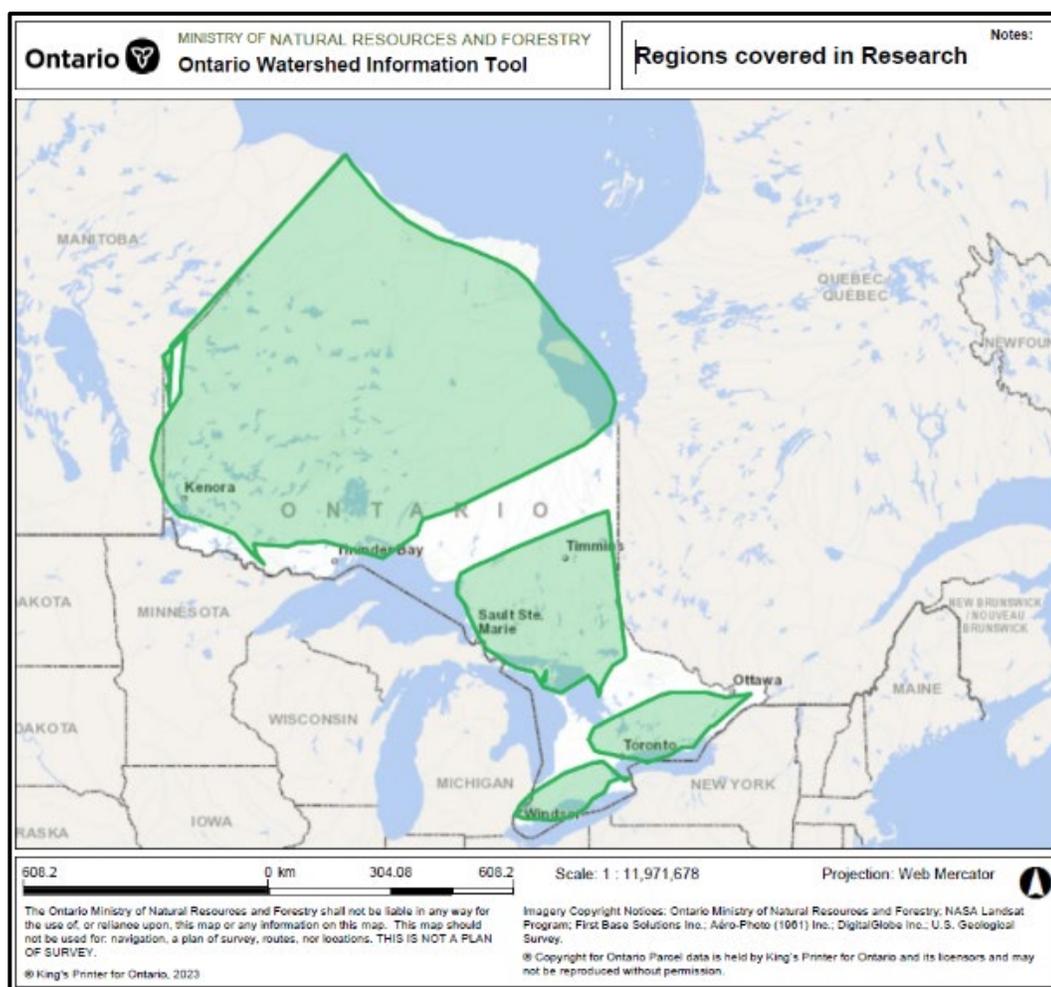


### *Special Education Qualifications*

Ten of the respondents have taken special education qualification courses with four becoming special education specialists. Two respondents said they did not go on to get their specialist as they would then be automatically assigned and confined to be the school Special Education Resource Teacher where “You have to be writing reports. You have to be doing IEPs and case studies.” The desire, instead, was to work with a variety of student as a classroom teacher where culture could be incorporated into the lessons.

### Map 1 Regions Represented in Research –

Adapted from Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry Map by S.Knott-Fife



Map 1 (Map of Researched Areas, 2024) illustrates the areas of Ontario where participants worked or lived, if parents. The map shares that a wide cross-section of communities across Ontario was accessed. This means a diverse range of experiences in terms of remote and access to urban communities were represented as well as the different nation types such as Anishinaabe, Ojibwe, Cree, and Haudenosaunee. With the original intention of conducting about a dozen interviews, using word-of-mouth among communities and educators, news spread, and I extended the number of interviews, or limited the number of interviews to 31 participants.

### ***Recruitment***

The focus of this project is on education programs being delivered in the name of special education for First Nation students in Ontario. Education programs are the prime responsibility of the classroom teacher, therefore, the domain of First Nation and non-First Nation teachers. These programs can be directed or restricted by available resources and local/First Nation, provincial or national mandates or curriculum requirements. This is why education department administrators or managers were interviewed as they have frontline knowledge of the limitations of the programs in the community in terms of resources and community requirements and sensitivities. A primary goal of this research is to critically explore how these programs can be reconceptualized or reimaged to better meet the needs of First Nation students with special education needs or if that is even required. Parents or primary caregivers of these students were able to give their perspectives of these programs while student perspective provided insights into their experience with special education programs as the research is about what would work best for students.

My experience in First Nation education over two decades has allowed me to develop personal and working relationships with education personnel from communities in the far north accessible only by plane as well as from many communities in the south. Interviews occurred after March 30, 2023, which was the date of my retirement from Indigenous Services Canada so there was

no confusion of the capacity in which I came to the participants. I informed anyone that I approached for an interview of my recent retirement, and most were already aware of my pursuit of a PhD through informal conversations in the past. I have had the honour to work with nearly all First Nation communities, political territorial organizations and tribal councils in Ontario and personally know at least one individual very well in the education department of most of them. Again, I had the honour and privilege to achieve a significant cross-section of education experiences by personally connecting to people through phone calls, emails, or personal visits. My original intent was to connect with at least one potential interviewee from each of the four directions of Ontario and from remote, connected, and urban communities. Namely, I wanted to connect with experiences of communities in the north, south, east and west Ontario and from communities with no road access or no readily available urban access, those with road access but still remote, and from communities with readily available urban access.

I reached out through phone calls and then emails to ask for an individual's engagement in my research. I used my personal network that I have built over 25 years in education. I was originally going to interview only 12 individuals, but I was humbled by the overwhelming response through word of mouth and had to cut the number off at 31 participants. When connecting with peers, some had me introduce my research intentions at small professional gatherings where interest really spread. I had known 19 of the First Nation participants for many years so I did not check their membership. The remaining five who I did not check, were referred to me by community members.

This research, designed to respect Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin, Indigenous Knowledge worldviews, and perspectives, also reflects my responsibility to First Nation communities, specifically, to ensure that First Nation voices are heard among other mainstream perspectives that historically have been the dominant voice in all sectors of society. With great humility, I believe that

this group of participants meaningfully shared their stories and reflected on all variations of community in First Nation education.

### **Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin /Indigenous Knowledge**

My Ph.D. Advisory Committee is composed of two Indigenous educators. Circumstances beyond anyone's control led me to having two supervisors. Esteemed Trent School of Education, Indigenous professor, Dr. N. Bell and Dr. L. Iannacci, Head of Special Education in the Trent School of Education. As a member and resident of a local First Nation and Anishinaabe, I continually consulted my committee and community, and ensured references to Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin has been acknowledged and well documented according to where I received it.

### **Elder Advisory Team**

I consider First Nation educators with extensive experience in formal classroom education to be Elders. Considering that the word *Elder* is a relatively modern term, there is no Anishinaabe word that describes how we have come to use the term today. Gete aya'aa means an adult, older person, or gchi aya'aa in Curve Lake dialect means great one, or big one. I often use Kinoo'amaagewinini or Kinoog'amaagewikwe, to mean one who teaches me (male/female). Ellerby (2001) classifies three types of Elders: a community Elder, an Elder healer and an Elder teacher. It is the latter type who have watched and participated in the evolution of special education for First Nation students as educators that I have called upon to share their knowledge and experience as my Elder Advisor Team in this research. This team assisted me in understanding special education from proven pedagogy and Indigenous perspectives and consists of my peers from work in the field over the past twenty-five years and included a retired Michi Saagig First Nation educator/administrator of Beausoleil First Nation, a retired First Nation educator/administrator of Akwesasne and a retired First Nation Educator from my First Nation, Curve Lake. Semaa was offered to these long-time colleagues and friends with humility and in honour of their vast knowledge and wisdom. This

generous group of Elders were readily available by informal and formal means. I met with them individually throughout this writing as their busy schedules allowed for discussion of ideas and encouragement. They were also approached and interviewed to provide valuable information about their experiences and are included in the 31-participant count. I relied on their guidance as well, when discussing traditional and general pedagogical subject matters within this study.

### **Interviews**

I approached the collection of stories through interviews to allow the sharing of lived experiences of the participants and their reflections on those experiences. Archibald (2008) calls this “telling stories as a way of interviewing” (p.42). Interviews were exploratory in nature. Exploratory research is an approach that investigates research questions not previously studied to any great degree (George, 2022). Dion (2009) used this approach in her research on Indigenous content in curriculum with a small number of interviewees. The exploratory nature of the research occurs in the interviews through the capturing of information not often expressed numerically. Findings are specific to Ontario First Nation students with special education needs. The interviews were conversational (Archibald, 2008) as Archibald defines, the questions asked were intentional in inspiring conversations about special education and First Nation students.

This PhD dissertation journey began in 2019, just before the pandemic era caused by the Covid 19 virus. Continuing through to the writing of this dissertation in 2024, I was not unlike other students who had to adjust to virtual and hybrid means of approaching academic pursuits. As such, comfort levels for safety in First Nation communities changed drastically on a weekly and sometimes daily basis during the planning phase of conducting the interviews for research. Community remoteness can also interfere with accessibility to easy travel so therefore, the plan was originally to conduct all of the interviews by video conferencing. Amazingly enough, however, windows of safety and comfort did open up over the latter part of 2023 and I had the great fortune

of conducting my preference of in-person interviews with 20 participants. Zoom Videoconferencing was used for the 9 interviews that could not be in person. Zoom was the preferred virtual application as it has a reliable recording capacity. Two participants due to physical limitations, answered the questions in written form. Interviews were generally an hour in length although a few went to two hours.

Participants were invited by a telephone call or email, to participate in an interview with details given in a follow up email. A copy of the invitation email and consent form is in Appendix B. Where the interviews were virtually conducted, a formal invitation was also mailed that included a tobacco tie and a gift handcrafted in my community as well as a small monetary gift. Tobacco and gifts were given to every participant. While I am aware that a few First Nation communities are predominantly Christian in practice and would not appreciate the offering of tobacco, all of the participants accepted tobacco.

The interviews were conducted to determine what has been working in special education in recent years, what simply does not work and what might an effective program look like. How much Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin exists in current curriculum and special education support and practices also became a part of conversations. Appendix 'A' contains a complete interview script outlining questions and the nature of the semi-structured interview process that resulted in co-developed knowledge. Knowledge from this research qualifies as co-developed knowledge because the gained information is a result of the sharing of influence in education and experience among the identified stakeholders. I gave tobacco and insured that my intentions were firm in the making of those tobacco bundles. Those intentions were based on respectful acknowledgement of the stories that I would receive and be entrusted to honour them as knowledge that would be revealed in this research.

Scholars such as Smith (2012), Baptiste (2013), and Wilson (2008) speak to co-developed knowledge and stress how imperative it is that knowledge gained through research is co-developed with the Indigenous community and even better, in the case of this research project within the community as I, the researcher am also Indigenous. These scholars speak further to the importance of the knowledge being returned to benefit the Indigenous communities. The intent of this research, as previously mentioned, is to bring utility of the gained knowledge regarding special education back to the First Nation education community. Interview questions prompted conversation to encourage a co-creation of knowledge between the participants and myself, rather than problematic, quick, ‘smash and grab’ interviews (Kovach, 2010). In the conversations that I had with the participants, I explained my intention of returning the finished research to communities with the purpose of being useful in their program development and delivery. The conversational interview was conducted in such a way that we both understood that what was being shared would be part of the knowledge created in the research. I did return to those participants when I was not confident that I had captured all the participant wanted to share and I needed clarity.

Two-Eyed Seeing Framework is apparent in the engagement of both First Nation and non-First Nation participants in using a decolonizing theoretical lens and a conversational method to gather knowledge. Dion (2009) engaged this type of approach and framed her questions in a way that garnered trust from the interviewee, considered to be the storyteller. They knew that their truth would be respected in her (re)telling. Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin is based on relational traditions and is open-ended (Benton-Benai, 1988; Johnson, 2003; Kimmerer, 2013; Smith, 2012). I am grateful that because of my long-standing relationship with most of the participants or those that referred participants to me, a level of mutual respect and trust already existed leading to the interview process.

### **Participant Withdrawal**

Though names are not public, participants had the option of leaving the research project at any point, including before researched stories analysis or before the findings were drafted.

Participants were advised that all information provided will be erased from recording devices within a year of dissertation defense or returned in written form, if desired. Again, I am humbled and filled with gratitude that all participants were eager to participate and trust me with their stories. No one withdrew from the research.

### **Analysis and Process**

An analysis of the themes arising from the co-developed knowledge is provided to address research questions, concerns, and foci. This thematic analysis (Cresswell & Creswell, 2018), identified patterns in the stories shared by interviewees that were evaluated and reviewed according to the methodologies mentioned earlier in this chapter. A research summary includes how the themes and patterns compare to the understanding of the stages the medicine wheel (Figure 2). The review of the results through the methodology of Two-Eyed Seeing and Critical Discourse Analysis revealed dominant constructs that need addressing. These are addressed in Chapter 4, Coming out of the Bush - Data Discussion and Analysis.

The stories in the research were analyzed for common themes, recommendations, and diversity of opinions. My professional and lived experience was applied in both the interview process and researched stories analysis. I come to the research having spent many years interviewing applicants for all staffing requirements of a First Nation school and education department. I have also facilitated focus groups, working tables and conference workshops to allow a group to discuss special education among other areas of education. I felt capable of facilitating these interviews and analyzing the stories that were shared in interviews.

The stories were coded using specific words to reference ideas, suggestions, and scenarios as raised by the interviewees (Cresswell & Creswell, 2018). The Codebook from the NVIVO coding application is shown in Appendix C. I anticipated that the emerging codes would include the following concepts: behaviour challenges, disability identification, teacher knowledge, funding, culture. In reality, the concepts in the next section, *Emergent Themes*, formed the bulk of the significant codes, which ended up as the resulting themes, were ultimately richer than my limited lists, and are defined largely in the participants' words as they emerged in the discussion.

### **Emergent Themes**

Several codes, (NVIVO Code Book in Appendix C), were used in the initial analysis of approximately ninety pages of stories with the following becoming the emerging themes. The themes of Special Education Programs, Policies and Supports or Impediments have a few sub-themes also emerging as explanatory additions. The codes essentially became the following themes that are used to organize participant stories and descriptions of special education programming for First Nation students:

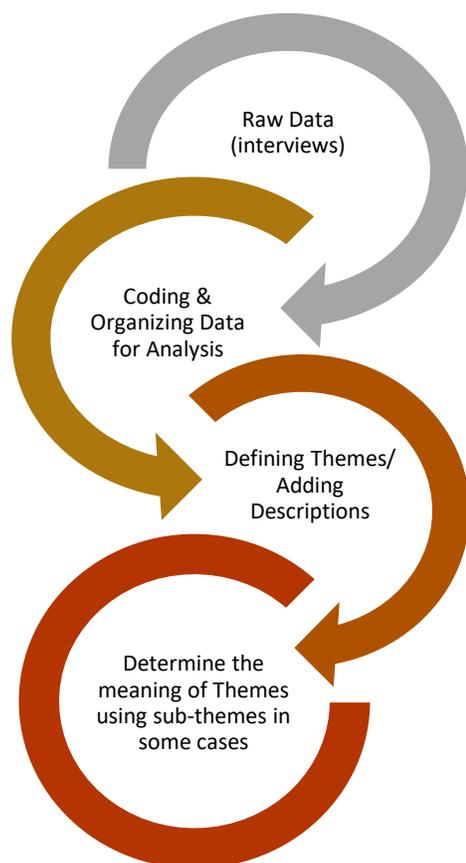
- Desired Outcomes of Special Education Programming (SEP).
- Special Education Programs with sub-themes.
- Importance of Inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge.
- Culture and Cultural Strategies.
- Supports or impediments to student achievement in Special Education Programming (SEP).
- Policy.
- Exceptionalities including Gifts.

The large number of participants required a tool that was equipped to manage the volume of information, so NVIVO was the software of choice. With the interview transcripts uploaded to

NVIVO, descriptive coding (Saldana, 2009) was utilized to more accurately capture verbatim contributions leading to descriptive codes such as “Inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge”. This phrase appeared in an interview question and had specific answers following it in the transcripts. I read every transcript accordingly and coded according to the key descriptor (descriptive code) in the question answers. I am confident in the trustworthiness of the information presented because of the intimate method of how knowledge was gathered. This information was personally collected and shared by the participants, the storytellers, in their stories.

The resulting coding allowed for a thematic analysis and a narrative analysis that appear throughout this dissertation, specifically in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. The format of the

*Figure 5 Flow of Data Analysis*



researched stories analysis is influenced by Creswell & Creswell (2018) and is outlined in Figure 5, which shows the direction of the analysis. As illustrated, after the stories were collected from the conversations with the interview participants, it was coded and organized by theme. The analysis of the themes is defined and described within the context of special education and disability discourse but take on more of a narrative analysis (Burke, 2005) approach

where thematic connections are made across participant stories. These thematic connections are made and form a narrative of how special education is delivered in Chapter 5 and 6, based on the meaning of the themes as they relate to the research questions that focus on the special education experiences of First Nation students in Ontario. The narrative continues further in the conclusion within Chapter 8, in showing how the findings reveal how programs/policy and practice can be reconceptualized or reimagined to better meet their needs.

## **Limitations and Delimitations**

### ***Limitations***

The most notable limitation in this study was the lack of previous research specific to special education for First Nation students. Much of the literature is based on historical special education circumstances leading to socially adopted discourse and understanding social constructs related to special education. Another limitation to this study is the vast scope of subject matter that can be explored in the field of special education especially as it pertains to First Nation students.

### ***Delimitations***

This research was conducted within the scope of special education for First Nation students who live on reserve, or on territory in Ontario. The period of time that the research occurred was during the months of October 2023 to January 2024. This captured a portion of the 2023-2024 school calendar year. The research included special education classroom programming that is provided to First Nation students in First Nation and provincial schools. Considerations in this research were made regarding where a First Nation community is located. These include in the north, south, east and west Ontario and from communities with no road access or no readily available urban access, those with road access but still remote and from communities with readily available urban access. Thirty-one interviews were conducted to maintain a manageable quantity of

information. The small sample size of participants who have needed special education may not give the complete picture of special education for students in First Nation communities. Limiting the research to Ontario also prevents any conclusions regarding the First Nation communities of Canada as a whole. Another delimitation was that the research is not confined to any particular 'special need' or disability and tends to be about a generalization of varied abilities. The research is focused on special education in the context of general delivery of programming.

## **Ethics**

### ***Relational Ethics***

In understanding the axiological component of this research that embodies the ethics and morals guiding the research which is especially important in over-researched Indigenous communities, I follow the teachings of Wilson (2008) who reminds us to ask: "What is ethical to do in order to gain this knowledge, and what will this knowledge be used for" (pp. 33-35)? Wilson (2008) brings the academic search for knowledge, represented by the production of a dissertation, back to Indigeneity. He reminds us that we, Indigenous people, as we have always done with our relationships, in our everyday habits, should see that 'Research is Ceremony' (2008). In the context Wilson (2008) presents, knowledge comes to us through ceremony. This ceremony could involve meditation or the gift of knowledge through dreams. In the instance of my research, knowledge came through the ceremony of a conversation that becomes sacred especially when tobacco is present.

Ethical foundations based on the protection of Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin and sharing from these conversations may not look like western, Eurocentric epistemologies. Bell (McGregor, Restoule, & Johnstone, 2018) provides some guidance to these foundations by associating some conventional research methods to the 'Wendigos' of negative connotations and warns of not being

drawn into Eurocentric research methods. An example is when storytelling is being used such as the Nookomis story as told by Bell and referenced by McGregor (2018) where Nookomis (Grandmother), or the research participant, as the keeper of Anishnaabe Knowledge must be protected by Nanabozho, the researcher. The safe or ethical space that Bell uses in her metaphoric instruction is that space of ceremony where Anishnaabe healing, and growth occur. In Eurocentric research terms, one could say that this research is based on the axiology of interpretivism where as an Anishinaabekwe in education, I am part of what is being researched and cannot be separated from it, so these findings are subjective to my experiences.

Requests for participation in the interviews began in conversation with individuals that I have come to know through professional working relationships. I again felt that humility and grace that they trusted me. I relied on my professional reputation of always putting the needs and interests of First Nation students first. I have access to communities across Ontario so I understand the variations of protocol within regions such as some will accept tobacco; others will not. I was confident that I could approach individuals in communities, ethically and with sensitivity. I did not take for granted the willingness of anyone to join in my research.

### ***Ethics in Research Conduct***

This research was conducted according to Trent University's Indigenous Education PhD Program Ethics Committee standard for ethical research with Indigenous Peoples and Trent University's Policy for Research Involving Human Participants. An Ethics Application to the Trent University Research Ethics Board (REB) and the Trent University Indigenous PhD Ethics Committee was approved in July 2023, under REB File #28578.

The Tri-Council Policy on Research (TCPS) with Indigenous Peoples that sets out requirements for ethical conduct of research involving Indigenous peoples were adhered to in the following manner:

- The research does not focus on any specific geographical Indigenous community or locations outside of Ontario. Community engagement is represented in terms of Indigenous education community at large.
- I have extensive experience regarding relevant protocol when addressing customs of particular communities. I reviewed codes of research practice and traditional ethics/customs of a particular community or communities where participants originate where appropriate and applicable.
- It was intended that differences between community protocols and institutional policies such as TCPS were to be resolved in advance, where applicable. However, this research was carried out with no conflict or need for resolution.
- Appropriate information and waivers were provided to the participants for their information and consent regarding the management of the information given by them. All were notified that their consent could be withdrawn at any time. A copy of the consent form is included in the appendices.
- Participants were allowed to have anyone witness this interview as they desired, such as an Elder or advisor. No participant chose to have this assistance.

### ***Critical Reflexivity***

Thambiniathin (2021) says that exercising critical reflexivity is key in the approach to decolonizing research and that researchers of Indigenous community knowledge find themselves not the finders of this knowledge, but learners. I understand that reflection without a willingness to change one's mindset on the information and opinions provided by the interview participants is not

sufficient in reconceptualizing special education processes or even in respectfully valuing the contribution of the participants. Reflexivity is an extension of reflection that can lead to paradigm shifts for the researcher particularly in wider social and political contexts. Reflexivity involves personal exploration into assumptions and understandings that I, as the researcher, may hold. “Critical reflectivity is powerful for examining researchers’ epistemological assumptions, their situatedness, with respect to the research, and crucial in addressing power dynamics in research” (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021, p. 3).

When explaining how the interview /conversations were to be conducted to the participants, I conveyed that the specific experiences to be shared in the interviews were very valuable and meaningful, if not sacred to me.

Journaling is a valuable tool that I used to practice critical reflexivity, particularly to track and weigh personal assumptions, document tensions, nuances and subtleties that occur during the interview process. Journaling also allowed me to check against the Seven Teachings and if I was staying true to this good way of conduct.

### **The Seven Original (Grandfather) Teachings**

In reflexivity practices, as in all my observances, my guiding principles are always the Teachings of the Seven Grandfathers, namely those teachings of Respect, Bravery, Wisdom, Humility, Honesty, Truth, and Love. This statement may seem overused and while I have not been through the seven years of instruction that one requires to pass on the teachings in ceremony, this is a very real model of guidance for me. I have been given a few variations of this teaching over the years, including in ceremony, but for citation purposes, I will refer to the instruction in Chapter 8 of *The Mishomis Book* (Benton-Benai, 1988 ).

Respect is honouring all of creation and in particular, valuing the newly created knowledge in conversations that occurred in the interview process. Respecting the balance of listening and sharing is one piece to practising respect.

Bravery is acquired when one faces the foe or the unknown with integrity. The foe in this research process is discourse that has been damaging to the academic progress of First Nation students. There have been other personal foes such as my own hesitations in completing this work based on those seeds questioning my ability and persistence. Fortunately, I was able to keep those seeds small and benign.

One knows Wisdom when one cherishes knowledge. Cherish is an excellent term to describe the experience of learning from a First Nation community and not only acquiring this new knowledge but the remembering of ancestors, those that came before us. Wisdom reminds us to call on that ancient knowledge.

Humility is critical to remember the balance of power in the research process, as the instruction of Humility is to remember that all beings, plant, animal (humans), or star, are of the same importance, not one is greater or lesser than the other. Each is as sacred as the next.

Honesty requires that we have the courage to face hard truths and to be true to oneself. I was fortunate to find in the conversations with the participants that I did not face unfamiliar truths. There are many hard truths in First Nation education stories as a result of colonial impacts so the honesty with which I express myself is based on being true to myself as an Anishinaabekwe as well as being true to the words spoken by the research participants. Another way my honesty came to the front was in the understanding that I am the learner in this research journey.

To follow the teaching of Truth means to give honour to the power of the words being spoken in the interview process. This is the understanding that those who are sharing, are speaking

*their* Truth. The teaching is that to know Truth is to know all of the grandfather teachings, only then can you be trustworthy. I would not have entrusted myself with all that was shared in this research, had I not had the guidance of the seven grandfather teachings while enjoying this journey.

I was provided the gift of acknowledgement when on the road to conduct the interviews north of Thunder Bay. Glancing down at the then low water levels of Serpent River running alongside Highway 17, I was gifted with the presence of eagles. Travelling with a couple of family members, we saw at least three, patiently sitting and fishing on the riverbed. I was told long ago by my Elder, Merritt Taylor, and others along the way, that eagles not only carry our messages to Creator, but come to let us know that we are doing good work. Migizi, the eagle, is one of my clans and I actually rarely get to see one. Migizi can fly high in the sky observing the world at great distances. Migizi is known to be closest to the Creator as they are part of the sky world and can access Creator's wisdom. The people of the Migizi Clan were said to possess the characteristics of the eagle, the head of the bird clan, in that they pursued the highest heights of the mind just as the eagle pursues the highest elevations of the sky.

Migizi is the keeper of knowledge and responsible for spreading the seeds of knowledge. Migizi were traditionally the teachers and farmers. These descriptors are from Benton-Benai (1988). I stopped and offered my tobacco to these mighty teachers who reminded me of the knowledge I was about to gather and to be responsible for spreading with reverence to those who shared with me.

Picture 1 – Eagle at Serpent River Oct 21, 2020 taken by R. Wolfe



The seventh Grandfather teaching is Love and to know Love is to know peace. After defending my dissertation proposal, I was asked to describe this project with one word. I replied “Love.” As with all of the educators and caregivers I talked to, I love our children. I truly pursued this research from the energy of love so that I may contribute to making our children’s future better.

### **Summary**

This chapter told how the research occurred with an Indigenous focus. Indigenized Qualitative Research Methodology, with Two-Eyed Seeing Framework (TESF) in understanding the findings of the story gathering and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is important in the analytical work of the reviewed literature. The 31 research participants came from shore to shore of Ontario and included a wide array of expertise and knowledge of First Nation education including special education. I shared with them how the Seven Grandfather Teachings were present throughout the research process. Chapter 5 will set out what I have heard and the emerging themes.

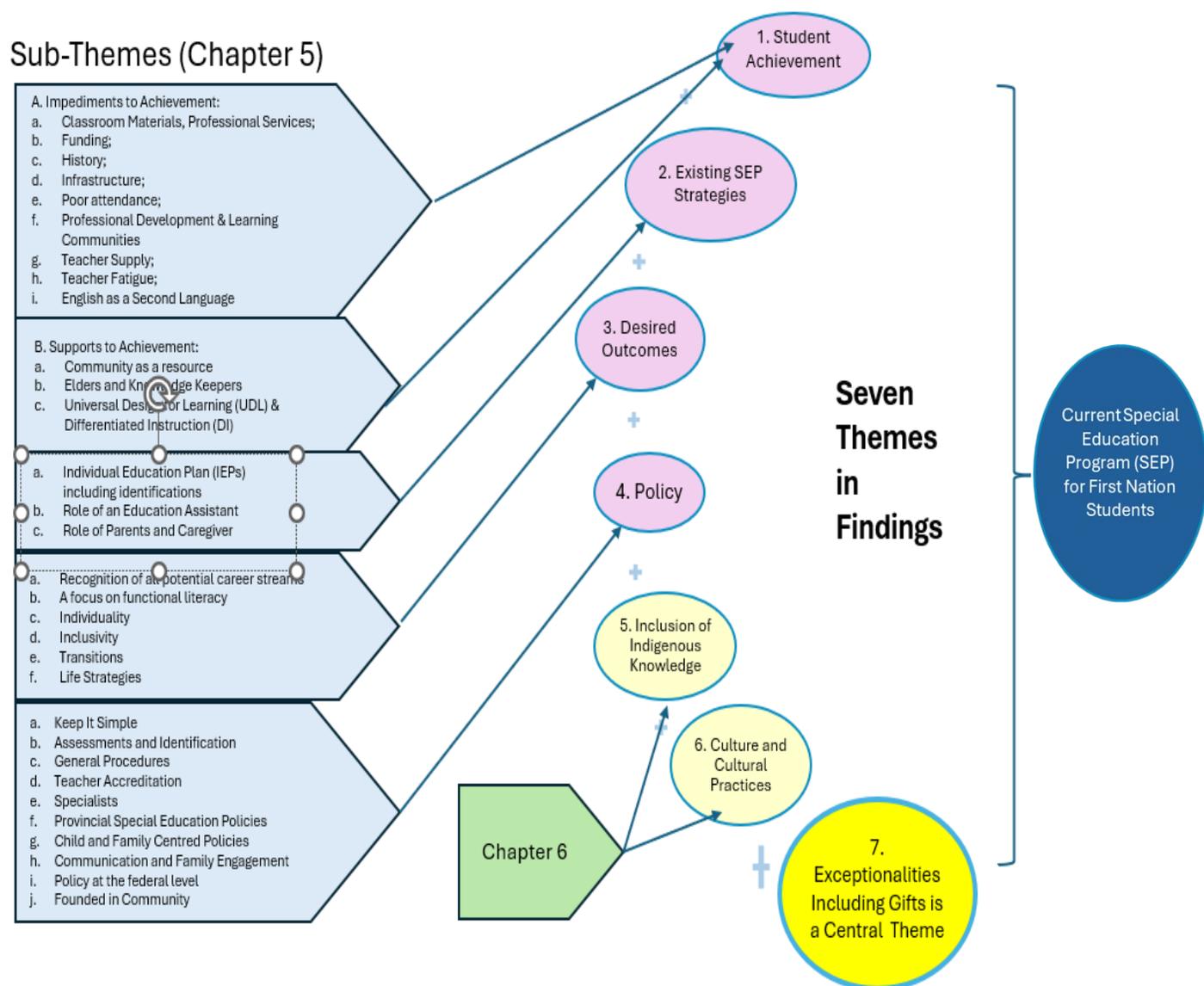
## CHAPTER 5

### The Findings

In this chapter, I share research findings that answer the research questions: ‘what does ‘special education’ mean in First Nations communities in Ontario? and ‘how can special education be re-conceptualized or reimagined to better meet children’s needs?’” This chapter provides examples of activities happening in First Nation schools and in provincial schools about the delivery of special education for First Nation children in Ontario. It also reconceptualizes First Nation special education, or simply education that focuses on student gifts and the development of a person’s whole being.

This chapter begins with an account of where the findings are situated in the four stages of the medicine wheel framework. Beginning the conversation of special education in First Nation communities in the context of research findings, is a short description of the problematic use of the term, ‘special education’. The remaining organizational structure of Chapters 5, Findings - Part One and Chapter 6, Findings - Part Two, is illustrated in Figure 6 *The Findings*. As indicated in Figure 6 seven themes emerged from the stories. Student achievement, special education strategies, desired outcomes, and policy are four themes that are described in Chapter 5 while inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge, culture and cultural practices are brought forward in Chapter 6. The central, and predominant theme of exceptionalities including gifts permeate both findings chapters. The four themes each include sub-themes. These sub themes are also listed in Figure 6 in the blue coloured shapes. The sub-themes of student achievement are divided into two components of *impediment to achievement* and *supports to achievement*.

*Figure 6 - The Findings*



### **Walking Out Of The Bush – Findings, Part One**

In my medicine wheel framework, stage 3 responds to how Indigenous people are recovering from the colonial legacy that affected all aspects of Indigenous community life. This includes how exclusionary and often cruel education practices happened and prevented Indigenous peoples from successfully participating in western based education systems (Roberts, 2023). Drawing

on Elder Couchie's analogy of the length of time it takes to walk out of bush as being the same length of time as it took to walk into the bush, this metaphor is used to emphasize the long and hard work that educators of First Nation children face in this recovery from the effects of colonial education systems. Those systems affected five to six generations, and it will take that same number to come to a place where education is completely Indigenous education. The stories shared in this chapter indicates that First Nations are working diligently towards that end.

### **Problematic term “Special Education”**

The term special education was identified as problematic by many of the participants. It was widely acknowledged that Indigenous students learn differently. As one Elder remarked “In a perfect world, there wouldn't be special education anymore. They would be just kids, you know, and every child would be a little bit different” (Elder). The term “special education” was often viewed in a derogatory sense. Educators and principals reflected that defensiveness emerged around the term's usage especially by parents and eventually by students. There was a preference for talking about needs in a way that recognized how each child learns differently and that any need could be accommodated, when accommodation was received. Special education calls for recognizing each person's individuality. Another reason that the term is problematic is how easily it has been wielded to identify and ‘other’ First Nation students.

### **Over-identification of First Nation Students**

Some understanding of the over-identification of First Nation children as having special education needs was given by this veteran educator:

*Something that we talk about a lot is the over identification of our children in special education. So I remember very clearly, [I was in] the First Nations principal course at Six Nations. When I attended part one, it was the first time they brought up the fact that our kids get over identified and one of the reasons they said it happens is because we have a history of poor attendance. And so naturally, there's gaps in our education, but people come in ‘Oh, there's some deficit we need to address’. Regarding the over-identification piece at [XXXX First Nation}, when I walked in there, 47% of our kids were identified through an IEP. When the [XXX program] came in and had some really good experts in*

*the area of special education who were not Indigenous but certainly knew of Indigenous context. Through working through their program, we reduced the identified kids to 17% because as we went through, we realized, oh, there's really no evidence. And I remember our special education teacher there. Real nice, lady, but I remember I asked, what's your list for those who are going to get educational assessments? And she showed me, I said. Well, why is so and so on this list? She goes, 'well, he's just struggling in the classroom and he's having a difficult time'. And that was all the evidence she gave me. She was an Indigenous person, and I said to her, 'You know, this is a very intense process we're about to bring this kid through. We're about to tell the family that in some way, your child is not normal. And that's a very upsetting thing to tell a parent and if we're doing that frivolously or without evidence, we're causing a lot of damage'. And so I've been very attentive through my career about that aspect of over identifying our kids when hearing, 'oh, yeah, that's a special education issue'. And sometimes our kids just don't fit into this peg of western education and that may be the crux of the problem. But it has become a special education issue that he doesn't think in this western context. That's the special education issue. So within the process of identifying special education kids, I think there's a lot of colonization happening there unknowingly or knowingly. (First Nation educator/principal/director who has decades of experience in First Nation schools)*

This principal also emphasized that First Nation students are often viewed as deficient, even by our own First Nation communities, primarily because First Nation schools are viewed in his words, as having less money and less resources along with other variables such as capacity development in teaching abilities and community support. This principal does not believe that there should be the title 'special education'. Instead, it should be something that is more about education for all. He relayed that historically, our people honoured those of any abilities, physically or mentally disabled people were elevated in the community, not considered as having a deficit. He shared his teachings that there is something inherently unique and sacred about these individuals that were not blessed with what some may say are 'normal' blessings. So, in his mind, special education has a deficit connotation and should be reconceptualized as recognizing the unique challenges of individuals. Many of the individuals who were labeled with requiring 'special education' could teach us a lot about how to overcome adversity.

A non-Indigenous teacher/principal/administrator of 32 years' experience, 29 years in primarily fly-in First Nation schools felt that each child should be given the same opportunity. He believed this is not about treating all children the same, but rather about equity where some children

need more attention. While he admits that systemically it is sometimes not possible, equity must be the goal. He believes that responding to culture and identity are critical to equitable outcomes, especially in the special education process. He describes how that belief came into practise in the following story.

*My philosophy of special education in the classroom is making sure that you make every attempt to give all students in your classroom the tools or the pathway to have success in their life or success in their educational experience. So that success is going to look different for just about every student, but they need to at least have the tools that will allow them to get some success or have success [from where they're at]...thank God that we have more pathways to make that happen now than we had, say 15 years ago or 20 years ago...making sure that the wellness of the students is priority too. And if students have areas where they're adjusting or there's something that's happened that's caused them to sort of pause in their development, figure out what's going on with that too, and to me, that fits into the whole special education package too so wellness, to me is part of it.*

*I became a lot more aware of it even when I got into administration and just looking at more the holistic side of education, more so than just my classroom. My definition sometimes of special education [includes those situations] of students with so many gaps in their education and are so many grade levels behind that it's going to take a bit of work to bring them up. We had a lot of students that were young adults and probably had grade two or three education. I remember we were trying a big push to bring them back in and they were just not ready to come back into that school environment full time because of their age. I remember I told a couple of young boys, and I don't think their reading was very high, they were in their late teens, I said, you come in, we're going to develop a program for you, we'll get you support and so on. I never heard back. But I used every time I'd see them to tell them to come in. I remember, just one Saturday they showed up at my door at my house and they knocked on my door, these two young boys. They asked me if I want to go hunting right then. So, I went for the day with them, and we chatted and so on. They came back to school, sort of. They came back and we developed a program for them within the next week or two. So, I don't know, it's just unless you sort of meet them in their environment that they learn in and that they live in and you respect that, then, they'll know that you're respecting it, [you're respecting them]....It is like they want to show you that they are not dumb. They are actually pretty confident in their abilities outside of school. So, we don't want to go to a place where we look dumb.... And I'll admit that I was intimidated out there in the bush [by their knowledge].(Non-Indigenous teacher/principal/administrator of 32 years' experience, 29 years in primarily fly-in First Nation schools)*

## The Themes

### 1. Student Achievement in Special Education

What did the participants believe to be factors that supported or are impediments to achievement in a classroom program for Indigenous students with special education needs? These factors were in the context of resources such as funding, physical availability of classroom resources, teachers, support staff, teaching materials, and Indigenous cultural programming, professional development and others.

An Indigenous Principal in the mid-Ontario area, with decades of experience in First Nations' schools, concluded that the special education conversation or even First Nation education in general, is about trying to operate in two systems.

*What impedes us as Indigenous people is fear. What impedes is this constant attention to deficit. What impedes is not looking at our kids holistically. What enhances is all the things that are opposite of that. What enhances the experience of children with special education needs is identity. Love and care and kindness, which is our culture, community support, extended family support, enhances special education needs. Along with commitment and dedication. (Indigenous Principal, First Nation School)*

#### A. What is an impediment or hinders achievement in Special Education Programming (SEP)?

A non-Indigenous principal in a fly-in community summed up the impediments to the success of students with special education needs:

- Misidentifying the exceptionality of the student;
- Lack of assistive technology to meet the need of the student;
- High turnover of teachers in the north;
- Lack of teachers trained in special education programs;
- Lack of training in Autism and other exceptionalities.

Overwhelmingly, all respondents had a comment regarding how resources in various forms impeded achievement in special education programs resulting in the following sub-themes illustrated in Figure 6 and in no particular order: Classroom materials and professional services, funding,

history, infrastructure, poor attendance, professional development and learning communities, teacher supply, teacher fatigue and English as a second language.

**a. Classroom Supports, Classroom Materials, School Supplies, and Professional Services**

Supports, other than Education Assistants (EAs) which will be discussed later, are abundant in some school settings and lacking in others. Here are examples of how many supports are in place in some schools and the effects of these supports or lack thereof.

*In the provincial setting, there are many restrictions in terms of how many students are in a general classroom and how many support staff are allocated, assessment is severely limited. Teachers say they have to give all students equal time. Really the needs of each student are different and that doesn't mean equal time, it's an old issue. One of the most effective strategies in terms of school resourcing is having the Indigenous staff support roles [in provincial schools]. Students have said that having someone who understands them, helps them in many ways. (Elder on my Elders Advisor Team, First Nation educator of 30+ years in First Nation education)*

A school principal said their northern fly-in First Nation education department has a lack of support staff because they are unable to hire people.

*We're lacking the people.... Right now, we have a school of 1500, and we do have a lot of students that are considered on the special education caseload. We only have one SERT [Special Education Resource Teacher]. SERTs are just so hard to come by. We don't necessarily have the student support, for, say, a kid that does have autism, without an Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) trainer, or anyone in any area that has training specific for autism. So, the personnel are definitely something that we're looking into. (non-Indigenous principal with 10 years' experience at fly-in First Nation school)*

One First Nation education department in a First Nation in southern Ontario, has “lots of human resources available” as described by the Indigenous SERT but there are challenges to overcome in that richness as well.

*[Besides teaching staff and EAs] We have a director, two managers, a land-based facilitator, an Anishinaabemowin facilitator..., one thing that might impede [achievement] is understanding our roles. Are we overlapping? ...I find way back when we didn't have, for instance the land-based facilitator, as a teacher I was doing those kinds of things as a teacher in a First Nation school., so a lot of it is kind of, okay, the teacher's not doing it. [For example], we had Hunters day ... and it was all arranged by our land-based facilitator and that was a really good day. But then follow up and [ask] how we can ensure that those kinds of things are being followed through within the classroom. You need to be kind of implementing and doing a lot of post lesson, introductory lessons and follow up.... but yeah, we do have a lot of resources and ... understanding each other's roles*

*and communicating [is important]. (Indigenous SERT in First Nation School with over 25 years' experience)*

A parent spoke of the lack of facilitation in classrooms for students with physical disabilities.

As a result, First Nations students had to be sent to the provincial schools for the specific exceptionalities of deafness and blindness.

Participants spoke about the limited access to resources due to the remoteness of their community. Remote communities rely on fly-in or ice road transportation which can delay deliveries by months.

*Resources aren't necessarily readily available if we need to order something like weighted blankets or different materials to help the students. With the lights or stuff like that, it takes months sometimes to get those materials in, and then we're waiting. Whereas if we were in an urban setting, we could just go to a store and buy those items. So, the resources I think, that's where we're lacking, just having the availability. (non-Indigenous principal at fly-in First Nation school)*

## **b. Funding**

Funding has historically been raised by First Nations to be the number one concern for communities (Garrow, 2017). Surprisingly, funding was not raised by anyone as an issue. Although funding is available to hire teachers and staff, staffing cannot occur because there are so few applicants. Prior to 2006, identifying students as having special education needs was the driver for additional funding (see Figure 1). At least one participant said that it would be a step backwards to qualify all your students as requiring special education to receive adequate funding. This same participant said that a gap analysis should be performed to determine the resources received. If there are gaps in service delivery, is funding a key concern? As an example, he asked is the school staff compliment, correct? The question raised was, what does quality education cost?

*Funding, I don't find that's a problem at all. We are very fortunate to be able to have enough funding to support programs that we want in place. I think that right now within our area, we're kind of struggling like with staffing shortages trying to get enough staff to support our students like we have postings out all the time and they're unfilled because we can't get people. And then just trying to find specialized transportation that's accessible across our district is one kind of challenge that we're trying*

*to support for.* (First Nation Education Director/Teacher of 30 plus years at a First Nation school)

*It is my belief that there is funding but sometimes it is [otherwise used] or not used at all or used for the wrong purpose. I have worked in schools where the actual need of the student is not met even though there is funding.* (Anonymous)

*Fiscal responsibility. There's a ton of leakage in our schools and we're all saying we rob Peter to pay Paul, but we waste a lot of money in schools. More attention needs to be paid to efficient use of that funding. I've seen it... I was on the other end in a provincial school for short term, and they do cartwheels over 500 bucks. They get a \$500 subsidy for something and, it's like, you know, they just throw a party... Give us [First Nations] \$50,000, we'll start, maybe raising an eyebrow. Give a library 500 bucks in a provincial school, see what that librarian does... It's like winning the lottery... Five years we saved \$750,000 in my community... We developed a whole language program from kindergarten to grade four with those dollars when I was director because we just capped the outflow of money and any of that leakage. No one wanted for anything you wanted something we found ways to fund it.*

*.... In all of the schools that I've been in, and I've been in some poor schools, and I've been up north .... They all have a teacher and an EA, and they have access to some type of resource books... they're never short. You go into any First Nation school in Ontario, and it's loaded with stuff. Stuff that's been there for years. Someone ordered it. Construction paper, calculators, we don't want for any of that stuff.* (First Nation Education Director/Teacher of 30 plus years at a First Nation school)

### **c. Colonial History**

One participant said that the effect of residential schooling caused many First Nation students to have academic challenges. Another participant noted that they had witnessed parental anxiety when having to walk into the school or classroom. At the admission of the participants, there was no empirical evidence to support these claims, but some parents and grandparents were survivors of residential school.

### **d. Infrastructure**

*“All road conditions up here are atrocious* (Indigenous principal in a First Nation school).” This principal’s school was accessible by road but was in northern Ontario. They could not emphasize enough; how bad the infrastructure was in their community. Infrastructure, such as housing, potable water and good roads, is a foundational piece to wellness, to motivation and to general health, necessary for a child to be prepared to learn.

*Last week we had friends of the school who got in a horrible accident and one of them passed away, so this is now going to be part of their [students'] writing campaign about traffic control... it was foggy. Southern Ontario has those little reflectors in the lanes to guide cars and or those rumble strips in the Centre, we don't have that up here and it gets foggy. In the wintertime, it's freezing fog and you know, people are always going in the ditch. Accidents with big trucks and everything. So, you know, kids feel the results of bad highways. Kids are really traumatized by it.... And places like [our neighbour] is calling out for support for fresh water. We made a big banner, and we put our handprints on it and our names and then we post it on social media... What our people have gone through in terms of trauma, and this is what you're putting them through.... The students say, "we don't drink water when we go home because you know, it has to be boiled and then cooled off. So, sometimes, we have to wait till we come to school." By then they're dehydrated. (Indigenous teacher/principal of over 40 years' experience in remote First Nation schools)*

**e. Lack of student attendance at school.**

Some students really struggle to maintain regular attendance at school. Six participants said this was a problem for students to achieve success. One First Nation school SERT said that,

*We call social services; they show up for a couple of days and are gone again... we had one student that missed 129 days last year. That's huge. How do you expect him to even be successful (SERT at First Nation School)?*

**f. Professional Development (PD) and Professional Learning Community (PLC)**

Twenty-three participants emphasized the importance of PD. One First Nation educator remarks on the positive changes that have happened where today, the school can offer so much more compared to twenty years ago.

*The school is so much better resourced to offer more things that couldn't be done in the past. In taking full advantage of the availability of resources, all professional development (PD) days are assigned, fully identified for the year. (Indigenous educator at First Nation school)*

Professional development for teachers including SERTS and other support staff helps them in “keeping up with what's going on” (Indigenous SERT at First Nation school). The desired PD would involve what was happening in other First Nation schools and what were the current practices in provincial schools especially where their First Nation students would attend.

Sixteen participants mentioned autism indicating that it is becoming more and more prominent as an identification. As one First Nation principal says,

*OK, next year for our training for staff, we need to have some training from a specialist who works in the school on how to deal with autistic kids. We need to learn sign language because we have to know how to communicate with this student. (Indigenous principal at First Nation school)*

The participants recognized that capacity development and professional development are very necessary but require experts teaching, and instructional leadership. As one First Nation school principal indicated, (“...it's NOT that we need more paper, we need more pencils, we need more computers. I honestly don't think we do right now.” There is a need for PD but efficient, useful and practical instruction. A principal of a First Nation school in a fly-in community, said,

*...even the training for the people that do work with those students, I would say is lacking. We've tried to do professional development on ABA and de-escalating and the instructors say, 'oh yeah, we're great at all this'. When they get here, it's not at all what they told us was coming. And that's really frustrating as we could have tracked down someone else and not wasted money ... we even had someone come in for FASD and they just talked about deer hide the whole time and didn't talk about FASD. Like the training is definitely something that we're lacking. The gentleman that came in for the de-escalation techniques... I don't know where he learned what he did necessarily, but everybody said like it was not helpful, and they wished they got to do the other PD that day because they thought it probably would have helped more and that was really frustrating to hear because we thought we were doing something great, and it didn't work out that way. (Principal of a First Nation school in a fly-in community)*

The COVID 19 era introduced the efficiency and challenges of virtual instruction, but a fatigue is building. An Indigenous SERT in a First Nation school in southern Ontario, wants,

*Physical people training us like actual, real people with real life experiences and giving us strategies and planning tips...Like we do have a calming room, but to get them there sometimes they've just torn apart a whole classroom. So like, we have so many battles to face. (Indigenous SERT in a First Nation school in south of Ontario).*

Assessments were mentioned by participants as another topic for PD. This was in the context that educators should be knowledgeable about how assessments are done and how to identify students' needs in order to prepare a proper educational program. One participant shared that many students who have special education needs are really intelligent and should just be encouraged.

Staff in one First Nation choose what subject matter will be covered in a PD day. One choice was 'trauma'. Trauma was identified as a learning need by several participants. One

Indigenous teacher observed that trauma exists not only for students but also for Indigenous teachers. Some administrators allow teachers to take care of their emotional and physical needs, and to work on their trauma so that they can be “getting myself to neutral so that I'm not reacting to every single thing” (Indigenous teacher in First Nation school). When teachers understand trauma, teachers allow students to understand their own journey in trauma or upheaval.

*It means that I understand and share the knowledge of balance, such as teaching students to verbalize, 'I can be loud and boisterous and I also can be quiet and calm', it means that all my feelings are valued. (Indigenous teacher at First Nation school).*

An extension of this, is to honour students with learning exceptionalities stemming from trauma. However, one teacher shared, “What is necessary for some, is good for all” (Indigenous teacher at First Nation school)” is a sentiment that is inclusive of all students.

Attending professional development courses or teacher programs specifically designed for First Nation teachers, is an experience welcomed by several teachers in First Nation schools. Such training can build a professional learning community (PLC), a common occurrence in provincial schoolboards. As an Indigenous Education Officer with the Ministry of Education, I facilitated one for the Toronto region of provincial school boards that focused on the First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework in 2009.

*...when you were doing that course, going away, you got to meet a lot of other First Nation students who are doing the same thing that you were doing, teaching and working in First Nation education systems. (First Nation SERT in First Nation school with over 20 years teaching experience)*

Another First Nation teacher said,

*What we found like in the last two years here, is that every community is kind of on their own little island and there's nothing really where we you can get together with like two or three other schools, you know what I mean and kind of just bounce ideas. (Indigenous SERT at First Nation )*

### **g. Supply (Availability) of Teachers**

Several participants said that schools, particularly in the north, are finding it difficult to hire qualified teachers and have to scramble at times to get teachers. Most teachers come with little or no experiences which adds to the problems of delivering the school's special education program. Some schools have been encouraging teachers to complete special education Additional Qualification (AQ) courses which can help them with on-the-job training. Many participants said that it is just not suitable to put people in the classrooms that are not properly qualified. Inadequate pay is a big issue.

When teachers do arrive, they probably lack experience.

*Lots of times you're getting new teachers come into the north with a big turnover. We're not experiencing that as much now. But they are so overwhelmed by everything, that special education sometimes is not the biggest priority. So then trying to decipher the IEPs that may not be written very well is a problem. A new teacher comes in trying to decipher that and figuring it all out. The special education program is hampered because of the high attrition rate. Many young teachers moving to the north find it very difficult to cope for several reasons. With this rate, the continuity of the program is not maintained from year to year. The new teacher must first become familiar with the expectation and know and understand how to function within the sphere of the program. When it becomes all figured out, it is the end of the year, and that teacher may not return. (non-First Nation principal at fly-in First Nation school)*

### **h. Teacher Fatigue**

Many participants vocalized the need for qualified staff and how teachers shortages has been a long-standing issue. While this may be a systemic wide issue across all communities in Ontario, First Nation and provincial, what makes the situation even more challenging in First Nation communities is the need for a classroom teacher to be many things in a small school. SERTs are often not available. EA or other classroom supports are minimal. Teachers often split the duties of principal, or other such dual roles may occur.

Teacher self-care is an important aspect of special education. No participant framed it as self-care, but it was evident in the scenarios how chaotic and energy-zapping a teacher's day can be when delivering special education. One participant explained how a child might think in class,

*It is not a time for you [teacher] to go pee, it is a time for me [student]. And I need to talk to someone. And I don't like you, and I ain't talking to you. So, get me someone here who will talk to me. That, to me is, what is real life. That is special education. (non-Indigenous teacher with 20+ experience in fly-in First Nation schools)*

An Indigenous SERT observed that teacher fatigue is real, and that their school was addressing fatigue more than anything. The fatigue was especially evident during the COVID 19 shutdown and still exists.

Another Indigenous SERT in a First Nation school spoke to the responsibility of being the only SERT in a First Nation school system that housed eight grades and compared this reality to provincial school boards who may have entire teams to do this work.

*...the roles are too big for just a learning resource teacher. Like, this is my role: IPRC's, IEPs, daily student support. Consult once a week, our consultant just comes in once a week and does meetings and quick observations. We do school-based team meetings, parent meeting, safety plans, Jordan Principle letters of support and I'm working with kids all day so if I don't find time, I'm doing my work at home.... And that's not fair. The role is too big. It needs a full-time coordinator to do all of these things. Like I know it and then it makes you feel like you're not doing your job because you're being pulled in two different directions trying to support kids on a regular basis. And then, I have a meeting to go to or I have 40 IEP's that I have to get done, so I have to close my room. It needs a coordinator. It's just too much. Because it's like you're never getting anything done, you're always spinning in circles. There's always something else that needs to be done. I work every night at home, but I refuse to work on the weekends. Sorry, I mean I need some time. I have grandkids. I want to see them. Right? So, I mean, it's a lot. And I think, like a lot of places, just overlook that because you have to remember the province has teams and there is just me and a support worker. (Indigenous SERT at First Nation school in south Ontario)*

**i. “We are still learning English as a second language.”**

Graham (2012) describes ‘Aboriginal English’ or specifically the vernacular specific to a students’ Aboriginal community means that English words used in school can be different from the student’s understanding of those words. One First Nation teacher pointed out how this exists in Ontario.

*...the challenges we have with language, with the English language. Even though most of our families are non-Anishinaabemowin speakers, we are still learning English as a second language.*

*You don't have the idiosyncrasies of relationships at home to support English being a first language, even though it's the only language spoken. Do you know what I mean? It's so hard to capture. If I go to a non-native family, they've had history of English inclusion. Ours has been somewhat bastardized approaches to English acquisition. (First Nation Education Director/Teacher of 30 plus years at a First Nation school)*

I remember being with non-Indigenous people growing up and not understanding conversations and references, at all. This gap made me uncomfortable and I lacked confidence in my ability to communicate.

### **Parents' Points of View of Impediments**

A parent of a student with a physical exceptionality and who is attending a provincial specialized school, said that there needs to be staff members onsite who are on top of the delivery of Indigenous culture, like ceremony or culture.

*I would have to go and pick them up. I would have to try to make special arrangements. And they don't like to leave the school. They love their school. They're a very dedicated student and so I think there's a responsibility there on part of the school and the education system, the Ministry to provide those supports to the Indigenous students that are in lodging at the school. In the spirit of truth and reconciliation, you know, on one hand, we've had people taken away to go to school, and we know that horrific history. Then here I am sending my child to go away to school to get the best class education possible for their disability and I want them to have access to culture, so [fortunately] I have a school that's willing to do that. We just need to figure out how that can happen to programming and resources and dollars and what is the province willing to provide in that and what's their role in that. And then again, like, you know, as a federal registered Indian, what's the role of [anyone] ...it's very slow for me. It's not happening fast enough. But I think we have amazing educators....There is also now, thanks to my advocacy in reaching out and doing parent networking and being a person that a family, if they're thinking about the school, available to talk to parents and tell them what our experience is like. What's it like to send your child away to school? Especially being Indigenous, right? Knowing our history. So now, I think we're up to 9 or 10 Indigenous students. It's the largest Indigenous student population they've had at the school... I'd love to see language, and I know when they get into high school, they have opportunity to access [an Indigenous language] in the [nearby city] with one of the local high schools.... We've asked for these things, and we know our education department here in [community] is doing their best...the school is willing, but they don't know how to make that happen either. So I need to make that connection for them. (First Nation Parent of a student with a physical exceptionality in southern Ontario)*

This parent was working with the Ministry of Education to create a smudging policy for the schools by putting a guideline or protocol in place so that students can feel they can smudge at

school. A dedicated person is important because a teacher who takes the lead will have the core and expanded curriculum to focus on and culture will be an extra activity and will happen only when there is time.

### **B. What supports Student Achievement in Special Education Programming?**

I cannot stress enough, how much humility and honour this research project brought to me as participants really bared their hearts and allowed me to carry their wisdom in trust. This particular participant and I have known each other professionally for years. She is a non-Indigenous teacher/education specialist who has worked with primarily fly-in First Nation communities since she first became a teacher. Her insight and candor made me realize how important this work is. I hope that as with all who shared their words, I have relayed the messages with the grace in which it was given.

*There were no barriers to success in that classroom, not even one. Oh. Oh, wait, Shelley, there was one. [Participant points at self.] Every single Elder did say to me that they wouldn't have been able to do what they did if it wasn't for my skill with classroom management. And so, I guess maybe that's the spirits just saying, OK, there was a bit of value to having you there. Factors that support the achievement within a classroom program, the first thing that comes to mind is the teacher. The teacher. Teachers don't like to hear that. But that's one of the biggest factors that I've seen support or impede achievement in a program, in any classroom. (Non-Indigenous teacher/special education specialist with 20 years in fly-in or remote northern Ontario First Nation communities)*

#### **a. Community as a Resource.**

Much has been said about Elders and Knowledge Keepers but there are lots of activities around a community that can inspire lessons to be taught in a school.

*As a teacher, you have to start looking outside of the classroom bubble and find the resources that are in your community, like [the community] remembrance day service they have, that was always something that I would teach in class as well. Talk about...where I'm from. (First Nation SERT/teacher in First Nation school with over 20 years of teaching experience)*

#### **b. Elders and Knowledge Keepers**

There have been many examples given under “Culture and Cultural Strategies” of how bringing Elders and Knowledge Keepers into the school and classroom is beneficial to all students

and especially in engaging students with special education needs. An Elder that was part of the interviewed participants, in a remote community, shared the following:

*Meeting up to your local Elders in the community and bringing in resources...to share.... We have a lot of people out there, not only Elders, but [Knowledge Keepers] ... think of who you could reach out to, to bring them into the classroom. [For example], we have a young artist. Different programs have been inviting her into different programming session [as a knowledge keeper], so, she brings her art with her. So, if you're going to school, you'll see part of her art in there. They've been using art as a therapy as well. But she's been doing it with many age groups, and they rather enjoy it doing that as an activity. (Elder/First Nation Educator, with over 25 years' experience in First Nation communities)*

### **c. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Differentiated Instruction (DI)**

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Differentiated Instruction (DI) were touted by five participants as being the best strategies when delivering education programming that accommodates the learning needs of the most students possible. Both strategies strive to meet the diverse needs of students and are often used to address a diversity of student learning needs in the classroom.

The principles of UDL are based on the provision of multiple means or options of:

- i. Perception- learners access information differently,
- ii. Expression – varied ways to demonstrate learning, and
- iii. Comprehension – looking for ways to encourage engagement (University, 2024).

UDL anticipates learner needs while DI responds to learner needs. Using DI, teachers work to carefully align tasks and activities with student specific, learning needs. It is labour intensive for teachers and requires lots of modifications in classroom instruction, curriculum content and processes (Pozas, 2023).

Activities based on Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin can access UDL and DI. Indigenous teachings should be offered based on a learner's ability to understand and absorb them. Kearney (2022) offers many options for using UDL when engaging in Indigenous pedagogies in classroom

activities by reminding us that storytelling is a pedagogical tool used with hands-on activities and is a sound alternative for students to engage rather than rely on written content.

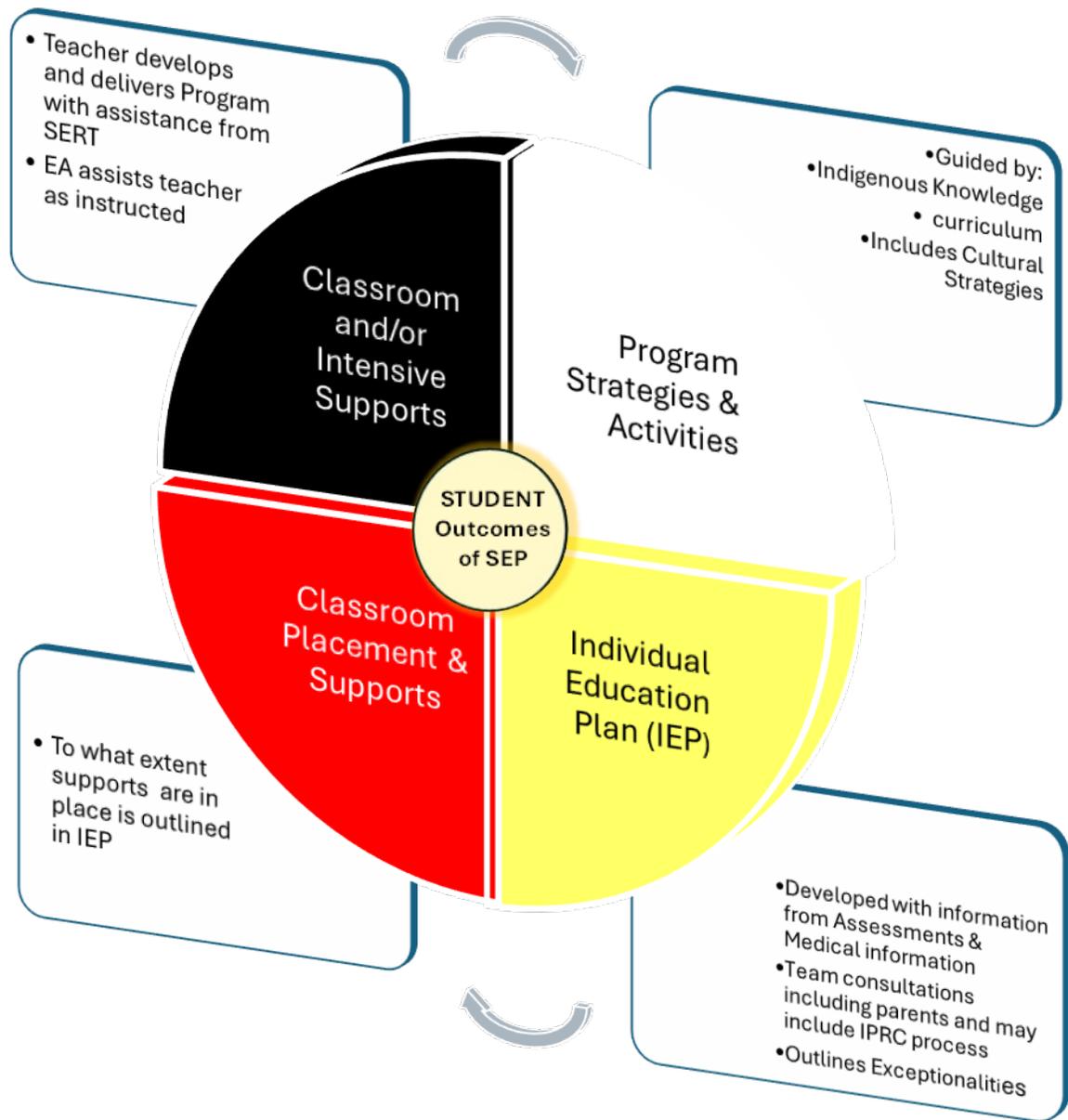
### **A Note on Literacy**

One of the Indigenous teachers/administrators is a big proponent of the primary division literacy pillar. He strongly believes that we could change the face of First Nations education across the country if literacy were the focus. He is part of an initiative that has been effective in providing teachers with instruction in literacy focused programming. There are several good literacy training programmes available to teachers. He emphasizes that students continue to learn to read until Grade 2, and then a bit in Grade 3. Then the curriculum changes and students have to read to learn. He makes the point that the groundwork is laid out to focus on literacy.

## 2. Existing Special Education Programming (SEP) including Strategies

I have set out in Figure 7, the special education process as it occurs in most schools and where cultural influences can occur.

*Figure 7 Special Education Program Process*



All of the teacher/educator responders described how they were delivering sound special education needs programming. Where the previous section spoke to desired outcomes of a SEP, this section sets out what SEP structures are currently in place for First Nation students in First Nation and provincial schools. This is a rich section with incredible insight that answers my research question “What has been the ‘special education’ experience of First Nation children in Ontario.” The vast experience of the participants was evident throughout all of the practices shared; to honour their voices I have chosen to share their answers verbatim.

In Figure 7, I summarized the SEP process as described by the participants with the intent of being a helpful tool for parents to understand the SEP process. Drawing again on the medicine wheel, the process starts in the east (yellow) with the creation of the IEP. The IEP is used across all communities and the IEP development is done with information from assessments, medical information, and team consultations including parents. First Nation schools generally have an IPRC process that may not mirror the provincial model but involves a meeting of all influential parties such as the classroom teacher, a SERT, the principal and the parent /caregiver. The first quadrant (yellow), the IEP, outlines the exceptionalities that need to be addressed in the plan. The second quadrant (red), details what kind of supports the student needs. The third quadrant (black) sets out all who will be involved in the delivery of the program. Quadrant four (white) includes the strategies and activities of the SEP. All pieces of the circle must exist for the SEP to be effective.

Analyzing through the Two-Eyed Seeing Framework (TESF), Indigenous influences can and do occur from the meeting style and protocol in the development of the IEP (first quadrant) to the cultural influences in the programming of the fourth quadrant (white). At the beginning of each

school year, the IEP is or is supposed to be reviewed and updated as necessary. This is an annual cycle.

#### **A. Individual Education Plans (IEPs):**

*[Ideally,] this would be creating a student profile for every child and depending on where there is a lack, the teacher would report, and the special education teacher is expected to create a plan of action using the curriculum to meet the child where he is at. It is the expectation that this program will help the child achieves the goals that is set out for him. (non-Indigenous principal participant from a fly-in community)*

*Resource teachers who did that work had been part of those processes, sat down and reviewed the IEP. They sat down and made sure teachers were working collaboratively with the SERT. Because we know teachers need to be part of that. Some places, the special education head teachers write the IEP while some throw them in the OSR and they never get seen again. And then that debate around who should have an IEP? I remember hearing one school say every kid here has an IEP. OK, I get it. Differentiated instruction every kids unique but, that should just be part of your teaching, I'm not so sure that needs to be an IEP. (First Nation educator/principal teaching in First Nation schools for over 30 years)*

One of the Elders in my Elders Advisor Team offered her experience which reflects how Indigenous and non-Indigenous modes of program delivery can occur in a classroom. An example was the non-linear, perhaps circular arrangement of desk versus the more Western linear desks in rows set-up:

*Students who did not respond to “desks in rows” achieved academic success at a higher level, likely because they felt more comfortable engaging in a variety of learning activities [however], some students like the order of desks in rows and the individuality of that (student voice from some of my past research). I found that students with behavioural challenges perform more effectively when they can openly engage and are free to move and talk – as opposed to the days when students weren't allowed to talk unless they raised their hands. (Elder in Elder Advisor Team/teacher participant who has over 40 years of experience in First Nation schools)*

This Elder/teacher/SERT/principal has years of experience as a teacher, as a SERT and as a school principal and believed that special education is simply “good” teaching, meaning the teacher finds out what students need to be the most successful they can be and builds programming to meet that need. She also added that at any given time, the unique spaces within the learning environment help students who need options at any given time.

Other reflections of what special education is, are included in these contributions:

*Teaching is teaching. Teaching, I don't consider it 'special'. I say it's a different aspect of teaching and we should be up to date, you know, keep ahead of the game by gaining more information. We have all this technology, let's use it for all our students... My grandson, when he was four and five, he could handle this laptop better than I could.... Then I should be the one being considered needing special education. It's just that terminology, I don't consider that term relevant.* (Elder in Elder Advisor Team/teacher participant who has over 40 years of experience in First Nation schools)

*In the Community here, there is a lot of stigma if your child is in special education. I did work in special education here for a couple of years and that was the biggest fight for me. Getting away from the stigma, [helping parents understand] that just because your kids in special education doesn't mean that they're not smart. It's just they just need assistance getting to Z from A so let's get them there. That is one thing that I think frustrates me like. No kid is cut from the same cloth, so why are you assuming that, yeah? That is a fight that I have every day with some teachers. In the same case it is differentiation because there are those kids that need the visuals and there's the kids that need the extra time doing their work and that does fall under the umbrella of special education. But with our school, we're very lucky because we do have services that other schools don't have. [Service providers] that come in all the time to our school, so we have an SLP [Speech and Language Practitioner] that works only with our students, whereas other communities they might go through [other agencies], and they have to share those people. So, our students are being seen a lot more. We have occupational therapy and physiotherapy, rehab assistants. We're very lucky because I know there are some schools, ... that don't have people specific for their schools.* (non-Indigenous principal at fly-in First Nation school)

These statements from three different First Nation principals give insight into day-to-day concerns regarding students with special education needs:

*There are a lot of components of the strategies that you can implement with the students, but you have to find that by working with them individually because they're so individualistic and unique in their own ways. And what one thing will work for one, may not for another, you might have to tweak it a little bit. Finding strategies gets easier based on experience.* (First Nation SERT at First Nation school with 25+ years' experience First Nation classrooms)

*There is an issue when teachers send students out of class for whatever reason or shuffle them down to the special education office.* (First Nation Education Director/Teacher of 30 plus years at a First Nation school)

*If we let a student out the door to a provincial school without a psycho educational assessment, the IPRC process at the provincial school will have a queue where they won't be a priority. It could take years before they get any type of service.* (First Nation Education Director/Teacher of 30 plus years at a First Nation school)

*[Strategies used include the following,] differentiated instruction, explicit instruction, repetition, practice routines and structure, visual aids like scheduling for the whole class, plus individual scheduling. We*

*use PECS<sup>12</sup> for communication because we have nonverbal students. We also do try to scaffold the learning, so that's meaningful and makes sense to them. We [provide] sensory breaks. We have a sensory room; we have a sensory hallway. We have a movement room. We have a workout room. So we have all of those things to help them get through their days and that doesn't always work. Especially for our high needs kids. (First Nation SERT with nearly 20 years' experience teaching in First Nation schools)*

Respondents said, that there is an understanding that students have 'their own way' of learning and educators needed to balance the needs of all students within the classroom. There is a dominant (western) education system that has standards and requires adherence to these standards. Several participants who teach in First Nation schools expressed this awareness of the 'other' system and spoke of their own conflict knowing that they are teaching students in preparation for their entry into the dominant system. "Indigenous [teacher] or not, sometimes we get the dominant culture perspective. They're still pushing that" (First Nation Principal in remote First Nation school).

*The importance of sitting with Indigenous Elders, for me has been really big. But then additional schooling [professional development for school staff, (P.D.)] has been really important too. It's a balance of the western world and the knowledge and the ways of knowing it, all those teachings that I learned from the Elders about honoring every student....(Non-Indigenous teacher/special education specialist with 20 years in fly-in or remote Ontario First Nation communities)*

Co-teaching models between a Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT) and a classroom teacher were explained that they allow students to remain in the regular classroom. This is a collaborative approach where a classroom teacher and a SERT plan together and carry out instruction to allow access to the curriculum for all students including students with disabilities (Cook, et al.2021). Both instructors work together to provide focused instruction. This model helps to increase the teaching capacity of the classroom teacher under the guidance of the SERT.

*All classes have students with learning exceptionalities. My approach, once I gained some experience in the classroom, was always that every student had their own way, and it was a balance to meet all needs and at the same time efficiently address the standards set by the education "system". When I worked in schools, I was also Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT) in four different schools over the years. This meant working with classroom teachers in a co-teaching model so that students could remain in the regular classroom. I also worked directly with students in a smaller setting,*

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<sup>12</sup> The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is a picture card communication system initially developed for children with Autism. (<https://nationalautismresources.com/the-picture-exchange-communication-system-pecs/>)

*depending on needs of students. (Elder in Elder Advisor Team/teacher participant who has over 40 years of experience in First Nation schools)*

*Lower performing teachers that struggle a bit in handling a regular full class [were put] into [intensive support] positions and then these teachers, ... quite a lot of the times are in the class with other teachers, trying to build models of coteaching. And because I think that can be a good way really to support all the diverse needs of the kids and not just [focusing on one student]. So I was trying to explain... we have some students with an IEP in this class. Co teaching is not like you going in pulling those three or four kids aside and the teacher teaches the rest of the class. But it's new for everyone. It's not something that they have done before. (non-Indigenous SERT at First Nation school)*

One strategy that a member of my Elder's Advisor Team, with extensive special education experience in the provincial school board system, used was meditation. Most of this First Nation teacher's experience was in a provincial school's Learning and Life Skills (LLS) program or a specialized program sometimes called an Intensive Support Program (ISP) of small class sizes, generally no bigger than 10 students. In her words:

*Students need to reflect on their own behavior for self-awareness. It is one of the things that I was so proud to see work in my LLS class. There is anxiety among the students of these classes. There are triggers. All kinds of things in the classroom can be a trigger. One of the times that I implemented meditation in the classroom was after lunch because at lunch, there is no structure. So, after lunch, to be able to get the students to refocus, there was a relaxation exercise that we did. It was so cool. I would have a student lead it for a month because it takes a long time to teach a student how to teach relaxation to the other students. At the end of the month the student would get a mark from the other students, and they would share what they liked about their presentation. The nonverbal students would be included as well by having them positioned at the front of the class. They were taught how to participate in different ways. After we were finished it, everybody was so relaxed and the regular classroom activities could carry on. I went to a graduation a few years ago. A student that had 'a bouquet of personalities' and was amazing was graduating and I'm all excited because I wanted to see her go across the stage. I go in and I'm saying 'Way to go! Way to go! Oh, my gosh, you're graduating!' She replied, 'Wait, Miss P, calm down, calm down.' Ohh, she passed across many stages to my eyes right then and there. She could read my hyperness. I was the one all excited and she wanted me to calm down.... [This Elder summarized,] so, what is special education? It is a student that requires TLC [tender loving care] and many prompts of 'well-done' to the student. It is even as simple as thanks for looking at me with your eyes. The small compliments because they've always had, 'Oh, you never listen or you're not doing your work ...or whatever [the negative comment]. A positive comment instantly makes them feel good about themselves. They're human beings. Special education or not. (First Nation Elder/teacher on my Elder Advisor Team with 30+ years' experience in provincial classrooms)*

Bringing an Indigenous component to a meditation practice would align quite well as many components of ceremony begin with being peaceful. Meditation works well where smudging may not be practical due to the potential presence of medically fragile students or other classroom issues with smoke in an LLS placement.

Regarding parents and community, they each have significant and key roles in the education of the students.

*Ultimately what we are trying to do is to create an environment and a program that allows that student to just reach their maximum potential right, I'll give you a case in point. When I was a teacher, and this guy [former student] is a success story and still is that. He was a [prematurely born baby] and [several] issues came with that condition. He had lots of challenges. He was in Grade 8 and just a super kid. I was playing guitar one day at lunch in the month of April and... he's like, 'what is that? What are you doing?' [I answer] it's a guitar. He asks, 'can I?' I gave this kid a guitar. By the end of June, this kid was in a band... going in to high school, he struggled but I recommended that he go into the Learning and Life Skills class. The family opted to go through regular programming where he did struggle but because he had shown that he was phenomenal on guitar, his parents wanted to see what he could do in regular programming. He had these talents and gifts but not being aware of the offerings at the high school, I thought that the right recommendation was the LLS class. And this kid struggled, but he made it through regular programming, and he graduated and learned a trade where he now has a red seal [in a trade] and is making a great living. (First Nation teacher with 20+ years teaching/administration experience in a First Nation school)*

One parent whose child had multiple exceptionalities, believed that had they been able to receive assessments early, before attending school, that it would have made a difference to his overall development and success in school. It was believed that knowledgeable teachers, parent training and support and more one-on-one opportunities for learning would also have been helpful.

*I do think that [my child] missed out and it should have happened at daycare and then [my child] would have been, well, better equipped when [the child] got to actual school. That's my opinion....[My child] had to go to a physiotherapist. But I think that that could have been done a lot more [through day care]. And then there was a big, long, waiting list. And I'm sure there still is, but what was missing also was parenting skills. They had parenting skills sessions for kids that did not have disabilities, but I didn't find anything about kids with disabilities. I mean, he didn't really have, I hate to say label, but he didn't have a label, you know, he just had a cognitive disability. But I couldn't find anything like for [my child] in terms of a specific disability that could help me. There was no help for the parents, [prior to and outside of school]. (First Nation parent living in a First Nation)*

### *Usefulness of Individualized Education Plans*

Nine of the twenty-eight educator/administrators had actually developed an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The IEP warrants its own section because of its importance as a working document that provincial schools in Ontario must develop for students with exceptionalities yet it can create much confusion for parents and sometimes teachers. Unlike the American IEP which is a legal document under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the IEP in Canada has versions and importance that vary across provinces but overall, in Canada, it is not a binding document (Belley & Phillippe, 2017). My own experience with IEPs as a parent, showed that achievable goals and expectations must be included in the IEP to make it a useful program guide and record of student successes. The IEP should be a shared plan as to how to achieve goals and expectations for a student. Therefore, it is important that parents/caregivers be included in the process to discuss what those goals and expectations should be. One of the parents responded that they did not feel that the IEP was appropriately explained to them and said, “They told me about it, but I didn't really read it”(First Nation parent of child with special education needs).

Teachers, SERTs, and administrators offered strategies to increase the effectiveness of IEPs.

*We are really trying to push with our teachers to incorporate individualized programming for everybody. Regarding accommodations, we accommodate everybody. It does not matter if they're identified or not, if they need extra time or if they need assistive technology, for example. If they like an alternative space, we will provide that for everybody. It should not matter if they have an IEP or not. Let's just make sure that they are able to be successful. (non-Indigenous Superintendent of Special Education in provincial school board)*

*Why aren't the teachers involved in this? So we're also shifting that this year. I am now training teachers on IEP. We don't have the resources at each school, so I've put together division teams like K to three and four and five are going to work together and have the resource teachers help them learn about IEP's, how to write them and how to write a goal. And again, trying to get parents involved, which is also challenging but I'm hoping they'll take more ownership of the writing IEPs. (non-Indigenous SERT at First Nation school education department)*

Some communities have early learning screening, prior to registering children in kindergarten. If one exists in the community, this occurs in the First Nation day care centre.

Potential exceptional needs (special education needs) are then already flagged and accommodated as soon as the child came into the school.

*Here is one of the strategies where I use [the IEP]. Because these students are in high school, their strengths have already come from their elementary background... So they're being folded into the high school IEP. What I do is, for each student I find out what their strengths are and what their weaknesses are? If their weakness is presenting and their strength is computers. I'm just going to go with that one. You could have them do a presentation with PowerPoint. So find their strength, take advantage of their strengths, and put it into the weaknesses to make your IEP. You want to make the student successful. Successful to various people I guess would be different. Success for me was having a student go to the washroom by herself and then coming back by herself. That's a huge step for her. But people wouldn't see that. Huge steps are different to a lot of different people. Find their strength, take advantage of their strengths, and use it to overcome the challenges and incorporate that into the IEP. (Elder in Elder Advisor Team with over 30 years' experience in Intensive Support Programs in Provincial Schools)*

Power Point presentations became a great tool to boost Jaime's confidence at Fleming College where she often gave power point presentations.

*I see it [IEP] as a task that teachers have to do that they hate and even the special education teachers hate to do. I think it is necessary because, unfortunately, there's lots of students that don't have IEPs in their systems, and no one knows what their needs are. To me it's very important to have some kind of a record or document that shows that this student has been looked at and there have been areas recognized where they have specific needs. What have we done to make sure that we're going to address those needs. This is what the IEP should be doing, but in an organic way. As a principal, I've gone through IEP's and I've seen, for example, we've got five students here but I'm looking at almost the exact same IEP throughout. So, it has to be a pretty organic document. (non-Indigenous educator/Principal/Director with 30 years' experience in remote or fly-in First Nation communities)*

One principal's perspective is to only write an IEP when the student's education program has been modified. The teachers felt that there are situations that fall below modification that still require an IEP, but in the spirit of trying not to over-identify and leaving good teaching with teachers, a lot of IEPs are not written.

One First Nation school uses a team called a "response to intervention team". This team gets together and brainstorms ideas for strategies that might work for a student. If a student's situation requires more support, if there is more to do, they discuss developing an IEP while communicating

with the parents throughout the entire process. After developing the IEP, school based assessments, occupational therapy assessments and speech and language assessments are done. If findings indicate that it is appropriate, a referral for a psycho-educational assessment is discussed. The discussion begins in Grade 2 for this type of referral as the waitlist means it will likely be done in Grade 3.

Other than suggesting minimizing the use of IEPs, the respondents made no suggestions to using the IEP in practice.

### **Disability Classification and Identification**

Sixteen participants spoke to the identification of students within the classifications of exceptionalities. Each of the sixteen participants spoke to the onslaught of unfamiliar and challenging situations and the wide range of exceptionalities that are present in special education including learning disabilities, autism, students who are deaf or blind and personality disorders. All sixteen respondents spoke about the predominance of students with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and how it has been increasing in numbers. The impact of substance use present on students was another challenge that was increasing in numbers.

According to the Ministry of Education, the categories of exceptionalities are Behavioural, Communicational, Intellectual, Physical or Multiple (EDU, 2024). Within those categories, most noteworthy are the following situations according to the experiences of the participants who responded to this question. These descriptions are provided as a sample of the exceptionalities that are prevalent in the experiences of the participants.

### ***Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD)***

FASD was not a specific theme of the respondents neither is it an exceptionality recognized on its own. It is often placed under communications, behavioural or multiple exceptionalities. Only a handful of participants spoke specifically to the effects of in-vitro substance use which often results in high rates of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD). I have included it here because I

have heard more community declarations on FASD's prevalence in Indigenous communities in my professional experience. Two participants mentioned that in-vitro drug use, largely methadone, are increasing in use. I had expected more conversations around this issue. One participant said:

*Drug implications are really immense. For example, students have a very difficult time retaining information and when they speak, their whole sentence sounds like one word. Speech intervention workers, not speech and language therapists, have had great success working with the students every day to help them have a better time communicating with the rest of the world. Families notified the school and asked for assistance in understanding their children which was the impetus for hiring speech intervention workers. (First Nation Principal in remote northern First Nation school)*

One SERT in a First Nation school expressed the need for more tools, resources, and strategies to help work with children with FASD that come to school. "And they can tell us, oh, it looks like an LD and to use visuals and use these things, and we do, but we need more than that, that's just scratching the surface"(First Nation SERT in First Nation school). FASD according to another participant, is a phenomenon that most educators have become familiar with for at least the last twenty years. The effects of substance use on children from in vitro exposure or in home life has been increasing in communities according to two participants. Alcohol is still a factor, but one educator said that the children born with methadone in their systems are now going to school and the personal characteristics as a result of these influences are not yet laid out as they were with FASD. Because of the wide range in the presentation of challenges by students with FASD or others suffering the effects of substance use, categorizations of exceptionalities could possibly be 'multiple', 'behavioural', 'intellectual' or 'communicational', although there is movement, nationally to have FASD as a stand-alone exceptionality (Millar, et al., 2014).

### ***Behaviour Including Trauma***

Four participants spoke about aggressive behaviour issues such as students biting staff resulting in bruised and broken skin. Schools responded by bringing in Education Assistants (EAs)

to manage the student when these behaviours occur. Students are moved out of classrooms when a student's behaviour has escalated.

*One young guy had such a bad reputation in the schools, but the truth was that he couldn't read, maybe at a grade two level. He would just act out so they could send him home or be the class clown so the kids wouldn't notice he couldn't read. (Elder in Elders Advisor Team with over 30 years' experience in First Nation schools)*

However, a diligent teacher will research and use past progress experiences to help in addressing the exceptionalities in the classroom, according to one non-Indigenous principal at fly-in First Nation school.

Applied behavior analysis (ABA) has been used by some communities. ABA is a method used to understand, predict and change behaviour by choosing a structure based on physical settings, instructions, verbal cues, rules that particularly have specificity and economy in number (Alberto & Troutman, 2012). ABA does require specific training and experience to be effective. One First Nation SERT in a First Nation school shared their experience with ABA. Unfortunately, “for some of our kids it doesn't work”(First Nation SERT at First Nation school). An example was given that if a student has experienced trauma plus is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), they require attention from someone with great skill and experience.

*If they have trauma plus ASD, just pure trauma is huge. It's a big part of our kids' lives. This is their safe place. So again. They come here ... and they let go because they feel safe, right? And they know they are.... So it's kind of hard because we want them to know that this is their safe place, but sometimes it gets overwhelming with the behaviors. And we have very little parent support, and we get blamed for everything. (First Nation SERT with over 20 years in a First Nation school)*

*The other really complex thing when we're thinking about special education and addressing those needs and trying to be successful, we need to think about trauma. The hundreds of years of trauma and even more recently residential school and the trauma that continues in all of our communities that are aftereffects - drug abuse, alcohol abuse, domestic violence, all those. That's going to affect our children, and in particular when we see special education issues a lot of times, there's also trauma there. So, we're not looking at children holistically where we're really not identifying the issue and how to help support healing and academic success. Western education doesn't take into account family and extended family. All those great supports [of] uncles and aunties and*

*grandmothers and grandfathers. [An Indigenous psychologist] always talked about the IPRC process. Why are we always starting with what the deficits are? Why aren't we starting with the strengths and operating from there? We're always looking at our kids as deficit. There are so many complex things... all these added layers of our experience really inhibits and present other challenges. If we're going to be good educators, in particular in the field of special education, and we need to have a knowledge of all those things. Because once again, they aren't just physical beings. [There are] all other components to who these young children are. I think that's about all I have to say about that. (First Nation Education Director/Teacher of over 30 plus years at a First Nation school)*

I had the privilege of interviewing a very renowned, Elder, who is long retired but had taught in a First Nation school for about 40 years, during the research process of this work. This is one of her stories:

*I started off teaching on the reserve in the 1970's. We had to discern which students were having difficulty and you know the students who were able just to work on the regular curriculum. I had to figure out on my own how to reach out to them. And I remember one student especially. Oh, she was the terror of the school. And I had her in Grade 4. She would just up and walk out and bother other students. And the teachers were just complaining about her. What I did was bring in 2 gerbils into the classroom and set up space at the back of the room. I told the students this is who we are, as Anishinaabe, we relate to animals, little creatures. We took care of them and nurtured them. The students had to feed and water them. They could hold them and touch them, show them some affection. And that was the best thing. That's all this girl needed. From that point, she started settling down, talking to me about animals and about taking care and being affectionate. It made all the difference. Just that one little aspect of who we are as a people, you know, being close to nature and being close to the land. I started thinking about bringing another way of teaching into the classroom. We had never done that before, but now it's a given in a lot of classrooms. All kinds of little creatures are being brought in. You may only have some fish there, but still, that's something. It is an example of how we learned and how we taught our children, teaching them to be responsible. (Elder, retired teacher, with 40 years' experience in First Nation and provincial schools)*

This Elder believes a lot of difficulties were compounded by the way language (English) is being taught in schools.

*Particularly for First Nations, I think it was a mistake across the [education system] and the reason I say that is the fundamental piece of learning a language is phonics. If you remove phonics, it really does give us a tremendous challenge in the schools. So some things identified as possibly being a learning disability is simply the fundamentals were never taught. (Elder, retired teacher, with 40 years' experience in First Nation and provincial schools)*

Language foundations in the recently announced Back to Basics Kindergarten Curriculum (Ontario, 2021-2024) are now including phonemic awareness, alphabetic knowledge, and phonics.

### *A Note on the Impacts of Covid 19*

The effects of COVID and the absence of classroom experiences is another ‘exceptionality’ that a First Nation administrator at a First Nation school raised. “We know it's going to take three to five years of consistent attendance in school for a child to catch up” (Indigenous education director with several decades teaching experience in First Nation schools). This participant also raised an interesting point of how globally, people downshifted, and motivation subsided, where children are witnessing home behaviour that models, “It's not necessary for me to work anymore. It's not necessary for me to get out and socialize. Everyone just kind of downshifted to the couch”(Indigenous education director with several decades teaching experience in First Nation schools). They further explained that increased mental health concerns from being in isolation so long has even affected staff. An example of a simple conversation was given where an added task was asked of a veteran staff member when all had returned to school again. Normally robust employees became sensitive, and this staff member burst into tears proclaiming that they were “dealing with a lot and that pain was new to them” (Indigenous education director with several decades teaching experience in First Nation schools).

While the following quote could be fused into the Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin/Indigenous Knowledge or cultural strategies section, it is in this place due to the way it builds on the value of disciplining with consequences in a thoughtful and culturally oriented manner.

*I look at my knowledge keepers, who helped shape me and part of the practices that I use. I'm going to use discipline as an example because there it's so overused or maybe underused in some cases. The word discipline from the root word disciple. Disciple comes from teaching. Being a teacher, [our teachings tell us] if we're going to be doing discipline, it's not to be consequential. It's supposed to be developing for learning. And we've been so colonized or so schooled through practices of how we were taught as children to how we were taught as adults going into the education field. That we are consequence based and it's so hard to break that. I want to really impress because that goes right across all school disciplines. Focusing on that, I look back again to some of my mentors. They never talked about overdoing consequences or of net negative consequences. They gave a lot of praise, but they also took time [with students]. One of the areas that I've actually brought in from my administrative career, I brought in the Crown attorney to work with us just to get rid of the myths,*

*for example, the myth of you cannot touch a child. ... And how we could embrace the culture in our teaching. So, it's not just speckled [throughout], it's just in, how do we bring that in? ... Even the assessments, build that relationship with the children and build that relationship with the parents. I support the basic concept that what many of our children need are hugs. And I am one of the hugging principals. The first thing when a child comes in crying, sad, or distraught. I want to get them consoled, 'yes, it's OK to feel what you're feeling'. Then we can start looking at identifying what the issues are. .... We are getting better. Better incident rates for special education needs. We're hovering around 64% [percentage of students identified as having an exceptionality]. And that's not stretching it. That's going by definitions of what is already included in the identification. Our younger children are experiencing a growth that we didn't have in the past. In the past, it was everything from lack of resources to lack of staff sometimes. We're now experiencing better things. Still, could be better. But I'm saving some money in special education now because we can't find service providers now. (First Nation Teacher/Principal with 45 years of experience in First Nation schools)*

One of the First Nation teachers/SERT/Vice Principal in a First Nation School remarked that with staffing and space restrictions, often decisions have to be made on what makes sense for the school. For example, there are enough students to create a need for an Intensive Support Program (ISP) class but there is also the need for resource support for a number of students but there is no space to accommodate both supports.

The range of need under the term special education means the need for a wide range of teaching specializations. Within each categorization of exceptionality, there are wide ranges of need. Learning Disabilities for example can range in challenges from coordination, writing skills, personal organization, note-making, math, language skills, social skills and more (Bennett, Dworet, Gallagher, & Somma, 2019). Interviewed administrators convey that teacher preparation and training, especially in First Nation communities is critical.

## **B. Role of an Education Assistant**

Education Assistants (EAs) are a significant resource to the delivery of special education. In my experience, additional funding requests are almost always for the acquisition of additional staffing in the role of Education Assistants. As a mom to Jaime, placing her as an infant then toddler then a young child into the day care and primary school setting, I was initially thinking, yes, one-on-

one support for my child is necessary. I was thinking that she needed to be protected, from bullying, from slipping through the cracks. However, it wasn't long at all before I realized that I didn't want her increasingly disabled by developing a dependency on others. My desire was for her to be as independent as possible while part of the whole school experience. One-on-one support to me, was only to improve those areas where she struggled. Regarding the roles of EAs, the participants made the following comments:

*One student needed a lot of coaching, [in the Intensive Support Program/LLS] so I had to write to the Superintendent because I was getting bit and kicked up to about 50 times a day. The Superintendent came down and we were given staff so that student had three staff with them because of violence. Right after I put in the word that I need some help, [it was there for] a couple of years. The staff worked so well with him that they lost their job, so the saying is if you do your job right, they won't need you. It was good for the first little while; we could get some type of a handle on the behavior and why it was happening all the time. But then again, the next year, we didn't have the staff, so we worked well with it because we were able to work with him. I've worked with many very, very, effective EAs, but they just know and it's hard to explain. You get the younger ones come in and because it's their first time feeling sorry for the student. And I always say don't. Please don't feel sorry for the student. Be happy that they're here. Let's teach them. With ten students[in the Intensive Support Program], two EA's would be effective in the classroom in my opinion. However, that's taken me a long time to get there with two EA's. It was more manageable, because then you're trying to assess all the staffing in the classroom as well. 'Will you do this?' And 'how are you going to arrange that?' and so on. So sometimes you can have too much. And then there's also the characteristics of the support staff. Unfortunately, first time I had found a staff member that I had to tell what to do all the time, and the person was older than me and, it's like, reminding them that they have all this wisdom behind them. They have their own children and knowledge. This person had to be actually told what to do in their job. That was probably my worst year of teaching. So it depends on the EA and I'm up front with staff in the classroom that we don't baby these students. They are students first. (Elder in Elder Advisor Team/SERT who has 33 years' experience mostly in Intensive Support Programs in provincial schools)*

*Four or five EAs in a classroom would be a lot. Where one of our classrooms has nineteen students, one EA is there on a consistent basis. One EA was brought in for one-on-one assistance and another to alleviate a situation. But it's not permanent, just as a means to get things settled. (First Nation SERT at First Nation school with 25+ years' experience First Nation classrooms)*

*We had EA's in tears because after two years... it's an unhealthy bond that forms. Crying, ...parents, the parents were crying. We're like, no, it's not this not what we're about. It's not healthy....We have lots of EA's, an overabundance. A lot of our kids need one-on-one support. We have a lot of autistic children. High needs autistic children..... Effective programming through EA support depends on the teacher. If a teacher is not directing the EA, then the EA proceeds with whatever they think they should be doing. Again, teachers sometimes don't know how to direct the*

*EA's. They don't know what to do for programming. (First Nation SERT at First Nation school with 25+ years' experience First Nation classrooms)*

*In the community schools that I am familiar with (mostly southern Ontario), there are many support positions within the school – Education Assistants, among others – at a higher ratio than in provincial schools. Also, Pupil: Teacher Ratio (PTR) is much lower in community schools than in provincial schools, which is a lower number of pupils per teacher...resources are good. (Indigenous teacher/principal of 40+ years' experience in First Nation schools)*

The unhealthy bond as mentioned above, is defined by the closeness and dependency that a student can come to have on an Education Assistant. Regarding dependency, one principal had a strong opinion on teacher roles and the predominance of EAs in a classroom,

*...[to teachers] this is your responsibility and your professional and ethical responsibility. There are way too many EA's. There are way too many IEP's.... [Regarding] universal design for learning and differentiated instruction, if we can have the teachers build up those skills where they're able to engage students where they're at, that will get rid of a lot of those IEP's like as soon as a kid is struggling... it's looking at how do I reflect and change practice and what things can I do ...and this [First Nation] has been great, I've had more PD in the last year than I have in like years and years and years past. So, it's the [First Nation] ... willing to do that training and try to give the teachers those skills and supports, but it's shifting that, [including] our EAs, making it more of a of a team approach. (non-Indigenous SERT/Principal in First Nation schools with decades of experience in education)*

### **C. On the role of Parents and Caregivers**

Parent advocacy makes a difference especially when getting services external to school or community for the child such as mental health care or other health related supports. A First Nation administrator with over 20 years' experience in a First Nation community, encourages a parent to be aware of the results of a Psychoeducational Assessment telling them that “this is your legal piece of paper that will allow you to lobby for your child and the services he will need....He's moving on to a provincial school and you need to understand what this paper affords you”( Indigenous administrator with over 20 years' experience in a First Nation school). This particular First Nation, as do many, will make it a priority to have children professionally assessed with a Psychoeducational Assessment before transitioning to the student provincial school where they could be on a waiting list for two or more years.

A parent of a student with severe special education needs, that in fact could not be adequately addressed at the First Nation school, said that one of the things that they encountered at the First Nation school was that the child was not making friends, and was being excluded. While the First Nation school had good intentions in the implementation of a ‘buddy bench’ where a student could go sit if they were feeling excluded and had no one to join during recess, then students know to go ask that person to join. The family found that the child had to go to the bench every recess to be included in anything. The child had an impairment that was eventually accommodated through attendance at a provincial specialized school. This parent was happy with this path at the provincial school and claims that the statistics show successful graduation rates for students who go on to successful careers in whatever industry chosen.

Four of the parents knew of their child’s disability at the time of birth while one parent was not aware until certain milestones were attained fairly late. An actual diagnosis was incomplete around kindergarten age. All the parents described their journey as a constant search for answers in how to meet their child’s needs.

*They told us at the hospital when we left that he would need care forever” (First Nation parent).*

*There’s actually a couple of milestone times [that stand out]. The first was when he was in junior kindergarten [in a provincial school] .... They didn’t offer any solutions other than separating him and getting his older sister who in grade 7 and then grade 8 at the time to come and manage him during the day. For us it wasn’t acceptable because they wanted to hold them back in junior kindergarten....His teacher referred to him as being aggressive....Other than that, they didn’t offer any type of programming or solutions other than just the separating. So being nonverbal, he wasn’t able to express himself other than showing frustration. (First Nation parent)*

All families became more versed in the underlying cause of the disability or exceptionality. One family said that the fulsome approach was for us to be better involved in special education. “Our greatest teacher was [our son]” (First Nation parent of First Nation child with exceptionalities).

### 3. **Desired Outcomes of Special Education Programming (SEP)**

Each participant was asked the question “In your opinion what is the intended outcome of an effective Special Education Program and is this specific to Indigenous students?” The predominant response was student focused, not focused on pedagogy in terms of Indigenous based or western based. However, all responses were in the context of current western influenced classroom program delivery. In other words, outcomes that included current classroom and teacher structures as has been the western based model. Everyone had a response as to what they believed were successful outcomes of an effective special education program. Overwhelmingly, participants wanted the education system to support the development of independence among students as a desired outcome. This means independence to live and integrate into the community with the individual’s confidence in themselves and their family’s confidence that they will survive and thrive. These explanations were not based on any specific disability or special need. The sub-themes that were explanatory of the overall expectations of this theme were:

- a) Recognition of all potential career streams
- b) A focus on functional literacy in either English or Indigenous language
- c) Individuality
- d) Inclusivity
- e) Transitions
- f) Life Strategies

Another prominent response was the desire for the education system’s recognition of students’ individuality when meeting their academic and behavioural needs. One Indigenous administrator at a First Nation school, said that “we need to examine what requires change or support within an individual’s program and abilities”( Indigenous administrator with several decades

experience at a First Nation school). A participant spoke to the many facets in addressing the desired outcomes of SEP such as partnering within the education staff and the parent/caregivers:

*What kind of changes do we want? If it's academic, then we can work back and find out where we're short and look at programs that would support those shortfalls... It if it is behaviour, how do we go about making changes in the behaviour as the plan of action is going to be both focused at home and in the school so that everyone supports it. (First Nation Education Director/Teacher of over 30 years' experience at a First Nation school)*

In addition to varied types of learning activities, that are the foundation of special education programs, the features of an effective SEP are organized under key sub-themes below.

**a. *Recognition of all potential career streams***

*...staff [need to] recognize and value all streams (especially at secondary level where student future work placement might be in a kitchen, gas station, or lawyer's office) and that they impart that thinking to students. (Elder member of my Elders' Advisor Team, First Nation educator of 30+ years in First Nation communities)*

**b. *A focus on functional literacy***

*Up to Grade 3, students are learning to read. From Grade 4 on, students then must read to learn. If they are not taught to functionally read by Grade 3, we have set them up to fail. (A First Nation teacher with over 30 years' experience in First Nation schools)*

*I talked to some of the kids that I taught, they're in grade 12 now and I said, what is one thing that you wish, and you can be hard on me because I was your teacher, that we worked harder on. And they said sometimes the reading and understanding what I read.... and I said OK, perfect. So, it's coming right out of their mouths what they think the younger kids should also work on and.... it hurt my heart to hear that. But then, they want the younger generation to have those skills, so it was good that they were thinking that way too. (Non-Indigenous Principal/Teacher of 10 years, all at a First Nation school in a fly-in northern community)*

**c. *Individuality***

One educator was clear that every single student needed their own program and gave the example of a student with generalized anxiety who was embarrassed because of it, "It is our job as teachers to get to know every single student"(non-Indigenous teacher with nearly 20 years' experience in fly-in First Nation communities).

*Some people look at it [SEP] as a way to identify kids and in the best world, they would look at each child's gifts and support those but help them compensate for any things they don't have...and in a perfect world, there wouldn't be special education anymore. They would be just kids. You know, and every child would be a little bit different. That would be what I would like, how I would reimagine*

*special education, because it seems like when they bring in something new, like inclusion, inclusion sounded like a good thing, right? You don't want those kids sitting in the hall with an aide, for whatever reason. (Elder First Nation educator of 30+ years in a First Nation community)*

*Students who understood concepts but struggled with reading and writing, enjoyed being able to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding through drama or art for example. (Elder member of my Elders' Advisor Team, First Nation educator of 30+ years in First Nation communities)*

#### **d. Inclusivity**

All respondents believed in inclusion and having everybody working together as a mainstay of a SEP with good outcomes. Differentiated instruction was also prominent in responses to allow the provision of individualized programming and meet the needs of all students.

*This means to me is you're walking into a classroom, and other than if a student has a physical disability, you don't see [disabilities]. ... I believe that, you know, moving away from that deficit model to more of a social model.... What are the barriers stopping those kids from being able to learn or to engage? ... Technology has helped a lot with that in terms of removing those barriers, but I think we have to get away from looking at special education as being different, we have such diverse needs in all of our students. There's no one average student in any classroom at any time, and those needs are broader now than they were, you know, 35 years ago when I first started teaching in the schools. (non-Indigenous SERT in First Nation School)*

#### **e. Transitions**

Ensuring transition strategies are in place for students who are transitioning between First Nation schools to provincial schools and then transitioning out of public education is also a prominent concern.

*Transition piece with our feeder schools....we don't know how the students are doing or if we can assist them in any way or help them if they're having difficulties. If they're having the same difficulties, there's no communication [with provincial school].... we don't know if it's a cultural kind of thing, if it's a social issue, if it's an academic issue... that's something that I think we've been working on. We were having lots of transition meetings and lots of transition days [in the past and that's changed]. We would talk about social....How much is their cultural identity recognized, and if they still carry that with them when they leave here? Again, communication and just opening up the doors to that... transition piece. (First Nation SERT at First Nation school with 25+ years' experience First Nation classrooms)*

*We work with outside agencies to support them beyond school, so that transition to kind of real work life.... A worker that works with them a portion of the day, but then also transitions to a job setting, say work at McDonald's or something so that we're able to provide them with more life skills to be able to ensure that they're successful on their own beyond school. We're going to be connecting with*

*community living to hopefully then get a lot of our students to be transitioning and do a lot of those work skills. (non-Indigenous SERT at a provincial school)*

#### **f. Life Strategies**

Students need to master life strategies that will assist them in their own learning styles, life skills and to address those personal challenges when faced with anxiety or the need to focus. One member of my Elder's Advisor Team with extensive special education experience in the provincial school board system as a teacher and initially, as an education assistant, taught students meditation as an example of one of her most successful strategies.

#### **4. Policy**

Twelve of the participants had comments regarding policy. Policy in education has a wide range and, in this research, means special education or general education program policies at a First Nation level, or at provincial or federal government levels. From my own experience working for my First Nation and with First Nations for decades, I can attest that First Nations have become quite proficient in policy development and interpretation of government policies. I have been amazed even as a 13-year-old participating in a Youth Employment Program on reserve, at the dexterity with which the older teens, just 16 to 18 years old, navigated the required reporting paperwork according to the government policy requirements regarding the program. My experience has also shown me that First Nations have developed great skill in understanding policy, policy ramifications and the elasticity of policy in terms of how they can be piloted and changed.

Comments about policy at a First Nation level, ranged from teacher recruitment and pay grid issues, to addressing student behaviour guidelines. To look at this through TEF, there is the knowledge that if First Nations, as the only legislated people in the world (via the Indian Act), are proficient at any western activity, it is that of bureaucracy. First Nations have been living with bureaucracy since the passage of the Indian Act. As with all components of education or any sector, to decolonize from this process will require First Nations to come back to our teachings rather than such a

dependency on the development of policies modeled on western practices. As Fyre writes, “Our community prospers when the work that each member performs is in alignment with the Earth and is a direct and sacred expression of Spirit...allowing the individual to move towards experiencing connection – to family, community, society and Mother Earth” (Fyre, 1998, p. 55).

Nonetheless, until those teachings become ingrained, for policies at both provincial and federal government levels, one participant suggested that policy changes should be transparent by including educators from all geographical areas, not just from urban centres but from reserves (First Nations) and the northern communities. Diverse opinions could identify issues that are specific to regions that otherwise would not be known such as the sourcing difficulties, not getting basic resources, or hiring teachers in the north.

Special education policies for a First Nation community were raised by six participants. For First Nation schools and education departments, these policies are focused on locally developed programming guidelines, restrictions and other considerations directed by Chief and Council or by the local education authority if that is the governing structure in a First Nation. A few participants spoke to the preference for a community to have a First Nation education authority with its own board that operates outside of the governance structure of Chief and Council. Such as authority can make policy and decisions independent of the Chief and Council meeting and election cycle. Through my experience at Indigenous Services Canada (ISC), I understand that there are at least three such authorities in Ontario.

Direction within a special education policy that is student centred, was a prominent theme throughout the comments of the twelve participants mentioning policies including special education policies. The following are some of the key areas that participants wanted to see included in special education policies:

**a. *Keep it simple.***

One participant was clear that a policy has to connect with the reader or user. For example, if policy affects parents and families, the message needs to be simply conveyed and 'kind'. Keeping it simple is also 'making it achievable'. One participant enjoyed the simplicity of working in a First Nation community, "We get a lot more leniency with like, if we want to take the kids outside, we don't have to have 5 million forms necessary to take them outside and explore"(non-Indigenous principal at fly-in First Nation school).

**b. *Assessments and Identification.***

Direction regarding assessments should include adequate educator knowledge about assessments with specific direction on which assessments are appropriate, and what assessments will be used to identify a student's need. Thorough education programs should be developed based on these assessments. Policies would include the description of these programs and how they will be derived.

**c. *General Procedures.***

Several participants suggested that procedural direction grounded in policy can include how all the processes occur from identification to lines of communication, to addressing everyday occurrences such as how student behaviour would be addressed. All school staff would have the same understanding of procedures if they were part of school (special education) policy.

An Elder in my Elder Advisor Team, who was also a SERT with 33 years' experience mostly in Intensive Support Programs in provincial schools, gave an example of one principal new to the school, who was not familiar with a student with special education needs. The student was in the cafeteria during a lunch period, experienced a trigger of some sort, got upset, picked up a table and threw it. The principal was called to the cafeteria. The student was sent back to the classroom. The SERT participant said that the student needed to learn what kind of damage he had done. This

SERT marched back up to the classroom, asked the student to come down to the cafeteria, put the table back down because the principal had put the table right side up. This SERT talked about the reason why he was there and that the table must be set back up so other students could sit at this table. The SERT and the student picked the table up and although the SERT was not sure how it was going to go, it went well, and they both went back upstairs to class. The SERT summarized that a student needs to be taught what is not appropriate. Nothing is learned if the student is just sent away and someone else fixes whatever was disrupted. Teachers can be directed to understand that students need to be given opportunities to learn, and that direction can be within policies.

**d. *Teacher Accreditation.***

Most of the twelve participants raised the lack of availability of teachers and special education resource teachers. While funding to hire staff may be available, teacher shortages are a very real issue. Two participants from one community shared that they are working with a university Bachelor of Education program to bring on-reserve instruction for local residents who are interested in participating in the Indigenous Teacher Education Program (ITEP) and eventually acquiring a Bachelor of Education degree. This is a great opportunity for those persons, who may not be able to leave the community to acquire these qualifications. In Ontario, there are opportunities to attend university Bachelor of Education programs (Queens, Nipissing, University of Ottawa, and Laurentian) to obtain enrollment in an ITEP diploma which allows one to work towards a Bachelor of Education over weekends and summer months. This particular initiative could result in as many as forty qualified teachers over three or four years for this particular community.

Pay grids that are reasonable and allow pay to increase as qualifications did, are pieces that could be included in education policies. I have witnessed two First Nation members who had been education assistants for several years. These two members attended such a program during the summer months, and the community was eventually able to hire them as teachers at the community

primary school. They both went on to further their qualifications without a break in employment. One also worked towards a principal's certificate and the other received a special education specialist qualification. They are now the Principal and the SERT of the school respectively. This is an example of building teacher qualifications to match the school needs and teacher career aspirations.

**e. *Specialists.***

One participant expressed the desire for more SERTs in the school to accommodate more one-to-one student program delivery. Another sought more behaviour specialists for those students who are struggling to make it through the day. Locally developed special education policies could be put in place to determine how many SERTs would be appropriate for a student population based on the number of students with special education needs. One participant said that identification should not have the purpose of generating funding. Instead, identification would be a legitimate means of understanding where student need is and could include a gap analysis of the program delivery gaps in the schools. This participant asked, "...is your community priority to be an employment centre or are you trying to deliver quality education" (First Nation Education Director/Teacher of 25 plus years at a First Nation school).

**f. *Provincial Special Education Policies***

At the provincial level, one participant was clear that the school board's special education policy is very "white based...[and]...not culturally representative of any culture"(Anonymous). It was shared that there is a "...need to include [the addition] of cultural representation, even if it's saying, OK, if your student is struggling, why don't you try something from their culture and infuse that into their lesson" (Indigenous Superintendent of Special Education in provincial school board).

**g. *Child and Family Centred Policies***

A participant said that special education policies or education policies in general, need to be focused on the child and their experiences. The main point of this contribution is to acknowledge

that if the family is hurting, then the child is hurting. “I think that we need to support families more”(First Nation administrator with 30 years’ experience in First Nation schools). Another participant put this into action by providing indoor shoes for all students in the school, acknowledging that for some families, to supply two pairs of shoes, indoor and outdoor, can be genuine hardship. Simple ways to address student discomfort such as these help to alleviate student stress and anxiety. This same participant brings optometrist and dental care professionals to the community to further ensure the well-being of students.

#### **h. *Communication and Family engagement***

Several participants spoke of the need to have sound communication structures that encourage parent or caregiver engagement. Simply stated, education policies and especially special education policies need to include ways to incorporate family involvement in a student’s school life. Participants stressed that a communication structure built on reciprocal interaction between the teacher and school is integral to an effective communication strategy. One participant emphasized that positive and negative conversations build faith in the education system. “We’re trying to do some good things for your child...You know, they really did really well today”(Indigenous educator in First Nation school). One participant gave an example of how important it is to reach out to parents.

*Dad is raising two kids on his own, doing his best. He has an Indigenous background and he's been very open and honest with the principal about how uncomfortable he is coming into the school building. He does not trust the school. It takes a lot of relationship building and listening. I've met with him on a number of occasions. One of his children requires special education services. How important it is for that community piece and parent focused part of policy to incorporate what's important to them when educating their children, it's not a one-size-fits-all model. (non-Indigenous principal in a First Nation school)*

**i. Policy at the federal level (ISC)**

Many participants acknowledged that federal policy was generally about funding and that such policy discussions must be transparent and led by First Nations with input at all levels, local, regional and national.

*... the funding structure needs to be overhauled.... but I think that that's going to be dictated at the local level who know what those changes need to be. That sovereignty piece is going to be how we define, how it would be. It would be super exciting to see First Nations that redefine special education as they see it from a national perspective. What they need in order to meet the needs of the learners. So I think those definitions need to be revisited and not just accepted in a very paternalistic kind of way [as in] from the province or the federal government's view of special education. So I think we need to exercise that right a little bit in terms of First Nations and in terms of taking on the challenge of defining / redefining, special education. Then we can design programs around how they can meet learner's needs from that end. Of course that comes to lobbying, to the development of teachers' skills and so on. (First Nation Education Director/Teacher of over 25 years at a First Nation school)*

**j. Founded in Community**

Several participants raised the importance of including the community when asking the question 'how are we going to teach our children'. The participants focused on classroom program and questioning whether it had to be based on provincial/mainstream guidelines and curriculum. The conversations included: What are the community values that should be reflected in the school community? Are there other education styles that better suit the needs of the First Nation school? Should special education policies also reflect community values regarding different learning styles and behavior patterns? How much involvement by spiritual leaders is welcome?

Community values are also foundationally important, according to a non-Indigenous administrator with decades of experience in fly-in First Nations, to special education policies. Students with different needs have an education journey that is valued and, "...not just a fringe group that we have to address. They're part of it [school experience]. A program to be valued is equally important for students with special education needs.... To effect change, we need all of the parties [student, parent, community, staff] aware of what's going on [in school programming]"(non-

Indigenous administrator with decades of experience in fly-in First Nations). Community support and engagement lends to a school environment that becomes familiar to the community and a place where students, staff and the community feel welcome.

### **Findings - Part One Summary**

The findings regarding what ‘special education’ means in First Nations communities in Ontario, disclose a systemic bias to the same processes in the Ontario provincial school system. Supports and impediments to the delivery of special education programming inspired a lot of conversation with clear ideas of what is challenging in special education program delivery and what is working. Access to adequate teaching and support staff is the main concern as well as several challenges such as community infrastructure, access to materials in remote communities, and staff and student well-being.

Efficiency and efficacy are terms that are evidence of how First Nations have been subtly guided into a system that funds results and rapid student achievement. This is evident in societal willingness to have low expectations for students with special education needs by not encouraging the completion of a secondary school diploma, limiting students to a participation certificate. The result is limited resources that are focused on greater aspirations or achievement for students that do not have special education needs and First Nation students with lower aspirations and achievement. For example, I could not get the school to allow Jaime to try for one secondary credit at school. It is encouraging that in the conversation about resources, that First Nations are looking for more teachers and training on how to address the needs of all of their students seemingly without any other concern but to ensure that students have successful experiences at school. The conversation was not about increasing graduation rates or any aggregate goal but to assist each student to succeed in school.

Optimistically, how special education can be re-conceptualized or reimagined to better meet First Nation children's needs was revealed in the findings within chapter 6. The themes of the Inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge and Culture and Cultural Practises emerge and lead to the possibility of reimagining education to look to the whole child.

## CHAPTER 6

### **Findings – Part 2: A Reconceptualization of Special Education**

This chapter presents the conversations that speak to the remaining two themes, the Inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge in special education programming and the Culture and Cultural Practices within that programming. The seventh theme of gifts, predominant throughout all aspects of this research, will also be described in the findings specifically within traditional Indigenous education methodologies, ideologies and cultural practices that are being brought into the contemporary context.

There are growing examples of how Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices appear in the academy. Kimmerer (2013) often combines Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin and scientific knowledge in her writing of personal present-day experiences as she learns and discovers original teachings with humility and humour. Similarly, Geniusz (2009) looks at science through an Indigenous lens but taking it further, brings to the forefront how research using Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin in science by and for Anishinaabe is actually recapturing knowledge. This is a departure from settler or western-based research of Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin that is theoretical and tends to be more in the name of preservation of Anishinaabe Gikendaasowin rather than practical use. Geniusz (2009) gives an excellent example of decolonizing Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin in the science context by incorporating story, teachings, harvesting and practical use of the white cedar and birch (Geniusz, 2009). Kimmerer (2013) likens the cross-pollination as demonstrated by the bees, to the production of a new species of knowledge if cross-pollination between the scientific and Indigenous worlds were to happen. She further suggests that the beauty of one can perhaps be illuminated by the radiance of the other. In this sense, this chapter also presents hope and foresight into how we get to Stage 4, self-determination of Indigenous education by Indigenous communities, determining the components and origins of knowledge,

Gikendaasowin, that we want in our education systems and from that, what a reconceptualized special education program might look like in the future.

## **5. Inclusion of Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin, Indigenous Knowledge**

Not all interview questions inspired responses from all participants, but all respondents answered the question regarding the inclusion of Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin, Indigenous knowledge in classroom programming indicating that it was viewed as being a very important component of the education of First Nation students, those with special education needs or not. Prevalent throughout the responses was the belief that passing on Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin/Indigenous knowledge is critical for students' foundational knowledge of who they are and where they come from. It better accommodates a student's engagement in school and connectedness. When speaking to audiences about my experiences as an Anishinaabekwe, I share my observation that when an Indigenous group loses most of its culture and language, it is devastating in a country like Canada where this is the only land where these languages have ever existed or where their revival will ever be possible. I remind people that if their heritage and original language of that heritage are not originally of this land, they have either brought their customs and language with them or may be able to go to that original homeland and hear that language, experience the food and the customs. But Turtle Island has been the only home of Anishinaabemowin or of the Haudenosaunee languages, of the Great Law of Peace and of the Seven Grandfather Teachings. After violent attempts to have those languages and cultural practices eliminated, this still remains the only land on which we have any chance of recapturing them. Again, as shared by the research participants, the presence of Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin/Indigenous Knowledge is critical for First Nation student education to ensure a resurgence or continuity of their growth as Indigenous people.

There was a common understanding amongst the research participants with lots of experience in the provincial education system, that introducing Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin to classroom programming allows non-Indigenous students to learn about the history and the cultural components of Indigeneity, besides ensuring that Indigenous students are engaged and connected to the schoolwork and community.

One non-Indigenous educator saw the inclusion of Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin as important in all education programming:

*The facilitation of learning for all should be multi-faceted.... Students with “special needs” often learn best by watching and doing – experiential learning. This has been described as how Indigenous peoples impart knowledge – by doing and through story as learned through some of my graduate research. (Non-Indigenous educator in fly-in First Nation School)*

This same educator said that a child with special education needs may grasp concepts easier if delivered in his language and culture practices, as these practices might align with how the child receives information at home. A parent respondent who has a child that went through school with special education needs responded that this inclusion is very important as she, without giving specifics, has seen the positive benefits in the overall learning experiences of the children in her family to have Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin included in the classroom program.

The majority of participants reflected on student well-being, emphasizing that when students understand their identity and are given opportunities to show what they know and what they can do in settings that make sense to their cultural identity and skill levels, positive things can happen. More than two participants observed that students become academically stronger and emotionally improved in wellness when they are connected to their Indigenous cultural heritage. One parent/educator spoke to their child’s journey through spiritual teachings and ceremony and now holds a prominent place of duty in their lodge. This student with profound special education needs absolutely understands this duty. “Students love to communicate in their language so when we do

the singing or counting in the language their face light up with joy” (non-Indigenous principal at fly-in First Nation school).

An Indigenous teacher in a non-First Nation school spoke to understanding the balance of the traditional Indigenous ways with the Western ways of teaching and learning, that Two-Eyed way of seeing. One challenge in balancing was trying to incorporate more experiential, hands-on learning when involved in classroom activities. This teacher witnessed the pride of students who are learning their language and previously unknown things about their culture. They also described the enthusiasm and excitement that builds in these students, leading to their ability to believe in their own success. Having worked in several provincial boards, this teacher reflected that inequalities and sustained marginalization still exist for Indigenous students in the current provincial systems and that infusing more Indigenous Knowledge would change these realities.

A First Nation parent/educator revealed that their child with special education needs was excluded (exempted) from the Indigenous language learning in the provincial system but during a summer camp for First Nation students with special education needs, that child excitedly learned to count and learned words about the weather in Anishinaabemowin (language), so was given a disservice through this ‘exemption’ during regular school months. This parent/educator was a former Director of Education at a First Nation, and she was advised by her employer to build the education system as if her son, a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), was attending. This is juxtaposed to my daughter, Jaime’s, experience in learning Anishinaabemowin.

Anishinaabemowin was the only regular class that she was allowed to attend in the provincial secondary school, and she received the Anishinaabemowin Award when it came time to graduate. Wonderfully, her grandfather, my father, was Chief at the time and he was the one to hand her the award at the graduation ceremony. This was also an award that her brother had received at his

graduation several years prior.

An Indigenous teacher in central north Ontario, shared that “it's actually going to be pivotal, in terms of us taking a look at ... the achievement and advancement of First Nation learners....so that we can at least get to or surpass the levels of achievement [of non-Indigenous learners] ...in a way that's culturally inclusive and sensitive”(Indigenous educator with 20 years' experience in First Nation schools).

Several of the educators, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, included in their discussion, the fact that they have been working very hard to bring the culture back into First Nation schools with an increase in cultural presence as a result. The challenge is that most staff do not have the background in the culture and sometimes do not have a level of comfort in sharing teachings or other cultural activities. They are concerned that they may be judged in the community. They may hesitate because their interpretation of culture may not be the same as someone else. With the efforts that have been made, these participants claim that they have seen positive change in the students when they are educated to understand what Indigenous identity is.

Regarding special education, one of the Indigenous educators made the compelling observation:

*Well, a lot of our kids that are in special education, they're not high needs. A lot of it is confidence, self esteem, like they don't believe in themselves. They come from trauma, they don't have their culture...they have these feelings, and they don't understand why they feel this way....kids do need to know who they are... I wish I would have known who I was a lot sooner in life...instead of having to go find it. (Indigenous teacher/principal with over 20 years' experience in First Nation schools)*

More participant comments:

*We didn't notice that we needed [an emphasis on culture] when we were growing up because it was there. (First Nation Elder/Residential School survivor with 30 years' experience in education on a First Nation)*

*My own personal philosophy of education is, you include the way that kids learn and go about their living...you experience their education with them. If you are teaching an Indigenous child, it has to*

*be. I don't think there's any other way.* (Non-Indigenous principal at fly-in First Nation school)?

One of the First Nation director participants works within the self-governing Anishinaabek Education System (AES) of the Anishinaabek Nation (Union of Ontario Indians) with a governing structure, Kinoomaadziwin Education Body (KEB). The AES self-government agreement with Canada was signed in 2015 and established a First Nation control of First Nation education system that is not beholden to ISC's education policies or national program guidelines. For the first time in Ontario, certain provisions of the *Indian Act* do not apply to the 23 participating First Nations. This participant referenced their belief in AES' vision of "All of our students are confident, successful, and strong in their language, culture, and traditional knowledge" (KEB, 2024). He has been involved in the development of this system for many years and is guided by a personal belief that Anishinaabe identity building is very important for the survival of our cultural ways and practices.

The impacts of excluding Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin/Indigenous knowledge include:

*[The inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge] applies to education generally. We know that the systems currently in Canada and North America are colonizing systems. We can look at the Ontario curriculum and we can point out the curriculum expectations that diminish or negate our worldview. A good example, is I forget if it's grade three-four or five, 'what are the physical characteristics of plants and animals'? Now, if I'm an Indigenous person teaching Indigenous students, and I adhere strictly to the curriculum and just teach that physical component of life, I am assimilating those children. I am an agent of assimilation and colonization because I haven't given my head a shake and realize, oh, there are three other quadrants. So, when we look at plants and animals, we need to look at them holistically. In fact, I write a lot of land-based curriculum that does exactly that and positions our relationship in the way we look at place, in those quadrants. So, in education, once again, we have a colonizing structure. We have colonizing curriculum; we have assimilative aspects to those things, and we know all the difficulties our people have stumbled upon because we're in this foreign system. There's a great video by Sir Ken Robinson. It's a 12-minute video and it's a video entitled "Do schools kill creativity?"<sup>13</sup> He talks about how modern-day schools are built on a model from the 1700s to address the industrial revolution. It's a capitalistic endeavor... When you [look at] the goal of the Ontario curriculum, the overall goal is to create good, productive Ontario citizens, to participate in the Ontario economy. Well, logically we know that the Ontario economy is capitalistic. We know capitalism is anti-Indigenous, so that, too, the very structure of*

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<sup>13</sup> "Do schools kill creativity?" is a Ted Talk (February 2006) by Sir Ken Robinson available at [https://www.ted.com/talks/sir\\_ken\\_robinson\\_do\\_schools\\_kill\\_creativity?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/sir_ken_robinson_do_schools_kill_creativity?language=en).

*our schools and the system here in Canada has all those aspects into it. When we have staff coming to work in the [First Nation] schools I work in, I say you better be very well aware of all the systemic issues we face, all the colonizing issues. Never use them as an excuse why we can't move people forward and be prepared to think outside the box. To overcome those barriers when we talk about education, we're talking about nurturing and setting up young people for success. We know that our culture is one of peace and harmony and we do look at everything holistically. So, when we look at children in band operated [First Nation] schools, we don't merely, just...what I like to say is being a principal in a First Nation and being a First Nation man, it's a lifestyle. Indigenously, education is lifelong from birth to death, and we never stopped learning. We never start stopped growing. We never stopped working as long as we were able to. So, in special education, when we're looking at these fragile scenarios of children struggling, we need to first and foremost look at who they are as human beings and need to look through that Indigenous lens holistically. (First Nation educator/principal/director with decades of experience in First Nation schools)*

Both students who were interviewed emphasized that including culture and Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin into the school environment was very important. Both attended schools where there was no culture available that they themselves did not bring in. One student takes it upon themselves to bring a smudging ceremony into their classroom and is now offering the land acknowledgment at graduations and assemblies. They said, "I think [the program] is good. I think it just has to have more inclusion and other types of histories other than Canada because we mostly just learn about Canadian history", meaning not much Indigenous content in that history.

The other student lives in ceremony and the lodge is very much a part of their life. They have a role as one of the doorkeepers. Their parent spoke of the gifts this child brings that go far beyond physical disability.

## **6. Culture and Cultural Strategies**

Twenty-nine participants included culture and cultural strategies in their conversation. Several responses were specific to special education, but unwaveringly they said students of all ability levels must be included in all activities. Most of the strategies shared were used in the classroom. Overwhelmingly it was stated that culture helps students feel a sense of belonging. The presence of

culture also allowed the school community to increase connection to families and Indigenous community itself. Indigenous cultural activities happen within First Nation and provincial school board schools. The following are examples of effective cultural strategies used in the classroom.

*In the classroom I used [culture-based] learning centres that addressed various learning styles – listening centre (stories, music), reading centre, art/drama/dance (choice of responses to demonstrate learning), manipulatives (for math-based activity) etc. Junior and intermediate classroom program design was actually built on how Kindergarten and primary classrooms of the day were set up. I also facilitated regular circles where students connected on current issues and concerns of a specific day or something overarching, or subject related. (Elder in Elder Advisor Team/Teacher participant who has over 40 years of experience in First Nation schools)*

*...one of the things is when the students come into the classroom, they need to greet the drum. The first spirit that talks is the drum. And when they are on their way in, if there's an Elder sitting, they need to stop and say, bonjou to the Elder. So if you're walking in the door and here's the chair, and here's the drum over here. You're walking, and you go 'Boozhoo, Boozhoo'. You sit down, touch the drum, give some tobacco, and then you sit down in the circle. That's not how I want to start my class. Because I want to speak first because I am the teacher. And how many times did I not enter properly? Teach the students how to enter that way. Because there needs to be an explicit teaching. I might be wrong about this, but my biggest class, our biggest class, was 42 [students in] grades 7 and 8 every day for that 55-minute block.... I remember many times it happened where we sat in a circle and the Elder would start to talk and he would have a smile on his face. And he would say. Yeah, it's good when you stop and shake hands as you're walking in and stop at the drum. (Non-Indigenous teacher/special education specialist with 20 years in fly-in or remote Ontario First Nation communities).*

*.... I made sure that there was toast and butter. I was constantly making toast for kids. I made sure that we always had tea. (Non-Indigenous teacher/special education specialist with 20 years in fly-in or remote Ontario First Nation communities)*

Professional development that was based on cultural teachings or activities like participating in sweat lodge. “Ceremony was allowing my healing, so I think supporting teachers in their journey [is so important]” (Non-Indigenous teacher/special education specialist with 20 years in fly-in or remote Ontario First Nation communities).

Grading students on a scale that is locally developed instead of using a typical numeric academic scale resulted in a ‘better buy in’ from the students. For example, “...students have listened attentively. I asked them just off the cuff, what story did you hear or what did that Elder have to tell you? What do you remember? They can give me feedback” (Non-Indigenous

teacher/special education specialist with 20 years in fly-in or remote Ontario First Nation communities).

Several participants shared that school pow wows or socials were common throughout the year. Some schools do their drum feastings and incorporating the whole school population in those. School calendars increasingly include First Nation ceremonial or seasonal harvesting timelines. It is now very common for graduation ceremonies in provincial and First Nation schools, to incorporate drum groups and other cultural practices. Elders' Tea days, the physical presence of Indigenous languages and teachings like the Seven Grandfather Teachings are increasing in the classrooms.

One principal participant shared that one of her teachers brought hoops to class to teach students how to hoop dance. My daughter Jaime was part of a drama troupe in our First Nation when she was in her late teens. She also learned to dance with six hoops and ten years later, even with a lapse of months in never picking up the hoops, she has performed her six-hoop dance in front of several different audiences and has taught other youth (not with special education needs) to hoop dance.

In one northern, fly-in access only, First Nation community, videos were made of Elders and community members on subject matters that they thought the students should know and what knowledge the Elders wanted to pass on. Videos and worksheets have been made using Indigenous language. Teachers use these resources and if they are doing an activity on the community and the history of the community, they use those videos and worksheets. It is an opportunity to hear the language. This same community has developed a language app [mobile phone/tablet application] that any student, or anyone, can access on their mobile phones or tablets.

This community uses technology to share these teachings and makes language fun to learn. Students with special education needs found that they could play the language games on the app and

that the games really catch their attention. The principal of this community described how one little boy really likes being on his iPad and does different activities on his iPad. In pointing out one of the language app games, he was told that he could hear people in the community that he would know. The voices caught his attention, and he would go around to all the people and let them know, “Miss Mary, I heard your voice”. It was a turning point for him as his main challenge was building relationships with people in the community and in the school. The app gave him confidence to approach people and now, he frequently comes up and talks to the principal and will have full conversations about what he did. Before this time, it was a struggle to get him to talk. “It was great”(Non-Indigenous Principal of fly-in First Nation school).

*It's a good conversation building tool. Which is important with speech and language and like a lot of other skill developments.... one of the skills that he was working on as well was just the conversation. He could talk, but to hold the conversation was where he was lacking. (non-Indigenous principal in fly-in First Nation school)*

Another school includes students in the Intensive Support Program (ISP) class by pairing student in the ISP class with one of the youth workers for activities such as: ice fishing, cleaning fish, nature walks, picking berries and learning about different plants. More hands-on activities were used for special education programming.

A non-Indigenous teacher spoke to how critical and effective it is to learn from Elders. This teacher’s reflection of her time was very powerful,

*...only because I listened and only because somebody believed that I cared to listen. I think that that's really important. And somehow when I worked with those Elders all the years, even when I didn't listen, they just lovingly repeated it.... because the next teacher that went in there, the Elders, all stopped attending. The Elders were all still fully, able to come into the classroom. But the person didn't listen. And how do you teach someone to listen? How did they teach me to listen? (Non-Indigenous teacher/special education specialist with 20 years in fly-in or remote Ontario First Nation communities)*

This same non-Indigenous teacher shared a story that spoke to how a child’s gift can emerge through cultural practices.

*All the teachers were upset because this boy was 'playing with the fire and I (questioningly) said to the Elder, this boy? I said, like all the teachers are upset because he's playing with the fire and the Elder just smiled and he goes, 'Yeab. Yeab, he's a fire keeper'. Of course. He had very high needs, we struggled with him all the time. He stayed around the fire all day, every day, every time it was lit, he never left the fire. He was constantly feeding it. But I remember what the Elder said [and I thought about it], 'of course you would know exactly what he's doing'. (Non-Indigenous teacher/special education specialist with 20 years in fly-in or remote Ontario First Nation communities)*

### *Land Based Learning*

Several participants shared that they saw the children with special education needs learning more when they were included in spiritual or cultural events. When academic learning was structured with land or culturally based activities, there was greater success. In visiting First Nation schools with land-based activities during the research, I was honoured to witness a community gathering at the school with a men's drum group that included students. There was a lunch and a giveaway where students passed out small gifts to all in attendance. This northern and remote community is one I have held in great admiration over the years. When I was an employee of ISC, with humility and as much as I could assist, I witnessed the education director worked tirelessly to engage the students, especially those students who had special education needs. He worked hard to develop a land-based program that is now a fixed part of the program.

Something I have come to understand about land-based programs, a phrase that has increasingly gained momentum in Indigenous communities, is that while there maybe components of Outdoor Education (OE) within land-based programs it is not an outdoor education programme. Land-based programs are opportunities to help Indigenous people see ourselves in our relationship to the land and how we, Indigenous people, are people of the land. These programs can show how the land is there for our healing and growth. For my practicum requirement in this PhD program, I used my experience with Gibimishkaadimin Reconciliation Project which was created to provide Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth with the opportunity to foster relationships with each other and the land through a canoe trip in northern Ontario. Gibimishkaadimin is directed by a six-person

Board, three of whom are Indigenous. For 6 years, I was part of the board and travelled on the canoe trips leading programming for three years of the canoe trips (UCC, 2024).

My experiences on the land with young people is that educators or program developers have the responsibility to ensure that youth see their homeland as valuable, with meaning, and ultimately, as part of their personal identity rather than seeing their homeland, especially if remote, as undesirable, as colonialism would have, and wishing for *better worlds*, away from their people. This is part of the special education conversation because of how mental health and lack of identity has clouded the ability for some Indigenous children and young people to learn. As one First Nation principal in a First Nation school states, “[There is] ...the real strong focus on land-based learning and the importance of that and it was never about which students had an IEP” (First Nation Superintendent at provincial school board).

An Elder from a remote community in the north that I had the privilege of interviewing reminded us that when there were no schools, children learned from their parents, grandparents, and community members, primarily through role modeling, listening, and through observation. This Elder has worked in education for most of her career and is a residential school survivor, now in her 60’s, who lived on the land before being taken away at the age of 5. Anishinaabemowin was her first language, but it was suppressed during her residential school experience, and she does not speak it as she could when she was a young child. She recalled being out on the land as being her playground. “We didn't really have any toys; we were simply being out in nature” (Elder). Engaging in our culture, she recalls a time of contentment. She stresses the importance of being out on the land and doing cultural activities. She has witnessed students’ enjoyment when working in land-based activities. We all have different needs and abilities and when teachers take these into consideration, all would benefit. “We all have our own gifts of learning”(Elder).

A First Nation principal noted that the neurolinguistic approach to teaching a second language, seems to be what students were responding to and were starting to become fluent. It is an approach that involves conversation, asking a lot of questions back and forth between the teacher and the child. The students are encouraged to speak to each other. Using phrases and vocabulary that they are learning. It is a gradual, cumulative process. “They were starting to see some real growth and then COVID happened...we’re trying to restart that” (First Nation School Principal).

An Indigenous educator/administrator shared great knowledge and background regarding land-based learning especially as it relates to student engagement.

*From a First Nation context all education is 'special' education...and all learners have special education considerations...because each one of them is unique and has different things to offer. Education, in our context, is an "exchange" between teacher and learner...in their lifelong journeys.*

*What the 'western' (Socratic) education process has diminished, or eliminated in many instances, is the value of that exchange. Each learner sees the world through a unique set of lenses, and hence gives them their unique perspective on the subject. The opportunity to express that perspective is where lessons lie for everyone in the 'classroom'.*

*Often times, the four walls of contemporary classrooms stifle the learning process because of a lack of stimulation or an absence of natural world elements for the learner to draw from. When we fail to allow this, we not only fail the learner, but we fail the "exchange". In some of those instances, the lesson that gets lost is the lesson we needed the most, whether that be patience, tolerance, or understanding the simplicity and beauty of it all. (Indigenous educator/administrator with decades of experience in First Nation schools)*

Including culture in the program helps students when they transition out of First Nation schools. One participant shared, “It shows them using strategies to reflect, ‘how can I incorporate my culture into this?’”(First Nation educator in First Nation school) For example, if a student is given a choice of a book or a project, you know they can look back into their own heritage for subject matter. For students with special education needs, engagement in learning material is often a big hurdle to overcome to achieve the enjoyment of reading. One Elder had spent time as a secondary art teacher and shared:

*We just went outside, looked for subjects to sketch, be with the trees and that's when you teach your values and your art techniques at the same time. Taking the students outside and putting them in the environment, going through streams, looking at the water, the movement and then when working with colour, you know blending the colours and going into where there was lots of colour and then seeing what kind of colours you can come by... Students love that, you know. They didn't complain and they would always come to class... Then I brought in extra help, and we worked with porcupine quills, birch bark, deer hide, making moccasins and gauntlets and bringing in fur as well. At one point I even [wondered] how I would do moose hair, so I had to learn myself how to do it and I was taught by another woman. around here somewhere. But this kind of stuff is using who we are and our art, and especially in visual arts.... looking at our people, what did they do? What were they doing? I brought my mother into the classroom cause one year we did the painting on cloth, our clans, and different aspects. Then we made it into a quilt, and she helped me. We sorted it out together. And we taught them how to do quilting. You know, so that's part of that too. Those quilts I think I ended up making four or five over the years I was teaching there, those quilts are still there, and they pull them out every now and then. You can see all the names in the year they were in the high school doing this. So [it becomes] part of our historical record. (Indigenous teacher/principal of 40+ years' experience in First Nation schools)*

## **7. Gifts - a Central Theme**

This research journey has been special to me for many reasons but primarily because I am able to be my Anishinaabekwe self and preside over the growth of this dissertation from that place of identity and of ceremony. I have felt Shawn Wilson's words, "Research is Ceremony" (Wilson, 2008) in every step. Our way as First Nation people is to lay tobacco and ask in prayer, in ceremony, for those answers that are not coming to us. One treasured exchange during the interviews speaks to this tradition, this kind of ceremony. The following is a conversation with a non-Indigenous teacher/education specialist who paid attention to the Elders she worked with and who had spent nearly 20 years, all of her teaching years, in fly-in or remote Ontario First Nation communities. The teacher's words are in italic type while mine are in normal type.

*Teacher: The thing that just popped into my head, when you talk about aha moments and I was trying to push it out of my mind, but it just came back again. So, I better just tell you. My second year of teaching, when I was in XXX First Nation, I had a grade 3/4 split. And I don't dream. I've had a couple of dreams in my life that are very significant, but this goes back to the question of inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge, Indigenous Knowledge and cultural practice. I really had a hard time with one student. .... He was punching kids in the face while he was walking by them in the class. He was opening doors and taking off and going home. It was, it was very disruptive. He was very clearly struggling, and we [the staff] were talking about, oh, we need a behavior plan, etc., all of this. And I went home one night. And I wished that he*

*wouldn't come to school the next morning because I did not know what to do. All of my strategies didn't work, and I went to sleep and right before I fell asleep and I wouldn't even say, like today my cultural practices for myself, not Indigenous or otherwise, but my spiritual practices, I meant to say, are very different. I have a very strong relationship with God, creator. But at that time, I didn't, but out of desperation, I said show me how you see him. That's all I said.*

Shelley: Wow, that's powerful. [I'm thinking, what a great question to ask Creator!]

Teacher: *In my dream I was sitting at my desk. Everything was as it was in my classroom, and I was sitting at my desk, and he walked up to me, and he had his hair parted on the side. It was like super slicked with like Brylcreem, and he was wearing a bow tie and a suit. And he walked up to me and said good morning, [calling her by her first two names]. And when I woke up, I was like, are you serious? That's how...? Of course, that's how you [Creator] see him. Of course. You see him in perfection (like that was my idea of perfection, I guess). That's something we can unpack another time.*

Shelley: Neat and tidy.

Teacher: *And polite. Yeah, and polite. He looked at me and whatever I needed to see. But the answer was he's perfect. And so that day I went to school, and again he walked in the room, punched someone in the face as he walked in, sat down, and he sat like this [mimicking hunched over with hood on his head]. And I walked up to him said quietly to him, (His name), God gave me a dream of you last night and then he [the student] looked at me right in the face. And I said from this day forward, I see you in perfection cause that's what Creator, that's what God just showed me. Just last night. And I said, do you want me to tell you the dream? And I told him what I told you in a little bit of a different language. And I'm telling you, not once, had I ever had to make a behavior plan for him. I never once had to tell him stop...anything ...ever again. He never punched anyone in the face, he never left class. And like I don't know how to explain that like I never had another dream like that. I never had one before like that.*

Shelley: It was your teacher dream, though. It was your teacher dream, as you told me earlier, to look at all kids with perfection as perfection. And that's the message of gifts, right? Oh, what a gift that you share that with me. Thank you. Miigwech. You just reminded me of when I was working with a community. This one young boy was a runner, but you knew he could and would run to the bush if left alone. He could likely get a deer, cook, cut it up into steaks and serve the whole community. So, like, nobody was really worried about him, that he was going to be in real trouble, but he was only 10. Being only 10, it bothered the heck out of the provincial school because people had made up their minds about him. One day I got an opportunity to have a one-on-one, look him in the eyes, conversation with him. And I looked at him, I said I see such a light in your eyes. I hope someday you see that too, and there was a flicker in his eyes because you know most told him that he was not much besides bad. He truly had that spark of intelligence and goodness in his eyes. He's a dad now, struggles some but tries hard. Kids just need to know you are rooting for them, especially our kids, because for too much of history, nobody has been rooting for them. Thank you for that.

When I talked to a group of First Nation directors during a gathering, after my retirement from ISC, one of the directors that I had known and worked with for at least ten years, came over and said that there were Elders in his community, a remote northern Ontario First Nation, that he could arrange for me to talk to about our children. I did not realize what an opportunity I had been given at the time, but I made the trip north and visited the Elders that I was introduced to by my friend. This particular Elder had been an Anishinaabemowin (Language) teacher at the First Nation school for some time but was also the head of the community Midewiwin Lodge. He had just returned home from the hospital that morning after a brief stay, but he very graciously accepted my tobacco and gifts and was happy to impart the teachings about children and the gifts that they bring with them. I found out while doing the last edits of this dissertation, that he is now in the spirit world. He allowed me to share this teaching in my research story, and with great humility, I am allowed to share with you:

*When we are talking about our children, it is often forgotten that we come from a place designed. Designed with so many different aspects of one's abilities. And we often forget that a child, an individual, has a unique creation to them. And our stories were told before we have even come to this way. We are stopped at a very sacred place on the way. This sacred place is where there are grandmothers and grandfathers who ask this soul's spirit, "What can you teach them? What can you provide to the others down there?" Some may see this in the context of gifts. And that little spirit before it was born to us, it chooses who it is going to be born to. It chooses its life. It knows what it's going to be like. That spirit knows the hardships that it will face. She or he chooses that life that it is going to. I want to stress; it forgets what choice it made after being born. The trauma of birth causes the baby to forget what his roles are. As in what I've chosen to do. Through time, we get to see how an individual is a child, and we come to understand that, however, this person is, how that person chose to be, one was born to this life. And because we are not aware of that choice, we are totally off course, we forget what we are supposed to do. When a child starts to develop, then we start to see the changes in that child. We often think that there are things missing. We often feel that there are things that the child needs, doesn't need, or require certain things for it to become aware of itself. And because of the world that we live in today, we often find ourselves over imagining. We often overthink about the child. We often forget that the child is a child, and we want that child to grow up fast. We often forget that we have to take our time with one another.*

*As a teacher, myself, I've seen the behavior challenges with our children. In our community it was very spiritually, community based, and the community involves a lot of the Elders in terms of how we raise a child, how we take care of a child. I think it comes down to the community where you*

*are working. How they view their children, how they take care of their children to follow those special teachings. To follow those special guidelines that those Elders keep and those spiritual people. The things that they use to ensure the longevity of the child's learning and this, may not always fall in line with provincial curriculum.*

Another Elder, who is in the same lodge, added to the teaching. “Our children are gifted to us and it's our responsible as parents and caregivers to protect care and love them unconditionally” (Elder). Both Elders emphasized that it is also our responsibility to assist children to understand their roles in the community. We are to help them reveal their gifts. This second Elder was led to the Lodge by her son, who taught her when he was 18 years old, that we are all gifted in our own ways.

An Elder/teacher/principal said following Elders and Knowledge Keepers saved his life when he started on the Pow Wow Trail<sup>14</sup> from age 16 to 32 as a singer and dancer. “It saved me from so many different things and that, is the importance of identity” (First Nation Elder/teacher/principal) . In my opinion, he became a gifted teacher and administrator.

The teaching of how a child, prior to being in the womb, is given their gift(s) as outlined in this “Gifted” section is an Anishinaabe teaching given in north Ontario, yet the gifted Elder/teacher/principal mentioned in the last paragraph is from southern Ontario and is Haudenosaunee. This understanding of the gifts within a child and children as gifts is an understanding everywhere in Ontario from top to bottom. This Haudenosaunee Elder talked of emphasizing gifts as opposed to deficits especially when looking at Indigenous children through a holistic lens. He says we could revise those IPRC and IEP processes to identify gifts once again. “How do we support those gifts? How do we synthesize those gifts with their overall education to make sure they're successful? How do we elevate them as human beings and get the rest of society to acknowledge those great gifts?” (Elder) He added that we need to overhaul the definition of special education and the process of

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<sup>14</sup>Pow Wow Trail means to travel to the Pow Wows of various communities over the summer months.

special education by looking through that holistic Indigenous lens. He said, "...to quote one of my mentors from years ago, every child has a gift. As educators, our role is to find out what the gift is so we can work on the positive and then work from there to support the needs" (Elder). He emphasized that if we continue to focus on the needs, we'll find needs in everyone.

### **Findings Summary**

In this chapter, examples of how traditional Indigenous education methodologies, ideologies and cultural practices can be brought forward into the contemporary context were addressed under the subject of the inclusion of Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin, Indigenous knowledge and cultural strategies. First Nations are indeed providing a resurgence of cultural presence despite the colonial attempts to keep it submerged.

Throughout the participant sharings, the emphasis was on the wholeness of a student, in terms of ability, of career potential, of strength as a contributing, literate individual and generally as a valued member of the community. There was no focus on disability or recognition of the person according to that disability. Any particular recognition is of what the child brings, what their gifts are. The wholeness of a student's medicine wheel was also raised in the research stories. Educators need to look for ways for the medicine wheel to flow smoothly, unhindered by chinks or disruptions to its proper rolling movement. A solid, unmarred quadrant contributes a smooth surface to the wheel's flow or roll. We understand from the literature that special education from clinical or diagnostic views have become an archaic means to address the needs of students with learning challenges. Evident in the stories that were gathered in the research is the view of a child as a whole individual with physical, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional needs. These needs make up a medicine wheel's four quadrants and are better enhanced by viewing the child's education through Gikendaasowin.

Viewing the student as a whole person with a complete medicine wheel, is explained by one Indigenous principal, that this view is, "...to help the students build resilience over the obstacle before them, [and] to develop confidence that [they] can function normally within [their] community" (Indigenous principal in a fly-in community). Another educator addressed wholeness in terms of how it works using today's programming strategies.

*If they have an IEP, positive behavior plan, or any type of support plan, any child that really needs some type of individualized programming or differentiating instruction, it could be just as simple as providing accommodations to meet that child's learning needs or modifications to the curriculum to ensure that they are able to be successful. Some of our students do require alternative programs, so it would vary from the Ontario curriculum and be more life-skills based. Again, depending on their diagnosis, exceptionality and also what they specifically need to be successful in life, so I think it's really about knowing that whole child and what they need to be successful and speaking with the parents and guardians about what they have for future goals. [The reality is], some of them will stay till age 21 if they have some type of exceptionality. [There has to be an understanding] of what is beyond high school, what are their life goals so that we can support them with those? We see students that are requiring some more support in self-awareness. So just really understanding their self regulation needs and how we can support them. (Non-Indigenous Teacher with twenty years of experience in First Nation communities)*

Extending the conversation of wholeness and how it must include Gikendaasowin in the delivery of special education programs, the sections within this chapter revealed the growing prominence of culture and Gikendaasowin into the important work of formally educating children.

In the upcoming Chapter 7, how the research findings relate to the east to west fluidity of the medicine wheel as depicted in the chronology of the special education for First Nation students in Figure 2 are described. Chapter 7 also includes further discussion of what reconceptualized special education might look like and presents a discussion on how these findings relate to the three assumptions introduced in Chapter 4 that emerged from the literature. After an analysis of how the findings relate to the four stages of the medicine wheel outlined in Chapter 2, a Holistic Approach is introduced.

## CHAPTER 7

### Discussion

In this chapter, the research is summarized according to how well-founded the assumptions introduced in chapter 4 are, and how the findings correlate to each stage of the medicine wheel outlined in Figure 3, the Indigenous Qualitative Research Methodology. Finally a holistic approach to education for First Nation students is set out.

#### **The Findings and the Three Assumptions**

In Chapter 4, three assumptions emerged from the exploration of special education using the research methodologies while conducting the literature review. The following outlines how the research stories do or do not align with these assumptions.

#### *Assumption One*

*Special education for First Nation children is exacerbated by historical, racist, genocidal, societal and policy realities in the public education of First Nation children.*

In the discussions on policy, the participants' stories revealed that the provincial special education policies are oriented in Western based philosophies and have no reference to Indigenous content (see p.150). Participants revealed that legislation such as the *Indian Act*, provincial curriculum, and funding dictated by the federal government, are constant reminders who are the dominant groups and who holds the power and decision-making capacity.

There are still challenges for students to see their place in school. According to the participants, trauma and racist, genocidal, and societal realities still remain in today's learning environments.

#### *Assumption Two*

*First Nation ideology and epistemology place children as gifts, particularly in their relationship to community and their contribution to that community.*

Teachings from Elders according to participants' stories regarding a student's gifts and the need to see beyond any disability, confirms that this assumption is still valid and very relevant. Indigenous ways of being are designed to draw out these gifts as demonstrated by the boy who was drawn to the fire.

### ***Assumption Three***

*There are legitimate physical, cognitive, and learning disabilities present among First Nation children requiring individualized education, labeled special education or otherwise, that may be better delivered through asset-based program delivery.*

The participants' stories indicate that we tend to want to make disability somewhat invisible. This may be well-intentioned in that the hope is the student is simply part of the class. However, learning needs still have to be met and support for students with disabilities, however minor, must be incorporated in the school program and become part of the 'normal'. Stigma related to identification of exceptionalities still happens in school communities.

### **The Findings in Connection to the Medicine Wheel**

This section summarizes the research as to how it correlates with each stage outlined in the Indigenous Qualitative Research Methodology (Figure 3).

#### *Stage 1*

This stage is the 'pre-contact' era before colonialism. The literature review revealed that in an Indigenous community, learning was described as being ongoing, throughout one's whole life (Rolheiser, 2011). Children were revered as important and valued members in all aspects of community life, and as future carriers of knowledge and traditions. Disabilities were not seen as a

deficit, but simply a part of the uniqueness of that child (Johnson, 2003;Porter, 2008;Simpson, 2017). As told by the Elders, children came into the world to reveal their gifts and all in community assisted to ensure that revelation occurred. In the contemporary education setting, this approach is seen as a way of responding to and valuing the strengths of students based on ways of knowing that regard disabilities differently, namely as exceptionalities or gifts (Battiste, 2013; Bevon-Brown, 2013;Dion, 2017; Phillips, 2010). This quadrant of the medicine wheel is where the wheel is at its strongest because this era is based on First Nation original teachings.

### *Stage 2*

Contact and the beginning of colonization is situated in Stage 2 in the medicine wheel. In this stage, and within the literature review societal views of disability were discussed. It was found that disability is significantly influenced by social construct and discourse imposed by settler colonists. Indigenous people and especially children were subjected to assimilation and genocide. Assumptions and continuing colonial legacies of deficit discourse about the abilities of First Nation children continue to plague the Canadian story (Castagno, 2008). Canada and Indigenous communities would do well to stop seeing Indigenous people as being ‘other’, especially First Nation students (Paugh, 2011). We can think differently about the potential of First Nation students by rejecting words and actions that have the impact of holding them back. Systems in Stage 2, and seeping into our time, Stage 3, have not considered generational trauma, complicated educational and social backgrounds of First Nation students, and the assets they bring to the classroom. This part of the medicine wheel is chipped, and this makes the medicine wheel's movement, the teaching and learning for First Nations, become bumpy and harsh.

### *Stage 3*

Today’s classroom experience in provincial and First Nation schools are represented in the third stage of the medicine wheel where First Nation communities are working to address the

impacts of colonialism by addressing the over representation of First Nation students in special education. Increasing teacher sensitivities to Indigenous worldviews is one of the strategies that could change those inequities (Ali, 2009). Such paradigm shifts can be provided by culturally responsive/relevant pedagogy (CRP) which is introduced in stage 3 of the literature review. CRP provides opportunities for teachers to incorporate self-reflection by challenging, analysing, and monitoring their own personal and professional assumptions about First Nation culture as well as institutional and instructional inclusion of culture, then, the equitable needs of all First Nation students are better met (Chang, 2022). This analysis was given by a non-Indigenous teacher/SERT who had spent her whole teaching career in northern communities. She shared, 'the only barrier was me'.

Every First Nation education personnel and the provincial school board staff across the province had intense passion, knowledge, and rich experience regarding their special education programs. The diverse group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators had long careers in education, are committed and work very hard to deliver the best education program, not just special education programs, to First Nation children.

The sharing revealed that Elders and Knowledge Keepers are vital to the decolonization of First Nation education and special education. They will be the guiding energy to ensuring that a child's gifts are remembered and that the relationship to the land is based on reciprocity among other guiding principles.

Parents become knowledgeable about their child's exceptionality and can learn to advocate on their child's behalf. The parents in the research were very present and cognizant to their child's needs and would be great resources for other parents of children with special education needs.

Students are paying attention and want to be valued but need our assistance and advocacy. The existing cracks in this quadrant are beginning to be patched but not yet with anything long lasting. There is still work to do.

#### *Stage 4*

The fourth stage is the emerging vision of reimagining special education for Indigenous students, based on Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin and the way of being. It is my goal that this quadrant becomes full and firm as it is at the beginning in Stage 1.

Like the muskrat in the creation story. I dove deep to see if I could find the re-creating earth that could be the foundation of a newly created special education system. Through this research, through conversations with my peers, long developed friendships and colleagues in education, observations from a lifetime of learning, I see a new way that welcomes all of the teachings, all of the abilities, and all of the gifts. All of these find a place in holistic education.

#### **Today's special education experience for First Nation students**

In Ontario, all of the participants revealed that the special education program (SEP) model that is used to address the needs of First Nation students with special education needs, is essentially the same as that used in the provincial school system. In other words, the identification process and program are influenced by western philosophies. These philosophies are deficit-based and favour diagnostic summations of ability. Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin and cultural strategies are increasingly being incorporated into the process. If decolonizing is a goal, the importance of reconceptualizing special education will be an important step in teaching First Nation students, these who would be formerly known as special education students, and now simply be known as learners.

Modeling after the provincial system is an understandable approach as the majority of students living in First Nation communities will eventually attend elementary and/or secondary programming in Ontario. The research shows that students are often educated in preparation for

moving into the provincial systems. Of the 133 First Nations recognized by the Chiefs of Ontario (COO, 2024), only 36 of these communities have schools that offer Kindergarten to Grade 12. If we consider hybrid and virtual secondary programs, then 51 programs are available on reserve. The On-Reserve Elementary and Secondary School Map (ISC, 2024) available on ISC's website indicates the location of schools on reserve and personal knowledge from working at ISC allows me to determine what grades are offered in these schools. Therefore, the students of nearly 100 of the remaining First Nation communities will be educated in the provincial system.

Preparation for provincial systems is a major concern in the First Nation communities especially in the area of assessments. Delays in services for students with special education needs is a reality if formal assessments like psycho educational assessments are not done when students enter provincial schools.

Another concern is the shortage of consistent and dependable teaching staff and the lack of professional development for staff regarding exceptionalities and special education needs.

There is still so much work to do to get First Nation communities in parity with provincial schools. Progress is being made but the distinction between legitimate learning disabilities and realities such as trauma or student self-worth is blocking a child's ability to learn is even more prevalent in First Nation communities. Social and emotional trauma and generational impacts of historical events exacerbate these blocks. Lack of infrastructure negatively impacts student learning. Lack of facilities and under-resourced schools are directly associated with the academic failure of learners (Khumalo & Mji, 2014). The challenges of living in remote areas especially in the north with the lack of basic services in communities and schools negatively impacts the recruitment of qualified teachers and the delivery of programs when there are teachers available. Overcrowded housing, lack of transportation, poor water quality and the lack of health care result in chronic

illnesses and discourage students from going to school. The experience for First Nation students is not similar to the experience of non-Indigenous students. Most urban provincial school communities have adequate supplies of goods and access to better housing, health care, potable water and safe transportation to school.

Special education, in fact education in general for all First Nation children requires a reconceptualization.

### **Holistic Education**

Toulouse (2016) shares that for the education of Indigenous peoples, it is important that children, youth, adults, and Elders have a respectful space to develop their talents. The literature and research stories revealed that today's special education climate, particularly for First Nation people, is judgemental and is fueled by historical, genocidal, and racist discourse that does not foster a respectful space that values talents or gifts. Toulouse (2016) further offers that Indigenous people hope that all community members will contribute to society (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and have a physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually balanced medicine wheel. The capacity to give and the capacity to be well comes from the integration of the sacred and the secular.

Toulouse further says it is about enhancing identity, promoting well-being, connecting to land, valuing language, incorporating teachings, and acknowledging the inherent right to self-determination. Indigenous people view learning as personal, subjective, spiritual, and transformative in a holistic context (Morcom, 2017). We have also seen in the participant stories, that there is a collective goal amongst educators to focus on a child's individual education program incorporating First Nation cultural practices and philosophies. We heard that a child can be transformed when seen as a valued person through an Indigenous lens. Morcom (2017) suggests that a holistic model such as one formed in a medicine wheel allows for assessments of students that can be accomplished on a variety of levels, encompassing all the quadrants of the medicine wheel. For

example, a student with intellectual or cognitive gifts may need more development in the emotional or spiritual quadrants. Spirituality is the most difficult quadrant to understand in the context of western references which generally mean religion. For many Indigenous Nations, spirituality is not dogma. In simple terms, it is the way of life in living in harmony with all things. "...to stand in awe of the greatness of creation and to honour their place within it"(Morcom, 2017, p.125).

Holistic education allows everyone to develop their gifts. As Simpson (2011) tells us, "...it is our own tools, strategies, values, processes and intellect that are going to build our new house" (p. 31), or in this case, our new school, our special education system, our community.

Viewing special education through the lens of holistic education recognizes the whole child in a place that considers all of the quadrants, and especially their gifts and would be a direction towards decolonized or reconceptualized special education.

### **An example of a Holistic Education Model**

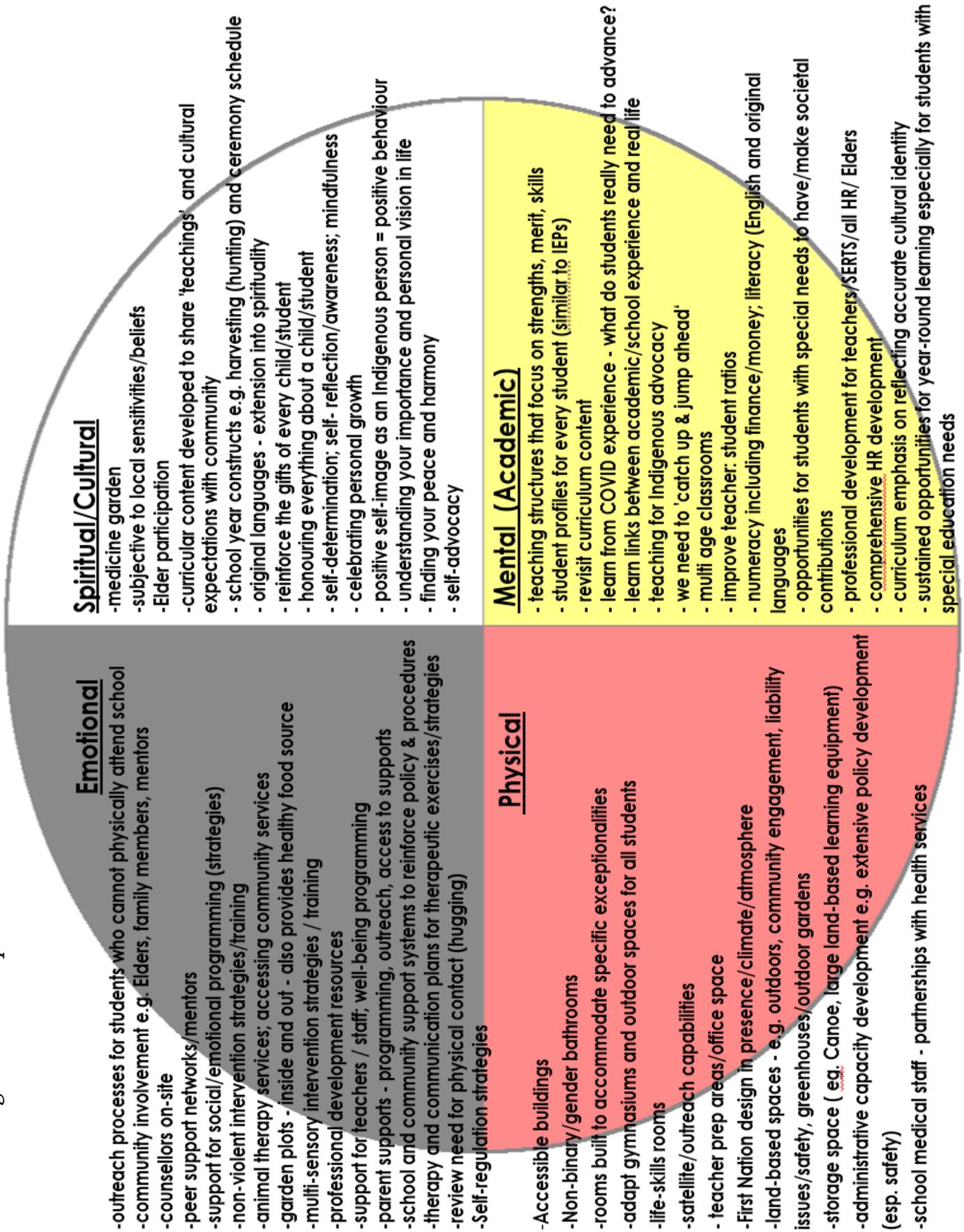
I co-chaired a High-Cost Special Education Task Team with the Ontario Technical Table for the Interim Funding Approach (OTTIFA) as an ISC representative from about 2020 to 2023. During that time, I facilitated a discussion on what a Holistic Education Model with a focus on special education, might look like. The following model was the result of that discussion. Further exploration with that group resulted in a breakdown of costing and resourcing required to facilitate such a system. The costing and resourcing are not included here as that is an exercise that depends on regional situations. This model is also based on the medicine wheel (see Figure 13). Communities can use the suggested components within any quadrant to form their plan for a holistic education system or start from a blank page and build their own based on local cultural sensitivities and capacities. Each quadrant focuses on how the organization of the learning place or education structure would address all of the potential needs of that quadrant. For example, the

emotional needs of a student could be addressed using the following sample of facilities, tools, or resources shown in the emotional quadrant of the medicine wheel:

- multi-sensory intervention strategies/ training;
- community involvement e.g. Elders, family members, mentors;
- counsellors on-site;
- peer support networks/mentors;
- support for social/emotional programming (strategies);
- non-violent intervention strategies/training;
- exercises in empathy;
- therapy dogs; equine therapy; accessing community services;
- garden plots - inside and out - also providing healthy food;
- outreach processes for students who cannot physically attend school/programs to facilitate socialization.

The First Nation could then determine how to staff and source the required components and build their system from there. Developing this system is an opportunity for future research. This Holistic Education Model is illustrated in Figure 8 where the medicine wheel is used as a foundation for the discussion of holistic teaching, with special education as a focus. This model is adapted from the one assembled by the Ontario First Nation Technical Table's Interim Funding Formula (OTTIFA) Special Education Task Team where I sat as a member.

Figure 8 An example of a Holistic Education Model



The following excerpt is from a chapter I wrote called “Education Tomorrow” in the book “Me Tomorrow” (Knott-Fife, 2021). A magical moment occurred for me during the research for this dissertation, when I was given the opportunity to visit a remote First Nation school, that I had not visited before. There was culture everywhere; students were happy; there was an ‘Elder-In-Residence’ very present, with smudge, gently guiding students and guests. Looking out from the rear windows of the mechanical and food preparation, and ‘shop’ classes, was an area outside that was the access area leading to the land-based programming wooded grounds near the lake. I was breathless, as it was like this vision of a First Nation school that I had written about, where there is no evidence of *special education* here, simply Anishinaabeg binoojii (children) just being and being included. I am including this excerpt because my vision may have been too shortsighted as I have already seen in reality what I thought were only still just possibilities. The education world for First Nation people is growing and expanding. As has always been, Indigenous people are ever resourceful and capable of making dreams a reality.

**Kinoomaagewgamig  
(The Learning Lodge)**

Nokomis (grandmother) notices nojishe peeking around the corner and motions for her to come for a quick squeeze before the little girl rushes off to Kinoomaage-kwe (Miss Teacher) for this morning’s lessons. Nokomis is on hand most mornings at Kinoomaagewgamig to give hugs, to smile kindness, to embody and model the grandfather teachings while sharing lessons of the great relationship, that relationship between all of the beings of creation provided by the Earth Mother. Nokomis reflects on the peace that has finally descended on the community since this calming space of learning came to be. No longer would children have to travel by bus from one end of the village or even out of the village, from one square prefab building to the next. The circular structure now houses all the children in whatever stage of growing in mind and body that may be. All children are accounted for today, they love to be here, in this space.

As she allows herself a few minutes to wander the varied spaces of Kinoomaagewgamig, the learning lodge, Nokomis marvels at the contrast of this warm space where laughter rings in the passageway between the various gathering areas designed for specific student-oriented types of teaching. As she peeks in the doorway of one room, she nods to one Kinoomaage-kwe who is revealing the skill of writing the English alphabet to a handful of children, new in discovering the world captured in printed word. While the alphabet

may be English in origin, the words are Anishinaabe. Nokomis's breath catches at the sudden warmth in her heart; that should be a familiar feeling to her by now, but she is still taken aback by how often this happens. Lessons are shared while children sit in a circle. As new letters and words are introduced, one child practises the word to the child beside them, who does the same for the next child, and so on. There are giggles when one laughs at themselves in their attempt, but all in the room enjoy that personal joke. Walking to another section of the lodge, Nokomis can smell the fresh-cut pine lumber in the woodworking class and hear the soft sound of keyboards across the hall as students are learning to code. Further down the hall is a foyer of wood construction looking out onto the cooking grounds. Modern outdoor cooking facilities are juxtaposed with various firepits. Moving further out in the yard is a wide seating arrangement circling the sacred fire pit.

There is a class there now with Shomis, (Grandfather), instructing the group in how to assemble the layers of a sacred fire that represent family and community and sharing why there are differences between types of fireplaces and fires. Across the small clearing beyond the fire area, a group of students is preparing to walk the kilometer or so to the marsh for today's teachings on the land. The horrible stories that Nokomis had been told by her mother of the clinical and cold school that Kob'de (Great Grandmother) had attended far away from her family were becoming distant memories, shoved so far back when she wandered these bright new pathways of learning. There is healing here and joy in knowing that these Anishinaabe binoojinyag (children) will never know a cruelty of the past (Knott-Fife, 2021).

## CHAPTER 8

### Conclusion

This chapter completes this study by highlighting the main findings and how they relate to the research questions and goals. Also discussed is the significance and impact of this research. A suggestion for further research is addressed as well as a brief epilogue.

### The Key Findings

The intent of this study was to investigate what the ‘special education’ experiences of First Nation children in Ontario have been and how special education can be re-conceptualized or reimagined to better meet the needs of our students with exceptionalities.

#### *The ‘Special Education’ Experience*

The results of the research show that the ‘special education’ experiences of First Nation children have been historically impaired by racist, genocidal, societal and policy realities. Current special education programs in First Nation schools are fundamentally modeled on the provincial school system in Ontario. Process and program are informed by Western perspectives that primarily rely on deficit-based identification practices. However, the special education programs in First Nation schools that were included in the research are progressing towards a greater presence of Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin /Indigenous Knowledge, philosophies and cultural strategies, especially land-based education. Momentum is growing. Every First Nation school and provincial school board that was included in the research had a robust range of inclusive Indigenous cultural activities in the school calendars and in the classroom.

### *Reconceptualizing Special Education*

It is clear that those in First Nation education struggle with the term special education. The stories pointed to educators and administrators believing that successful outcomes of a special education program are based on a student being valued as an individual and an independent contributor to a community, whether that be their home or school community. Indigenous ways of being are community based, but we all need the gifts and individuality of each one of us including all the other relations, all of the other beings of creation that we are related to. Indigenous ways of being are community-based. The holistic health of the collective is dependent on the individual gifts of each community member as well as the gifts of our more than human relatives (Wall, 2024).

Common messaging throughout the research spoke to addressing all students with the recognition that all have their own specific need. Strength or asset-based programs were constantly mentioned. Arguments presented in the research stressed that positive discourses or asset-based approaches removed potentially damaging labels and instead cultivated a student's uniqueness or 'gift'. The literature speaks to how positive approaches removes the pathology of special education or the dependence on clinical diagnosis with an emphasis on all children being honoured and respected. Those who were emphatic about change called attention to holistic approaches that spoke to all facets of the medicine wheel, emotional, spiritual, physical, and intellectual. This means a call for approaches that see all of the child, the whole child, based on our own traditional belief systems while providing the skills and knowledge necessary for today's world.

Incorporating Indigeneity more and more into education systems will give Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin/Indigenous Knowledge a chance of advancing beyond preservation mode, where it will be a part of regular life and not preserved in books or only as a story. This means being informed by teachings and models like the four quadrants of the Medicine Wheel. Shki Kinoomaagozi – my new learning in this research journey is that reconceptualizing special education

means to be holistic in our approaches, to regard a student's gifts and develop what makes us all valued members of our community.

### **Recommendations For Future Research**

Building upon the findings of this research, future studies might focus on what special education in an Indigenous holistic education framework would look like. This research has concluded that such a framework should be developed given the growing understanding of how much Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin is being incorporated in today's elementary and secondary school programming. A recommendation for future research is the exploration of Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin can be transferred into the development of a holistic education framework that is accessible to all Indigenous communities.

My recommendation that more research occur into holistic education frameworks built on Anishinaabe-Gikendaasowin as a means to replace special education is important. I hope it will be a catalyst for deeper epistemological insight that can change First Nation special education policy and delivery, perhaps to inform improved successes within Special Education for other Indigenous groups (Metis, Inuit) and or marginalized groups in society. This dissertation offered findings that reveal how First Nation and non-Indigenous educators, parents and some students, regard special education program delivery and how it could be improved. Hopefully, this research informs First Nation education policy makers at local, and regional levels to consider their autonomy in guiding the development of curriculum and making the necessary pedagogical changes. I am optimistic that transformation is possible in terms of reconceptualizing disability and special education, not just in First Nation communities, but in the greater education community. This research has the potential to shift paradigms regarding how special education is viewed in First Nation education communities. Paradigm shifts can transform educators, families, and community perspectives about special education or differently phrased, education that is unique to each child. My hope is that First

Nation education communities re-think special education as a means to uncover or develop students' strengths, students' personal attributes, their ways of knowing and ability to 'know', essentially, their gifts.

Additionally, future research could include:

- further exploration of the connection between the experiences of First Nation students who are First Nation with those who are black, queer or of other marginalized communities.
- While this study was to examine what special education looks like for First Nation students today (and why it does was also a byproduct of the examination primarily in the literature review) and how it can be reconceptualized, future research could include the argument for an improved and more comprehensive approach to special education using Gikendaaswin particularly in comparison to non-Indigenous approaches.

## Epilogue

Picture 2 – Semaagwinde (tobacco heart on water). Photo October 26, 2023, by S.K.Fife



After a full career dedicated to the education, specifically special education, of First Nation children, I know that peace that is spoken of in the teaching of the Grandfather teaching of Love as I have proceeded in this research in Love. Another stop on the journey north during the research process that we made, was at a powerful waterfall fairly early in the morning. I was travelling with family, we offered tobacco into the water. I

offered mine in thanks and acknowledgement for the gifts of this research journey. Appreciating the beautiful sunny morning, I glanced down after a few minutes and each of our tobacco offerings had formed perfectly shaped hearts. Miigwech nibi (water) for your acknowledgment that I come from the place of Love.

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## Interview Script

**Title of Research:** SHKI KINOOMAAGOZI - NEW LEARNING, REIMAGINING SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR INDIGENOUS CHILDREN

**Researcher:** Shelley Knott Fife, PhD Candidate, Indigenous Studies, Trent University  
[shelleyknottfife@trentu.ca](mailto:shelleyknottfife@trentu.ca)

Chi miigwech, Nia:wen, thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project. This research project is being conducted to explore what the education landscape looks like for First Nation children with special education needs in Ontario. Classroom programs will be reviewed regarding their effectiveness. This can include discussions on student, parental, educator and systemic expectations, as well as challenges in delivering program and the successes. Please review the following questions in preparation for the interview. Our conversation will begin with these questions. It is hoped that a discussion will occur to help the researcher better understand your point of view. Consider the information that you are willing and not willing to share. Personal names will be changed in research analysis. The conversation in the interview will be largely based on these questions.

*Educators/ First Nation Education Personnel including Indigenous and non-Indigenous Teachers and Education Directors/Managers:*

1. How long have you been teaching or worked in a role in First Nation Education?
2. Were you raised in a First Nation community? On a reserve or an Urban community?
3. How important to you is the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge, cultural practise into the delivery of special education programming. Expand on your answer.
4. Do you have any Special Education Specialist Qualifications?
5. Have you used culturally responsive or influenced educational practices in your classroom? What did they involve/look like?
6. In your opinion, did they: effect achievement? decrease classroom and/or student challenges? If yes, How?
7. In terms of classroom programming, what do you consider to be Special Education Needs programming?
8. How much experience had you had with learning exceptionalities that are presented by students in your class/school system?
9. Have you personally developed any Individualized Education Plan (IEPs)
10. In your opinion what are factors that support or impede achievement within a classroom program for Indigenous students with special education needs in the following terms?
  - a. Resources –funding; physical availability (of resources), Indigenous cultural programming.

- b. Professional development – classroom teacher/personnel training.
  - c. Other
11. If you indicated that the lack of funding impeded achievement, do you know how much funding you would require?
  12. In your opinion what is the intended outcome of an effective Special Education Program and is this specific to Indigenous students?
  13. Do you have any examples of your most successful strategies that could be shared to achieve these outcomes?
  14. What would be some improvements for future Special Education to better meet the needs of students?
  15. Do you have any recommendations for Special Education policy changes, at a local (First Nation) level, provincial or federal level?

*Indigenous parents and students*

1. How old was your child / or you when it was first recognized that they/you would require special education programming?
2. Were you raised in a First Nation community? On a reserve or an Urban community?
3. How important to you is the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge, cultural practise into the delivery of special education programming.
4. What could that Indigenous Knowledge/cultural practise look like?
5. How much do you know of the specific exceptionality or disability that has been specified for you/your child?
6. In terms of a classroom program, what do you consider to be Special Education Needs?
7. Are you familiar and comfortable with the terms of an Individualized Education Plan (IEPs)
8. In your opinion what is or was missing, if anything, from you (or your child's) success in a classroom program.
  - a. Resources –funding; physical availability (of resources);
  - b. Professional development – classroom teacher/personnel training.
  - c. Other
9. If you said/indicated that the lack of funding prevented achievement, what is your understanding of how much funding is required?
10. In your opinion is Special Education programming needed?
11. Can you give any examples of what could be done to help your childts/you achieve success in school?
12. What could be done to better meet the needs of Indigenous students with special education needs?
13. Do you have any recommendations for Special Education policy changes, at a local (First Nation) level, provincial or federal level?

Title of Research: SHKI KINOOMAAGOZI - NEW LEARNING, REIMAGINING  
SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR FIRST NATION STUDENTS

Researcher/Primary investigator: Shelley Knott Fife, PhD Candidate, Trent University  
Contact information: [shelleyknottfife@trentu.ca](mailto:shelleyknottfife@trentu.ca); Cell (705)875-7120

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Contact Information: [luigiannacci@trentu.ca](mailto:luigiannacci@trentu.ca); (705)748-1011 ext 7508

Name of Participant (Interviewee)  
(Print) \_\_\_\_\_

**Purpose, methods and expected benefits of the research:**

The purpose of this research project is to focus on Special Education as it relates to the education of First Nation students. Earlier academic work and the researcher's professional work experience has revealed that there is a need for this work. The research will look at what disability means for First Nation students and the resulting education experiences of First Nation students.

The methods of research include guidance through a Medicine Wheel and a Two Eyed Seeing Framework to make sure that not only is First Nation knowledge, culture and heritage maintained as a focus of the research but also that an 'eye' will stay on the education language and strategies of today to allow for all educators, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to be able to use this research. There will be a critical examination, through Critical Discourse Analysis, of the origins of the current experience in special education of First Nation students and how thought processes and past ideas shaped special education and the experiences of Indigenous students with disabilities while receiving special education services. The methods to be used to gather data will be conversational interviews with participants who are involved in the education of Indigenous students with special education needs as well as former special education students.

This research could have important implications and benefits regarding the delivery of special education programs. There could be a reconceptualization or re-imagining of special education for First Nation students. This research could provide foundational information to assist First Nation communities with the development of Special Education Resources and Programming.

## APPENDIX B

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**Consent Form for Research Participation****The nature and duration of the participant's involvement:**

Participants will be asked to participate in at least one individual interview not exceeding two (2) hours in length. The researcher will follow up by contacting the participant two weeks after the interview to see how the participant is feeling about the discussion. A second interview may occur if requested by the participant to provide an opportunity to edit or change any shared information. The second interview would not be longer than thirty minutes.

By signing this consent form, the Research Participant indicates an understanding of the following statements. The Research Participant is encouraged to ask the Researcher, Shelley Knott Fife, questions regarding this research project at any time.

The researcher has no financial or personal stake in the outcome of this research.

This research data will be used in the development of a PhD Dissertation publication specifically to aid in the exploration of what special education looks like for First Nation children with special education needs in Ontario and what some stakeholders in special education have to say about what their experience with special education was like and how it could be better.

Research findings would be available to First Nations as foundational information that could assist First Nation communities with the development of Special Education Resources and Programming.

Participation in the research is voluntary. Participants do not have to answer questions that they do not want to, and participants may discontinue participation in the research at any time without consequence or explanation.

The researcher is committed to a high level of confidentiality. Participants will be assigned a non-identifying name (pseudonym) if written publication is necessary. Actual names and addresses are required for consent purposes and for follow-up disbursement of research findings in the dissertation.

Signed consent forms, personal information and data will be stored in an encrypted digital file. While interviews will be recorded and transcribed, this raw data will also be stored in an encrypted electronic file.

Researchers must safeguard data privacy. If data is retained, the Researcher, Shelley Knott Fife will be responsible for this data and its' destruction via file deletion and/or shredding as appropriate at maximum 5 years after completion of research.

Data will be recorded using a recording device and note-taking by the researcher.

**Risk Advisory:** While the interview questions are not designed to create emotional distress, it is understood that retelling education experiences from the past may become emotionally difficult. Please advise the researcher at anytime that you are not comfortable to continue with the interview. You are welcome to have an elder or advisor accompany you for support. Please remember that you may withdraw from the interview process at any time.

<p>Some Counselling and Psychotherapy resources are as follows:</p> <p><i>HOPE FOR WELLNESS</i> is available to all Indigenous people across Canada. Experienced and culturally competent counsellors are reachable by telephone and online 'chat' 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Counsellors have diverse educational and professional backgrounds, knowledge on a variety of topics, and demonstrated cultural competence. (tel:1-855-242-3310) or <a href="https://www.hopeforwellness.ca/">https://www.hopeforwellness.ca/</a></p> <p><i>ADVANCEHEALTH</i> - Self-referrals can be made at Advancehealth through the website - (<a href="#">Find a Psychotherapist Psychologist for Anxiety and Depression (advancehealth.ca)</a>). Advancehealth is available all over Ontario. Coverage of fees are available through personal insurance coverage OR First Nation Non-Insured Health Benefits (FNIHB) to qualified applicants with Indian status.</p> <p><i>TALK NOW</i> is a service offered in partnership by Peterborough Regional Health Centre (PRHC), Peterborough Youth Services, Canadian Mental Health Association HKPR, Four Counties Addiction Services team, Kinark Child and Family Services and the Peterborough Family Health Team. Each organization is combining existing resources to staff the virtual clinic. TALK NOW is staffed by a Nurse Practitioner and Therapists. More information at <a href="https://www.prhc.on.ca/healthcare-services/mental-health-addictions/talk-now-mental-health-and-addictions-clinic/">https://www.prhc.on.ca/healthcare-services/mental-health-addictions/talk-now-mental-health-and-addictions-clinic/</a></p> <p><i>TAO Connect</i> at <a href="https://www.taconnect.org/">https://www.taconnect.org/</a> TAO does not provide personal counseling services but is a suite of online tools for life skills education, well-being, resilience and behavioral health with content available 24/7/365.</p> <p><i>TELEHEALTH ONTARIO</i> – Speak to a nurse 24 hours a day at 1-866-797-0000</p>
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Participant is fully informed and freely give their consent to participate in the research. The participant has had the opportunity to ask questions or to address any concerns associated with their participation.

The participant has received a copy of the consent form for their records. (Initial: \_\_\_\_)

The participant understands that the interview(s) will be recorded. (Initial: \_\_\_\_)

The participant understands that the project has been approved by the Trent Research Ethics Board.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

For information regarding this consent form or the research study please contact: Shelley Knott Fife, PhD Candidate ([shelleyknottfife@gmail.com](mailto:shelleyknottfife@gmail.com) or (705) 875-7120). For information on the Trent Research Ethics Board processes, or if you wish to connect with someone other than the researcher, please contact Anna Kisiala, Coordinator, Research Conduct and Reporting ([annakisiala@trentu.ca](mailto:annakisiala@trentu.ca)).

\*SAMPLE INVITATION EMAIL\*

**APPENDIX B**

To:

**Page 4**

From: shelleyknottfife@trentu.ca

Boozhoo Boozhoo XXXX

I hope that this email finds you well. I am writing to you in relation to my PhD dissertation research project "SHKI KINOOMAAGOZI - NEW LEARNING, REIMAGINING SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR INDIGENOUS CHILDREN". I had talked to you briefly about it when we last met up in XXXXXX and I am hoping that I can include you or someone in special education capacities at XXXXXX within my research participant scope. I would like to speak to at least one educator from XXXXXX who has taught students with special education needs.

My research project involves exploring what the education landscape looks like for First Nation children with special education needs in Ontario. Classroom programs will be reviewed regarding their effectiveness. This can include discussions on student, parental, educator, and systemic expectations, as well as successes in delivering programs and the challenges. I will provide questions in advance for preparation for an interview which can be conducted in person or via Zoom. I am hopeful that a robust conversation can begin with these questions. Any information provided will be referred to respectfully and anonymously within the final dissertation document. My research has been approved by the Trent Research Ethics Board and the Indigenous Studies Ethics Board under REB File # 28578 and I will have a small nominal gift for the interviewer or school dependent on First Nation policy.

I would love to discuss this further with you if you have such time. I can be reached at 705-875-7120. I can also discuss details on how such research can be beneficial to XXXXX.

Chi Miigwech, I look forward to hearing from you.

Shelley

--

Shelley Knott Fife  
PhD Candidate  
Indigenous Studies  
Trent University  
(705) 875 7120

## SKF PhD – Code (Theme) Book

Codes (Themes are bold print)

Name	Description	Files	References
<b>Cultural Strategies -</b>	culture; activities; on the land; land based; language; teachings	29	65
<b>Disability Classification and Identification</b>	The prevalence of identification of disabilities and what this means to a classroom. Question: "How much experience had you had with learning exceptionalities that are presented by your students in your class/school system?" Follow up question "Are there any that are new to you?"	16	23
<b>IEPs --</b>	Have you ever completed an IEP? Yes (9); no (10)	19	32
<b>Inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge</b>		22	36
<b>Outcome of SEP</b>		14	18
<b>Parent knew of exceptionality</b>		4	8
<b>Policy</b>		12	20
<b>Special Education Programming -</b>	success; happy student; inclusion	24	67
<b>Successful SEP strategies</b>		24	103
<b>What Supports or Impedes achievement in SEP</b>	resources; funding; staffing; professional development	23	77
<b>Funding</b>		15	20
<b>P.D.</b>		7	7
<b>Resources</b>		7	7

## APPENDIX D

### RESPONSES TO RESEARCH BY THEME

The following chart in Figure 9 illustrates the prevailing themes of the collected research stories and the number of corresponding responses from the 31 participants interviewed. As the chart indicates, the response regarding cultural strategies used in special education programs was abundant. Most responses regarding cultural strategies were not specific to addressing special education needs, rather they addressed how inclusive the cultural activities are and how do they work to ensure that all students, especially students with special education needs were in the ‘community’ of school. ‘Successful special education program strategies’ was merged with and became the section ‘Special Education Programming’ as the information shared was often presented as one subject matter.

The IEP and Disability Classification and Identification are included in the special education programming section as the information presented were extensions of the whole programming conversations.

*Figure 9 Responses to Research by Theme*

