The Shaping Influences of ‘A Capable Person:’ A Narrative Research of Elders’ Stories of Raising Children to Inform Aboriginal Education in the Northwest Territories

by

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Approval

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Ethics Statement

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, either:

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Abstract

Storytelling, oral traditions, land-based legends, and ancient cultural and spiritual teachings enliven the narratives of many Northwest Territories (NWT) Aboriginal Elders, revealing northern story lights for those who choose to experience them, learn and make meaning from them. I chose to follow twelve NWT Elders’ story lights, and took a two-year journey with them to learn about the phenomenon of ‘a capable person’ from their Indigenous perspective. Through a narrative research approach, I articulated my purpose to identify and examine the influences that guide the growth and development of ‘a capable person.’ By drawing from NWT Elders’ personal life-experience narratives of raising children and relationality, four shaping influences emerged that allowed me to develop a re-interpreted lens from which to view contemporary Indigenous pedagogy and practices in order to inform Aboriginal education in the NWT. Through reflective analysis and research ceremony, my conceptual framework arose, revealing the processes of raising children as similar to raising an Indigenous tipi. The four structures of the tipi made up the framework that sought to bring meaning to the overall shaping influences that guide the growth and development of ‘a capable person’ as: 1) the Circle showing the grounding influences; 2) the Triangle (or tripod) raising the relational influences; 3) the Spirals revealing the recurring influences; and 4) the “Canvas” illustrating the outside influences.

Findings from this study were based on the narrative accounts of the NWT Aboriginal Elders, which were presented in two parts: through a story-based approach of restorying with Elders’ biographies and photographs, and through thematic development. By interweaving the Elders’ stories with my own experiences as an Aboriginal educator and leader, and through the emergent story themes, this study shows that by paying attention to the grounding, relational, recurring and outside influences of ‘a capable person,’ the shaping influences can lead to a new approach to pedagogy and practice needed to create the conditions for transformation in this new century of Indigenizing education in the NWT.

Keywords: Aboriginal education, Indigenous education, personal life-experience narratives, ‘a capable person,’ sense of self, relationality, Indigenous, narrative inquiry, spiral learning, spiral guides
Dedication

To the Great Spirit:

The sacred presence that kept me attentive, connected, and sane as I explored the concept of 'a capable person,' even when I got close to the edge of imbalance. The Great Spirit's gifts of faith, hope, kindness, goodness, gentleness, patience, peace, self control, joy and love (Galatians 5: 22-23) were the spiral guides that channelled my 'capable person' experiences, wakefulness, and transformation.
Acknowledgements

To the NWT Aboriginal Elders whose personal life-experience narratives enriched my learning and life by teaching me to pay attention to the grounding circle of self, the connecting tripod of relationality, the spirals of recurring cultural and spiritual teachings, and the canvas of outside stimuli, thus creating a metaphorical tipi in which I envisioned and articulated the shaping influences of ‘a capable person’ that transformed my perspective on Aboriginal education.

To the Aboriginal children, families and communities of the NWT whose learning paths may be guided by the shaping influences in becoming, believing and being ‘a capable person’ in their own unique ways.

To Dr. Carolyn Mamchur and Dr. Charles Scott for their guidance, time, expertise, and direction in this dissertation adventure.

To my Grandma and Grandpa, my Manitoba Métis family, who showed me love, belonging, and nurturing – three powerful forces that shaped my grounding sense of self.

To my Maw who quit drinking first for me, then for herself, to become the capable person that she is now, after forty sober years.

To Mamma and Pappa who taught me about the North, the Dene, and the Land.

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And to my children, Jordee, Cai and Talton – I learn, love and live for you.
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Chapter 1. Introduction

“Long ago people had strong medicine power, but it’s not like that as much anymore. In today’s world, our children need to be well educated – that is their medicine power” (The late Michel Paper, Yellowknives Dene First Nation Elder, 2010, K’âlemi Dene School Graduation Booklet).

It started as a sunny afternoon in May in Canada’s Northwest Territories (NWT). I was walking from my downtown office to an education meeting that was taking place in one of the local high school gymnasiums in the capital city of Yellowknife. The gymnasium was filling with people when I arrived. Anticipation was in the air, as parents, teachers and community members prepared for the meeting’s agenda focusing on education reform in the NWT. Participants had ideas, questions, and especially concerns that were vying for an outlet. This meeting was “in the midst” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 212) of a series of information sharing meetings throughout the NWT in which different stakeholders were able to interact with the planned reform and provide their feedback. This one was expected to be particularly heated, as many Yellowknife parents had questions about the Government of the NWT’s Department of Education, Culture and Employment’s (ECE) initiatives highlighted in two new policy frameworks slated to change the way that education would be delivered in the North: the Right from the Start Early Childhood Development (ECD) framework (NWT Government, 2013) that largely focused on a full-day junior kindergarten program that was intended to be implemented in the school system; and the Directions for Change Education Renewal and Innovation (ERI) document (NWT Government, 2013), which outlined educational change for the K-12 system. Both frameworks outlined ten-year goals and commitments with ensuing action plans that would deal with shorter-term undertakings. A lot of community members were there demanding answers about the impact on the status quo and costs to taxpayers for these proposed educational changes.

The meeting started off on a positive note, with one of the presenters adding some light hockey humour to the presentation. Apparently the Montreal Canadiens hockey team
was in the semi-finals, and she wanted to share her delight. After the update presentation, participants were asked to split into groups by choosing from a variety of topics whose titles were placed on the tables in the gymnasium manned by different ministry coordinators. Once people had selected the topics and were seated, the small groups started their questioning. As time passed, the gymnasium started getting hot, even though both doorways were open to ensure a circulation of air from the cool summer breeze. Biases, controversy and funding concerns thickened the intensity of the room. A city counsellor was asking about graduation statistics in his group; a parent was asking about the continued quality of education in her group; a school board trustee was asking about project funding for a Yellowknife-based alternative education plan; a childcare operator was asking about what would happen to childcare facilities when full day junior kindergarten started. The discussion became increasingly demanding, veering towards personal vendettas. ECE staff members were holding their own in spite of the intense questions. One particularly heated group of city parents and business owners were grilling a policy director regarding costs to education reform in the NWT. Overall, it was a difficult meeting as there were many conflicting opinions and varied perspectives. The meeting ended with a closing presentation by the Deputy Minister of the day who reminded the audience of the basics of bureaucracy and politics, citing that her staff were there to present the most robust plan to make the much needed educational change in the NWT supported by best practices, research and data. Her job as the lead bureaucrat was to put forth that plan, along with her team who had been managing the questions and presenting the information. She reminded the audience of their democratic rights and responsibilities as parents to ensure the best education system possible for their children by continuing the dialogue among themselves, with the department, as well as with their elected leaders.

The meeting ended on a subdued note with the atmosphere still smoldering. Parents and community members went home to their children and evening responsibilities. NWT education reform would have to wait another day. A group of the ECE staff members, including me, stayed behind outside the gymnasium to discuss the aftermath. The evening sun was only beginning to descend as we waited for our rides. Our conversation centred on the myriad of opinions, misunderstandings and emotions that arose during the meeting, as well as on the words of reason presented by the Deputy
Minister. It was a short debrief, when one of the local teachers came up to us, asking if we had been downtown lately. She described that on her way over, she passed by a few kids in various stages of intoxication, one even passed out on the street. She said that she did not recognize any of them; which was odd because she knew a lot of youth in her position as one of the well-liked high school counsellors. She spoke about it being close to the end of the school year, and a lot of drinking and drugging were taking place, particularly with the youth who were not graduating. She was disheartened to report that many of them were Aboriginal youth from the outlying communities. Our small group dissipated. But something was worrying me; I did not go home like the rest. The counsellor’s description stayed with me, so I drove downtown instead.

Sure enough, I did not have to drive very far, when I saw a young Aboriginal man splayed out a few blocks from the downtown liquor store. His stained, ripped tee shirt tangled around his chest, scrape marks on his back, eyes closed in a drunken stupor. Sad. He looked like a beaten alley cat. The police car was slowing down behind me, most likely to take the young man either to the local drunk tank, or to his home; I prayed that it was the latter and that he had someone at home to care for his wounds. As I drove ahead my heart sighed. What had happened to this Aboriginal youth? What had battered his identity? Where was his family, his people? And most importantly, where were his integrity, his dignity, and his hope? I drove a little further ahead stopping at the four-way intersection to head home when I heard my name being shouted. Up ahead and across the street was a staggering couple waving and hollering, making a ruckus of noise indicating that they wanted me to notice them. I looked over, and there were Carol and Tom*, parents of two of my former students at the Aboriginal community school where I used to work as the principal. I knew them well: friendly, kind-hearted people besieged by tragedy. Recently their teenage son had committed suicide, and their young daughter was in the care of social services. Hardship and sorrow experienced by such an amiable Aboriginal couple whose deep-rooted problems were seeped in alcoholism. But I cared for them dearly: I was sorry that our system had devalued their Aboriginal traditional knowledge and skills and that they had turned to alcohol often to

*Pseudonyms have been used in this chapter to protect the identity of the people involved.
deal with their pain. Whenever I saw them I would offer them a ride home, and the conversation was always animated. I pulled over to stop for them. They opened the car door with a flurry of laughter and greetings, as they got in, reeking of booze. “Hey Ms. James! How are ya? Edlánet’ea?” They greeted me in Chipewyan. “Sast’ile, kunēn? Good to see you!” I replied. The conversation on their ride home centered on the happenings in their lives since the last time that I had seen them about a month ago. Tom was still working at the school from time to time, talking so proudly about the upcoming canoe trip to the Yellowknife River that he would be helping with in a few weeks. I reminded him that he had to make sure that he lived a healthy life if he was to keep working at the school. He nodded profusely letting me know that he just had a little slip. Carol was quieter; I noticed that she was quite a bit more inebriated than Tom. From the rear view mirror, I saw her head bowed in sleep soothed by the movement of the vehicle.

Tom and I spoke for the rest of the drive to their home. He seemed happy to be chatting, letting me know the latest community news, then asking me about what I was doing. I went into the description again about my new job as an education director with the government, and that I was at a meeting talking about ways to change the education system to try to have more of our youth become capable people in the NWT. I was thinking about my dissertation topic as I continued. “You know, like the old time ‘Dene nézo’ who honoured the land, spoke their language, practiced their culture – just like you, Tom. And like the culture based education that you help with at the school so the kids can learn about their Aboriginal heritage, identity and culture.” I realized that we had not really talked much about this approach at the meeting, but it was what Tom understood. He nodded, “Yeah it’s good what we do at the school. I really like working there. You were a good principal, you know.” I thanked him. Then to my surprise, he moved into an unexpected narrative shift. He said:

“You know, you talk about a meeting with the white people up town and changing education. Well I tell you … my big question is why didn’t they change it sooner? Maybe I could of done better for me and my family? Instead I had to go residential school, so did Carol, and it just about killed us. I don’t talk about it no more, too many bad memories, makes me mad.” At that moment, he started speaking more seriously, the topic seemed to sober him up, as he asked me: “That’s good that you’re working uptown with the white people and trying to change the education system. I know that you worked really hard at our school to do that. But right now, what about the rest of us? What are those people gonna do uptown? How are
they gonna repair the damage that they already done to all us Indians? And what about our kids? So many of them have trouble in school. For sure in their lives.”

Tom nailed it. He presented a difficult conversation that expressed the long-standing questions asked by many Aboriginal people regarding the education system in the NWT. His questions jolted me into realizing the complexity and discontinuity of the issues that he raised about the Western style of education that was prevalent in the NWT schools. In spite of the trauma that Tom endured as a result of a racist ideology that shaped educational policy and developments through the state and church in his generation (Bouvier, 2013), he still contributed to education even though he struggled with life. His trail had been a difficult and winding one to remain a good person who gave of his knowledge, culture and skills in a gracious and honourable manner in spite of deep-rooted ghosts that still haunted him. He was a complex capable person, as many of his generation are. A whole century of Eurocentric education dominated by Indian agents, white superiority, and hegemony (Battiste, 2013) crashed down on both of us. I realized that we had a long way to go to change the “cognitive imperialism – the white washing of the mind as a result of forced assimilation, English education Eurocentric humanities and sciences” (p. 26) that still directed education in the NWT, in spite of the well intentioned talk of education reform earlier that evening. It still had not yet reached the Aboriginal people whose homeland we were on; it seemed stuck in the Western stance. We sat in silence. After a bit I said that I was sorry that he had to go through so much in his life. Tom gazed out the passenger window. I thought to myself. There was still so much work to be done in NWT school reform to change the ecology of Indigenous education (Cajete, 1994), in order to create the conditions that would help shape the development of Aboriginal learners into capable people that they are meant to be. It is critical in this post-residential school era to establish an education system free of colonialism and racism, which has caused so much damage in the last century. The healing process for the many Aboriginal people is only beginning in this new century, and the schools in the NWT seem like the ideal place for this healing, learning and relationship building to take place during this period of school reform. After all, schools were the place where all the trouble started, and schools should be the place where this trouble becomes resolved. As Justice Murray Sinclair, Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRCC) declares, “Education is the cause for much of the challenges faced by Aboriginal people today. However, it is also the solution in moving forward” (p. 11, as cited by Darren McKee in
Canada Education, 2014). With this, I thought of the medicine power that Aboriginal Elders hoped for their children. This medicine power is vital for today's Aboriginal students to become the capable people that they choose to be, drawing from the many hopeful stories from the Elders and Ancestors. But it was not present on the trail that I took that evening, driving Tom and Carol home. It was crucial for me to explore, understand, and find the influences of its power. They were rumbling inside of me. This was my purpose.

1.1. Research Purpose

This study examines the central phenomenon of ‘a capable person’ as first documented in the NWT Aboriginal curricula: Dene Kede (1993) and Inuuqatigiit (1996). Both the Dene and Inuit curricula were first developed under the leadership of NWT Aboriginal Elders, as supported by ECE curriculum coordinators, Aboriginal language and cultural specialists, and a contracted linguist. Through this qualitative narrative research, I re-opened the concept of ‘a capable person’ with twelve different NWT Aboriginal Elders to retell – to restory – the narratives of raising children by exploring their understandings of ‘a capable person,’ their personal life-experiences as teaching stories, and their Aboriginal cultural knowledge and traditional spiritual teachings. The restorying of the Elders’ experiences, the practice of Aboriginal protocols, cultural catalysts like prayer and ceremony, the recursive themes in the Elders’ stories, and my own lived experiences as an Aboriginal educator and researcher, celebrate the ways of making a difference in the education for Aboriginal learners. Through reflective analysis and “a raised state of consciousness” (Wilson, 2008, p. 69), four shaping influences manifested themselves from the Elders’ stories and the research process. The purpose of this study is to identify and examine the shaping influences that guide the development of ‘a capable person,’ in order to inform Aboriginal education in the NWT. These shaping influences can bring about understanding and meaning towards effective Aboriginal community schools that can create the conditions for the unique ways that Aboriginal learners can become, be and believe as the capable people that they are meant to be. Contemporary school reform needs a helping hand, particularly as it has not yet reached the Aboriginal children and families who have been impacted by the past injustices of the last century’s forms of Aboriginal education. Hope arises for Aboriginal learners in light of understanding these
four shaping influences that guide the growth and development of ‘a capable person.’ In this new century of Indigenous education, acknowledging and designing strategies by recognizing these four shaping influences as the primary catalysts for pedagogical and curricular development are critical to transform the stories of education for Aboriginal peoples in the NWT from the last century, towards a more capable future. The following research questions were addressed throughout the study, which took place over a three-year period.

1.2. Research Questions:

1. What is a capable person? As outlined in the original NWT Aboriginal curricula? And from the perspective of Indigenous educational theory and research?
2. What do the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ experiences show about raising children to become capable people?
3. How does this narrative research inform Aboriginal education in the NWT?

1.3. ‘A Capable Person:’ Problematizing Accounts

As Piantanida & Garman (1999) note, “Problematizing” signals the intended outcomes of the study (i.e., to lay out the complexities inherent in an educational phenomenon that is often discussed in overly simplistic and functional ways)” (p. 113). Thus, this section outlines the problematic aspects of difficult conversations about ‘a capable person.’ It was in this way that the experience of attending the heated education meeting juxtaposed with the experience of driving the Aboriginal couple home created a huge dissonance in my heart and head that evening. Dewey’s (1938) philosophy of experience as education was testing my “attentive care” (p. 49) that was urging me to find meaning in this unexpected and disturbing dichotomy of experiences. Keith Basso (1996) describes how such experiences or “tales, when retold in the context of moral misconduct, have a way of literally getting under your skin: that story is working on you now. You keep thinking about it. That story is changing you now, making you want to live right” (p. 197). There I was at this big fancy education meeting talking about such normal things, like educating children, and making changes in education to improve the system; and then I
came face to face with some of the biggest problems in the NWT socio-historical, cultural and political context: lost Aboriginal youth, alcoholism, violence, trauma, and the voice of an alcoholic parent raising questions about past injustices that revealed the crises in education for Aboriginal learners.

The two sets of very different parents that entered into my “theory-practice relations” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 12) that evening and challenged my thinking about education reform as “an effective, relevant NWT education system for all learners” (NWT Government, 2013, p. 24). On one hand, I was juggling questions from angry parents about full-day junior kindergarten and education reform; and in the next moment, I was trying to process the unresolved inequities caused by the last century’s dismal failure in providing education for so many Aboriginal children in the NWT, and in Canada. The political rhetoric of “equal educational opportunity for all” (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991) was again being voiced in the NWT education reform talk. Eurocentric heavy policy documents had little mention of the issues that plagued NWT Aboriginal youth, families and communities. This was troubling me; this stayed under my skin. Unfortunately, there were no Aboriginal issues, nor solutions, discussed at the meeting that evening largely dominated by non-Aboriginal upper / middle class parents, many who were ignorant of the history of education for Indigenous children and the assimilative approach of the past 20th century (Battiste, 2013). Unfortunately the silent issues had only minimally been addressed in the new NWT education reform documents, mostly because the societal ills of Aboriginal peoples are largely an “out of sight, out of mind” reality. Who wants to deal with problems that are so prevalent and complicated? But trying to unravel the damage done as a result of colonialism and residential schools that Tom described, and begin weaving a stronger fabric of nation building for Aboriginal peoples is the job for capable Aboriginal people, and their allies. This begins with understanding research as ceremony (Wilson, 2008), employing decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 2012), and practicing Indigenous pedagogies (Goulet & Goulet, 2014), which celebrate the elements and experiences that can influence Aboriginal learners to become capable people on the road to developing dignity, identity and integrity in this new century. Somehow the Aboriginal ways of knowing, believing and being continue to be undermined in the talk about education for all. This pluralistic viewpoint is definitely part of the postmodern world, and I believe it will have its day further into the century, once the Aboriginal peoples are
restored to their once strong nations, families, languages and cultures. But for now, much work has to be done for school reform to reach and engage the vulnerable populations in the NWT Aboriginal communities where trauma and dysfunctions are still rampant (S. Snowshoe; E. Erasmus; L. Lamoureux, personal communication, 2014). “Inequity and racism are still pervasive aspects of our schools and society” (Goulet & Goulet, 2014, p. 198). The NWT education system needs to keep digging into Indigenous research, drawing from lived experiences of Indigenous educators and Indigenist (Wilson, 2013) allies, and applying the Indigenous pedagogies that show the ways for Aboriginal children, youth and families to find their trails to becoming capable people that are uniquely their own. The NWT is definitely moving in the right direction, particularly with its new Aboriginal Cultural Orientation funding to schools, the new Northern Studies Grade 10 curriculum, which includes a module on the Residential School System in Canada (NWT and Nunavut Governments, and Legacy of Hope, 2013), and the pilot Elders in Schools (NWT Government, 2013) programs; however, now is the time to get even closer to the root cause of the problems not only by recognizing and acknowledging the complexity of the past century’s wrongdoings, but more so by developing the relationships with the Indigenous ecology that has the potential to transform Indigenous pedagogies and methodologies that can shape educational practices in the Aboriginal community schools. The Indigenous agenda needs to be front and centre, particularly in a place where more than half of the population is Indigenous Dene, Métis and Inuvialuit peoples (NWT Bureau of Statistics, 2015), where the majority of schools are small Aboriginal community schools, and where the NWT Indigenous population remains relatively small and positioned to make a difference. It is critical to remember the details of these statistics, as we strengthen Indigenous educational principles and practices on the homeland of the Aboriginal peoples of the NWT.

During the months that followed that meeting, I continued my questioning of the concept of ‘a capable person’ and trying to work through the mixed emotions that I had experienced that evening. I anguished over how much I wanted to return to my former life of being a principal of an Aboriginal community school again, and working first hand in helping Aboriginal youth become capable people. However, I knew that there was a lot of work to be done at another leadership level, the political and policy based levels, into which not too many educators choose to venture, especially Aboriginal educators. I
reasoned that my involvement in the latter world was to tell the bigger picture of the Indigenous story and my own lived experiences working with children and youth in an Aboriginal community school. I believe that the community people, parents and educators at that meeting ended up pondering very different questions than the ones that I was left with that night, such as: how do we reach these lost Aboriginal youth, how does the education system welcome and help them connect with learning that makes sense to them, how are educators taught to celebrate Aboriginal students’ identities, culture and heritage, how do educators enhance pride and understanding of Aboriginal peoples’ ways of knowing and doing, how do educators help guide them on their journeys towards becoming ‘a capable person’ in their own unique way? Many questions affecting my heart were waiting for my head to catch up in order to capture them in writing. I breathed deeply knowing that the stories that I had gathered from the NWT Aboriginal Elders held many of the answers that I was looking for regarding ‘a capable person’ and the trails to becoming one, which would then inform Aboriginal education in the NWT. My aim is to add to the NWT policy documents by informing a “new transdisciplinary quest to balance European and Indigenous ways of knowing” (Battiste, 2013, p. 95) to find the common ground about which Bouvier (2013) writes, where we can develop the poignant understanding that we are all part of something greater than our differences. In this way, my study focuses on positive and proactive means to advance Indigenous educational approaches to help Aboriginal youth to acknowledge their emotional baggage (if it exists), celebrate their gifts, honour their languages and culture, and find their unique blend of success with the academics that are part of schooling.

1.4. Problem Statement: The NWT Context

Presently in the NWT, Aboriginal children and youth are not reaching levels that would be deemed capable. One marker of this problem is the NWT data indicating low graduation results: 43% of Aboriginal students graduate in comparison to 70% of other students (NWT Government, 2011). These statistics align with the figures at the national level with 30% of Aboriginal students graduating compared to 80% of their Canadian counterparts (Canadian Council of Ministers of Education, 2010). Battiste (2013) underscores that “more than three out of every four Aboriginal students fail in public
schools” (p. 65). These statistics reveal the tip of the iceberg of the many widespread problems in the education system for Aboriginal learners. In the NWT, the large-scale gap in achievement between NWT Aboriginal students is particularly apparent in small remote community schools, as opposed to other students in the capital city and regional centres. The most recent standardized tests, the Alberta Achievement Tests (AATs), used in the NWT showed that Aboriginal students are failing compared to non-Aboriginal students. In 2012-13, the AATs outlined the English Language Arts percentages of students “at or above the acceptable level” as compared to their Canadian counterparts. These percentages showed a huge gap in academic achievement between students from the larger centres and the smaller communities whose populations are close to 100% Aboriginal. The testing showed that Aboriginal students in Grades 3, 6 and 9 were well below the acceptable standards compared to students in the larger centres and in Yellowknife (NWT Government, 2013). The gap is no different than the one found globally “between dominant-culture students and their minority peers from other ethnic, linguistic, religious, or cultural backgrounds” (Shields, 2012, p. 2)). Although the gap is apparent between minority students and the dominant culture, it becomes particularly difficult digesting these results knowing that Aboriginal peoples are the minority in the NWT and Canada. This becomes especially troubling when one realizes that the land they call their homeland is the only place where their Indigenous languages, heritage and culture exist. They cannot move to another country to learn the essential components of their unique histories, knowledges, languages, values and belief systems. As such, change is needed in the NWT education system to empower and shape Aboriginal learners to become capable people in their own homeland, and beyond if they choose to broaden their horizons.

To combat this gap in achievement, the NWT implemented an Aboriginal Student Achievement (ASA) Education Plan (2011) to begin the process of decreasing the gap and initiating ways to help Aboriginal students to achieve success. Over a two-year period from 2010 to 2011, the Minister of Education visited six different regions in the NWT to discuss identified priority areas of “early education development and child care, student and family support, Aboriginal languages and culture curriculum and resource development, and literacy” (p. 10). Over 1,000 people participated in the dialogue on Aboriginal Student Achievement including Aboriginal, community and youth leaders, along
with education leaders, parents, college staff, teacher union staff, and government officials. The meetings culminated in the education plan, which was endorsed by all Aboriginal leaders in an Aboriginal Student Achievement Education Partnership Declaration at the annual Dene Nation Gathering in Fort Providence, NWT, in August 2011.

With the ASA Education Plan as the foundational piece, the NWT is currently examining ways to improve the system. Over the past several years, ECE officials have been meeting with a wide range of audiences to complete the creation of two reform documents: the Right from the Start Early Childhood Development Framework (2013) and the Directions for Change Education Renewal and Innovation Framework (2013). Both frameworks were designed to initiate ways to revive the system for early learners and those in the K-12 system. Overall, the existing system is not completely awry; however, many aspects require change, particularly in recognizing that there still exists a multitude of inequities between the Eurocentric and Aboriginal ways of learning, much to the detriment of Aboriginal students. Current data from several sources including the previously mentioned standardized tests, local teacher evaluations, and student support plans cast light on the issues. This current data, along with the passionate voices from the ASA regional forums, point to the glaring reality of an education system that is failing many Aboriginal students in the NWT.

Of the 8,000 students in the NWT, over 50% of them are Aboriginal students with the majority of them living and attending schools in small remote communities throughout the North. Unfortunately, the education of these students becomes very difficult as many factors have attributed to the low achievement levels including both family and community problems, such as poverty, alcoholism, violence and abuse largely arising from the trauma experienced during the many years of the residential schooling system in the NWT (NWT Government, 2013). Families and communities are struggling to find their way back to the once rich and powerful languages, traditions and culture of long ago, before the negative impacts of Western education brought in by the government and churches of the day (NWT Government, 2013). Many Aboriginal families and community members are at different stages of healing from the devastating effects of residential schools, racism, assimilative policies, and the near loss of Aboriginal languages and traditions. Some are
finding their way; countless survivors are still struggling. As well, many of this generation’s children and youth are victims of “intergenerational trauma” resulting from the past system of oppression, compliance, and horrors of residential schools (Furniss, 1992; Thomas, 2000; Young, 2005; King, personal communication, 2013). Sadly, many of the Aboriginal peoples and families are not practicing the traditional values set out in the Dene laws (Blondin, 1997): values such as sharing, helping each other in community, respect, even as specific as trying their best to “sleep at night and work hard during the day” (p. 71). All parts of being a capable person. Instead many have sunk into lives of despair, alcoholism, and broken families. So different from the once strong Dene and Inuvialuit people of the previous generation, people that cared for their families, knew the land, were experts at trapping, hunting, knew to pay the land and waters for the food it offered, worked with moose hide, caribou hair, porcupine quills, all kinds of fur, were in tune with the spiritual world, and storytelling as a means of keeping the oral histories (Tetso, 1970; Blondin, 1997; Fumoleau 2000; Scott, 2007). Of course, a large part of the tremendous loss is due to colonialism, racism, residential school, and the ensuing desolation, substance abuse, poverty, violence, and current intergenerational trauma – a wicked circle of misery and despair. Certainly there are numerous stories of success among Aboriginal peoples, definitely more and more as we enter into this new century of decolonizing education (Smith, 2012; Battiste, 2013, Goulet & Goulet, 2014, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Canada, 2015). But not enough for me, as I witness so much suffering, sadness, broken and battered people dealing with many hardships. What is especially hard are the invisible children and youth living in poverty, within cycles of dysfunction, and in homes of trauma. How does the education and social services systems reach these children and youth? How do they work together? How do educators and leaders initiate change, especially at a systems level? How can the education system change to help schools make a difference? How do educators and leaders strengthen the movement out of the cycle of abuse, poverty and racism? How do we help Aboriginal children and youth to find their own unique ways to becoming the ‘capable person’ that they are meant to be?

To answer these questions, I sought guidance and stories of lived experiences. As an Aboriginal educator, my first step involved going to the Elders (Struthers, 2001; Kovach, 2006). From their stories, I aimed to access “the compassionate minds” (Lightning, 1992), comparing them to the modern Indigenous education theory and
ecology that would lead me to understanding and identifying ‘a capable person’ pedagogy in order to find the meaning, connection and purpose that I needed to move ahead in figuring out how to “nourish the learning spirits” (Battiste, 2013, p. 18) of Aboriginal children and youth in becoming capable people who can navigate the NWT education system, still honouring their sense of self, family and people, as they prepare for their futures wherever they go.

1.5. Research Methodology

This qualitative narrative research blends two methodological paradigms that capture the essence of stories from both an Indigenous and Western perspective in order to explore the concept of ‘a capable person.’ I have a particular affinity for this approach as a Métis educator who views experiences with a foot in both worlds of knowing, even though I respectfully realize that there are many ways of interpreting the world. I chose this bi-cultural approach as its substance aligned with my Métis ancestry. According to the Manitoba Aboriginal Directorate (2016), the term Métis means “people of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry” (p. 4) who have knowledge of the Aboriginal world and the White world resulting from their birth and upbringing. Mohawk scholar Brenda Tsioniaon Lafrance (2000) makes note of this bi-cultural perspective and highlights its advantage in Aboriginal education in that it allows knowledge seekers “to walk forward in this world with, on one hand, the First Nation teachings and wisdom, and, on the other, an understanding of the Western way of knowing” (p. 102). As such, it is with this “two-eyed seeing” — a phrase coined by Mi’kmaq Elder Albert Marshall (as cited in Hogue & Barlett, 2014, p. 25), that I have selected two methodological paradigms that inform the study’s data analysis, which examines the stories of twelve NWT Aboriginal elders who described their understanding of ‘a capable person,” first in their Aboriginal language and then through their connections to how they were raised, how they raised their children, and from their experience as cultural experts in the contemporary school system. Through processing their experiences, I was able to “study how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 24), as they relate to ‘a capable person’ and Aboriginal education.
The first methodological paradigm that I used in this study was to honour the Indigenous traditions, practices and protocols, specifically as I was working with NWT Aboriginal Elders. By adopting Dr. Jo-ann Archibald’s (2008) Indigenous research methodology of storywork, I found a method to explore a theoretical framework that resonated with my natural way of working with Elders. With this background, I worked through the Elders’ experiential stories following Archibald’s seven principles of storywork: respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, inter-relatedness and synergy (p. ix). The stories that I listened to and participated in came alive and became my teachers guiding the way to understanding ‘a capable person’ sometimes with noisy loud laughter and energy, and at other times, on a deep still level that reached right through to the soul of storytelling. As Archibald notes, “coming to know and use Indigenous stories through storywork requires an intimate knowing that brings together heart, mind, body and spirit (p. 140), which is truly Indigenous education” (p. xi). I understood that I was walking with the Ancestors delving into stories that not too many are privileged to experience. As I travelled to and from the Elders’ homes, I had much time to reflect on the knowledge that I gained through stories of language, culture, family, relationship, and place, which illuminated my understanding of ‘a capable person.’

Through the careful application of Archibald’s seven storywork principles, I then prepared myself for the complementary methodological paradigm of finding a respectful place “to come alongside” the Elders, “living, telling, retelling and reliving” their stories through the narrative inquiry espoused by Connelly & Clandinin (1990, p. 4). Once again, I experienced the same natural affinity to this experiential methodology as I had with storywork. Narrative inquiry’s relational nature (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) allowed me to gain energy from the relationships that I developed with the Elders as we manoeuvered ourselves in the “three dimensional narrative inquiry space” of time, place and interaction (p. 49). I was able to connect with the Elders’ many storied moments and found a natural way to engage in the research about ‘a capable person’ by relating to the Elders’ and my own lived experiences. As respecting Elders and building good relationships were both deeply held beliefs in my own educational practice, I knew I was on the right track of good research in adopting the Indigenous research approach of storywork (Archibald, 2008), and narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000) as the theoretical underpinnings that
allowed me to develop my understanding of ‘a capable person’ into the fullness of the four elements of life bringing body, mind, heart and spirit into the research.


Clandinin (2013) outlines several design considerations that provided my study with the necessary structure to consider the essential rationale questions that all narrative inquirers must broach: So what? Who cares? They sound straightforward, but a necessary component in qualitative research, which must provide the social and practical justifications for research pursuits. Clandinin presents that an inquiry’s end points deal with the social aspects of larger educational issues on a theoretical or social justice level, with the practical aspects of the research, being able to respond to how the study may be insightful to changing or thinking differently about education.

My study of educational theory that examined the concept of ‘a capable person’ from the Indigenous perspective touches upon several social action and policy justifications by making visible the issues faced by Aboriginal learners on their journey to becoming capable people. On the trail to becoming capable people, some make it and enjoy the “good life” and “thinking the highest thoughts” (Cajete, 2000, p. 276). Alas, many do not make it, and encounter obstacles; some of their own making and others as a result of a Eurocentric heavy bureaucracy that does not always understand or pay attention to what Aboriginal students face to even get to school (Goulet, 2001). In many cases, it is like a parallel universe with Aboriginal learners trying to pursue their education, and non-Aboriginal teachers who have no clue as to the realities of the students’ life or challenges. There are many northern educators who learn to connect to the children and their culture and community. These are the ones who make a difference. But there are still many others who arrive with their pre-conceived notions and their agendas. They live in a compartmentalized view of education into which no Aboriginal problems (or any issues for that matter) can spill into the classroom, infringe on their teacher centred objectives, take away from their time, or disrupt the precious life-work balance that may prevent them from ending their work day when the buzzer announces the end of the school day. Their mantra is: I am here to teach social studies or chemistry (or whatever the subject matter
content area is), and do not care about Aboriginal students (or any students) having trouble connecting with the subject matter. Their approach to learning follows a “banking concept of education” (Friere, 1990, p. 57-58) that aims to fill students with supposed knowledge, asking them to ingest then regurgitate onto assignments and standardized tests without connection to learning or living.

As a result of these kind of educators and an educational system that is indifferent to these problems, many Aboriginal learners drop out, never finding the means to navigate a system that does not value them, their identity, their style of learning, their gifts of relational meaning making, let alone their challenges. They become part of the statistics that divulge the stories of Aboriginal dropouts, low graduation rates, and attendance problems (Goulet & Goulet, 2014). These are also the ones about which we read later in life in the plethora of news articles that tell the dark stories of suicide, domestic violence, stabbings, anger, isolation and substance abuse. Some names include Eddie Paul Beyonnie (Northern News Services [NNSL] Ltd., 2003), Alice Black (NNSL, 2009), Daniel Faine (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [CBC], 2013), Destiny Hope (CBC, 2014) – once NWT Aboriginal students who for one reason or another lost their lives only to make the headlines that cause many to shake their heads in sadness, despair and wonder. These are not to mention the youth under sixteen years of age who die similar deaths whose names are withheld under the Criminal Code of Canada, because of their age, or the ones who commit suicide and do not make the news for fear of copy cat acts. Very similar situations, which may have resulted in the many murdered and missing women whose lives were recently commemorated across Canada at the Walking with Our Sisters memorial art ceremony. Our NWT ceremony was held at the Prince of Wales Centre in Yellowknife in January 2015. Where was the medicine power that they needed in their lives to become ‘a capable person?’

These are the tragic stories that provide social justification for this study that aims to define ‘a capable person’ and to try to find the trails for Aboriginal youth to become capable in their education and their lives, and not fall victim to unnecessary hardships or untimely deaths. In this way, the social injustices that we read about in the media and which affect many Aboriginal youth may be reduced, thus clearing the trail to purpose, learning, and connection to becoming ‘a capable person.’
Social justifications also require a practical outlook; one that considers the everyday picture of education in ways that will have educators consider a shift or change in practice (Clandinin, 2013). On many fronts, this shift is taking place with the movement towards focusing on Aboriginal voices and the vital foundation of Aboriginal learning with the appropriate pedagogy, content and inclusive processes as outlined in the 2004 Council of Ministers of Education, Canada’s (CMEC) report on Aboriginal education (Avison, 2004). As leaders in Aboriginal educational theory, CMEC continues to establish priorities for Aboriginal education in areas such as early childhood learning and development, elementary and secondary education, post-secondary education, and adult learning (CMEC, 2010). This past summer CMEC recently accepted a proposal by the NWT and Alberta Ministers to co-lead efforts to improve educational outcomes for First Nations, Metis and Inuit students across the country (CMEC, 2015). As such, the NWT was the location for the CMEC meeting of provincial and territorial Education Ministers to take the steps into addressing key areas in Aboriginal education, including recruiting and retaining Aboriginal educators in the school systems across the country.

To coincide with the CMEC meeting, the NWT Minister also hosted an Aboriginal Educators’ Symposium in June 2015 to identify ways to best encourage and support Aboriginal people to pursue teaching careers. Having a workforce of dedicated teachers who understand and can support Aboriginal students, and increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers, who are members of the same communities and share the same culture and traditions as their students are powerful vehicles for change. For this conference, my husband and I served as the moderators, sharing our stories as NWT Aboriginal educators. The practical justification of my study became very real for me in discussing ways for educators to determine the most effective influences to guide learners on their trails to becoming capable people, particularly in being part of the shift in education that changes not only education policy, but also practices that involve healing and transformation for Aboriginal students and educators in the NWT education system.

1.7. Personal Justification: I care!

So what? Who cares? Well I do! A shift in educational theory, policy and practice is necessary as I never want Aboriginal learners to experience the same inferiority, shame
or racism that I went through as a young person in the sixties. These are terrible
debilitators of growth and learning that if experienced stay with you forever. For me, one
of my tame stories of indifference goes back to my Grade 4 class in Inwood Elementary
School in Manitoba (MB). I believe it was a social studies class as the teacher was talking
about nationality, even though I believe she meant racial background. To this day, I hate
the word nationality, and it took me many years to admit that I am an Aboriginal person,
which was very hard considering my long black hair, hawk nose and high cheekbones –
thanks to my great, great, great Cree grandmother (personal communication, S. Monkman
(nee Chartrand), 2014), but I did not know this at the time. There I was in the typical 20th
century classroom in 1969 with its rows of desks facing the blackboard, and the White
teacher up at the front. She was going student-by-student, row-by-row, asking us: what
is your nationality? As the question proceeded and they got closer and closer to me, I
was shaking in my brown skin. All of the other students had “acceptable” responses. They
were full-blooded Irish, Scottish, English, Ukrainian, or French people of European
descent, and some could even speak fluently about their ancestry. How on earth was I
supposed to answer? An Indian mutt. Surely I would get teased when it came time for
recess. So I braved the storm, when it came to me, I announced that I was Scottish,
French, and choked out an “Indian” response. The teacher just accepted my response,
no interaction, quickly moving to the next student. In the meantime, I was devastated with
feelings of embarrassment and non-acceptance, and yes, I did have to bear the racist
jokes at recess! Although for a skinny little brown kid, I packed a pretty good punch! Little
did I know that close to fifty years later, I would learn that Indigenous scholars call this a
story of resistance that inspires generations about the strength of identity, culture and
pride that plays an essential role in nurturing and educating Aboriginal children (Thomas,
2005; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012). Unfortunately, this teacher was not versed in how to
celebrate and honour her students’ identity or culture. Culture based education, anti-
oppressionist literature, post colonial or Indigenous research methodologies and
pedagogies certainly did not make up her formative development as a Canadian teacher;
unfortunately for me and a whole generation of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit children, we
were a generation away from the Indigenous renaissance (Battiste, 2013) that could have
made me feel at least a little bit better about myself. Instead, I carried the shame for years,
hiding my “nationality,” getting exotic hairstyles and fancy clothing and lying to everyone
saying offhandedly that I was an Italian. With laughter, I was able to withstand the racist,
malicious blows to my identity and confidence, but deep inside I was fragile and broken. Now I take heart in Cam Willett's (2005) advice as he expresses: “Remembering and reflecting on my experiences as an Aboriginal person is Aboriginal re-search. Through the telling and retelling of my story, I am able to reclaim, revise, and rename it so that I come to a new understanding about it” (p. 101).

1.8. My Narrative Beginnings

The previous excerpt was a comforting piece to process, as it re-enforced my personal justification for this study. As well, it brought to the forefront many memories that relate to my own capable person journey. Clandinin (2013) emphasizes the importance of narrative beginnings for narrative researchers by “justifying the inquiry in context of their own life experiences, tensions and personal inquiry puzzles” (p. 36). My narrative beginnings held many tensions and puzzles from which I have developed into an individual with a high level of sensitivity for the vulnerable, the lesser blessed (van Camp, 1998). I began my life as an Aboriginal kid being ashamed, experiencing racism, wanting nothing to do with Aboriginal peoples or culture. The racism and indignity were too much to bear in addition to the poverty, alcoholism, and violence in my miserable childhood home. I spent the first part of my life privileging Eurocentric ways that skewed my understanding of ‘a capable person.’ I believed that looking and acting like White people, having a clean household and clothing, getting a Western education, fitting in, and striving for high marks and the right credentials were all part of being successful. But painful memories of my childhood and the constant feelings of inferiority blurred my way towards understanding ‘a capable person.’

My narrative beginnings as five year old painstakingly learning to print amidst broken beer bottles, ashtrays full of stinky butts, and that scary Buffalo Springfield song blaring from the radio were tough. I have clear memories of my Kindergarten class on King Edward Street in Winnipeg, MB, and experiencing the accomplishment (albeit Western) of having my perfect printing hang on the classroom wall like the other children. As a neglected Aboriginal kid, I became deeply impacted by such attention, and continued to strive towards cognitive and intellectual achievement: first my printing displayed on the classroom wall, then getting 99% on my Grade 1 spelling test at Holland School, to
memorizing the multiplication tables with flash cards in Grade 3 and acing the test, and onward to high school where I memorized the whole Biology 300 textbook (and other subjects) in order to achieve the coveted high marks! I can remember the teacher would hand out the tests by calling out the marks from the highest to the lowest. There was no way that I wanted to be on the bottom of the list. So I studied and memorized in madness. But still, the recognition that I needed from the White teachers did not happen. They did not believe in me. I can remember my high school principal talking with a group of my friends and me, and then announcing: “Hey James, you don’t have to worry about university, you’re only going to become a housewife anyway!” And then I moved to Yellowknife, NT, to begin working to save for university. I can remember one time at my desk, talking with one of the White senior managers describing to him that I would be starting at the University of Manitoba in the fall. He smirked as he said, “You can’t do that, you only know how to be a secretary!” These hegemonic, hurtful, indignant comments fuelled my determination. (Note: my purpose is not to undermine the important and respected work of housewives or secretaries in this study.)

In 1980, when I finally made it to the University of Manitoba’s Bachelor of Education (BEd) program, there were no such curriculum as Aboriginal or Indigenous education courses, and certainly no talk about First Nations, Métis, or Inuit peoples’ histories or culture. It did not matter anyways; I was already an Indigenous student who hid her inner self, stories, identity, and heritage. Instead I achieved; cognitive success was my power. After my second year of the BEd program, I travelled to Switzerland to live for a year in a French immersion setting at the University of Lausanne, and upon my return to the University of Manitoba, I made the Dean’s Honour role in my last year of the BEd program. I can remember passing by the framed list in the hallway of the Faculty of Education building. But it did not matter, as no one saw it but me. I yearned, studied, and committed many hours to excelling academically to become ‘a capable person.’ When I got my first job as a teacher in Yellowknife, no one asked me for my marks. But who cared? I had become ‘a capable person,’ or so I thought, with a high academic standing as my demented metric. At teacher’s college I was taught a strict adherence to a Eurocentric education system: I was to teach the subjects, to ensure strict classroom management, to employ a wide variety of materials and instructional methodologies, to execute well planned lessons and unit plans, which aligned with firm curricular demands, assessment
schedules, and standardized testing. I was the teacher, definitely not to be friends with students whose job it was to be ready for class, with their pens, supplies, and if they were late, the door was locked. I was very strict and savvy, and only wore skirts because that was my image of a capable teacher. The cognitive dominance of literacy, numeracy, discipline subject learning, and intellectual achievement was part of the Western style of education that informed my formative teaching years in the late 1980s and early 90s. I had no awareness of Aboriginal cultural teachings and spiritual knowledge, or social emotional learning. These heart and spirit kind of soft skills activities were definitely stifled in my repertoire as a beginning teacher.

1.9. Situating Myself as an Aboriginal Educator and Leader

Then in 1999, I made a life-changing move in my professional career. I became a teacher, and later principal, in a newly formed Aboriginal community school in the small community near Yellowknife. What a shock! Nothing that I had learned in my undergraduate Western education program or from my uptown classroom teaching experiences prepared me for this new position. I thought I could teach with the same Eurocentric principles and practices of education as I used in my former classrooms teaching English Language Arts and Core French to my middle class predominantly White students. But no way did that work. So my choices became quite limited: either quit or change. As I had the most tenacious spirit, I could not quit, so I hunkered down and began to figure things out. Through reflection and dialogue with my Chipewyan Dene family, and prayers, ceremony and being a quick learner, I found a “new” way. I learned to get damn good at caring for kids – really loving them. Along with a team of committed, strong spirited, caring teachers and community champions, I was privileged to build a model school of culture based education, along with developing foundational principles that focused on: celebrating the Aboriginal languages and culture of the children, families and community; honouring the virtues of the children; helping the students learn school academics and technology through culture-based education, and promoting physical and active living. As well, it was close to a decade that passed in that small Aboriginal community school before we realized our school vision – Building our children futures.
today by teaching and learning the Dene way – and fully embedded four school rules that developed with the students, teachers, and families. They were:

1. Get to school every day on time,
2. Do your best work,
3. Listen to your teachers, and
4. Be kind.

Fortunately, three years before starting at the Aboriginal community school, I had my formative training, as a teacher and coordinator of Dene cultural camps with my husband’s Aboriginal family and people. This was the serendipitous training grounds that got me through my Indigenous based leadership at the school. I made sure that I sat down with my Chipewyan Dene mother-in-law (Mamma) who taught me the Dene seasonal activities, values and beliefs. Then I visited the Aboriginal community parents and Elders to find out what their expectations were for the new school. It was after those conversations that I figured out that I really had to change my whole approach. As principal of an Aboriginal Community School, I drew from the community Elders’ ways of teachings, my Indigenous families’ storytelling and connections, and deeply reflected on ways that worked with my own Métis Grandparents. I worked with the written documents to guide me: the Dene Kede curriculum (1993), Verna Kirkness’s Triumphs and Struggles (1992), Erasmus & Wowk's (2005) Dene Ways project, and the Canadian Council of Learning (2007) models of Indigenous education. My game plan was to make the Aboriginal community school a place where the kids loved to be, with a safe, healthy, caring environment where the Dene heritage, culture and language were alive. Grounding principles of love and belonging won over spiteful parents who had superiority complexes and felt their children would do better at uptown schools far from their community. The school celebrated the Aboriginal identity, family and community members. School was not only a place of learning, but also a place to develop the heart and spirit, from the ubiquitous damage of intergenerational trauma. Along with the team of dedicated educators, I designed a different approach to helping children and youth reach their own unique paths to becoming ‘a capable person.’ It was like I flipped my Western ways of cognitive dominance, no longer placing so much emphasis on getting the best marks, but rather more on balancing the hard and soft skills of learning (Heckman & Kautz, 2012), and becoming a good person, a ‘capable person.’
Although my new understandings developed over time, the Aboriginal community school became the place of my educational transformation, by working in an Aboriginal community school, with kids just like me. I helped guide them towards finding their talents and beauties, and never once were they ever ashamed to be Dene. I protected their dignity like a mother buffalo cow. I can remember another story, this one a counter-story (Thomas, 2005), which took place in Mrs. Velma’s* Grade 1-2-3 multi-aged grouping classroom. The children were lining up; my 8-year old son was at the end of the line, waiting for the teacher to take them out for recess. They were getting antsy, and starting to argue: My son shouted I’m Dene, I should be at the front. His reasoning met with a chorus of responses, shouting and giggling, “No way, I’m Dene; no, I’m Dene; you’re not, I am!” I was also going out on recess supervision, and went over to the line of little ones, saying in the Willideh language: “Hut’a (Enough)! You kids are all Dene, and even if you’re not, you’re all made beautiful by Creator, so let’s go out and enjoy the spring warmth.” This approach and atmosphere flourished, and the relational momentum grew, propelling me to the next level of educational leadership attempting to bring this Aboriginal community school story to a larger audience. As a veteran Aboriginal educator and leader, I had a story to share. This was when I began my new job as a Director of Education with the Government of the NWT, and also began my doctoral program with Simon Fraser University, culminating in this narrative research on ‘a capable person.’

1.10. Study Limitations

A narrative research was appropriate for presenting the personal life-experience narratives of the Aboriginal Elders whose stories illuminated the shaping influences of the central phenomenon, ‘a capable person.’ However, this study is limited in that it considers only the self-reported experiences, viewpoints and narrative accounts of the eight Elders whose restoried narratives and themes were explored in this study. It does not represent the experiences and insights of all NWT Aboriginal Elders, as well does not intend to limit the incredible wisdom of all Aboriginal Elders at the national and international scene, related to the concept of ‘a capable person.’ As well, providing opportunities to voice perspectives and share lived experiences did not guarantee the NWT Aboriginal Elders
told all the stories applicable to the research questions. These personal life-experience
types of data are always subject to possible sources of bias.

As well, the narratives that formed the basis of this study, were collected by myself,
as the researcher. My own philosophy and practices as an Aboriginal educator and leader
could have contributed to the study’s limitations. As such, I recognize my own values,
beliefs and experiences may have influenced my interpretations of the eight NWT
Aboriginal Elders in the Northwest Territories stories and viewpoints.

1.11. Research Definitions

Aboriginal and Indigenous – This study follows the convention that the term
“Indigenous” applies worldwide and includes the First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples of
Canada, who under Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution are encompassed by the
term “Aboriginal.” Throughout this study, I use both terms interchangeably.

Dene and Inuit mean the people in all the languages of the six diverse cultural
groupings of the NWT: the Chipewyan, the Tłı̨chǫ, the North Slavey, the South Slavey,
the Gwich’in, and the Inuvialuit. As well, I included in this study the narrative from a Cree
Elder born and raised in the Fort Smith region of the NWT.

1.12. Dissertation Organization

Chapter Two reviews the literature and research on topics, theories, and
concepts related to the central phenomenon of ‘a capable person’ from the lens of
Indigenous educational research and theories, as well as a brief description of the
related Western educational research and theories.

Chapter Three outlines the narrative research methodology and design that I
used to conceptualize and conduct this study.

Chapter Four is a unique chapter that honours the Indigenous qualities of this
study. By describing the journey onto the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ narrative landscape, I
was able to present the unique Indigenous features, protocols, ceremonies, and research procedures that I followed to tell this story.

Chapter Five presents the restorying of the Elders’ narratives.

Chapter Six offers the Elders’ biographies and photos in order to situate the Elders’ personal, family and community lives for the readers.

Chapter Seven presents the thematic groupings of the Elders’ narratives that I conceptualized into the shaping influences of ‘a capable person’.

Chapter Eight presents the interpretations of the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ traditional viewpoints of ‘a capable person’ into modern terms to inform Aboriginal education in the NWT.
Chapter 2. Literature Review

“They told me to tell you the time has come. They want you to know how they feel. So listen carefully. Look towards the sun. The Elders are watching you” (David Bouchard, Raincoast Books, 2003).

In this chapter, I review the literature associated with the study’s central phenomenon: ‘a capable person,’ considering first a definition from the standard Oxford English dictionary, and current Western educative references that present learning capabilities and competencies, then to the NWT Aboriginal curricula where the term originated. In this review, I provide only a brief overview of this Western scholarly discourse on educational research, as the ideological foray into this perspective far exceeds the scope of this study. For the majority of the review, I focus more in an intuitive manner on the Indigenous worldview, as this is the main lens through which I view the main concept of this study that concentrates on the Indigenous discourses from across “Turtle Island (North America)” (Anderson, p. 4). However, since these discourses can end up in a tangle if not presented clearly, I realize the need for an organizational framework to focus on aspects of Indigenous research that are most relevant to this particular study. As such to add structural meaning to the review, I add the component of time to present the overview of ‘a capable person’ by taking a look at things from a temporal lens in keeping with this narrative research. Connelly & Clandinin (2000) indicate that temporality in narrative inquiry is a key term in studying experiences, thus an opportune matrix that organizes this literature review is presenting the Indigenous worldview related to ‘a capable person’ from an historic lens, then into the current promising Indigenous practices that connect to ‘a capable person’ pedagogy, and finally into a future outlook of education and research related to ‘a capable person’ philosophy. As well, I focus on a traditional accountability device that is inherently a part of the belief systems of many Indigenous peoples whose ways of knowing, being, doing (Martin, 2003), and believing honour the understanding that the “Elders are Watching.” The words of Bouchard’s (2003) poem appeal to many Indigenous peoples who commit to the stewardship of the land, as well as encouraging practices that uplift the health and well-being of Indigenous people, culture and community, as well as their brothers and sisters, the animals, sea and sky life, plants and trees. By using this timeless motto about the need to change the way that the natural world is treated, this accountability gauge of
thinking about the “Elders are Watching” adds depth to the Indigenous discussion of ‘a capable person.’

2.1 Definition of ‘A Capable Person’

According to the online Oxford English Dictionary (2016) the adjective, capable, concentrates on the meaning of, “having the ability, fitness, or quality necessary to do or achieve a specified thing,” as in: I’m quite capable of understanding that meaning. As well, the word’s synonyms, able and competent, also capture the significance of the meaning in its diversity, as in: she is a capable writer or analyst. The more aesthetic flair of the meaning comes from the wisdom of ancient Greek philosophy in Plato’s definition that speaks of the purpose of education being “to give to the body and to the soul all the beauty and all the perfection to which they are capable.” In reference to Western education, Benjamin Bloom’s (1956) taxonomic reference to being capable runs the gamut of the three domains of learning to which educators refer as the knowledge, skills and attitudes that a person requires to learn, interact with others and contribute to society. Although contemporary educational thought has come a long way since the thinking that formulated the ubiquitously referenced Bloom’s taxonomy, the legacy of industrialism, scientific control, and standardization continue to dominate the school hallways today surprisingly still based on the social efficiency movement of Thorndike, Taylor, and Callahan (p. 8-16, as cited in Eisner, 2002).

2.2 Western Viewpoints on ‘A Capable Person’

Even after 120 years of schooling, the standardization of Western education is very similar to the hallmarks established by the Committee of Ten in 1892 (Wikipedia, 2016). School students are still categorized by their date of birth and held responsible to absorb the information that they glean as presented by standardized curricular objectives and outcomes, in specified grade levels, following an agricultural seasonal calendar. The capable student in contemporary education may be described as one who sits quietly in school classrooms, follows the teacher centered instructions and activities, ingests knowledge with limited connectivity, and regurgitates the content in the form of testing
either teacher generated, subject specific, or standardized by provincial and territorial educational policies. As Robinson (2011) exclaims this form of schooling is killing all remnants of potential creativity, imagination and innovation in its attempt to educate the youth into capable people. As well, this Western system in the past has wreaked havoc on many Aboriginal learners in its assimilative, colonial nature, and currently still does not seem to be reaching and engaging Indigenous students. Battiste (2013) concurs, “Aboriginal peoples in Canada and Indigenous peoples throughout the world are feeling the tensions created by a Eurocentric education system that has taught them to distrust their Indigenous knowledge systems, their elders’ wisdom, and their own inner learning spirit” (p. 24).

For years, experts and scholars have been mining for ways to bring about educational reform that extends learning beyond the development of intellectual and scientific capabilities that accumulates information and tests for the reproduction of standardized outcomes. In so doing, they base much of the political, economic and educational decisions upon the advent of globalization, digital advancements, and the new knowledge economy. Capable people in today’s world of rapid scientific discovery and technology require a school that equips them for the world of tomorrow, ensuring that they do not repeat the mistakes of the past. This world requires the balance of a fourth way that combines the innovation and improvement of renowned world educational leaders, in high performing countries and regions such as Finland, Singapore, England, and Canada (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012). However, I wonder if the Elders are watching this fourth way in ensuring the respect and responsibility of the ancient cultural and spiritual teachings of Indigenous peoples?

The beginning of the change may be towards the development of more connected features of ‘a capable person’ starting with the consideration of an educational language known as competencies in learning. The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2005) defines competencies in their Project Definition and Selection (DeSeCo) project that defined competencies as “more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilizing psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular content (p. 4) ... Competencies involve a mobilization of cognitive and practical skills, creative abilities and other
psychosocial resources such as attitudes, motivation and values (p. 8). These overall tone of competencies delve more deeply into the many layers of learning that are placed into three broad categories: namely 1) the capability to use a wide range of tools to communicate and interact in all the languages of the world (digital, linguistic, etc.); 2) the capability to engage with others from a range of worldwide backgrounds; and 3) the capability to act responsibility and autonomously in the global village (OECD, 2005). This contemporary definition of a capable person looks at competencies on a more interdisciplinary and collaborative view. The most thoughtful part of OECD’s view of competencies is in the description of “reflectiveness – the heart of key competencies” (p. 8). This part of the DeSeCo framework considers education that is not only about how individuals think, “but also about how they construct experience more generally, including their thoughts, feelings and social relations” (p. 9). This message resonates the four pillars of education from J. Delors’ (1996) Treasure from Within, the UNESCO report, which celebrates education not only as learning to know, but also learning to do. Although these references are significant, they also highlight learning to be in the affective and social-emotional sense, and learning to live together in the peace and harmony of community and society as a whole. This definition of a capable person echoes the approach embraced by the NWT Aboriginal curricula and seems to ring more true to the heart and spirit of the Elders in the NWT.

More attention on the definition ‘a capable person’ has also been deliberated by the Canadian organization of educational leaders known as the Council of Ministers of Education in Canada (CMEC). Recently CMEC penned their position on the competencies for the 21st century during their meeting with national Aboriginal organizations. At this momentous meeting of both CMEC and Aboriginal leaders, the delegates concentrated their discussion on topics related to crucial issues of early childhood and Aboriginal education in addition to addressing “the broad range of skills that young people will need to be fully engaged workers and citizens in the knowledge society of the 21st century. These competencies included critical thinking, information literacy, collaborative learning and new modes of civic engagement” (CMEC, 2011). These priorities show the attention that is being geared more thoroughly on the consideration of all that is necessary to educate a capable person in this day and age.
With this intense interest in the current description of 'a capable person' and competencies at the international and national levels, other Canadian educational organizations are also considering their position on learning and creating the environments for children's capabilities and competencies to flourish. For example, the western and northern Canadian educational leaders in curriculum development known as the former Western Northern Canadian Protocol (WNCP) as well put forth their “white paper” on modern development of curriculum frameworks. The document entitled “Guiding Principles for WNCP Curriculum Framework Projects” (2011) outlines “a shift in the images we use, away from knowledge pictured as fragmented pieces put together, one piece at a time, in a linear fashion on an assembly line, to an image of knowledge as complex organic network organizing into living fields, territories, or “landscapes” (p. 6). The WNCP document aligns with Brandford, Brown & Cocking’s more expanded description of the shift in thinking about ‘a capable person’ in reference to:

Learning the landscape. In this metaphor, learning is analogous to learning to live in an environment: learning your way around, learning what resources are available, and learning to use those resources in conducting your activities productively and enjoyably. Knowing where one is in a landscape requires a network of connections that link one’s present location to the larger space. (2000, p. 139)

The learning objectives and outcomes of bygone curricula development are now becoming irrelevant as the learning sciences describe learning as a living discipline in a landscape for exploration, inquiry, and discovery. This is the shift that is influencing the current curriculum redesign in Alberta (2016) and the personalization movement in British Columbia (2012), and across Canada. While the “Elders are Watching” these new Western perspectives change and develop, I believe that they are smiling, as these educational shifts seem to be coming full circle in respecting the Indigenous values and beliefs regarding teaching and learning long ago on this land. The earlier hegemonic Western education in its one-size fits all, intellectual, scientific approach to learning and curriculum certainly did not heed the Elders' words: “If the beauty around us is to live through this day, we’d better start watching – and care” (Bouchard, 2003, 9).
2.3 Origin of the Central Phenomenon ‘A Capable Person’

With the intent of providing an understanding of ‘a capable person,’ from the perspective of the Aboriginal peoples in the NWT, both Dene and Inuit Elders gathered in the early 1990’s to work together with curriculum and linguistic experts to deliberate over NWT Aboriginal worldviews, values, and beliefs. From these deliberations, two Aboriginal curricula were created, namely Dene Kede (1993) and Inuuqatigiit (1996). At the time, the NWT consisted of the Inuit from the territory that is known today as Nunavut, including the three language groups of Inuinnaqtun, Inuvialuktun, and Inuktitut (1996). The Dene included the five current language groups of Gwich’in, North Slavey, South Slavey, Tłı̨chǫ, and Chipewyan, along with the Cree language in southern NWT. These are the nine official Aboriginal languages of the NWT (Figure 1) [including Inuktitut not featured in the map below.]
The two Aboriginal curricula outlined the essence of ‘a capable person’ with different wording although similar meanings. In fact, it was the Dene Kede curriculum from which the concept of ‘a capable person’ originates as explained by the ten Dene Elders who were producing the curriculum and who introduced the term. I continue to explore concept’s depth in this study.

The Dene Kede curriculum, which is becoming increasingly referred to as a guiding philosophy rather than a curriculum, is the document that specifically uses the term ‘capable’ in describing its circular framework by outlining “knowledge, skills and attitudes
that the Dene strive towards in order to become ‘capable people,’ ones who have integrity in their relationships with the spiritual world, the land, other people and themselves” (1993). Amidst photos depicting northern scenes of the land, rivers, waterfalls, earth medicines, animals, along with photographs of drummers, and children learning with their families and community, in addition to resonant quotations from NWT Elders, the concept of capable is captured. The document weaves the meaning throughout its foreword, mission statement, and descriptions of Dene Kede concepts, leading to the structural framework of a circle that celebrates the four relationships of respect relating to the general learning and language expectations, and finally into the expansive thematic units. The late Elder, Elizabeth Mackenzie, describes the meaning of capability succinctly in her words: “Affirm that you are Dene. As a Dene, you search for yourself. You seek those who are skilled and pattern yourself after them. Learn the skills they have. You will be come the Dene envisioned. The Real Person. The Dene” (p. xxvi). The specific methodology is described in an accompanying Teacher Resource Manual that outlines learning to become a capable person based on a “spiral” (p. 18) design in which students are continually exposed to the Aboriginal languages and learning in key cultural experiences from the curriculum’s thematic units. The spiral nature of this design echoes Chicksaw scholar, Eber Hampton’s, approach outlined in “Towards a Redefinition of Indian Education” as he describes his ideas that “progresses in a spiral that adds a little with each thematic repetition … [finding] meaning in each turn of the spiral (1995, p. 6). The spiral learning philosophy reflected the traditional ways that children learned by being exposed to key cultural experiences that started very basically then advanced to more complex levels of theory and practice. For example, a key cultural experience is learning to build a campfire: young children would begin by observing how a fire is built, then as they got older, they learned to work with a small ax and cut small pieces of wood (kindling), then larger firewood. Eventually they would work their way up to actually starting a fire of their own, enjoying its warmth, then experiencing the age-old tradition of storytelling around a campfire. In this way, the children would undergo cycles of learning and reach levels of mature capability over time, particularly as they listened to instructions, then moved into learning about stories and legends about fire that they learned from family members guiding them through the life long cycle. Other examples of key cultural experiences in the curriculum include: picking berries, learning legends, feasting, snaring small game like rabbits, learning about the birds, animals, and waters and rivers, and
praying and showing respect to Creator. All of the activities in the curriculum are intended to be authentic and natural activities that consist of whole experiences rather than only parts. Other features of the key cultural experiences are that they “reflect or are a real part of the Dene culture today. The experiences are holistic, activity oriented, and ideal in the sense that they reflect as much as possible, the ideal relationship that the Dene can have with the land, other people, the spiritual world and themselves” (p. 28). These relationships of respect are the central philosophy that provides the focus to the learning. On the spiral journey to becoming capable Dene, they are to develop the four relationships of respect that provide the depth and balance to the learning. Children are taught the basic skills; however, the teacher (parent, grandparent, family member) enhances those activities by presenting the “primacy of direct experience, interconnectedness, relationships, holism, quality and value” (Cajete, 2000, p. 66) thereby leading the children towards capability in understanding holistic learning connecting to transcendent entities such as the land and spiritual world. Ermine (1995) spoke of this wholeness as being an integral part of Aboriginal epistemology that connected all of existence into a whole that enmeshed the being in its inclusiveness. He continued by saying that “it is a mysterious force that connects the totality of existence – the forms, energies, or concepts that constitute the outer and inner worlds” (p. 103).

The main purpose of the key cultural experiences in Dene Kede is to connect or reconnect students to their Aboriginal traditions and heritage that provide the foundational pieces of their education. In this way, the students through the cyclical exposure to key cultural experiences become more skilled and knowledgeable, as their learning progresses leading them to increased levels of capability. This learning pulse of cyclical time is illustrated by Nakawe Elder Danny Musqua (quoted in Knight, 2001):

We have a beautiful tradition and a holistic view of the universe that makes us who we are. In our circle, we need the old and the young, the old to teach and the young to keep the tradition alive. Nothing really dies out in a circle, things might get old and wear away but they renew again, generation after generation. This is what the circle is about. (p. 5).

The circle of learning in becoming a capable person is strengthened in the four “Relationships of Respect” that emphasize the integrity “to live life to the fullest, Dene students must develop respective relationships with the Land, the Spiritual World, Other
People, and Themselves” (p. xxxi). Through the development of these relationships students develop a more expansive understanding of the essential physical, mental, emotional and spiritual growth involved in the four parts of development in the human being.

The words and the wisdom of Elders also became the foundation of the Inuit philosophy outlined in the Inuuqatigiit curriculum (1996). These Inuit values guide the students towards becoming a capable person by encouraging them to become “a good person. Being ‘good’ means you have self-respect, patience, and strength; you share and are understanding and respectful of others; and you are humble, honourable and respectful of the laws that govern society and the nature and spiritual worlds (p. 32). The framework of the curriculum is in the shape of a traditional inuksuk describing the foundational pieces of “sharing knowledge, continuous learning and contributing to the community to develop a productive and contributing member of family and community” (p. 16). Similar to the Dene Kede curriculum, Inuuqatigiit organizes its structure into relationships of respect, these ones concentrating on “Relationships to People” (p. 37) and Relationships to the Environment (p. 91). The integral relationships are the cohesive force that outlines the importance of Inuit families, kinship links, and natural world around them. Both documents emphasize the unity of the circle: Dene Kede refers to the relationships of respect; Inuuqatigiit calls the cyclic learning a circle of belonging and cycles of seasons and life “radiating to encompass the world” (p. 31). One of the major achievements in schooling in the NWT according to the Government of the NWT’s submission to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was the development of these two Aboriginal curricula and programming for both the Dene and Inuit peoples of the North, which continues to provide the philosophy towards Aboriginal languages and culture based education in the NWT.

2.4 Indigenous Worldviews Related to ‘a Capable Person’

Throughout all of North America, or Turtle Island, as it is referred to by many Aboriginal peoples (Mercredi & Turpel, 1993), the concept of ‘a capable person’ has its own unique interpretations according to the different worldviews of Indigenous peoples on their vast land base. With 500 First Nation, Metis and Inuit groups in Canada alone
(Toulouse, 2013), the ways that Aboriginal peoples develop their capabilities are as varied as the nations themselves celebrating diverse, rich languages, ways of knowing, protocols, and ceremonies. Although the differences are apparent, not surprisingly, the relatedness of the concept of ‘a capable person’ shows the unity of many Aboriginal peoples who value holistic, cultural and spiritual approaches to teaching and learning. As the late Elder Ken Goodwill from the Standing Bull Dakota First Nation says, “the purpose of education is to help students recognize who they are, to see their gifts, talents and strengths and recognize the responsibility that accompanies these gifts, so they can survive, thrive, and contribute as they navigate through both the broader world and Indigenous cultures” (p. 5, as cited in Goulet & Goulet, 2014). Certainly the late Elder’s view presents a universal based value system that is adopted by many nations regarding education, which illustrates an approach that is “good education for all students” (Goulet & Goulet, 2014, p. 5). However, the difference for the Indigenous peoples is that they have separate worldviews and histories from those who are not indigenous to Turtle Island. For many Indigenous peoples, the concept of ‘a capable person’ has been a journey of trying to rebuild and reconcile from the past socio-historical, cultural and political injustices that nearly ended an entire race of people due to “a powerful ideology” (Battiste, 2013, p. 23) that privileged the Eurocentric colonists as superior, and the Indigenous peoples as inferior, and initiated a downward spiral for the Indigenous peoples who almost lost all of their lands and resources, protocols and ceremonies, notwithstanding their capable ways of living on a land undisturbed by Western hegemonic forces and value systems.

2.4.1 Historical context

As Kirkness (1999) describes, “long before Europeans arrived in North America, Indians had evolved their own economic, political, and education systems (p. 9). Traditionally, children were raised with many caregivers around them at all times, not only the parents but also older brothers or sisters, aunties, uncles, cousins who attended the children, along with the endless chores necessary for survival on the land, in the bush, on the plains, beside the oceans, wherever the many Aboriginal peoples made their homes and raised their children. In traditional Aboriginal society, it was the duty of all adults to serve as teachers for youngsters. Child rearing was not just the province of biological
parents; children were nurtured within a larger circle of significant others (Brendtro, Brokenleg, van Bockern, 1990). The task for those around the growing child was to provide experiences that enabled the child to become what it was meant to be. Traditional child-rearing practices respected the autonomy of the child and her gifts, talents and beauties. Independent exploration was encouraged and parenting was often characterized by natural consequences and non-interference (MacIvor, 1995). The learning child would explore, listen, observe, ask questions, wander, run and walk about to discover the world with its own unique blend of curiosity and wonder. Learning occurred in a cyclical fashion. Through repeated exposure to experiences, children began to learn at their own rate of readiness and volition. Children were constantly learning as they lived life (NWT Dene Elders, 1993) towards entry into the various stages of human development: adulthood, then parenthood, and lastly into becoming Elders. All the while the life lessons and experiences led towards becoming ‘a capable person,’ who valued the Indigenous languages, traditions, and ways of being became the journey for young people. Educating children and youth to reach their unique capabilities was the main responsibility of parents, grandparents, and family before any vestiges of schooling began on this land (Kirkness, 1999). Indigenous peoples honoured tribal values and practices, following land-based nomadic travel and harvesting, following the animals and seasons according to the cyclical, natural, and spiritual laws understood by most Indigenous peoples. For centuries, Indigenous peoples survived and thrived on Turtle Island undisturbed by other nations or peoples.

Until 1492. This was the well documented beginning of Columbus, and later his co-patriots: the advent of Western explorers, and later missionaries to the New World bringing with them Eurocentric hegemony, power, politics, and weaponry that changed the Indigenous peoples, traditions, languages and cultures forever. As history shows, the next five hundred years would bring the near cultural genocide for the Indigenous peoples of Canada, Hawaii, and New Zealand (Battiste, 2013, Meyer, 2003, Smith, 2012), causing the demise of the original ways of life as capable people on Turtle Island. What ensued has only been recently captured in the history books acknowledging the Indigenous presence and perspectives. Through monolithic social justice and legal movements, such as 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and the recent 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, leaders and scholars have documented the impact of
colonialism, racism, assimilation, disease, deaths and horrific hardships on Aboriginal peoples, including the following periods of major note. For the purposes of this literature review, I will present only the last three centuries of information (19th – 21st), as a full representative of Indigenous history and Western impacts far exceeds the limit of this review. At this point, I send a prayer of remorse and reverence to the Indigenous peoples, families, and Elders who endured pain and suffering as a result of the grand movement of trade, wars, and take-over of lands, resources, and cultures (TRCC, 2015) in the previous centuries leading up to this century.

- Pre-1800s throughout all the 20th century: A large-scale “process that brought European states and Christian churches together in a complex and powerful manner” to gain Indigenous lands and resources through widespread colonialism, racism, and notions of superiority. During this period, there was “mass migration” with “the activities of explorers, farms, prospectors, trading companies, or missionaries often set the stage for expansionary wars, the negotiation and the breaking of Treaties, attempts at cultural assimilation, and the exploitation of the colonized lands” (TRCC, pp. 43-44)

- 1867 and 1876: The British North American Act and The Canadian Indian Act “were enacted to allow European settlers unfettered access to Indian lands, and to justify and maintain the racist belief in the supremacy of the European settler” (Wilson, 2008, p.46).

- 1920: Canada’s Indian Act was revised to lay the foundation for the removal of Aboriginal children from their homes and massive forced migration of children to a large network of residential schools whose mission it was (allegedly) to develop capable Indigenous peoples.

- 1934: Duncan Campbell, the Indian Affairs bureaucrat, stated: “I want to get rid of the Indian problem. [...] Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department” (NWT and Nunavut Government, 2012, p. 15). Scott is commonly and wrongfully attributed with uttering the goal to “kill the Indian in the child” (a phrase that belongs to an American military officer), but rightly associated with the expansion of the Indian residential school system in the 1920s and 1930s” (MacLean’s, 2013, online)

- 1940-1970: The Assimilationist Phase - “Up until and throughout the assimilationist phase, Aboriginal lands continued to be examined, explored and exploited for their natural resources” (Wilson, 2008, p. 49)

- 1969: The White paper – the federal government’s attempt to change their “Indian Policy. This document proposed a massive transfer of responsibility for First Nations people from the federal to the provincial governments. It called for the repeal of the Indian Act, the winding up of the Department of
Indian Affairs, and the eventual extinguishment of the Treaties” (TRCC, 2015, pp. 69-70).

- 1972: the Red paper - The Indian Brotherhood delivered its landmark paper, Indian Control of Indian Education. They stated that: “We want education to provide the setting in which our children can develop the fundamental attitudes and values which have an honoured placed in Indian tradition and culture. The values that make our people a great race, are not written in any book. They are found in our history, our legends, and in our culture. We believe that if an Indian child is fully aware of the important Indian values he will have reason to be proud of our race and of himself as an Indian” (Kirkness, 1999, p. 47).

- 1990: The Oka uproar between the Mohawk community at Kanesatake and the Canadian government that revealed

- 1996: The Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples established by Prime Minister Mulroney established commission that included the education – Volume 3: Gathering Strength – towards building Aboriginal capable people – p. viii Aboriginal people are using education to make concrete changes in their lives. Still the pervasive Eurocentric ideology that continues to obstruct the efforts being made in Aboriginal curriculum development, language maintenance.

- 1990: The Oka uprising between the Mohawk community of Kanesatake and the Canadian government that revealed the rumbling discontent of Indigenous peoples regarding ownership of land. “The dispute was the first well-publicized violent conflict between First Nations and the Canadian government in the late 20th century” (Wikipedia, 2016).

- 1996: The Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples established by Prime Minister Mulroney was to address the many issues of Aboriginal status, lands, languages, and education. Volume 3: Gathering Strength – the education chapter calls upon the system to building capable Aboriginal people. However, “Aboriginal people are using education to make concrete changes in their lives. Still the pervasive Eurocentric ideology continues to obstruct the efforts being made in Aboriginal curriculum development, language maintenance” (RCAP, 1996, p. viii).

- 2008: Prime Minister Harper’s apology, known as “Canada’s apology to Aboriginal peoples for the destruction of their lives, their loss of parenting skills, and jeopardizing their continued livelihood based on their rich cultures and heritages com a as a welcome first step in creating a responsive education system for Aboriginal peoples” (Battiste, 2013, p. 64)

• 2015: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Canada (TRCC) was “a holistic and comprehensive response to the charges of abuse and other ill effects for Aboriginal children that resulted from the Indian Residential school legacy” (Wikipedia, 2016). The TRCC’s recent publication sets forth 94 Calls to Action to bring about change in the areas of child welfare, education, language and culture, health and justice.


These are the historic milestones, both appalling and outstanding, which bring the people of Turtle Island to the present day stories in improving the education for Indigenous children, families and communities to become capable people.

2.4.2 Present Day Stories

Today in this new century, Aboriginal peoples are still reeling from past cultural genocide with its appalling history of education for Indigenous children and families, which almost wiped out any vestiges of capable Aboriginal peoples due to the wide-spread tyrannical and hegemonic governments, churches, and societies “based on the ideologies of Eurocentrism and racism” (Goulet & Goulet, 2014, p. 37). Although the process of decolonizing and Indigenizing education seems to be moving at a “glacial pace” (p.46), much work continues with the advent of Aboriginal education movements, such as culturally responsive education, anti-colonial and anti-oppressive education, and decolonizing education programs and pedagogies.

The concept of ‘a capable person’ is captured in the expression, “All My Relations” that connected the kinship of all Aboriginal peoples in the understanding of the interconnectedness of all individuals, living things, and particularly the serious job of raising children. King (1990) celebrates the expression as an encouragement for us to accept the responsibilities we have in this universal family by living our lives in a harmonious and moral manner. Around the world, all groups of people have unique ways of expressing their beliefs, values, and experiences. These worldviews are interpreted through the peoples’ philosophy, stories, heritage, family lineage, cosmology, languages and relationships with the land. Although the different worldviews are many, the problem
becomes real, and alas historic, when hegemony arises in creating a dominant worldview that considers itself superior to others. The downfall of many Indigenous cultures have taken place as a result of the colonizing activities that has belittled others in favour of their interpretation of knowing, being and doing. Fortunately, the “Elders are watching,” as history and education are teaching the global community the importance of accepting Indigenous viewpoints, cultures, and languages, which may be the approach that saves the planet.

The concept of ‘a capable person’ in present day stories finds itself abounding in many related programs, projects and initiatives that celebrate decolonizing and Indigenous education. Examples of these teachings include the Ojibwe Good Life Teachings, Tipi Teachings, Seven Sacred Teachings, Circle of Courage, The Six Directions, Learning from Native Science, Dene Laws, Medicine Wheel, Holistic Lifelong Learning Models, and Circle of Life Teachings outlined in the WNCP resource, Our Way is a Valid Way, (2013, pp. 33-34). These types of program bring hope in this new century of rebuilding, reconciling and acknowledging the value of Indigenous education in today’s education system.

2.4.3 Tomorrow’s Capable Learners

Valuing First Nation, Métis and Inuit worldviews in the contemporary education system is the first step in eliminating the racism and prejudice that has caused so much damage in educational organizations. Unfortunately, the new term for past colonialism has become bullying; therefore, safe and caring schools agendas moving forward seem to be the antidote for change. As Battiste (2013) expounds, “Understanding dominance and superiority within the context of history and their continued domination in contemporary knowledge is foundation to change” (p. 178). Relational educational approaches are also steps in the right direction for tomorrow’s capable learners in understanding, accepting and opening the mindsets of the dominant culture on Indigenous issues. As John Ralston Saul (2014) experienced:

In September 2013, in the Columbia Basin, I listened to Kathryn Teneese, chair of the Ktunaxa Nation Council, explain that the first step is “recognition and
Then we can work at relationship “one step at a time” – and gradually – find things we can do together” (p. 16).

These “things we can do together” are the ones that the “Elders are Watching” in the age of Indigenous renaissance and trans-systemic education systems that honour both Indigenous and Eurocentric knowledge systems (Battiste, 2013) in fostering the growth and development towards capable people.

2.5 Summary

By presenting this chapter in its review of the past, present day and future events, one can see the implications on the growth and development of ‘a capable person’ from the Indigenous perspective. In the spirit of present day reconciliation and relationship building, much is to be learned from the history in its treatment of Indigenous peoples and the development of the education system. These are the present day lessons that will lead to a future of hope, inspiration and nation building for Indigenous peoples and the dominant culture to live and learn together.
Chapter 3. Narrative Research Methodology and Design

“Grandfather spider’s net. Grandfather spider’s net.” This is what the children chanted as they asked Grandfather Spider to stop the rain and create a rainbow (A Dene Truth, Dene Kede Curriculum, 1993).

When entering into the field of academic inquiry in is hard not to become overwhelmed by the maze of choices presented in the research nomenclature. Terms like research traditions, worldviews, frameworks, theoretical assumptions, methodologies, paradigms, all present themselves in a web-like formation. Each strand is fluid and interacts with other strands in an integrated and interdependent manner. For this reason, I found this chapter to be the most challenging during my study. I spent much time writing, rewriting, reflecting, and trying to make choices that I thought made sense. I struggled with the plenitude, complexities, contradictions, and abstractions in my research choices. Piantanida & Garman (2009) say that research “study entails a prolonged engagement with complex ideas. It requires a tolerance for ambiguity and an appreciation of multiple positions on complicated issues” (p. 45). After processing my research options, I entered into the qualitative tradition because I believe that studying my topic with words rather than numbers would allow me to tell this complicated but essential story. Thick rich descriptions and telling stories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) appealed to me. With this in mind, I spent a great deal of time looking at the qualitative approaches that could match my topic, such as: phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2000), ethnography (Wolcott, 2008; Fetterman, 2010), case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009), and grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2006), (as cited in Creswell, 2013). After intensive reading, I discovered narrative research. I knew that I wanted a personal and relational approach, so when I read Creswell’s (2013) description that “narrative research is best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences” (p. 73), I made my decision. Through the Elders’ stories, I hoped to explore the guiding influences of ‘a capable person.’

Before I begin the details of my research, I must insert one early addendum at this point. I realized that I have chosen words (qualitative), rather than numbers (quantitative) to express my ideas; however, it has become apparent that I have used quite a variety of different numbers in my study to explain the processes that I chose: i.e.) two worldviews,
two informing methodology reviews, ten story elements, three visits to collect the data, a two-part data analysis, a two-fold presentation of the findings, all leading to the themes highlighting the four shaping influences that relate fundamentally to my central concept. Miles & Huberman (1994) advise: “Think display” (p. 310), and suggest that evolving forms of display can bring clarity and meaning making to data. As such, to eliminate any confusion before the presentation of the data, the following diagram (Figure 2) aims to outline the use of the numbers in their differing capacities in the study to guide the way towards understanding and making meaning.

![Diagram of Methodological Research Processes]

**Figure 2.** Methodological Research Processes

### 3.1. Two Worldviews

The purpose of my research study was to identify and examine the shaping influences that guide the development of ‘a capable person,’ in order to inform Aboriginal education in the NWT. As a Métis educator and researcher, my two worldviews consist
of a bi-cultural perspective in carrying out this purpose. Piantanida & Garman (2009) refer to worldview as “the totality of one’s beliefs, for research purposes the most relevant beliefs are those of ontology, epistemology, and axiology” (p. 47). In exploring these philosophical assumptions (Creswell, 2013), I felt compelled to use this dual approach to gain understanding and meaning in keeping with my lived experiences, which look to the essence of both the Indigenous and Western ways of knowing. This bi-cultural approach created a whole spectrum of possibilities for me to explore. Like the children, I waited for Grandfather Spider to dissipate the rain to experience the clarity of my direction inside the glinting web of stories and teachings. As such, in keeping with the words of Archibald’s Elder-teacher, Dr. Ellen White, “they always said that if you have the tools of your ancestors, and you have the tools of the White man … you’ll be able to deal with a lot of things … When your hands are both full with the knowledge of both sides, you’ll grow up to be … a great doer, and helper of your people” (Quoted in Neel, 1992, p. 108). With both hands full, and still growing up, I situated my ontological, epistemological and axiological stance in the Métis beliefs and values that guided my worldview. Maria Campbell (1973) calls the Métis people “Halfbreed.” In the Chipewyan language of the NWT Dene, they are called “Beghárek’aze” (South Slave District Education Council, p. 81) or half burned, referring to the mixed blood of the largely Indigenous women and the European settlers of Scottish, French and English descent. For me, I found that the best portrayal of the Métis worldview constituting a kind of “two-eyed seeing” as described by Mi’kmaq Elder Albert Marshall:

> Two-Eyed Seeing refers to learning to see from one eye with the strengths of, or the best in, the Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye learning to see with the strengths of, or the best in, the Western (mainstream) knowledges and ways of knowing, but, most importantly, learning to use both eyes together, for the benefit of all. (as cited in Hogue & Bartlett, 2014, p. 25)

This "two-eyed seeing" positioning became the “self-conscious method” (Kilbourne, 1999) that I used to design this study, by drawing upon the conceptual and methodological moves that allowed me “good reason” (p. 28) to ground myself in this place. I have learned to use these two eyes when needed. As such, I designed a two-eyed seeing methodology, which drew upon the literature of an Indigenous perspective
and a Western one. The following sections present a brief review of the methodological approaches of two established narrative research scholars that inform my methodology.

3.2. Two Narrative Research Paradigms Informing My Methodology

Although the main part of this chapter outlines the methods that I used for my research, such as the procedures and instruments, this next section is meant to highlight the two narrative research paradigms that inform my methodology. As Polkinghorne (1988) expresses narrative researchers are those who work with narrative knowledge, information, histories, explanations and understanding because they are concerned with people’s stories “as the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful” (p. 1). Although narrative research is still a field in the making (Chase, 2011), its increased application has gained legitimacy in educational research (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). In keeping with my Métis bicultural approach, I amalgamated two emergent research methodologies: first, Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008) and second Narrative Inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Both celebrate the story-based genre that exists in the qualitative narrative research. Although they are emergent or reformist research (Polkinghorne, 2007; Chase, 2011, Clandinin, 2013), I decided to use these two paradigms, as they both captured the essence of my meaning making spirit. As Piantanida & Garman (2009) state, “this fundamental choice (of research genre) is based on an elusive mix of personal orientation, worldview, interests and talents” (p. 75). By encompassing the Indigenous and Western perspectives, I spent much time understanding narrative frameworks from the perspectives of the two narrative researchers. Both are Canadian scholars: one Indigenous, the other two are Western scholars. A central part of my inquiry explores the data through stories by following the storywork principles as they flowed through the narrative inquiry dimensions to reveal the main constructs examined as the means for guiding Aboriginal learners to become capable people. The following is a review of these two narrative research methodologies and highlight the way they inform my study. This section is meant to provide a brief review and does not present all the details and insights that these scholars used to design their methodological narrative research paradigms.
3.2.1. Narrative Research Methodology Review #1: Indigenous Storywork

Dr. Jo-ann Archibald is the Indigenous scholar whose narrative research work, first informs my methodology. After searching the Aboriginal scholarship, the principles that best aligned with the NWT Aboriginal ways, traditions and culture that dealt with story as a means of data collection were featured in Archibald’s *Indigenous Storywork* (2008). Archibald outlined her “storywork pedagogy as a process oriented approach where the learner engages in story to find answers and meaning” (2001, p. 5), which she first designed in her own doctoral work: Coyote Learns to Make a Story Basket: The Place of First Nation Stories in Education (1997). Through storywork the “story, storyteller, and listener created a synergy for making meaning through story and making one work to obtain meaning and understanding” (2001 p. 1). Through storywork, I kept close to the seven principles that Archibald’s Elders taught her, as they resonated with my own Métis upbringing and married Dene family’s epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies. She termed them “storywork principles highlighting: respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, inter-relatedness, and synergy … And she learned that stories can ‘take on their own life’ and ‘become the teacher’ if these principles are used” (2008, p. ix). This is the first methodological framework that I used in my study to fulfill the purpose of my research study, and to use as a road map in following Indigenous protocols that best honoured the NWT Aboriginal way of having stories guide the research process.

As such, these were the Indigenous principles that I followed in gathering the stories to gain an understanding of my central phenomenon. As Creswell (2012) points out, “telling stories is a natural part of life, and individuals all have stories about their experiences to tell others. In this way, narrative research captures an everyday, normal form of data that is familiar to individuals” (p. 502). The stories that I talk about are personal experience narratives, or life-experience stories. “Story is the portal through which a person enters the world – by which their experiences of the world are interpreted and made personally meaningful” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477). Through these stories, I listened carefully as the Elders described their experiences first as children themselves with their families (how they were raised), then as parents of their children (how they raised their children), and finally as Elders in the school system sharing their traditional knowledge and cultural teachings as capable people (how they noticed children
“raised” in the modern education system). I knew that listening to the Elders’ narratives would be the key knowledge generating method in my research. With patience and trust, I opened my senses to visualize the experiences, beyond the auditory sense, to feel and anticipate the actions of the story, and apply the storywork principles. As Archibald advises, “we must let our emotions surface. As the Elders say, it is important to listen with, “three ears: two on the sides of our head and the one that is in our heart” (p. 8). In using this narrative research methodology, I sought to make space for the Elders’ storytelling of their experiences, and to delve deeply into the life histories of the Elders to learn more about ‘a capable person’. As Kovach (2009) emphasizes if research is about learning and enhancing the well being of those in this world, then story is research. “It provides insight from observations, experience, interactions and intuitions that assist in developing a theory about a phenomenon” (p. 102). I knew that I was on the right track, and by following my inner voice I would be able to take the words of the Elders not only to express their teaching power, but also to connect it to contemporary Aboriginal education in a way that enhances pedagogical strategies to help Aboriginal students find their paths to being capable people. As such, I integrated the seven principles of respect, reverence, responsibility, reciprocity, inter-relatedness, holism and synergy (Archibald, 2008) as I examined and analyzed the Elders’ personal life-experience stories. In doing so, I gained a unique perspective, which combined with the second narrative research methodology brought an enriched way of conceptualizing the Elders’ stories to understand the central phenomenon.

3.2.2. Narrative Research Methodology Review #2: Narrative Inquiry

Dr. Jean Clandinin and Dr. Michael Connelly (2000) are the authors of the second story approach whose work, Narrative Inquiry, informs my methodology. In narrative inquiry designs, researchers describe the lives of individuals, collect and tell stories about people’s lives and write narratives of individual experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Most narrative inquiries begin with the researchers interviewing participants who tell stories. Connelly & Clandinin (2006) add that the main form of narrative inquiry based on telling is storytelling. These narrative research references, like the Indigenous storywork principles, touched my natural style of finding understanding and meaning in complex
issues that require research. As Eber Hampton (1995) highlights, research is fundamentally about learning and ought to be looked upon as such. So in my learning journey, as an Aboriginal narrative inquirer, I examined closely Clandinin & Connelly’s (2000) chapter on “What Do Narrative Inquirers Do?” Drawing upon the Deweyan theory of experience, “specifically with his notion of situation, continuity, and interaction” (p. 50), these two narrative inquiry scholars explain the creation of their “metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, with temporality (continuity) along one dimension, the personal and the social (interaction) along a second dimension, and place (situation) along a third” (p. 50, parenthetical additions are mine). They saw these dimensions as avenues or directions to explore through narrative inquiry, much like ways to structure the experiential discoveries, musings, interactions, memories, and reflections involved when telling, living, retelling or reliving of narratives.

Connelly & Clandinin’s three-dimensional narrative space helped me to determine my own design of structuring the stories that I gathered from my Elders. The three dimensions stayed in my mindful awareness as I explored the scholarship trying to find a framework that could assist me in organizing my study’s data. It was a revelatory experience as these three constructs kept appearing in the discourses on educational research and paradigmatic methods that examined and conceptualized phenomena in different ways. Jameson (1991) outlined one of hallmarks of postmodernism as finding that meanings are not universal, but rather are grounded in time, space, and cultures. In continuing my explorations, I began to notice the three dimensions repeating themselves in many seminal texts by patterning themselves as inter-related parts to view the world through inquiry.

Through re-imagining these three-dimensional terms, and re-configuring them to fit my purpose, this is the second methodological paradigm that informed my study in a way that captured the details of the Elders’ experiences. By using these three dimensions and melding them with the seven Indigenous storywork principles, I framed the methodology of my narrative research to understand and learn from the Elders’ experiences about the concept of ‘a capable person’ and the ways to inform Aboriginal education in the NWT.
3.3. Selecting the NWT Elders and Research Sites

As Creswell (2012) outlines, “in qualitative inquiry, the intent is not to generalize a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon. Thus, to best understand a central phenomenon, the qualitative researcher purposefully or intentionally selects the individuals and sites” (p. 206). In this manner, I carefully considered the sampling approach with the NWT Aboriginal Elders, and their locations in an intentional and purposeful manner in order to best understand the central phenomenon of my study. Purposive sampling is a technique that involves the researcher selecting the population sample using his experience and knowledge of the group to be sample, and using specific criteria for inclusion (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2014). I chose this sampling technique as appropriate for my study in considering the Elders whom I hoped would be a part of the study. Outlined below were the criteria that I used to identify potential participants for the study. Some of the factors bordered on sensitive issues; however, they were to be included in order to ensure the integrity of the study:

- Elders who were known as traditional knowledge keepers;
- They were to be living healthy lifestyles, and have raised their children well;
- They have worked in NWT educational organizations having contributed their cultural knowledge and spiritual teachings;
- They were to be from one of the Indigenous groupings of Dene, Métis, Inuvialuit, or NWT Cree peoples;
- They were to speak one of the nine NWT official Aboriginal languages, or have a working knowledge of these languages: Chipewyan, Tłı̨chǫ, South Slavey, North Slavey, Gwich’in, Inuvialuktun, Inuinnaqtun, Inuktitut or Cree;
- They were to live in one of the six NWT regions: South Slave, North Slave, Dehcho, Tłı̨chǫ, Sahtu or the Beaufort Delta.

After careful consideration of these variables, I came up with a long list of Elders who fit the criteria, having known many Elders and having been blessed to work with them in one capacity or another over the past 25 years in Aboriginal education in the NWT. I knew that I could not work with all of them, alas narrative research dictates focusing on the experiences of only one or more individuals (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2014; Creswell, 2013). I prayed that Creator would send me to the Elders who would help me best fulfill the purpose of my study and research questions. In addition to individual Elders, I wanted
to include husband and wife couples, so they would be able to talk more specifically about the family aspects to raising children. I began the initial set of phone calls to my Elder friends, reminiscing with them, and using my introductory script (Appendix A) to provide them with preliminary information, the time commitment and the possible benefits for Aboriginal education in the NWT. After a week of phone calls, I had twelve Elders who lived in seven communities as follows: Fort Smith, Hay River, Fort Resolution, Jean Marie River, Behchoko, Ndilo and Fort McPherson. Overall, all Indigenous “tribes” (Kovach, 2009) and language groups were represented, so I was set to begin the exploration of ‘a capable person’ and listen to the stories.

I did not realize until much later during the analysis process that I had too many Elders. Once I had completed the first phase of the narrative research analysis, with eight restoried versions from the original data, I realized that I had reached data saturation (Creswell, 2012; Piantanida & Garman, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2012). With that, I had to remove four Elders from my study. This was a very difficult situation, as I had already involved them in two interviews and many phone calls at this point. With much care and thought, I reviewed the four remaining sets of interviews to determine the duplication and saturation points. I was disappointed when I had to phone the two Elders from Jean Marie River, one from Behchoko, and the other from Ndilo, but they were graciously understanding.

3.4. Ethical and Political Considerations

In a related manner, I not only determined the participants and research locations, but also began the long and detailed process of completing the ethics segment of the study. By consulting with the SFU Office of Research Ethics (ORE), I began the process of outlining all the aspects of my research by completing a Study Details description. During the ORE online tutorials, I learned about research with human subjects and vulnerable groupings. At first, I was nervous about engaging NWT Aboriginal Elders in my research, as I thought that they were part of a vulnerable population, and that it would be too difficult to have them involved. Linda Smith’s (2012) oft-quoted reference to the word itself, ‘research’ as probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary, shook the White part of my bones. I definitely did not want to be classified as
taking away from the Elders, as my innate nature has always been to acknowledge, honour and serve them as “repositories of cultural and philosophical knowledge and transmitters of such information” (Medicine, 1987, p. 142).

After reading the OCAP (2005) document and reviewing the Government of Canada’s TCPS2 website that guides “Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans,” I completed and submitted my Study Details report. After several revisions, I received my SFU ORE approval; one month later, I also received my Scientific Research License from the NWT Aurora Research Institute (ARI) required for research in the NWT. As well, the NWT ARI had its own protocol of informing the various Aboriginal governments and / or cultural institutes in the communities where the Elders lived. This added layer of “gatekeepers” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 152) eased my fears of working in a vacuum with no scrutiny on my research, and of having the additional benefits of more levels of communication and variables to consider. Once I received the permission (some written, others verbal) from the NWT Aboriginal leaders, and support from the NWT Education Superintendents, I was set to proceed.

3.5. Data Collection Methods

For the data collection phase of the study, the first set of visits with the Elders took place in the early fall to collect the initial data. To explain the interview process, I designed an interview protocol (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), consisting of a set of preliminary questions for the Elders to get comfortable, and “open up” (as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 164). These questions consisted of contextual questions that connected to the relevant data that added to a later chapter, biography chapter (Chapter 6). They were relaxed and perfunctory questions whose purpose was to put the Elders at ease and begin sharing personal and familial information, such as: where they were born, what languages they spoke, where they were raised, etc.

After these initial questions, I carefully read the Informed Consent from (Appendix B) agreement with the Elders explaining once again the purpose of the research study, emphasizing the voluntary nature of the decision to participate, presenting an overview of the interview process. At this point, I also asked their permission to audio record their
stories for transcription purposes, adding the reassurance that the recorded audiotapes would be kept in a secure place, and after two years deleted due to security purposes. I paid close attention to their understanding of all that I was reading, as I could tell that the heavy Western tone of the formal nature of the interviews process was unnatural, so I made sure that I spoke carefully, as in many cases, English was not the Elders’ first language. For example, in my Informed Consent document, I had used the term, “traditional pedagogies.” Right after I used that term, I explained what it meant in more familiar language as ways to teach and learn long time ago, traditionally, and repeated the explanation if necessary. Most importantly the tone that I used was very calm, caring, and respectful.

Another significant ethnical component that I attended to at beginning of the initial interview was to ask the Elders if they wished to use a pseudonym, or their real name in this study. Without hesitation, the Elders agreed to use their real names with references to their families and home communities. All through the study, I kept checking with them regarding this aspect of the study to ensure that they were aware of the implications of such a decision to use their real names.

The second visit to the Elders took place in the following fall season when I returned to verify the accuracy of the transcriptions and begin the restorying process. Altogether I gathered approximately 350 pages of raw data containing many interesting and moving stories and details, some of them smooth stories, others sacred (Clandinin, 2013). I paid particular attention to developing a narrative account that followed a chronology of coherence and relation to my research purpose (Gay, Mills, Airasian, 2014). As such, from the raw data, I bolded various parts of the interviews to ask questions during this second visit, and began organizing the story into elements that were informed by the two narrative research methodologies of storywork and narrative inquiry (Archibald, 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The energy, flow and moving nature of the stories helped me discover the elements of their capable lives.

The third and final visit took place in the last summer of my study. Before I set out on the third visit, I had devised a useful matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and process that allowed me to complete another close reading and re-reading of the raw data, dissect the
stories, examine the narrative elements, then put them back together again in a process of storywork and restorying of the narratives (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002; Archibald, 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I had set aside time from my work situation to concentrate on the final visit, and had a fresh take on the emerging metaphor (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), and learning themes (Creswell, 2013) from the Elders’ stories. As a concluding step in the collaborative process of the third visit, and to ensure validity, I added a final consent form, a Validation Check (Creswell & Millar, 2000) (Appendix C). I carefully reviewed this document with the Elders during the last in-person visit. This step ensured that the Elders had a major role in the collaboration to check the accuracy of the restoried versions of their personal experience narratives, to ensure that their biographies were true, to ask questions, and to sign off on the consent to use their real names, restoried narratives, photographs and biographies.

3.5.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

To explore the central concept of my study, I adopted a conversational style of interviews in a semi-structure approach. These interviews were my main form of data collection. As Mishler (1986) notes this is the most popular way of data collection. Schwandt (2007) states, “the typical in-depth, semi-structured, or unstructured interviews, aim to elicit stories of experience” (p. 163). Certainly there were times when the interview seemed unstructured, and the Elders meandered off topic into a variety of traditional stories, interconnected memories, and cultural teaching, but for the most part, even when there were expressions of deep emotions, I kept the gist of the dialogue focused on the semi-structured format. Although the research interviews that I had with the Elders covered a wide range of emotions (Chase, 2011), I managed to practice all the principles of Indigenous storytelling principles (Archibald, 2008) through respectful attention to details, gestures, tone, mannerisms, and intuition. The overall approach was attuned more to a “conversational method that involves open-ended structure that is flexible enough to accommodate the principles of oral traditions, and is thus differentiated from a more traditional interview process” (Kovach, 2009, p. 124). In this way, the Elders had more flexibility to share what they deemed important regarding the topic, and how it played out in their experiences. However, in the back of my head, I knew that it was going to be
my responsibility to make meaning from what they were saying, so I ensured that I guided the conversation onto topics that related to the central concept.

For the data collection questions, I used the theoretical lens of the medicine wheel (Bopp, Bopp, Lane & Brown, 1984; Hampton, 1995; McGabe, 2009; Chartrand, 2011) outlining what I deemed were the four dimensions of a capable person, in order to structure the questions. Creswell (2012) suggests that a theoretical lens in narrative research acts as a guiding perspective or ideology that provides structure to the research study. I used the main features of the medicine wheel featured in Figure 3 below to guide my interview questions.

![Figure 3. Medicine Wheel (adapted for the NWT Aboriginal Elders in the study)](image)

Although only a few of the NWT Elders had not heard of this all encompassing Indigenous ideology of the medicine wheel, some of them had a close affinity to the medicine wheel through past alcohol treatment programs that had used this strong Indigenous guiding perspective as part of a healing journey. As the medicine wheel is the strongest model, I wanted to use a structure that not only was easy to explain to the Elders, but also connected to their sense of meaning and intuition. The set of interview questions that I developed for the twelve Elders focused on the concept of a “capable person” and

- Mental
- Intellectual, academic, mind work
- Knowledge

- Physical
- Walking, moving, working
- Strength

- Spiritual
- Beliefs, values
- Faith, family
- Soul

- Emotional
- Kindness, sharing and caring
- Love

- Mental
- Intellectual, academic, mind work
- Knowledge

- Physical
- Walking, moving, working
- Strength

- Spiritual
- Beliefs, values
- Faith, family
- Soul

- Emotional
- Kindness, sharing and caring
- Love

- Good Heart
- Strength
- Soul
- Faith, family

- Strong Spirit
- Mental
- Intellectual, academic, mind work
- Knowledge

- Healthy Body
- Physical
- Walking, moving, working
- Strength

- Active Mind
- Emotional
- Kindness, sharing and caring
- Love

GOOD HEART

ACTIVE MIND

HEALTHY BODY

STRONG SPIRIT
traditional Aboriginal pedagogy framed within the structure of the medicine wheel. The four primary data-collection questions that guided the semi-structured interviews were:

1. What is your understanding of ‘a capable person?’
2. How were you raised? Who and what shaped you towards becoming ‘a capable person?’
3. How did you raise your children? Towards becoming ‘a capable person?’
4. How do you see children raised in the modern education system – the contemporary school system?

From these guiding questions, the Elders’ stories moved freely and naturally within the context of the medicine wheel structure. I had thought that perhaps it may be too foreign for the NWT Aboriginal Elders, but they were comfortable with the structure. Overall, the NWT Elders did not have any adverse reactions to the medicine wheel, and intuitively understood when I explained it to be the four parts of a capable person. In this way, they were able to speak quite easily in this mode, as they delved into their personal life-experiences of being raised in a traditional Aboriginal way, raising their own children and taking on a role of Elder in “raising” children in the schools in their regions.

The Elders did not receive pay for their participation in the study, but they did receive a small honorarium, and many gifts of reciprocity for their time and stories, in keeping with research protocols (Creswell, 2012). All three sets of interviews lasted approximately 2-3 hours each, thus producing a lot of data in both the original transcript form and my accompanying research journals. With the Elders’ permission, the stories were audio recorded and later transcribed. Through time and close attention to the audio recordings, I discovered data that I had not noticed during the actual interview. I realized the added dimensions enriched my understanding of the Elders as capable people, such as: the cadence of their language; voice inflections, dialectical differences between the language groups, and particularly the sounds of their homes and communities. Most poignantly, through sitting with the data repeatedly going over the transcriptions, I was able to immerse myself in the actual experiences of the conversations, allowing the Elders’ voices to resonate in the processing of my central phenomenon and research questions, adding more insights and deeper understanding of the emerging themes and patterns. I believed that personally transcribing all Elders’ words, although an arduous task helped
me to understand the stories. Listening, writing, rewinding, and listening again enabled me to pick up on nuances that I might have otherwise missed. As well, in sitting with the data and reflecting on its content over time, I believed that this process allowed a more continuous analysis of data.

3.5.2. Observations

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, I also made many remarkable observations during my travels in the homes and communities of the Elders. “Observation is the process of gathering open-ended, firsthand information by observing people and places at a research site” (Creswell, 2012, p. 213). As a form of data collection, the observations that I made while travelling to the Elders allowed me to appreciate a fuller picture of the Elders’ lives in contributing to my understanding of the phenomenon that I was studying (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2014). As such, I observed many sites, scenery, and wildlife that added to my developing philosophy of ‘a capable person.’ Such observations included macro experiences, such as: the vast land base, snow, rivers, the ferry system, buffalo, raven, community living, old churches, old school buildings, arbours, and out-of-town campsites (Georgetown) on other side of ferry near the community of Tsiigethchic, NT. As well, I experienced many micro memories, such as bannock on the kitchen table, hot tea, frying caribou meat, hanging dry fish, wood stoves, cardboard paper in the entry way, slop pails by the door, grey linoleum flooring, hundreds of framed family photos in the living room, the cross of Jesus, macramé knitted plant hangers, TV bingo – so many visual memories of Aboriginal homes in the NWT. Similar to Meyer (2003), “the aim of the observations was twofold. First, I wanted to develop a sense of context in which to experience what some informants were sharing. Secondly, I wanted to ground the conversations and interviews in a shared experience so that I could enter into discussions of knowledge, learning and understanding with informant” (p. 134).

3.5.3. Photographs

To further triangulate the data, I added the many photographs to the observations that I made on the second visit with the Elders. Schwandt (2007) cites that “the strategy of triangulation is often wedded to the assumption that data from different sources or
methods must necessarily converge on or be aggregated to reveal the truth. In other words, so the arguments go, triangulation is both possible and necessary because research is a process of discovery in which genuine meaning residing within an action or event can be best uncovered by viewing it from different vantage points” (p. 298. These photos are displayed in their variety in Chapter 6 celebrating the Elders’ biographies. The use of image data revealed the context that I wished to share in describing the capable stories of the Elders.

3.5.4. Documents

The last source of data for my study consisted of the formal documents that were the Aboriginal curricula: Dene Kede (1993), Inuuqatigiit (1996), and the Western Northern Canadian Protocol Aboriginal Curriculum (2000). “Documents represent a good source for text (word) data for a qualitative study” (Creswell, 2012, p. 223). Together these three sets of curricula or philosophies expanded my understanding of the context of the central concept of ‘a capable person.’

3.6. Overcoming Challenges during the Research Process

Overall, I did not encounter any challenges with the Elders and the interview process, thanks in large part to Elders themselves, their family members, and the respectful commitment to Indigenous research methodologies, protocols and preparations. Kovach (2009) describes, “preparatory work means clarifying the inquiry purpose, which invariably gets to motivations. Preparation assumes self-awareness and an ability to situate self within the research. It requires attention to culture in an active, grounded way. There is no formula (nor could there be) for this preparation” (p. 108). By ensuring that I practiced the principles of Indigenous storywork (Archibald, 2008), and honoured the cultural and spiritual ecology of the Elders, I was able to enter into the Indigenous knowledge base of ‘a capable person.’ Absolon talks about this way as a portal or doorway into the knowledge that is accessed by:

People sharing, by community forums, by sitting in circles, by engaging in ceremony, by honouring your relationship to the spirit. When we do that, the spirit
will reciprocate and we will be given what we are needed. The universe will provide for us if we honour the great circle and cycle of being, and that can only happen if we know how to do that. (as cited in Kovach, 2009, p. 154)

Intuitively, spiritually and culturally, I followed this inner voice that guided me through the challenges involved in the research. This was especially true during the travel that was involved in this research on the Aboriginal Elders’ narrative landscape. As I mentioned, I travelled over 25,000 kilometres from Fort Smith to Fort McPherson, NWT, and communities in between for the three visits to the Elders’ homes. This travel happened to take place in the fall and winter during all the visits, which presented major challenges in terms of weather and modes of travel. Fortunately, I did not encounter any accidents, but I can remember getting close to the edge at times. Whenever I drove the long distances by car, I had my husband travel with me for fear of travelling alone, of the road conditions, and of the large game, i.e.) buffalo or moose. On one particular visit to Hay River and Fort Resolution, we set out early in the morning in our little car. It was a bitter minus 40 below Celsius, yet no wind or snow. By the end of the day, however, and one interview completed in Hay River, we still had to travel to interview the Fort Resolution Elder, which was a usual two-hour drive. Nothing prepared us for the unexpected blizzard and windstorm! Hard snow belted against our windshield as we crept towards our destination with snow banks accumulating on both sides. There was no one on the highway, but us in our dinky little car. My husband snarled under his breath, “And what are we doing this for?” I replied, “We’re under Creator’s care. Everything’s going to be all right.” I prayed hard during that trip. Although the Elder was worried, she still had bannock and a delicious moose burger soup ready for us, with a rice pudding dessert. The evening and sleep over at her house were filled with stories and life lessons that carried me through to the end. “But, boy, that was a close call!” It seemed like when I travelled all my Ancestors were with me, reminding me over and over again of the dynamism of Indigenous storytelling – the true nature of capable people.

3.7. Two Data Analysis Parts

After processing the initial raw data through the interview transcripts (1st visit), verifying the accurate contents of transcripts (2nd visit), and reviewing the reflective journal writing that I used throughout the study, I sat down to begin the data analysis
phase. Over a two-year period, I realized that all the steps in data analysis are “interrelated and simultaneous throughout a research project” (Creswell, 2013, p. 182), connecting the beginning and middle discourses of the narrative research, and leading to the overall findings of the study. As Daiute & Lightfoot (2004) say, “narrative discourses are cultural meanings and interpretations that guide perception, thought, interaction and action” (p. x). With the vast amount of narrative data that I had collected, as is usual in qualitative research, I knew that I was going to need to develop some sort of system to make sense of it all. So I patiently began the meticulous process of trying to find a framework to gain meaning and generate knowledge from the Elders storied experiences. I appreciated that a “learn by doing” (Dey, 1993, p. 6) data analysis was my best bet moving forward. With the two narrative methodological paradigms guiding me, I set out to craft a unique design that took a bit from all the data analysis discourses that I had been reading. As Huberman & Miles (1994) noted: “data analysis is not off-the-shelf; rather it is custom-built, revised and “choreographed” (as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 182). As such, through integrating Archibald’s (2008) and Clandinin & Connelly’s (2000) modes of storywork and narrative inquiry, I developed a two-part approach in my study that led me to a full spectrum view. From this two-part data analysis approach I was able to consider the methodological assumptions that were guiding me, and to see all parts of the webbed sections that shone in the sunlight of my analysis like a spider web after the rain.

This two-part approach consisted of: 1) a narrative analysis, and 2) an analysis of narratives as outlined in Polkinghorne’s (2007) discussion of narrative research. It is critical to note the differences between the two methods in spite of their similar terminology, as they are both unique data analysis processes. Gay, Mills & Airasian (2014) note that the first – narrative analysis: “is when the researcher collects descriptions of events through interviews and observations and synthesizes them into narratives or stories [using] the process of restorying; and the second – analysis of narrative: “is a process in which the researcher collects stories as data and analyzes common themes to produce a description that applies to all stories captured in the narratives” (p. 402). Although the two data analysis parts seem to delineate the data, that was not the case. As Strauss & Corbin (2008) explain the analysis involves breaking up the data, and the findings are about putting it back together again. Over time, the in-depth reflection and
generative concept processing involved in the analysis flowed naturally into the meaning making processes that are described in the next section.

3.8. Two Findings Processes – Making Meaning

In presenting the findings, I chose to employ two processes for making meaning from my study: a restorying of the Elders’ narratives and thematic groupings. The first set of findings presents the restorying of the Elders’ personal life-experience narratives. The restorying follows a process of gathering stories, and analyzing them for key elements of story in a chronological sequence (Creswell, 2012). I chose to restory using the elements of two story-based frameworks: the seven principles from Indigenous storywork (Archibald, 2008) and the three dimensions in a metaphorical narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In restorying the narratives, I ensured that the stories flowed from the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ narrative landscape: 1) first ensuring the Elders’ voice is present using their own words, and 2) secondly, allowing for the readers’ own interpretations in reading the restoried versions. To prepare the restorying in this study, I did minimal editing to the Elders’ words trying to keep as close to the transcript as possible. To ensure that the transcripts and the restoried versions in this research were consistent with what the Elders wanted to share, I made three in-person visits with the Elders (along with many clarifying phone calls), to receive their approval on: the raw transcripts (1st in-person visit), the beginning of the restorying process (2nd in-person visit), and the restoried versions (3rd in-person visit), which the Elders approved with accuracy corrections. On each visit I asked permission from the Elders to use their actual names, finally receiving written approval on the last visit. This information is outlined in the validation section of the methodology that follows.

The second presentation of the findings reflects the analysis of narrative data in its entirety from the original verbatim transcripts into thematic groupings. In this process, I identified the themes “told” by the participants (Riessman, 2008) using in-vivo coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) in an attempt to stay as close to the Elders’ own words as possible. In identifying the themes, I also noticed the recursive nature of the patterns through transcribing, reading, reflection, re-reading the transcripts, and recognizing the shapes through their re-occurrence in the Elders’ stories. These thematic groupings
allowed me to represent the qualitative data in such a way that was "a description of both
the story and themes that emerged from it" (Creswell, 2013, p. 75).

3.9. Procedures to Address Trustworthiness and Credibility

As qualitative research methods explain, it is necessary to assess the validity and
reliability of the data collected to ensure the researcher’s procedures do not present biases
and / or assumptions that interfere with the findings or conclusions gained from the data. To clarify my understanding from the scholarship, validity usually refers to authenticity or
trustworthiness of the data, while reliability relates to dependability or credibility of
processes. However, as Reissman (1993) comments, “concepts of verification and
procedures for establishing validity (from the experimental model) rely on measurable and
objectivist assumptions that are largely irrelevant to narrative studies” (p. 89, as cited in
Webster & Pertova, 2007). In this narrative research, I took heart from this description of
validity and reliability, as well as from Polkinghorne (1988) who notes the “need to re-
orientate our measures in using narrative. It is not satisfactory to apply traditional criteria
of validity and reliability to narrative. Rather, it appears beneficial to look for “new
measures such as access, honesty, verisimilitude, authenticity, familiarity, transferability
and economy” (Huberman, 1995) (p. 90, as cited in Webster & Mertova, 2007). With these
in mind, the procedures that I used to address the trustworthiness and credibility (Creswell,
2013) of this study included: triangulation of research methods; respondent verification,
prolonged engagement and trust building with the Elders; rich, thick descriptions through
the restorying that showed verisimilitude; and a final visit validation check with the Elders
to ensure the truth of the restoried versions and themes, and to receive permission to use
their real names, and references to their families and communities.

In qualitative research, using two or more methods to study the central
phenomenon is following the process of triangulation to validate the data. According to
Schwandt (2007), “the strategy of triangulation is often wedded to the assumption that
data from different sources or methods must necessarily converge on or be aggregated
to reveal the truth. In other words, so the argument goes, triangulation is both possible
and necessary because research is a process of discovery in which the genuine meaning
residing within an action or event can be best uncovered by viewing it form different
vantage points” (author’s emphasis, p. 298). In this study focusing on examining the phenomenon of ‘a capable person’ from the Elders’ narratives of raising children, I not only collected and analysed the data revealed through the stories in the semi-structured interviews, but also through other research methods. These involved informal observations of the Elders in their homes and the happenings in their families and communities, as well as including the biographies and photographs to enhance the findings of the study.

To ensure further validity and reliability of the data, the second process that I employed was respondent verification. This process was accomplished on my second visit to the Elders’ homes, after the first full transcriptions of the interviews were completed. By returning to the Elders in person and reviewing the original transcripts with them, I was not only able to verify the accuracy of their stories, but also to discuss key sections of the narratives that began the restorying process of the research process. The Elders were happy to see me the second time, and they gave me the “feeling right” energy that motivated me to continue capturing their stories and reflecting the “essence” of what they were trying to convey in telling their capable person stories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 47). The respondent verification combined with the prolonged participation at the research site (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2014) allowed me to engage and build trust with the Elders, over the two-year period of data collection and analysis.

The “serendipity and discovery” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 13) that I experienced with the Elders filled me with hope, knowing that I was connecting with them to restory their narratives “with rich, thick descriptions” (p. 17). Through these descriptions, I fulfilled another validity and reliability check in that the restoried narratives and thematic groupings intertwined with the concept of verisimilitude, that is: “Stories derive their convincing power not from verifiability but from verisimilitude: they will be true enough if they ring true” (authors’ emphasis, Amsterdam & Bruner, 2000, p. 30, as cited in Webster & Pertova, 2007, p. 5).

The real truths of the stories rang loud and clear when the Elders heard the end results in their homes. This process was validated on the third and final visit to the Elders’ homes. Again, the Elders were happy to see me, as we celebrated their capable person
narratives in the printed restoried versions and discussion of the themes. Once I arrived at their homes, we found a quiet place to review their document. At this time, I invited the Elders to select whether they wanted to read it by themselves, or if they wanted one of their family members to read it for them, or whether they wanted me to read it for them. All of the Elders chose to have me read their stories with them. During this close reading method, if there were inaccuracies or twists of detail gone wrong, they would indicate for me to stop, and I would immediately correct the final version. Once this process was completed, there were smiles, high emotion, and further celebration of their completed capable person stories and understanding of the related themes. This was the time of the final validation check, “a key validation step in the research” (Creswell, 2013, p. 188), when the Elders authenticated the data with their signatures indicating their collaboration, review and consent.

3.10. Summary

In this summary, I presented the narrative research methodology and design for studying the NWT Elders’ narratives related to the central phenomenon of ‘a capable person.’ By choosing a qualitative method and narrative research genre, I was able to meet the proposed study’s purpose in following an oral traditional approach and interpretive manner that connected with the Elders, and felt right to me, as the researcher. Through a two-eyed seeing worldview, I reviewed two story-based methodological paradigms that informed my own research methodology allowing for data collection and analysis that considered narratives in a culturally sensitive manner mindful of the Elders’ ways of knowing, doing, being and believing. Overall, in making meaning in this study, the two processes that I employed brought me to restorying and theme development that revealed the shaping influences of ‘a capable person’ in ways that ensured trustworthiness and credibility of the Elders’ narratives of raising children and relationality.
Chapter 4. Honouring the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ Narrative Landscape

“Many are calling on Ancestral memory, through ceremony, for our connection to this knowledge base. We are, as a people, reweaving the intricate web of our Traditional ways by doing things “the Indian way.” (Fyre Jean Graveline, 1998, Circle Works)

The purpose of my study is to identify and examine the shaping influences that guide the development of a capable person to inform Aboriginal education in the NWT. Before considering these shaping influences represented in the next two findings chapters, it is important to understand how I conducted and conceptualized the study by honouring the narrative landscape of the NWT Aboriginal Elders. This chapter shows how I entered into and traveled on the NWT Elders’ narrative landscape, how I developed close trusting relationships with the Elders, how I followed the Indigenous protocols, how I involved myself in “cultural catalyst activities” (Kovach, 2006, p. 92) to gather the knowledge, and most importantly, how my conceptual framework arose from being in the centre of the storywork narrative inquiry space.

Through narrative research, I entered into the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ narrative landscape (Clandinin, 2013), as this approach allowed a more personal and relational manner. Clandinin calls “this process of coming alongside participants and then inquiring into the lived and told stories retelling stories” (p. 34). By using the first person voice, and in collaboration with the Elders, I was able to retell – or restory – their personal life-experience narratives about raising children and relationality. For two years on three separate visits, I did this: I lived, experienced and listened to stories on the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ narrative landscape. It is a landscape that is not entered into by many in the research academy, as it is difficult to negotiate, navigate and narrate. I believe that it is challenging, not only because of the remote terrain and rugged weather conditions, but also in accessing the NWT Aboriginal people, particularly the Elders. However, when the relational, collaborative, and respectful stars of narrative research align, and if one pays attention, this Aboriginal Elders’ narrative landscape provides breath taking scenes, extraordinary flora and fauna, rich stories and unique voices. The north has its own set of unwritten rules that contain the “beliefs, customs, values, history, and the achievements
of the Dene people, and it has been handed down through stories from generation to generation” according to NWT Aboriginal Elder, Albert Canadien (2010, p. viii). Through these stories, I found a way to connect to the Elders, to their narrative landscape, and found the best place to learn about story power (Archibald, 2008) in the Indian way (Graveline, 1998).

4.1. Entering into and Travelling on the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ Narrative Landscape

To meet the exploratory and interpretive needs of this research, I followed the traditional and cultural ways of the Dene, Métis and Inuvialuit of the NWT, as I have learned them over the years. I am a Manitoba Métis by birth and upbringing, but have lived most of my life in the NWT, having married into a Chipewyan Dene family for 30 years. As well, I have spent 25 of those years working with NWT Indigenous peoples in education, and have close connections to many NWT people. With this long-standing familial, cultural and educational presence in the NWT, I entered into the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ narrative landscape by using a tribal based approach with Dene, Métis and Inuvialuit knowledges as guiding epistemologies (Kovach, 2009). This approach allowed me the historical, cultural, social and pedagogical understandings that I needed to conduct the study with NWT Aboriginal Elders. With these understandings, I sought out my Elders. In many cases when an Aboriginal person has a query or question, their inclination almost by instinct is to seek out their Elders. This is part of what the Indigenous scholars call heart knowledge or blood memory (Holmes, 2000; Cardinal, 2001; Abolson & Willett, 2005). Elders are “people who have acquired wisdom through life experiences, education (a process of gaining skills, knowledge, and understanding), and reflection” (Archibald, 2008, p. 37), preferring not simply to call them Elders, but rather “Elder teachers” from whom “important cultural knowledge and teachings are learned carefully – over time” (p. 37). Winona Stevenson (2000) refers to Elders’ oral history as a unique form of traditional Indigenous transmission of knowledge and history. As a Cree scholar, Stevenson espouses an “entirely different kind of relationship based on long-term commitment, reciprocity, and respect” (p. 15). This kind of relationship brought me to my heart and blood memory the inherent need that I had to seek out Elders whom I already knew and
trusted to gain understanding of a complex concept and connect it to contemporary Aboriginal education. In entering this landscape, Kovach (2006) refers to “a subjective involvement with one’s research where the act of ‘collecting data; is as much about cultivating and nurturing relationships, as a long term proposition, as it is about acquiring information” (p. 81). In delving deeply into my central phenomenon of ‘a capable person,’ I instinctively mapped the journey that I was taking in learning and travelling on the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ narrative landscape.

In total, I travelled over 25,000 kilometres on roads, ferries, bridges, and airways during three separate visits to the Elders during the two-year data collection period of this research. On the way, I was inspired by the grandeur of the Land, reflecting on the Ancestors who had travelled before me, as I encountered many Friends along the way, including raven, bear, buffalo, moose, wolf, fox and even porcupine whom I barely recognized. I accepted these relational and fundamental Indigenous knowledges, and many times felt apprehensive knowing the nascent responsibility that I carried in gathering Elders’ stories. But I knew to follow the old ways, the traditional ways; they were in my soul. So I paid the Land, offered tobacco, and bowed my head often in reverence to the unseen guiding dynamisms. At many moments along the way I wondered if I would be able to complete such a colossal task of collecting the necessary stories for this study, but I called upon the Great Spirit to show the way, ensure my safety, and keep my mind alert, awake and attentive to the possibilities that stories present on this narrative landscape.

4.2. Close Trusting Relationships

As Kovach (2009) shares, “by listening to one another, story as method elevates the research from an extractive exercise serving the fragmentation of knowledge to a holistic endeavour that situates research firmly within the nest of relationship” (p. 99). All through the study, I sought this nest of stories and “deep respect associated with the relational quality of this approach” (p. 99). The interactive, collaborative process developed into close trusting relationships between the Elders and me during the in-person visits, and the many phone calls and clarifying questions over the two-year period. Fortunately I also had a pre-existing and close relationships with the research participants much like Archibald’s (2008) intimate connections with Squamish, Coast Salish and Sto:lo
Elders, and Fitznor’s (2005) sharing circle approach with Indigenous educators. As Gay, Mills & Airasian (2014) highlight: “narrative research necessitates a relationship between the researcher and the participants more akin to a close friendship, where trust is a critical attribute” (p. 357). “By establishing a teaching-learning relationship based on trust and ethical responsibility” (Archibald, 2008, p. 44), I continued to find my way on the Elders’ narrative landscape. I followed this practice not only when I visited them in their home communities, but also when the Elders travelled to Yellowknife where I live. On many occasions, I would receive calls from Elders when they were in town, at the airport, or at the grocery store, asking me to pick them up, and drive them to their various destinations. As well, I would invite them to my home for dinner, visiting and catching up on their life’s happenings, and paying attention to their stories about their families, their health, and their well-being. I felt obliged to serve without hesitation, as these Elders became like my “extended family” (Archibald, 2008, p. 52). This process served the important purpose of staying connected with the Elders, in spite of the prolonged time lapses between the in-person visits. As Pinnegar & Daynes (2007) underscore, an important element in the relationship between the researcher and the researched is that both will learn and change through their engagement. I recognized the relationships of learning and trust that developed over such an extended period had changed me, and I am certain that it did the Elders, too. “The narrative environments [were] multiple and layered” (Chase, 2011, p. 431), leading me to appreciate the respect and richness of the relations on this landscape. This strong collaborative feature showed itself to be a blessing in time, as the shaping influences and themes emerged as a result of continuous dialogue, reflection, and interaction between the Elders and me.

4.3. Aboriginal Protocols

When on the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ narrative landscape, I ensured that I paid full respect to the Aboriginal protocols of the land upon which I was conducting my study. Archibald highlights that:

Respect must be an integral part of the relationship between the Elder and the research – respect for each other as human beings, respect for the power of cultural knowledge, and respect for cultural protocols that show one’s honour for the authority and expertise of the Elder teacher. (p. 41)
By practicing this respect in all aspects of my study, I was able to reach a level of being “culturally worthy” that “means being ready intellectually, emotionally, physically and spiritually to fully absorb cultural knowledge” (p. 41). However, this commitment to being culturally worthy required much attention to the Elders’ narrative landscape: honouring their comfort, routine, and understandings, along with their traditions, languages, and culture. Overall, I paid particular attention to following the Elders’ “agenda,” which very often meant that my research agenda went to the wayside. All of the interviews took place in the Elders’ homes, in an unhurried atmosphere, at the times they selected, and in their communities to which I travelled to be with them. When we were together, we ate together, we visited, we shared updates on life’s events, and we laughed – so much laughter, which was the medicine that bonded our relationships. There were also many times when the Elders went off topic, wandering into experiences inspired by nostalgia and memoirs, not at all close to the research topic, but as Archibald (2008) explains it is very necessary that the “Elders should be given as much time as they needed” (p. 44). “Patience, patience, patience” and “sit down and listen” (p. 46 and p. 47) were her guiding measures, which I followed entirely. I understood these maxims, realizing that the countless times when the Elders meandered on their own narrative landscape, mixing in a myriad of contextual details; this all added the extra texture and depth to the research experience. Overall, the richness of the dialogue, the flow of the conversation, the atmosphere of conviction, the sacred moments of storytelling, and the moving personal life-experience narratives made me feel honoured and humbled to be on the Aboriginal Elders’ narrative landscape. I was well aware of this privileged narrative space; I ensure that I practiced the respect, reverence, responsibility and reciprocity of Indigenous storywork (Archibald, 2008) when experiencing the stories.

After the visiting, I would ask permission to begin the more formal part of the research, which consisted of semi-structured interviews. In keeping with the Aboriginal protocols, all the interviews began and ended with a prayer. As Archibald (2008) says, “prayers in the traditional language helped create a respectful atmosphere in which to interact” (p. 51). At this point, I would ask the Elders if they wanted to pray in their language, or if they preferred that I pray. Most of the time the Elders would pray, and sometimes I would. I will always remember many of them drawing our hands together to form a sacred circle. These were the powerful moments of connection, love, hope and
promise, as we spoke words about serving the children and families of the NWT through this gathering, sharing and advancing of knowledge about ‘a capable person.’

The other natural part of research on the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ narrative landscape was the many gifting rituals that I followed to ensure adherence to Indigenous protocols. These were part of the northern tradition of reverence and reciprocity for Elders. I discovered that a keener sensitivity to, and complete participation in, this protocol firmed up one’s cultural worthiness. As such, before I made my arrangements to travel to the Aboriginal Elders’ narrative landscape, I would always phone them to ask if they, or their families, needed anything, and they always did. I loved practicing this protocol of giving and receiving. I realized that this ‘capable person’ quality was a part of my own ‘capable person’ developmental process, and made visiting the Elders such a delight, not only to learn the knowledge and advance this study, but more importantly to take part in the time honoured practice of giving and taking that was a part of Indigenous cyclical and spiritual acts on the land, in families and with friends. This gifting ritual on both sides of the visits was extensive, sometimes unexpected and always amusing. These were the things that I brought to the Elders on the giving side: fig newton cookies, lemon loafs, cranberry loaves, a sheered beaver pelt, two cans of Resolve carpet cleaner, Chinese food, Kentucky Fried Chicken snack packs, Christmas decorations, raspberries and blueberries, cloud berry tea, spruce gum salve, Trapline to Finish Line books, scratch bingo tickets, an awl, bannock, colourful yarn, beading needles, and white stroud. And gifting rituals were never a one-sided interaction. They involved me also taking home the offerings that the Elders gifted me on my way home. Some of these gifts included dry meat, dry fish, moose meat, a picture of Jesus’ last supper, beaded mitts with beaver fur trim, colourful pink and blue strings, moose hide scraps for ribbon, bannock, children’s moose hide beaded slippers with rabbit fur, a poster of Dene Nation gathering in Fort Providence, Treaty #8 Tribal Council clock, sweet grass, a large yellow beaded rosary, and lots of love and encouragement from the Elders. I was blessed to have had these gifting opportunities, as well as to visit the Elders in their homes, meet their families, and be a part of their narrative landscape.

Similarly, before I left the Elders on the first and last visits, after the formal interviews, I gave them offerings of tobacco and gifts of my appreciation. These acts of
reciprocity were an important part of being on the Aboriginal Elders' narrative landscape. On the first visit, I gave each Elder a moose hide beaded cardholder and $50 bill tucked within, and on the last visit I gifted them with a bag of dry meat and a card expressing my thankfulness and connection with them. I believe that the trust and truth of our relationships carried me far into the next steps of my research, as the Elders ultimately recognized and understood the most profound act of reciprocity. As Archibald (2008) expresses: “Establishing relationships within the context of storywork research has become a way to sustain lasting friendships through deep caring and endless stories and talk. Learning to listen with patience, learning about cultural responsibility toward the oral tradition, learning to make self-understandings, continuing the cycle of reciprocity by sharing cultural knowledge, and practicing reverence” (p. 51) are all part of being, researching and making meaning on the Aboriginal Elders’ narrative landscape.

The Elders and I both recognized the main reason for sharing their cultural teachings and stories with me. This essential mode of reciprocity involved serving the northern children, families and communities with the knowledge that I gained to inform Aboriginal education in the NWT and beyond. I felt this sacred responsibility at all levels, particularly in my head, heart, and spirit (Toulouse, 2013; Battiste, 2013; Goulet & Goulet, 2014), and knew that the energy and power that I received through these stories would be in service to Aboriginal education. As Archibald (2008) emphasized, “if the principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence are not practiced, then the power of the stories diminishes or goes “to sleep” until awakened by those who can use the story power appropriately (p. 138).

After my time with the Elders’ storytelling, I would find a place near their homes “to pay the Land” by offering tobacco in prayers of gratitude, humility, respect, as well as for the Elders’ well-being and good health. As well, I prayed to understand and fulfill the responsibility of ensuring that the stories that I gathered did not go to sleep, and were honoured on the NWT northern landscape by contributing to the cyclical learning of healthy children and families in their homes, schools and communities.
4.4. Aboriginal Cultural Activities

While being on the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ narrative landscape, I found myself compelled to be involved in as many Indigenous cultural activities as I could find time for, even during the time-pressured period of dissertation writing. Kovach (2006) calls these undertakings “cultural catalyst activities” (p. 92). From an Aboriginal perspective, these are “sources of fundamental and important Indigenous knowledge [that include] the land, our spiritual beliefs and ceremonies, traditional teachings of Elders, dreams, and our stories” (Archibald, 2008, p. 42). As such, I developed almost like ‘a capable person’ check list to ensure that I was practicing all aspects of cultural worthiness. I wanted to ensure that I was walking my talk. I would start my day in prayer and reflection, analyzing cyclically, remembering to take walks on the land, make tobacco offerings, even learning the Chipewyan language from our Elder uncle who was living with us, paying attention to his traditional stories, and making them a part of our family conversation. Overall, I practiced what Wilson calls “raised consciousness” (2008, p. 40); Clandinin calls it “wakefulness” (2013, p. 40) to ensure that my mind, heart and spirit were alive and ready to accept the gifts of learning and meaning making. Like Manulani Aluli Meyer, I “allowed myself continual access to waking and sleeping dreams, voices, visions” (2010, p, 135) that were an integral part of being on the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ narrative landscape. So I should not have been surprised when I experienced two concomitant cultural activities that caused the turning points of my study. I was so intent on focusing on “research as ceremony” (Wilson, 2008) that I almost missed the ceremony in research, and being in the midst of the sacred (Kovach, 2006).

It was summer time, and I was in constant research mode spending every day with the Elders’ stories as I was in the analysis phase. By listening, rewinding, analyzing the words, then synthesizing the ideas, writing, and re-writing, I sat with the data repeatedly questioning, leaving for a while, then returning to the stories again and again, reflecting over time on the stories and the deeper expressions of emotion, interjections and silences. These were the revered moments that attached to my memory because they reached into the heart and soul of the oral tradition of storytelling. Then one day, my research writing was put on hold. I was asked to attend an important Aboriginal languages meeting. After the meeting, one of my colleagues described the upcoming Council of Ministers of
Education Canada (CMEC) symposium that was to be held in Yellowknife at the end of June, and their frenzied search in trying to find a moderator for the event. I listened for a while, and left the meeting a bit disappointed that they had not even considered asking me. After all this was my home. But just as quickly as that thought entered my head, I ejected it, realizing the huge responsibility that it entailed. What was I thinking? I was deep into my research with so much work yet to do, and could not possibly find the time to commit to such a large-scale event. I did not think about it anymore, until a few days later when the event coordinator called me with an apology and a request to be the moderator of the conference. I almost declined knowing the amount of work involved, and also that my research would be put on the back burner. But I remembered my resolve to involve myself in as many cultural activities as possible. Little did I know that through these “cultural catalyst activities,” I would experience two major narrative shifts that would take me to the turning points of my research.

Consequently I put aside my research, and took the leadership reins as the conference moderator. This job involved being a part of the weekly organization meetings. At the initial meeting, I recognized immediately the reason for my participation. Unfortunately, there was no Aboriginal thinking in regards to the location, agenda, and the processes of the conference. Essentially the symposium needed to be “Indigenized,” and that became my role. As such, I took on another huge responsibility in committing to the design and set-up of an “Indian Village” for the symposium. This involved setting up the tipis, tents, the fire keeper’s location, and all the related fixings. This became the first shift that would lead me to my turning point.

As I observed the Aboriginal Elder who was hired as the tipi-leader, I noted his cultural knowledge and finesse in taking control of the formidable task of raising three 20-foot Fort McPherson canvas tipis. These canvas tipis were a delight for northern eyes, and the community of Fort McPherson had made them quite well known in the NWT. I knew the sight and use of them would indigenize the “Indian Village,” and make the conference Elders and participants feel “at home.” I recognized that this cultural activity and knowledge of raising a tipi was becoming a rare entity, so I decided to videotape the steps involved, particularly with the knowledgeable Aboriginal Elder. Many times I got in the Elder’s way, but he was patient with me, knowing that I was learning, and that I would
share the knowledge. One of my main purposes in videotaping the tipi raising was that I wanted to ensure that my husband and family remembered the steps involved, as I sensed that we would be called upon again to put up another tipi in the near future. I wanted to document the Aboriginal cultural activity.

I carefully watched the Elder as he established a circle by placing a 3/4" rope meticulously on the ground with a 20' diameter, which was the height of the tipi. He also surmised the shape of a guiding circle, which would determine where the poles would be placed. As well, he positioned himself by looking to the sky to ensure the tipi faced the east, as is the tradition of the Dene people. I then saw him select three of the tallest and sturdiest tipi poles and place a slipknot around them about ¼ of the way from the top ends. These were to become the main tripod that would hold the other structural poles in place. After the Elder ensured a robust torque on the poles, he called the team to lift the tripod in the air using the grounding circle as a base to calculate the equidistant measurement for the placement of the three poles. Up they went into the air creating a majestic tripod for the master shape of the rest of the tipi. I was suddenly aware that I was no longer paying attention to my videotaping, but more on realizing the phenomenon that was rising right in front of me. I believe the power of Elders’ stories had engaged my mind, like learning through osmosis. There I saw a metaphor of raising children and raising a tipi. They were alike, and also had sometime to do with the other two shapes: the circle and the foundational tripod. I still had not figured it out. I recognized that I was getting in the way too often, so I stopped videotaping, but the metaphor and shapes stayed in my mind. The Elder and the tipi team finished raising that tipi, and went on to the next one. The “Indian Village” was to consist of three tipis and four wall tents, along with a central fire pit for the conference fire keeper, so there was still a lot of work to do. Fortunately the long NWT summer sun was with us until late into the evening when we finished the set up. At the end, we gathered around the fire pit, and the Elder blessed the site with a prayer in his Chipewyan Dene language and a tobacco offering into the centre of the fire pit. What ensued was a successful two-day national CMEC conference that celebrated the ways to recruit and retain Aboriginal educators into the field of teaching. I not only experienced the joy of being a moderator for this national Aboriginal symposium, but also the first narrative shift of experiencing the metaphor and the two shapes. I began to realize that they were the beginning of my developing vision.
When the “Indian Village” was taken down, I experienced another unanticipated transaction. The second narrative shift that led to the full turning point of my study. I bought one of the tipis, and had it set up at my home. I had not planned to buy a tipi at that time, but there had been an error in sending this particular tipi to Yellowknife. In any case, I jumped at the opportunity to buy a very reasonably priced 20-foot Fort McPherson canvas tipi. My husband and family used the videotape that I had done to guide the previous tipi raising. I was glad that I had taken the time to do this. It was again part of my resolve to have cultural activities happening with my family, and cultural artifacts around me to honour the Aboriginal Elders’ narrative landscape. They made me think in the “Indian way,” and became more determined to return to my study. With that, I began preparing for my last trip to the Elders’ homes to take the restoried versions and themes of their narratives to them for the final validation. But first, I planned a ceremony in the tipi with tobacco and sweet grass. I had done a similar ceremony at the beginning of my study, smudging sweet grass smoke on my books and computer, after reading about an Aboriginal researcher, Fitznor (as cited in Kovach, 2009, p. 116), who had done a similar ceremony when she had started her study. I wanted to do this ceremony again, to ask Creator for safe travels and guidance, for the Elders’ continued support in this final validation stage of my research, for their good health and their families’, in addition to expressing my gratitude for getting me to this point in my study. With these intentions, I went into the centre of the tipi in ceremony where I offered tobacco and sweet grass prayers. As I sat in this reverential state, the scents, smells, and sounds around me awakened my mind, heart and spirit. I was given the tiny inkling of understanding and a sense of presence as I raised my bowed head and opened my eyes to watch the spiralling smoke from the two braids of sweet grass. Another shape. At this moment, I experienced the medicine power: the turning point in my study. I began to understand the shaping influences that I was to explore in my study about ‘a capable person.’ They were all around me. The circle that formed the base of the tipi, the tripod that held up the tipi, the spiral of sweet grass smoke that made me think of the recurring themes from the Elders’ stories, and the canvas covering the outside of the tipi. From the Elders’ stories, and my participation in the cultural activity of setting up the tipis, I watched a metaphor (Huberman & Miles, 1994) arise: raising children and raising a tipi. Then by participating in a revelatory ceremony, I experienced an epiphany (Denzin, 1989a) as I observed the spiral shapes from the sweet grass smoke. As I reflected and looked around me, I remembered
raising the tipi, the circle and the tripod. Then I saw the smoke coming from the two braids, the spiral. And looking further around me, I noticed the outside canvas that covered the tipi. This was turning point of my study and brought about my conceptual understandings and connections, along with taking me deep into the emotional and spiritual interpretations of this study.

4.5. Conceptual Framework

“The content and form of the conceptual framework itself assists in illustrating the researcher’s standpoint, thus giving the reader insight into the interpretive lens that influences the research” (Kovach, 2009, p. 41). The message that I received from Creator, the Ancestors, and the Elders through my interpretive lens was to believe in and use the integrity of Aboriginal cultural catalysts and Indigenous spirituality to inspire the vision of my study. They gave me direction, revelation and hope in this winding research journey of learning about ‘a capable person.’ Later after more reflection, analysis, and processing, I identified the conceptual framework through the metaphor and the epiphany involved in the “intimate studies” and “interpretive acts of meaning-making [that] lie at the heart of what is to be understood through qualitative – that is, interpretive – research” (Piantanida & Garmin, 2009, p. 51). These brought me to the four shaping influences from the Elders’ stories and the research process as: 1) the circle showing the grounding influences; 2) the tripod raising the relational influences; 3) the spirals revealing the sacred influences; and 4) the “canvas” illustrating the outside influences. These fundamental constructs manifested themselves in the conceptualization of my research, as the major influences that shape the development of ‘a capable person’ from an Indigenous perspective, worldview, and ecology. In the midst of ceremony and prayer, I found the sacred. These I believed represented the recursive, spiralling patterns that were emerging from the Elders’ stories that I had just completed storywork, restorying, and conceptualizing the thematic groupings. They were like revered representations of the Elders’ ancient cultural and spiritual teachings. The story teachings that did not want to go to sleep. They were alive, giving breath to this research, taking it up, and showing “the power of story to “be the teacher,” which is storywork pedagogy” (Archibald, 2008, p. 112).
Before the final visit to validate the Elders’ restored narratives, I became an instrument of the narrative research in developing my conceptual framework in such an unexpected turn of events. As Eisner (1991) observes, “The self is the instrument that engages and makes sense of it. It is the ability to see and interpret significant aspects. It is this characteristic that provides unique, personal insight into the experience under study” (p. 33, as cited in Piantanida & Garman, 2009, p. 59). My own inward knowing and awareness allowed me to experience the shift in my inquiry that led me to understanding the theories that were swirling in my consciousness and ceremony. As Stan Wilson describes, “when research as ceremony comes together, when the ceremony is reaching its climax, is when those ideas all come together, those connections are made” (as cited in Wilson, 2008, p. 122). With the connections enlivened, essentially I felt like the artist described in theorist Rollo May’s (1975) account of “theoretical sensitivity” (Piantanida & Garman, 2009, p. 59): “The receptivity of the artist must never be confused with passivity. Receptivity is the artist’s holding him – or herself alive and open to hear what being may speak. Such receptivity requires a nimbleness, a fine-honed sensitivity in order to let one’s self be the vehicle of whatever vision may emerge …” (as cited in Piantanida & Garman, 2009, p. 59). In opening up my senses in a good way, I initiated my meaning making processes that led to the findings presented in the next two chapters of the study.

4.6. Summary

This chapter describes the ways in which I entered into and travelled on the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ narrative landscape. The presentation of this information was significant for me, as an Aboriginal researcher, as I wanted to show the cultural and spiritual practices that I honoured and followed in carrying out this study. By ensuring that I worked at the pace of trust with the Elders, and practiced patience, listening, the Aboriginal protocols and ceremony, and participation in as many “cultural catalyst activities” (Kovach, 2006, p. 92) as I could, all these allowed me to enter into another realm of research that included not only the theoretical and interpretive aspects, but also the emotional and spiritual understandings that led to a deeper acceptance of my role in responsibility and reciprocity to the NWT Aboriginal children, families and communities by
using the knowledge gained from this study in the future work that aligns with my belief of servant leadership.

This chapter provides the Indigenous landscape for the upcoming restorying and thematic groupings discussion chapters that come next in this study, which feature the Elders’ restoried narratives about ‘a capable person’ (Chapter 5) and the themes that emerged from these stories and the research processes (Chapter 7).
Chapter 5. Restorying the Elders’ Narratives

“Good storytelling technique transcends both language and culture. For thousands of years, this has been the practice of the Dene elders – telling to teach, to entertain, and to share their life’s wisdom” (Patrick Scott, Talking Tools, 2012).

These next two chapters (Chapter 5 and 7), which focus on the findings will address the data in two formats, as mentioned in the Methodology and Design chapter. In this chapter I present the first part of my research findings from the narrative accounts of the eight NWT Aboriginal Elders’ personal life-experience narratives. Following this chapter (Chapter 6), I present the biographies of the eight Elders featured to situate them in the research. In this chapter, the findings stem from the original raw data, which were gleaned from the interviews with the Elders. I present them in the form of restorying the Elders’ narratives. As Kovach (2009) shares, “oral traditions, traditional histories, personal narratives, storytelling, teaching stories – are methods by which each generation is accountable to the next generation in transmitting knowledge” (p. 113). From the stories, I listened as the Elders shared their personal life-experience narratives of raising children and relationality, which I restoried drawing from the elements of story from storywork and narrative inquiry.

As outlined earlier, I will present not only the thematic findings of this research exploration, but first the ‘research as conversations” (Archibald, 2008, p. 57) from which the themes and teachings emerged. As a way of privileging the oral tradition of the Elders’ stories, I have chosen to present the restorying first, which offers a more personal discussion on the emergent theories arising from this research in telling stories about raising children and relationality. In this way, the aim of the restorying chapter is to complete two processes: 1) to reflect the Elders’ voices; and 2) to allow readers to engage with the people, place and time, and draw their own interpretations. By using this traditional approach, I was able to get to the heart and spirit of the stories, which expressed the essence of ‘a capable person.’ Overall, I could not have made it this far without the Elders’ trust.
5.1. The Pace of Trust

Overall, I worked at the pace of trust to gather the Elders’ stories. It was not an easy process, and took much time, care and attention to details. As Archibald (2008) emphasizes, “Going out to the field to ‘talk story’ takes time, patience, openness, and the will to keep talking with one another in order to learn how to engage in story listening and to make story meaning; none of this is unproblematic. It is hard work” (p. 127). Many times I found myself in conversations rather than in a research process, as there was a high level of trust between the Elders and me. This trust allowed us not only to advance the study, but also to enjoy many moments of fun and laughter. Although I have many inspirational memories, it was not without its initial anxiety. Several months ago, I was reflecting on my initial anxiety, and thought back to my first interview with one of the Elders whom I visited in Fort McPherson. I had not known this information at the time, but he shared it with me later. Even though the study was not on residential schooling, this Elder could not venture far from his lens of hurt, shame and anger. It bled from his essential being, and it was the only way he could tell his stories. He was a survivor of the Indian Residential School system in the mid 1900s. Having stayed ten years in the residential school, he stated that when he came out, he knew nothing and was angry. He did not trust White people. It was only through his daughter, the principal of the local school, that I was able to arrange to meet with him and his wife, as research participants. I remember the principal talking to her mother on the phone while I was in her office; she was confirming the time that I could go over to their place. At one part of the conversation, she raised her voice saying, “No, tell dad, that she’s not an “Ungit;” we laughed when she translated. Yes, I thought, some Elders were still unsettled by the White researchers, and government officials, a residual effect of Indian Residential Schooling. So when I met with the Elder, I had to make a special effort to locate myself for him, referring to my NWT Aboriginal family’s association with sled dogs, cultural ways and other Dene traditions. I believe he felt at ease when he saw me, and connected to my family, my purpose and the respectful manner of engaging him in conversation about ‘a capable person.’ I remembered how hesitant he was at the beginning, but after awhile, he could not stop talking, even after three intense hours. I chuckled thinking back about how the Elder’s wife was trying to end the interview because it was approaching 8:00 p.m., and her TV bingo game was starting. With all the diplomacy that I could muster, I let the Elder know
that it was time to end the interview. We ended our time together with a closing prayer. I thanked them, and promised to return so they could validate their stories, and to negotiate the meaning and accuracy of them. (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2014; Creswell, 2013).

Through this continuous and sustained collaboration over a two-year period, I was able to ensure that several critical parts of narrative research were achieved:

- “A high degree of caring and sensitivity” between myself and the Elders,
- “Negotiation in terms of a shared narrative,”
- “A close friendship, where trust is the critical attribute,”
- “Working on a problem together … to gain a greater understanding of the issues involved,” and
- Conversations that are “mutually constructed … caring, respectful and characterized by an equality of voice” (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2014, p. 354).

Most of all, I knew that collaboration was the key component that I was searching for in a narrative research design. So when I found myself in a restorying genre of narrative research about the Elders’ experiences, I recognized that I was where I was supposed to be.

5.2. Research Purpose

The purpose of my research was to identify and examine the influences that shape the development of ‘a capable person’ through Elders’ narratives of raising children in order to inform Aboriginal education in the NWT. From the interaction with the Elders, my focus was on understanding the dynamics that contributed to their development in the unique aspects of their own life journey. Their capable person stories did not happen in a hierarchical step-by-step manner, but rather, more organically as they experienced their lives on the ever-changing northern narrative landscapes impacted by the social, cultural and historical changes from the last century to the new one.
5.3. Research Methodology

The four main sections of the restorying were from the four research questions of the study. They formulated the main topic headings of the Elder’s stories as follows:

1) Their understanding of a capable person;

2) Growing up experiences of how they were raised;

3) Parental experiences of how they raised their children; and

4) Noticing experiences of how they viewed children “raised” in modern schools.

Through these four main sections, I established a chronology (Czarniawska, 2004; Creswell, 2013; Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2014) in the narrative account, as when the Elders are involved in storytelling they do not necessarily pay attention to the real-time order of events. As such, by going through the process of restorying, I was able to provide the coherence and chronology that developed the story flow. This is a common approach for understanding a narrative form of writing in which the researcher presents life in stages or steps according to the age of the individual (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By following the story flow, I moved into the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space to create sub-headings in each of the four main sections. In these italicized sub-headings, I captured the details of the stories’ interaction, continuity and situation in a succinct manner (Ollenershaw & Creswell, 2002). These outlined the inward and outward movement of the storytellers’ personal and social “interaction,” the backwards and forwards movement of the stories’ timeline past, present and future, as well as the “situation,” which indicated the place and context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Most importantly, I paid close attention to the story flow while acknowledging the seven principles of storywork – respect, reverence, responsibility, reciprocity, inter-relatedness, holism and synergy – (Archibald, 2008), as they appeared in the stories. I ensured that the storywork principles were included in the narrative accounts, as their presence highlighted the Indigenous qualities of the stories.
After the first draft of the restorying process of repeatedly reading and re-reading the original transcripts, and establishing the narrative account into a chronology, I had many empty spaces of questions in the overall matrix. These spaces, I circled and formulated into lists of questions that needed more information, such as the Elders’ inner reactions to particular situations, or clarification on the order of an event’s happenings, or thoughts that may have occurred that connected to the seven-principles or to the three-dimensions. Then before visiting the Elders on the third session, I made numerous phone calls to fill in the blanks. I tried to ask all the questions at the same time, so not to bother the Elders too many times, but alas there were times when I had to make a second, and sometimes even a third call. How patient they were with me! But I wanted to ensure accuracy and coherence in the restoried narrative accounts. “This approach is consistent with Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) idea of retelling and renegotiating the story, a collaborative process that occurs between the researcher and the participants in a story” (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 342).

5.4. Research Data Analysis

As such, in developing the data analysis for this first chapter of the findings, I focused on the experiences of the Elders’ stories, examining them through restorying as a technique for constructing the narrative account. “After individuals tell a story about their experiences, narrative researchers retell (or restory or remap) the story in their own words. They do this to provide order and sequence to a story – a chronology. Restorying is the process in which the researcher gathers stories, analyzes them for key elements of the story” (Creswell, 2012, p. 509), and makes meaning from their emerging themes.

Again the key elements that I selected for the restorying were Archibald’s seven storywork principles (respect, reverence, responsibility, reciprocity, inter-relatedness, holism and synergy), and Connelly & Clandinin’s (2000) three dimensions of narrative inquiry space: interaction (person and social), continuity (past, present, future) and situation (place). Once I had determined these ten elements, I drew from Ollerenshaw & Creswell’s (2002) article on restorying as a data analysis approach to devise a matrix (Creswell, 2013) that allowed me a systematic framework that I needed to analyze the raw data. By using the data analysis matrix, I was able to move inward and outward,
backwards and forwards, and consider contextual details of the story, while being aware of the storywork principles at work in the Elders’ experiences. Based on Dewey’s (1938) philosophy that deemed individual experiences as the central lens for understanding a person, I viewed the Elders’ experiences as windows into their understanding and meaning regarding ‘a capable person.’

Through the close relationships that I had developed with the Elders, I ensured that the collaboration would “lessen the potential gap between narrative told and narrative reported” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, as cited in Creswell, 2012, p. 512). I recognized that I had captured the Elders’ voices on the central topic of ‘a capable person,’ because when I completed the third visit to verify the accuracy and content of the restorying, the Elders were astounded. Many of them asked if they could use this version as the beginning of their own life story, which they could turn into their own projects. I said absolutely, these are your stories! I then explained that I captured only a small part of their very capable lives, with the purpose in mind to bring forward the shaping influences that can guide and show Aboriginal students how to choose capable qualities from their examples that I featured in the restoried versions of their experiences. I also explained to the Elders that by practicing the time-honoured ritual of sharing their capable stories, that it was my hope that Aboriginal young people can take into account these shaping influences to guide the choices that they make in learning and life.

5.5. Elders’ Stories

The research stories that make up this chapter emerged in response to the four data collection questions highlighted above. Included in our conversation is what I termed the main question about what is ‘a capable person.’ First I asked the Elders to consider the response in their own traditional language, in order to have their ideas flow naturally. Of course, they knew instinctively that there were so many interpretations available depending on one’s experiences and life history. As such, at the beginning of our conversation I asked them to think in their own language and try to translate as closely as they could to their understanding, and this became the conversation starter that launch us into the stories.
The structure of this chapter includes the eight research conversations that start with a situating introduction, and end with a brief reflective commentary written by me. Throughout the restorying, I identify the teachings that resonated the essence of ‘a capable person,’ and were particularly relevant to the flow of the restorying. Their stories were so engaging, insightful and instructive as they pertained to ‘a capable person.’ As such, as the restorying unfolds, I intersperse the Elders’ own words from the raw transcript in the form of italicized quotations to connect to their own words and voice. Creswell also (2012) suggests, “the researcher may interweave his or her personal story into the final report” (p. 507). In this way, I connected the Elders’ capable person stories with my own experiences in a way that celebrated story, life stages (personal communication, Vicki Kelly, November 2015), and learning about ‘a capable person.’ This process of interweaving one’s own stories with those of the participants is a unique feature of narrative research that attracted me to this methodology. I wanted to learn about ‘a capable person’ for reciprocity purposes of giving back to my NWT Aboriginal community, but also to learn on a personal and relational level about human complexities and life choices. As such, in connecting with the Elders’ stories that “trigger our memories” (Creswell, 2012, p. 508), this relates to this study’s overall purpose of exploring the qualities of ‘a capable person.’

Through the restoried narratives, the Elders share their different understandings and personal life-experiences about ‘a capable person,’ which show the wide-ranging breadth and depth of the central concept. This is why narrative research was the best way for me to approach this central concept because through stories, you can hear the answers, which is storywork (Archibald, 2008). The first story presented is from the Elder described above, Charlie Snowshoe. The order of the stories presented are according to sequence of the last visit that I made with the Elders to receive the validation of their narrative restorying and theme presentations.

5.5.1. Charlie Snowshoe’s Story

Several months after completing the first set of interviews, I was reflecting on my initial anxiety about the data collection phase of my research, particularly the northern travel, the unpredictable weather, the exorbitant costs, and even considering the privilege
of being welcomed into the homes of highly respected NWT Elders. I thought back to one of my first set of interviews with Charlie Snowshoe, one of the more challenging interviews, largely because of the distance to get to him, and because I did not know him personally. I knew his wife through the education circles, but had only heard of Charlie Snowshoe through the media releases from the political and environmental realms of events in the NWT. He was well known at the territorial and national level for his constant commitment to Gwich’in land claims in the 1990’s – one of the first major land claims in Canada. Through his close interaction with the Indian Brotherhood of the 1970’s to the current Assembly of First Nations of the 1990’s, Charlie was a major presence in the nascent world of Aboriginal self-government, land claims negotiations and environmental sustainability talks constantly battling against the pre-conceived Eurocentric racist and assimilationist attitudes towards Aboriginal peoples’ treaties, land rights and self-determination agendas of the late twentieth century. It certainly was not an easy battle for these early Aboriginal activists, like Charlie. But through his tireless commitment and assertive approach, he became a hero to his people; many not realizing the tremendous personal and family sacrifices that came with such a high level of involvement in this type of politics. As a recent Indspire Laureate for Environment and Natural Resources in 2014, he continues his feisty fight to protect the rivers, lands and traditions of his home region.

I did not know this information previous to the interview, but Charlie also had a darker side that inflamed his attitude towards White people. He was a survivor of the Indian Residential School system in the mid 1900s, having spent ten years in All Saints Indian Residential School in Aklavik. He stated that when he came out of this system at 15 years of age, he knew nothing, nothing. He repeated those words vehemently; he was spitting angry. He did not trust White people, including what he perceived me to be. However, through his daughter, the principal of the community school, Shirley Snowshoe, one of my colleagues and close friends, I arranged to meet with her mother and father, as participants in my research. I can remember Shirley talking to her mother on the phone while I was in her office; she was confirming the time that I would go over to their place. At one part of the conversation, Shirley raised her voice saying, “No, tell dad, that she’s not a Ungit;” both Shirley and I laughed when she translated. Yes, I thought, who could blame these respected Elders, still unsettled by the White educators and researchers, residual effects of Indian Residential Schooling, coming at them to gain access to their experiences, their stories. With this realization, I reaffirmed my vow to practice the four
R’s of Indigenous education: respect, relevance, reciprocity and responsibility (Kirkness & Barnardt, 1991), especially with Charlie. So when I first met him, I had to make a concentrated effort to locate myself for him, referring to my NWT Aboriginal family’s association with sled dogs, cultural ways and other Dene traditions. I believe he felt at ease when he saw me, and connected to my family, my purpose and the respectful manner of engaging him in conversation about ‘a capable person.’ I remembered how hesitant he was at the beginning: he was standing in the kitchen when I first met him, frying caribou meat on the stove, and ‘sessing me out. But with humility and patience, I made space for his experiences, inviting him into the research; and even though the study was not about Indian Residential School, I acquiesced knowing that this was a critical part of his capable person journey (albeit not of his choosing). Once he got started storytelling though, he could not stop, talking incessantly for three intense hours. With all the diplomacy that I could muster, I let Charlie know that it was time to end the interview (even though he wanted to continue storytelling). We ended with a closing prayer, after which I thanked him and his wife for their time, and promised to return after I had transcribed their words to check the happenings in the story and to negotiate the meaning (Creswell, 2012). This is the validation process that I followed with all the Elders. I returned two more times, and each time, Charlie would ‘sess me out, remember who I was, then rev up his storytelling engines. A voracious storyteller, with experiences reaching out in all directions of Gwich’in history, current events and future speculations.

**His understanding of ‘a capable person:’**

Like his fellow Elders, Charlie’s understanding of ‘a capable person’ centred on the traditional knowledge of land-based skills, along with the essential responsibility of being in community and passing on the knowledge to future generations. He said:

A person that is capable of doing everything out on the land. He's gotta be a good worker. He's gotta know how to work with things out in the bush. You know, putting up camp, putting up tent, and being a good hunter, good trapper, and a good fisherman. These are all capable people … they've been doing that all their life. It's not only one guy, or one person. These are the people that's been doing it all their life. And they've been passing it on and on and on. So to me, that's what our people used to be. Capable people. And they all were with one another, at all times … But there's certain people in the group, you know, are really capable of getting … capable of getting caribou. Sometimes people
have hard time. But these people who are smart, and people that know them. They always depend on that person. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 1)

At the end of the account, he added another dimension: emphasizing two other components of ‘a capable person.’ As he noted only certain people in the group were “really capable,” and others depended on their intelligence and trustworthiness to keep the community together in times of survival trials and tribulations on the land. In the follow-up visit with Charlie, he emphasized the critical importance of these “smart people, capable people,” adding that there were many legends about them, including the Legend of the Caribou Boy who helped the Aboriginal people locate the elusive caribou in spiritual ways (Journal Notes, October 24, 2014) that went beyond the human capacity. Reflecting on my notes and the many conversations with the Elders, I realized that the balance of these two mental and spiritual components was essential in the development of a capable person.’ I believed that Charlie’s sensitivity to this balance was a major influence in his rocky road towards becoming his own capable being.

Growing up experiences of how he was raised:

When asked about how he was raised, Charlie responded in a straightforward manner informing me that he was raised by white people for ten years in residential school in Aklavik, NT. He said:

We were practically in jail, in the residential school. We couldn’t get out of the yard ... So I knew Columbus ... Champagne ... Cartier ... Alexander Mackenzie went down the Mackenzie Valley. And who else, Vancouver? That’s what I learned in residential school, nothing about my traditional knowledge of my people. But I’ve read about it. Yeah. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 7 and p. 14)

This small boy grew up in a prison like setting, moulding his experiences, and developing his knowledge base from distant European explorers, reading the few scanty pieces about his own Aboriginal peoples. Charlie added later that most of what he read about the Aboriginal peoples in those days was in a condescending way of being savages and requiring civilization (Journal Notes, October 24, 2014). I can only imagine his other stories; however, I did not ask specifically about his residential school experiences, they
just seeped from his being like open sores. He did not even share the bigger wounds; I did not ask. Although Charlie did share one of the most heart-rending pieces of information in such a haphazard manner, that I almost did not even notice. While telling me another story about sharing meat with his community, he added that when he was eleven years old, while he was at home, out of the residential school, he lost his mother. I choked back the tears thinking of my own fifteen-year-old son, who is the same age as Charlie was when he was released from residential school. Actually Charlie did not tell the story of his mother in detail, but rather randomly placed this moving piece of information into another completed unrelated story. Like a soft mountain aven flower stomped on by herds of passing caribou, the story of his mother was buried deeply in his memory. The unexpected tangles of his stories exemplified the complex development of Charlie’s inner self, as it found its direction towards the influences that later helped him figure out his capable trail. Charlie is one of the many examples of residential survivors that miraculously found their capable way through grit and resiliency, and the connection to their people and place. The medicine wheel of his stories showed the continuity and connectedness of events in his life that continually helped him to heal and develop into ‘a capable person.’

Reverting back to traditional stories of life on the land:

When asked about how he was raised, Charlie could not go into his own upbringing, as he did not have the context, so he reverted back into the past to a generation before him when boys were trained to be warriors, and the people lived a hunting and fishing cycle of life. He said:

In that day, they trained their people, you know, asking questions about way back. They trained their people ... And they trained their boys ... All that they used to do. And they raised their children up to the point where they starting to get wise. And afterwards, they passed them onto their uncle. Pass them onto their uncle to train them everything. They gotta watch what they eat, and they gotta watch, you know, don't sweat too much. There's certain part in the caribou that makes you sweat. They don't allow them to eat that ... My cousin, in Old Crow, was the last guy that was raised up like that. And he became very capable. That's the way they used to raise the boys ... [to be] a good warrior, you call it. Out of that, to make them a good hunter. In them days too, they never think too much of trapping. They all go for caribou in the wintertime up in the mountain. And then in summertime, they come
back and they ... do fishing, and some people stay doing it all year round.
(First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 2-3)

Sadly, Charlie could not fully draw from any of his own childhood experiences on
the land, as he could not remember any, so he reverted to other sources. He said that he
read a lot, habits that he kept from his many years at residential school; as well he listened
to Elders’ stories when he returned home. He said:

I do a lot of reading, and I know that every elder that told us stories. It's the same thing right across every nation. They have the same
stories. You go to Alaska, you go to Yukon, go to Nunavut, the same story of how the people used to live out on the land. Same story. So
that's, you know, my way of it. And you asked the question about
womens working out on the land. They were capable. They were
capable of moving out on the land. Everything morning if there was
caribou, the mens would take off. And the womens they would put up
camp. Some of them, they would have round house. They'd even pass
the poles around. And they used dog packs in the summer time. So
that's the womens side of the story from me. And like I say, it's in every
story, every story, the mens go ahead, and then the womens come
behind, they do all the work. They were more harder workers than the
hunters. That's what I say about the womens. They had to do
everything.. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 3)

Although his foundation came from books and storytelling, he provided an
authentic context for a boy who, for ten years, had not been raised by his Gwich’in people.
Through his constant interaction with reading, his precocious and observing ways, he saw
a lot through those beginning eyes, including how hard the Aboriginal women worked for
the community’s survival. Somehow I believed that really he was remembering and
honouring his own late mother. It was almost as if she became his example of ‘a capable
person’ and began the formative development that shaped his sense of self, in spite of her
death.

**Shifting ahead to two months of the year out of residential school:**

As Charlie talked about his childhood, I was intrigued by the perceptive way that
he noted how his experiences in residential schooling distorted the natural flow of learning
that would have taken place had he remained in the traditional setting with his Gwich’in
people. Alas, some of the core foundational influences of his childhood were about being
excluded when he returned home during the two-month summer period out of residential school. He described the difficulties he experienced in a typical scene comparing how he was treated to how his wife [as a child] had been treated. He said:

And in my day when I came back, I find it very hard, 'cause only time I’m home is two months of the year. I was thinking about that. A lot of parents had a hard time to talk to their children after not seeing them for ten months of the year. And I wonder, I think about that because we spent time out of the land, ten miles from here, fish camp. My dad never ever tell me, go visit net. He never ever told me set net. Just like they were afraid to tell us something. My grandmother and my auntie, they go to snares everyday. Today I think about it, how come they never asked us to go with them. You see the difference? When you're home, you're there with them every day, and if they're going to do something. She'd tag along with her dad [referring to Mary Effie]. She has that understanding. For me, I didn't have that. [There was a] difference between being raised up in residential school and being raised up at home. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 3 and p. 7)

For Charlie that difference had a huge effect on his sense of self, often times deferring to his wife when the interview conversation turned to traditional lifestyles. I sensed that his view of his land-based knowledge was inferior to hers, as she has been raised on the land, and he had not. From listening to his stories, I recognized that Charlie had to deal with a deep-seated inferiority complex that often revealed a vulnerable core. This inferiority complex had lasting impacts on his younger life in the development of a self-deprecating attitude of never being good enough, and forever having to be aware and awake, to catch up to his non-residential school peers, like his wife. For Charlie, it was the result of not having experienced the love and belonging that a healthy family would have provided had he been raised at home.

**Returning home after ten years of residential schooling:**

With rage and regret, Charlie described the state of his development at age fifteen. He came out of residential school, an angry young man, without his mother, and with a father unfamiliar, not only with what his son had endured, but also how in to help him. He described:

After I came out of school, residential school. Green horn to everything. I don't know nothing. Absolutely nothing. [I was] 6 years old, and I
come out when I was 15. And I spent two years right in school, 13, 14 [meaning he did not go home for the summer] ... I was nothing ... not a capable person when I came out of residential school. I was very green, don't know nothing ... My dad, he tried to [help me] get over it. I just push him away. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 2, 3 and p. 12)

On several occasions, Charlie talked about the two main figures who raised him when he was out of residential school during the summer months, and when he left residential school: they were his father and his uncle. Charlie spoke about them finding a “little bit of good in me” (First Interview, November 26, 2013, pp. 3 & 7). While I listened to him speak in such a diminutive tone, I was struck by the precocious nature of this young Charlie who found his way to becoming ‘a capable person’ against the odds of not having the influence of a close, attentive family to guide his way in those critical formative years.

Upon his departure from residential school, Charlie was like a released jailbird, experiencing the exhilaration of freedom along with the fear of wide-open spaces. The watchfulness, tenacity and courage of this young Aboriginal man kept him on guard: he was hyper alert to what was happening around him trying to catch up and make up for lost experiences. And he wasted no time. His stories recounted with exuberant details his land adventures with both his father and uncle travelling by dog team, hunting, beaver trapping, and learning from them. He also learned from Mary Effie’s father and brother. He described:

After I got back [from residential school], I moved up to where her family was [referring to Mary Effie]. They’re the people that taught me, a little bit of what I know ... they’re partly animal, that’s how much knowledge they have ... That’s where I learned. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 3-4)

Unfortunately, along with the good, Charlie also experienced the negative forces of community living during this era of post-residential schooling: many people were at different stages of healing, and Charlie was no different. In the beginning, he developed a poor and demeaning attitude towards his Elders. He said:

I had no respect for elders, I didn't know that. I knew my grandmother. But the thing is that, we were raised up right beside the elders. We couldn't go near them ... After I came out of the school, it took me a long time to find out. The elders were the best people! They were there to help you in every way they can. They were there to make you laugh. They always got something funny to say. They were playful too. That's
what I learned from them. And I went through a lot of people that I had fun with. Elders, you know? And they never put you down. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 7)

In the follow-up interview, Charlie said that it took him years to get himself out of the negativity and alcohol abuse, but his story had a positive continuation, in that he learned the magic of Elders that helped him to shape his identity and entrance into the relationality that life inevitability had in store for him. (Journal Notes, October 24, 2014) I believe that Charlie’s gifted gregarious nature helped him past the darker times in his life, and allowed him to fully appreciate his people and his land to the high capable level of serving his people at both the political and environmental realms. However, his road out of residential schooling, and right into Indian politics, did not provide Charlie with the adequate experiences to learn the next phase of his life: fatherhood. He went onto to share honestly with me both the low and positive aspects of raising his children.

Parental experiences of how he had raised his children:

For Charlie, he was blessed to have united with such a grounded and resourceful partner. For over thirty years in his married life, Charlie spent the majority of his time on the political landscape, travelling, meeting and involving himself in revolutionizing Indigenous rights for his people. Unfortunately, Charlie spent far too much time away from home, and forgot about his immediate people, his own family. The many years at residential schooling did not foster a family-minded young husband; however, Charlie credits his wife for taking care of their children during the early years of their marriage. With humility and gratitude, he expressed:

I praise her [Mary Effie] for taking caring of my family ... The knowledge she has. She used that for our children, to become what they are. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 10 and p. 7)

My initial impression of Charlie’s praise resonated bittersweet reactions, as the time and place in which he was raised were not his fault and were not conducive to learning about familial relationships, let alone married ones; yet somehow he still developed the emotional maturity to express his deep-felt and simply expressed gratitude and love for his wife.
Although Charlie Snowshoe became a household name in NWT politics in the late twentieth century, he paid dearly for the many years spent away from his family. The toll that it took on him was a father’s nightmare. He described:

   I got into this political business. Land claims, 1976, 75 ... We had a lot of work to do that we will need to be, you know, to get our claims and stuff like that. In the meantime, I leave her behind and she's the one who took care of the kids. She's the one that took all my children to school. And my 19 year old, we had a 19 year old boy who we lost. Told his mother, two, three times, he didn't know me. That's how much I was gone from home. So at any time, when you're talking about, you know. How you raise your children and how, you know, to get them to become where they are. I brought this in the reunion they had on residential school, everybody talking about the sadness of the school. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 7)

After telling this story, Charlie veered right into sharing his experiences at the 2009 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) meeting that took place in Inuvik, in which he shared this story. He called the event “the reunion,” emphasizing the sadness. It was as if he wanted to avoid the pain, and tell other more bearable stories; the sorrow and grief were palpable, but not spoken. It was as if he lost track of time, moving from one random topic to the next. After losing their son to a tragic death of a freezing accident after leaving a late night party, Charlie and his wife had to make a life-changing decision regarding their own family well-being and mental health. It was around this time, that they decided to begin a life of sobriety. I believe that they made this decision because they valued their family. Charlie described the event:

   The very good thing is that, we stopped drinking in the 70’s. And that was good, it was a good move, that we made it. And we did that because today, all our, you know ... All our kids are pretty well sober now. You know that is the good thing we did. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 10)

Fortunately, the later years of family life were good to Charlie thanks to that difficult decision and the commitment to his family and children. Although he still struggled, he found his way to an acceptance and realization that he had to move ahead as ‘a capable person’ to find a healthy balance of politics and family. But most of all, he had to find the healing power that came along with forgiveness, particularly in his inner growth as a
residential school survivor. Fortunately, this came about after a life-changing apology from his arch nemesis, the leader of the Catholic Church at the 2009 TRC meeting held in Inuvik.

Moving forward to the Catholic Church bishop’s apology and healthy family gatherings:

At that milestone meeting in 2009, Charlie took a strong leadership role as one of the main counsellors, assisting his fellow Indian Residential School survivors with their testimonies. He handled himself well, until he found out that the Catholic Church bishop was there to make an apology. Charlie recalled Harper’s insincere apology in 2008, and was not going to sit around and listen to another one. So he left. He described the event:

I walked out of that meeting, I had my little car and I had the radio open. But I tell you, when he [the bishop] started talking, it really just hit me. I went right back [into the meeting] and they were just closing up, after he made an apology. They closed up. And I walked up to him, they donated him a big blanket. He had that blanket wrapped around him ... I went up [to the bishop] and shook hands with him ... As I was talking to him. I told him here. I accept your apology. It really hit me that I accept it. I didn't accept the Prime Minister's apology ... While I was talking, he was rubbing my back ... Eh, rubbing my back. He made feel that small. That's the first time ... Well the apology he make, it came from his heart. What happened in the past ... He meant it, [and he said,] "What happened in the past, sorry, that it happened to you. I apologize for that." And then you can see that he's saying it from his heart ... For the bishop, boy he really made me feel good ... The important thing about that is that, I guess, when somebody put an apology to you. There's something that we went through that there's really kind of, you know, I was just thinking about it. And it was hard on us. And hearing it from the bishop, really made me, like I said, really made me feel good for the way he talked. You know. The apology and like I said, I can feel it coming from his heart. Yeah. That's the thing is that ... you pass on to other people, you know. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 12-13)

I believe that “the thing” about which Charlie spoke was the healing power of forgiveness, which becomes even more powerful when it is passed on, particularly in the development of capable influences that affect relationships. After that heartrending apology, Charlie continued his healing journey as ‘a capable person,’ and even began to notice his family relationships more. He said:

We had a party ... in our house ... And all our children come. There were at that time around here. We have Thanksgiving dinner, we had
Christmas, everything we have in here. And after they finished eating. You know, they all sit on the floor, sit on the couch. They’re laughing away over one other. And I was sitting right there, and I look, it just hit me right there. That’s what I miss in life. That’s what I miss in life, family life … From there on, you know, only after, when I found out myself, only then after that. They started talking about residential school. And um, so it really hurts. Have all that taken away from you. What they took away from you was the family love, family get together. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 13)

It was as if a wellspring of insight and joy had burst in this Elder, allowing him to appreciate and enjoy his family. After so many years of doubt, inferiority, regret and anger, he found his peace, and was able to continue his journey as ‘a capable person,’ as an example of discovering his grounding sense of inner self fulfillment rising up to interact and continue to learn the joy of relationality in family, with his people and on his homeland.

**Noticing experiences of how he viewed children “raised” in the modern NWT schools:**

As Charlie and I moved to the final part of the interview, I listened intently to this Elder speak about what he noticed in the modern school system. You could tell that he was not as well versed as his wife in the field of education, as his message related indirectly to schools. He strongly recommended that young people get involved in self-government and band politics, but to do so they had to make sure they committed to a good education. He emphasized:

So the message is got to go on to them, we were saying, to the young people. We need them to get their education. In order to keep going with that land claim we have. Talking about self-government and everything. That’s what we need. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 14)

**Shifting ahead to wise practices in education:**

In addition to emphasizing the importance of receiving a good Western education, Charlie shifted to reminding me about the importance of Aboriginal peoples’ identity, and cultural teachings in schools. Many of the Elders in this study spoke about ensuring a strong sense of self as a wise practice for the youth of today. Charlie warned against losing the unique perspective as Gwich’in people in this global world. He said:
The young people don't know who they are, where they come from ... that’s due to the residential school ... That’s the thing is that we have to explain to them. Who your people are, where you come from. And that you are one of us. So that's my thinking about identity. That’s very important for the young people. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 12)

For this wise Elder who survived the last century’s formidable residential schooling in tact, shifting ahead to future generations of Gwich’in youth resonated back to his own past. Undeniably, he never wanted to repeat the sorrow that he had experienced, the temporary loss of his own identity, and the life of sacrifices that he had endured to make sure that future Charlie’s not only survive in this new age, but thrive with a strong base of their identity as Aboriginal capable people, towards the relationality of interweaving their ideas, philosophies, traditions, contributions, stories and social capital with the worldviews of others to make this land a richer place to learn and live.

5.5.2. Mary Effie Snowshoe’s Story

For almost three decades of Gwich’in education in the NWT, Mary Effie has been the lifeblood for ensuring culture-based education in the Fort McPherson school and beyond. As a fluent speaker of her language and well versed in the Gwich’in Dene traditions and culture, she is a strong educational leader in showing how to embed traditional knowledge into classroom practice, culture camp experiences and culturally sensitive mentorship for both new and experienced teachers. When I was looking for capable Elders to interview, Mary Effie Snowshoe was on the top of my list, and I was honoured when she agreed. I first learned of Mary Effie when I was part of the 2005 NWT Educational Leadership Program (ELP) that took place at the Tl’oondih Healing Lodge, a former school and community cultural wilderness lodge made with huge logs transported down on the Peel river system. In our boat, I was with one of the Inuvik teachers who knew the area and pointed out a camp on west side of the river, saying in reverence that that was Mary Effie’s fish camp. Who? I asked. Mary Effie Snowshoe, a well-respected Gwich’in Elder who lived most of her life at that camp. I knew Mary Effie’s daughter, Shirley Snowshoe, an up and coming dynamic new Aboriginal teacher, at the local Chief Julius School in Fort McPherson, but I had not met her mother. As one of the ELP organizers, I vowed that the next time the program took place in the Beaufort Delta region,
we would invite this Mary Effie as a guest presenter. Sure enough a few years later at the 2008 ELP, I was privileged to meet Mrs. Mary Effie Snowshoe. Dressed in the typical Dene style, she wore a bright hair scarf, a pleated skirt, thick brown stockings, and beaded moose hide slippers. I smiled when I saw her; she represented the classic image of a capable Dene Elder with Indigenous knowledge radiating from her being. And there she was in front of me. True to form, her wit and wisdom captured my attention immediately. We were at the same Tł’oondih Healing Lodge on the Peel River; it was a calm summer evening. Mary Effie and her daughter, Shirley, a more experienced teacher by this time, were giving a presentation to the visiting principals and teacher leaders on culturally sensitive schooling. I burst into silent laughter when Mary Effie opened their presentation by introducing herself and her daughter as a pair of snowshoes. With not only a quick sense of humour, but also a soft heart and an immense presence for such a petit woman, Mary Effie exuded Elder power. If you looked closely into her alert brown eyes, you could see the knowledge, values and wisdom of so many Gwich’in peoples who had survived in relation to the harsh but plentiful land that followed with ultimate precision the seasonal cycles that provided food, clothing and stories for generations of Indigenous Beaufort Delta peoples. As a Gwich’in Elder, Mary Effie is known as a living legend; her stories that evening captivated the audience of listening educational leaders with the wonders of mountain hunting, beaver trapping and travelling on the pristine landscape of northern Canada.

The earlier stories that I had listened to her tell at ELP held the same allure and passion as the stories that she shared with me over the two-year period of my research. Never did I tire of my collaboration with her: each time she provided me with more details of her personal life-experience narratives that continually expanded my understanding of ‘a capable person’ through Mary Effie’s eyes, but also as the stories interwove with the other Elders’ stories.

Her understanding of ‘a capable person:’

Having lived a traditional life with most of her time spent on the land, Mary Effie’s understanding of a capable person focused on land-based knowledge and customs. Her response to describing a capable person ensured the importance of learning both the male
and female roles of living on the land, as the forces of nature were unpredictable and unforgiving, so survival demanded versatility. She replied:

Like myself, I grew up out there. I was brought up by my parents. I was brought up where I was taught how to do everything. How to hunt, how to trap, how to fish, all these things ... That's how I was taught ... It was not only mens that learn all this, it's also for womens too. Because the elders spoke about it in front of me, the reason for this is because you never know what's going to happen. You might become an orphan and your husband is gone, you have to continue to do the work. For that reason, you have to learn both. My dad said that he had to learn everything. He learned to sew for himself because he was an orphan. Also he shoot moose and give moose skin to a woman who could tan it and give him half back, and he would always sew with that. So it's not only womens that is doing mens job, mens do the same thing ... So that's the kind of person that I am. Like right now, I still go out on the land because I was taught how to do everything out there. I don't find it very hard to do these things because I'm used to it. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 1)

Without a hint of fear or frustration, she described matter-of-factly the life that she knew so well; a lifestyle that would cause many a well-intentioned researcher to turn weak-kneed at the thought of such extreme cold, harsh and demanding conditions that were the norm for the capable people of these northern climes in Mary Effie’s day. Mary Effie sat calmly reminiscing over the past activities of her capable life, which were still an active part of her routine. Her inner strength balanced her physical age: she is a tough and inspirational Dene woman.

Growing up experiences of how she was raised:

As we proceeded to the next part of the interview, Mary Effie was a little indignant when I asked her to describe the women’s role of life on the land as capable people. Mary Effie’s mother was a tanner of caribou, moose and beaver hides, as well as knowing much about the traditional medicines and remedies. Mary Effie spoke fondly about her mother’s land-based skills, but you could tell that most of Mary Effie’s time was spent with her father. Her immediate response indicated her nature as an outdoors person, even a bit “tomboyish” spending all her time with her beloved father. She reacted:

I was a person that was outdoors, not inside. And any work that's going to be done out there it was me. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 1)
This lively response expressed her natural inclination of loving to be outdoors and on the land. The ideal energetic daughter for a father of the same nature. Or so it seemed. Another conversation with Mary Effie later in the year (Journal notes, October 24, 2014) revealed the secret, and wretched, story of three older siblings who went to Indian Residential schools in Hay River and Aklavik before Mary Effie, and died. They were only three, five and eight years old. No explanation was provided to the family. This is why Mary Effie did not go to residential school. Although she did not explain, I believed that her father might have hid on the land with Mary Effie, and his family, to stay away from the residential school agents. He wanted to keep this little girl close to him. He was scared to lose this precious daughter so full of youthful vitality, and who loved the land like he did. As an orphan child himself, he must have been heart broken from his earlier loss; so he poured all his energy, love and knowledge into the little Mary Effie, and the children who followed her. Her sense of self developed in the vigorous wide open spaces, close to her Gwich’in people learning the fine-tuned details of ‘a capable person,’ such as knowing how to read the wind when hunting moose or caribou, or how to handle herself in snow storms or cold weather. I began to sense that the influences that guided her relationality with all parts of her environment boosted her confidence and made learning both purposeful and playful for her, particularly when she was with her father. He was her divining rod leading her to explore and discover the wonders of time, people and place.

Moving back to learning “right on the land” with her father:

Mary Effie spoke confidently about how her father raised her in a manner that demanded her full attention and participation. Her precocious nature allowed her mind and spirit to be alert; she paid attention and learned quickly during her upbringing. She described:

So me I grew up, he taught me everything anyways, right on the land. I saw lots of things that I didn't know ... Everything he had to show [me]. It's times that my dad would say we were going out, and we're gonna be looking for certain kind of wood, birch, to make snowshoes. I had to go with him. If he was gonna go trap for beavers, I would go with him and he'd show me how to set traps for beaver. All these things. So how they call, that's the way they were brought up. Everything was on the land. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 2)
The responsibility that Mary Effie’s father taught his young daughter stimulated her natural ways to learn, and his natural way of teaching. When I asked her what that meant, her response covered not only her own learning, but also connected to how the important experiential, tactile learning is for the holistic development of children. She told me:

I think my dad really was a good teacher for me. Now, I think back, and I think to myself ... Good teacher is ... Everywhere he went, he would take me along. How they call, he's got no book. He don't know how to write, he's not going to write and say, "okay you learn this." You have to do things with them. I really believe this myself. Taking kids out on the land, they have to be out there to see for themselves. And you know, everything that is taught to them, they gotta feel it and do it themself. That's the only way to learn, exactly, that's how I was taught. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 5)

I realized that the time Mary Effie’s father committed to raising her was a large contribution to her development as a capable person. Life was very hard for him as an orphan child, so he wanted to ensure that he equipped his own children with what he didn’t have: the holistic set of knowledge and skills in order to be prepared to face the forces of nature, and implicitly the inter-relatedness of time and love spent between a parent and child.

**Shifting forward to time in the hospital as a child, to mountain hunting as a youth:**

When Mary Effie was fourteen years old, she remembers vividly when she began her training in mountain hunting with her family. She expressed that it was almost like a calling from her father who had set her up with all the necessary equipment. She described:

And then [at] 14 years old, I remember start going to mountain with my parents. But I was in the hospital for a couple of years, so I had a chance at the age of 14 ... And I would get called, that's when I started working for them with dog team. What my dad really did was, he had everything for me. He had dogs for me, sled, ax, gun, good blanket, and I think he had everything that I want. I never paid for it but he paid for it, it's mine. And then after he got me all this stuff, well I had to get out there and work. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 5)
Because she had been in the hospital with tuberculosis (TB) for two years previously, she longed for the synergy of being on the land, and with her family. She had also described the strict rules of the hospital, and the startling meanness of the staff members: having to lie all day in one position on her hospital bed was utter cruelty for the active youngster. But disobedience was met with strict reprimands from the unpleasant nurses who many times would administer slaps right across the face, especially if the children refused to drink the mandatory black broth. Mary Effie said that the way that the hospital staff treated the children with TB in those days was similar to the way they were treated in residential schools (Journal Notes, October 24, 2014). When she was finally discharged, her father must have been so excited to have her home. He equipped her with the gear for a full outfit, and out they went on her first mountain hunt. Mary Effie recalls one time watching the hunters manœuver on the mountain; her description was almost like watching a symphony of players delivering a rendition of a caribou offering. She described:

I went out with hunters many times too, and just like one time. I seen this mountain here, and all these people were standing like this [gestures a semi-circle]. And I didn’t know what was going on. And this hunter, is an elder, was with me. And we were going with [sled dog] teams there. [When] we got there, he tied his leader and then he tied his sled back. And I did the same thing. And he told me to stand over here with long poles so they [the sled dogs] don’t bark. He told me, “You know why these people are standing here? They all going to have [a] chance to shoot caribou.” And I told him they might start shooting, even before you get up there, and he said no. They see me, they’re going to wait. So he got over here, right at the end. And I was watching, next thing this person shot, and caribou started going up this way. Everyone had a chance to shoot. And then it started back out down again and same thing. By the time they finished, everybody had a lot of caribou to work with ... [She explained again.] So, the last person over here will shoot. And next person and next person. And just went like that. And even me, I’ve been to mountain many times. And the elder told me, you know why these people are standing here? They see caribou down there. And the reason why they’re standing here is that this one is going to shoot and the next one going to have a chance. And everyone is going to have a chance to shoot. And they’re going to be waiting for me, exactly what happens. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 5)

When I asked her how the hunters knew to wait and take their turns, and how they prepared the meat afterwards, she replied:
Well, that's the way they were trained. Everybody has to work together. And how they call, this hunter here, gotta wait for this one get over here. And they're all standing up there. And then they seen this last guy coming. So they waited for him too. ... So everybody had chance to shoot caribou and they got enough meat ... And like in the morning, you have to take camp down. And go and put up camp at night until you get to a lot of caribou ... But it's nothing for them [to do all the work and butcher the meat]. It's nothing for them. Those days, mens are so smart. And it's just nothing for them. Just skin the caribou. It's just nothing for them. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 5-6)

From listening to this story, I imagined the astounding synergy and interrelatedness of such a “choreography” with unspoken precision, understanding and delivery of a tradition that had taken place since time immemorial for these Gwich'in hunters. The impression left on the young Mary Effie stayed with her for many years later, recounting the people and place that played a large part in facilitating the development of a capable, young hunter, and later mother, teacher and Elder. She continued the cyclical holism of Gwich’in education in a conservational and environmental manner that was innate to the Dene and Inuit people of long ago. They were without books, lectures or note taking for thousands of years, perfecting their hunting process without Western scientific interference, or rationalistic processes. The cycle of life depended on their high level of Indigenous ways of knowing and doing.

**Sliding back and forth to the passing on of knowledge from her Gwich’in people to her children:**

Back and forth repeatedly, Mary Effie traveled across time from the stories of long ago to today emphasizing the importance of passing on traditional knowledge to the next generation. I counted the times that she repeated this cultural teaching during the initial interview: five times in various manners! Instinctively she practiced this innate Indigenous responsibility of teaching through the tenacious repetition of cultural teachings. As she shared the many ways that she transmitted her capable ways of knowing, I understood that it had a lot to do with the oral traditions of the NWT Aboriginal peoples. Mary Effie told me:

My grandfather, my dad, they were storytellers. My grandfather was a storyteller, it went to my dad, and then it came to me. That's why I picked up quite a bit. It's not only from parents too. I used to go out
and sit with old people to try to find out as much as I could. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 2)

From learning how to a set net under the ice, to setting a dead fall trap for wolverines, to knowing which birch to use for snowshoes, or what kind of wood to burn for heat, or how to travel in a storm, or hunting big game (Journal Notes, October 24, 2014) – all these traditional stories naturally moved into explaining that she still practiced these activities today, as well as reiterating the importance of passing on the knowledge to her children. She explained:

Today I'm still out there trying to get fish and go hunting with my grandsons ... It's what I enjoy. It's life, that's my life. It was like that way back when my dad was brought up and then he brought me up like that and I brought my kids up. I'm still doing it with my kids. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 2)

The generative process of storytelling contained all the narrative threads of how much she valued the relationships with her family, with Elders, with her people. Mary Effie’s stories of passing on the cultural teachings demonstrated the reciprocity that she practiced in the sharing and helping that were taught to her at a young age. She said it took a while for her to catch on. She described:

On [the] mountain, everybody has the same life. And my parents have a lot of caribou, they cut lots of meat in the tent outside. Everybody, you go around the tents, you're gonna see [different ways to prepare the meat] ... like roasted head, then boiled ribs or brisket. The best meat eh. They're going to make bannock and after, they're going to make a dish with roasted head. Maybe roasted head or ribs, brisket, whatever. And they're going to put hot bannock with it and say, "Take this to the old woman over there," or "Take this to your auntie over there." And I think to myself, you know, everybody [already] has things [to eat]. Why do we have to do that? That wasn't the reason. They're training you, how to share with other people. Share what you have. Later on, I caught on to what he was doing. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 6)

As Mary Effie told this story, I was thrown back in time remembering my own childhood mealtime memories at my Grandparents’ Métis home. The cultural practice of ensuring that the Elders were served first in order to choose what they preferred to eat was drilled into my way of waiting and watching. This same practice today in caring for the Elders, and the vulnerable, is very much a part of my lifestyle, so as I listened to Mary Effie’s foundational circle of helping others, I related to its strength as a wise practice in
the movement from self to relationality with social norms of an Aboriginal family and community.

**Parental experiences of how she had raised her children:**

As Mary Effie’s husband, Charlie, was heavily involved in Dene politics and the Gwich’i land claims, she spent many months, at times, years as a single mother. Although the Snowshoe children did not always see their father on a full-time basis, their mother made sure the children knew to respect their father and to understand the important political and activism work that he was doing for the Gwich’in people. In turn, Mary Effie made up for his absence tenfold by acting as both the mother and father. Adeptly she handled both the male and female roles of raising children that she herself experienced as a child long ago. Since her parents had built such a strong foundation for their daughter, this was how Mary Effie raised her own children. She continued the cycle of capable learning, which emphasized the importance of taking care of your people, sharing, kindness, and keeping the connection to the land – these were the foundational elements of her Gwich’in epistemology and values. She validated my perceptions when she shared with me a poignant example of modeling that was the integral component of raising her children. She said:

> What I heard, what I was taught and that’s what I tried to pass over to my kids ... Not only from my parents but also from the elders. And what I was taught, how I was taught, how to respect people and I share what I have. Why I always think to myself that. I don't have to keep it. I have to share this. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 8)

Above all Mary Effie believed in the power of a mother’s love. She shared her own reverence for her mother who never verbalized her affection to her daughter, but showed her love through touch. She remembered sitting closely beside her mother, who would stroke her hair causing the little girl to snuggle in more closely. “Felt so good ... just the touch from your mother.” Mary Effie said that in many Gwich’in homes it was not like this; but not for her, she insisted on using both words and actions to show her love for her children, and grandchildren (Journal notes, October 24, 2014). From listening to the story, I believed the close and caring touch that she experienced with her mother allowed Mary Effie to understand the importance of love in children’s emotional development. In turn, she took it one step further by adding the words that validated her love for her children
letting them know that they belonged, that they were important – both critical components that shape a child’s development into ‘a capable person,’ and allow the child to move beyond self into further relationality with security and confidence.

**Moving forward to fish camp with her children:**

In listening to Mary Effie describe the ways that she raised her children, she often drew upon her own cultural teachings that served her well as a youngster. For Mary Effie, the best place to practice and model such teachings were at her fish camp. She describes:

> The best place that I talked to my kids is, at fish camp ... When I take them up to fish camp, I always share stories that I get from my dad and from old people. How to share, how they care for other people. Till today, I still tell, they're all grown up today, all got their own kids ... I would be at fish camp and I tell them stories, about my mother. My mother always do something to make a person laugh. We'd tell them stories, like that, and they'd laugh. And you know, there's laughing is a good medicine for them. (First Interview, November 23, 2013, p. 7-8)

From her stories, I am certain that the Mary Effie’s children were privileged to experience much good medicine at their family fish camp, not only through laughter, but also through dedicated time together as a family, sharing stories, and developing the close bonds that helped shape their sense of self in an atmosphere of fresh air, fun, and love under their mother’s close and watchful presence. Certainly the Ancestors were there also watching them in the spirit of relationality that honoured all aspects of the children’s growth at that season, with their people and in their place. Mary Effie validated the presence of the Ancestors by reiterating the timeless cultural teaching of reciprocity of the Gwich’in people. She said:

> And that's the way Gwich’in people brought their kids up. And caring all this. So, here I am, I try to pass it on to my kids. Because my wish is that, one day, that my kids will pass it on to their kids, you know. Already some of my grandchildren is around with me and the way I look at my family, is who's going to carry that on. (First Interview, November 23, 2013, p. 9)

**Sliding ahead to emphasizing the importance of school and staying sober:**

Although the traditional Gwich’in values and beliefs were what Mary Effie primarily emphasized in her stories, she also underlined the importance of her children getting a
good Western education. She stressed that their futures depended on them being able to connect not only to traditions, but also to the future of modern education. She said:

I tell them education is really important because it's so different that time I was growing up. Prices here, now they're going up, prices going up and still going up. I said, I tell my kids that if they don't get their education. They're not going to end up with good job and they're going to have a hard time because it's going to be part time. Because last year, we never seen caribou and it was very hard. Especially old people, like us, we couldn't eat chicken and pork chops everyday. That's not our food. And I talked to, it's not only my kids I talk to, I talk to young people just the way I'm talking to my kids still. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 8)

When I asked Mary Effie to talk more on how she encouraged her children and other Gwich’in children whom she knew to stay connected to school, she replied in her usual hearty nature. She said:

Yeah, I even tell them, "You people prove to me, that you're going to take care of yourself, that you going to get yourself through school, and that you're going to have a good job ... That you're going to take care of yourself, that you’re going to put yourself to school. Prove these things. That's what I tell my kids. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 9)

But overall, Mary Effie emphasized the importance of her children's sobriety in being able to lead healthy lives and maintain theirs homes for themselves and their children. She described:

I think pretty well every one of them [her children] is not drinking. One is still slipping and that but you know. At least they're all sober ... And yeah, doing their job, and they got nice place, they got good house of their own. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 10)

Sobriety to both Mary Effie and her husband were the turning point of their lives, and she demanded the same of her children. The example that she set for them regarding such a strong sense of self, inner strength and respect for her cultural teachings and the Gwich’in people and land steered most of them in the right direction, continuing the cycle of holistic healthy living.

Noticing experiences of how she viewed children “raised” in the modern NWT schools:
As Mary Effie and I moved into the final set of questions about the modern education system and how she saw children “raised” in the modern schools, I realized that throughout the conversation that she had already touched upon so many aspects of education and its importance to her own children and the Gwich’in children in her communities. However, in keeping with similar Elders’ attitudes across the NWT, Mary Effie’s immediate response zeroed in on technology in the schools. Unfortunately, she saw the overuse of electronics as detrimental to children’s growth and development. As soon as her husband, Charlie raised the issue, Mary Effie took right over responding by saying:

Yeah, too much. Not good in school. Our days, there was no radio. No TV. No running water. Everything was off the land. Our food comes from the land. Everything, water, all that food is coming from that land. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 15)

Mary Effie’s view on all of life itself focused on land-based resources that had sustained the Gwich’in people for generations, so tuning into forces that were not natural was difficult for many Elders to relate to and see the importance of; they were used to listening to the land moving, the animals migrating, watching the movement of wind and clouds, the water freezing and breaking up in the cyclical seasonal changes. I believe that much work has yet to take place to bring the two aspects of education together to find the advantages of technology, and to teach the importance of moderation, as well.

**Along all temporal dimensions: so important to learn from Elders:**

But Mary Effie ended the interview with sage and universal counsel that no one would dispute; however, modern educational systems have yet not to put it into practice. From my own recollection, I have seen many education dollars being spent paying the fees for southern consultants travelling to the NWT, so called educational experts, to learn about Western epistemologies and southern programming, such as Four Block or Balanced literacy programs, or Math Makes Sense and the use of manipulatives, assessment for and as learning, project based learning, self regulation, etc. – all definitely effective, research proven, classroom tested, cognitively based ways of learning, but not exactly evidence based in this land. Mary Effie emphasized a maxim of learning that has proved effective since the ancient ways of time honoured Gwich’in practice. She shared:
The best teachers that you could have is the elders. In the past and now. I think everybody had their knowledge ... it's not on their own, you got all that knowledge. And it comes from a lot of elders ... Myself, that's where I come from. That's what I want to leave for the young people. The best teachers are elders. (First Interview, November 26, 2013, p. 14)

Her words echo in my being, reminding me that the worldview of Elders like Mary Effie need to be amplified, repeated like guiding spirals that influence the minds and hearts of those who teach and learn in the halls and classrooms of academia.

5.5.3. Pauline Gordon’s Story

Fort Smith, where Pauline has made her new home with her partner, Mike Beaver, was a far cry from the more northerly expanses where she was born in the Beaufort Delta region of her Inuvialuit people, but she seemed happy, content with a new life that she had chosen in the South Slave of the NWT. I had travelled by plane to get to her and Mike’s home: a little Jetstream 32 aircraft that made daily flights between Yellowknife and Fort Smith. I loved travelling on this flight, as many familiar faces, friends and family provided good conversations to catch up on northern happenings. Such was the way of living in a small territory: I knew many people, which proved to be a benefit, as I also knew many capable Elders, like Pauline and Mike. I had arranged to visit them at their home; Pauline insisted that I come over for dinner. They were my first capable couple interview, and I was a little bit nervous. But as soon as I entered into their welcoming house, the unease dissipated; it felt like walking into my own home.

Pauline was not home yet, so I visited with Mike as he was preparing dinner. No sooner had I asked him if he needed any help, and there opened the door, the two little dogs barking in recognition; their caregiver finally home. Pauline entered in a flurry of busy-ness. She was the recent Aboriginal cultural advisor for the local college, and was arriving home from a meeting. I said to her, I thought you retired? She replied, I’m trying, I’m trying, but it’s not working very well. As a retired teacher, principal, superintendent and former Assistant Deputy Minister with the Government of the NWT, Pauline was no stranger to education: she maneuvered like a master, particularly as it related to advocating and celebrating Aboriginal education. Of Inuvialuit and Cree ancestry,
Pauline’s calling was to ensure the infusion of language and culture into learning experiences for students. Once Pauline had settled, she came over to hug me; I had not seen her since last year when I had first asked her to be a part of my study. She had been the first Elder that I had asked; she knew my purpose. I was so happy when she agreed to invite me to her home for this initial interview.

After a delicious meal of moose meat and bannock, I asked if I could set up the recording equipment to start the interview. I arranged the seating for Pauline and Mike to be close together, and then asked Pauline to begin with an opening prayer. In preparation, she reached for Mike’s and my hands, and asked for blessings upon our time together. She prayed in a soft, reverent voice to a Creator whom she knew well as a young Elder; you could tell that they had spent much time together on her journey to being ‘a capable person.’

**Her understanding of ‘a capable person:’**

Pauline had been on the leadership team that created the original NWT Aboriginal curriculum in the early 1990’s, so she was familiar with the term, ‘a capable person,’ not only from her professional life, but also in her own personal journey. As a residential school survivor, I believed that her healing journey had many high cliffs and rocky terrain much like the Richardson Mountains of her homeland. As she considered the question, she bowed her head, closed her eyes. You could sense her returning home to the whale camps of her childhood with her Inuvialuit mother, Métis Cree father and extended families with whom she was raised. She began:

Long ago it was all about survival, being capable of surviving. So that as community members, as family members, as parents, you were entrusted with giving to the community, even as children. Those elements that bring promise, joy, love, pride, respect, all of those elements to a community, even as a very young girl I remember hearing that. So I think some of the things that make us venture on in life are those things that I think that our parents or grandparents and others instilled in us as necessary for them, not only them to survive, but for us too. So sometimes the things that they would pass on to us are things like, just the basic things, like feeding ourselves, feeding the environment, making sure that the things that we did were respectful of ourselves, and respectful of others, and took into consideration those things. I think sometimes we forget that as people that, you know ... I think a capable person years ago, when we were growing up, was anyone in
a communal setting that was ... we were never ever said like at any point
that we were capable, we were just given the skills, the tools, to provide
for others and ourselves in a society setting. So even as a child, we were
taught, you know, go pick wood, and go cook, and everything, and then
as we grow older then we were taught different things. And as a part of
a family, we had roles, some of them gender specific, others not. And I
think in that way our parents were trying to build us into somebody that
could take care of themselves and could help take care of others. (First
Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 1)

Through this opening narrative, Pauline gave me a glimpse of her life growing up,
and the importance placed on survival, living on the land and being in community. From
listening to her words, I felt her close connection to the capable qualities that were instilled
in her from birth that honoured the ancient values of passing on knowledge, learning
through doing, remembering the roles in family, taking care of basic needs, and
experiencing love and belonging – all elements of a solid grounding of self. But even more
so, Pauline emphasized the higher level of capability that was the norm of her land-based
society in which when had been raised. She spoke about her whole community
contributing to the greater good, or to “the good life” as it is known by Indigenous peoples
(Toulouse, 2013), by developing the ability to think beyond yourself: first by thinking of
others, and then learning to take care of others, as survival depended so much on this
cycle of intuition and empathy, and had the potential to go beyond survival to a flourishing
relationality that enjoyed a haven of living with love, respect, joy and even the promise of
happiness.

**Growing up experiences of how she was raised:**

As our research conversation continued, Pauline stayed in this same time period,
her voice expressing the memories of venturing along the rocky shorelines of her
homeland with her friends, as she told of skipping and jumping as a young child to go
“picking pukok” (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 5) – perfectly round rocks of all
sizes, covered with seaweed, and formed by the tide moving in and out along the Arctic
shore. I was momentarily mesmerized by Pauline’s descriptions, but her voice drew me
back into her living room where she began to recount the stories of how she was raised
highlighting the growing up experiences that moulded her into ‘a capable person.’

*Moving back to the summer whale camps of her childhood:*
For Pauline, life on the land was held in reverence with her memories of being at whale camp on the coast near the Arctic Circle. She described the whole summer being spent at the camp where, other than community celebration on July 1st she and her extended family never had to go into Aklavik. So they had “two full months just totally immersed in community living” (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 2) where her mother tongue of Inuvialuktun guided, directed and enriched the traditional activities of the camp. She added that her Métis Cree father, originally from Fort Vermillion, AB, found his capable way of interacting with his wife’s people. She said:

Even though my Dad understood Inuvialuktun, he rarely spoke it, unless he spoke it to my Mom. Because we had two separate languages. But he never ever, because of proximity I guess, never spoke Cree to us, or Michif, or French, except when his friends were there. There were a couple of older men in Aklavik, they would get together. [Altogether he spoke] six languages: Cree, French, Michif, Inuvialuktun, English and ... ‘cause he lived in Arctic Red (Tsiigehtchic for two years, he [also] understood Gwich’in. (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 3)

In addition to his incredible linguistic abilities, Pauline’s memories of her father were full of fiddling, double beating, jigging, singing, saying that he had a song for each of his children (Journal Notes, February 6, 2015). The balance of song and compassion did wonders for the development of the young Pauline’s sense of self. Her unique upbringing with Indigenous roots in the Inuit and Cree ways of knowing and living provided her with a rich backdrop of variety for summers spent on the Arctic coast. She described the energy of play, curiosity and exploration that filled her time with the synergy of fun, friends and family:

In the evenings the people would play, you know like, they called it long run. And there was two bases here and everybody would play, like my Mom and everybody, and everybody would play. But then, they [the adults would] have to rest, so most times they chose to go to bed earlier. But because there’s 24 hours sunlight, we would go around the island, just small. And this one evening, they were playing, but my older sister, Emily, said let’s go for a walk. And there was group of us, and I can’t even remember how many of us. But we used to, we called it pukok, we used to look for those, to pick those round rocks, you know, because they get formed into round rocks ... It’s just picking that we call pukok, like we go pick ... So we go, I would say like go pukok for rocks ... and it’s really special to find a totally round one. (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 5-6)
The stories of roaming the land to find hidden treasures brought me back to my own childhood summers on my Métis grandparents’ mixed farm in the Interlake region of Manitoba. Our late afternoon activity would be to go get the Holstein cows for milking time. I would love walking in the fields with Grandpa and his mixed breed collie that herded the cattle back to the milking barn. On those enormous blue Manitoba summer skies danced my whimsical wishes and dreams: I had no fear, except the occasional garter snake that would slithered over my bare feet. And just as suddenly my summer would be over, and I would have to return to the harsh reality of returning to my alcoholic parents’ row housing slum in the north end of Winnipeg. I hated it. Much like Pauline’s abrupt summer end when she, too, would have to prepare herself for summer’s end, and return to the despised residential school away from those she loved, and the place she revered. She told me:

The priest would pick us up at the fish camp to go to residential school. Bring us to town, to the dock, and then we’d go. (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 2)

The ominous remembrance of Grolier Hall in Inuvik was Pauline’s reality and nightmare for the remaining ten months that she was not at whale camp. Even though she knew that my research was not about residential school, in Pauline’s mind its adverse memories lurched in the shadows of her stories, taunting her dark secrets of anger, fury and loss: emotional reactions that unexpectedly attacked Pauline’s healing – her innermost tears were witness to the struggle that would be her life journey as ‘a capable person.’

Returning to the communal way of living:

So many formative memories of being part of a larger community developed Pauline’s worldview into one of sharing, abundance, and unity. She described a typical scene of her home life:

There was a big communal area where the women cut the muktuk, cooked it, and then the meat too, the meat from the whale ‘cause we used all the parts. And there was stages [to hang the meat], like just long ones, and all across the shore there, because it was for everybody, and at the end of the summer they would just separate everything. And ... in the morning, what usually happens is they all yell to us, you know, "Kai Kutchi! Inuit, come and eat!" Anyways, like I said, there would be
one tent there, and in the front of it, like this, there would be a circle and people would share their food. (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 6)

The description of all her family eating together showed the inter-relatedness of her way of living and eating. I related immediately to this meal time scene, remembering my Métis Grandmother calling us to eat: “À table!” she would yell to a rumbling herd of children making their way to the large supper table. But no one was allowed to touch anything until my Grandfather sat down. I remember his large spoon and fork – fit for the patriarch. And a kind one at that, because added to his own brood of five children still at home, were his eldest alcoholic daughter’s children: me and my four brothers – all with heaping appetites! But never once was there even the faintest hint of exclusion. Never.

My grandparents, much like Pauline’s close-knit Aboriginal family, were kind, loving, sharing their plentitude, and forming the experiences of love and belonging. Pauline emphasized that this Aboriginal way of living nurtured not only her stomach, but more so her soul (Journal Notes, February 6, 2015), enriching the development of the inner self, as it rose to other levels of relationality with family, community and place.

**Remembering the death of a young friend:**

This same spiritual lesson was exemplified in the heartrending death of Pauline’s thirteen-year-old friend who died from a rare incident of botulism, having mistakenly eaten a piece of meat that had been stored aside for the sled dogs. Pauline remembered the tragedy:

[That] morning, I ran over there because I saw the circle, but I didn't know that it was a prayer circle, because Evelyn was really sick. I just remember really being struck by the fact that all these people there was a whole circle of people praying there for her, and all these women were acting as nurses because everything was coming out of her system, right. And I remember being really puzzled by this, and my Auntie ... was there, and I sat beside her and she said, “It's okay. Sometimes when things like this happen you just have to watch.” And I said “Well, what's happening?” And she said, “Evelyn's not really doing well.” I said, “She was walking with us last night,” “Well, they sent for the Doctor,” she said, “But it's okay if you want to go back to your tent,” she told me. And I always remember how it wasn't my Mom or my Dad, but my Auntie that was trying to help me through this. So when she passed now, before they came, they had covered her and everything. But they
told us, when we were all sitting there, just individually to each other, like they were talking to each other about Evelyn, mostly to us kids kind of, about life and how it's like a journey and sometimes people's journeys end sooner. And I still remember that as being so ...what a poignant way to say it, instead of you know, she passed and how sad or whatever. But she had a place on Earth for, I think she might have been thirteen, for thirteen years, and we will be sad for her, but they have to thankful that she gave them thirteen years. So just at that very young age, I think I might have been about seven, how that really impacted my feelings about loss and grief, and how they included us. (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 8)

The perceptive reaction of one so young, being remembered by Pauline, now, as an Elder, revealed the powerful nature of stories attached to strong emotion – they stay with you forever, thus exemplifying the cyclical importance of narratives. Stories told over and over again to remember the past (Journal Notes, February 6, 2015). As I witnessed Pauline demonstrating her capable storytelling, I was reminded of critical importance of oral history, as the means for Aboriginal peoples to remember times of tragedy, along with all other varieties of time, stories that shape development of capable qualities influencing one's sense of self, identity, traditions, people and place.

Parental experiences of how she had raised her children:

For Pauline, her three children were her lifeblood as she made her living in Inuvik as a first year teacher, while having to accommodate her first husband who was an alcoholic. Pauline vehemently added that when he was home he was drunk most of the time, making daily life a constant struggle for Pauline as a single-mother living close to the poverty line as a result of alcoholism and family dysfunction. Throughout these hardships, Pauline persevered, rising above her challenges to raise capable children by reaching into her inner self, drawing from the examples of her childhood, the compassionate father and the communal lessons of relationality from her extended Aboriginal family that firmly established her strong sense of self and ways of knowing and doing.

Shifting ahead to time with her children:
When Pauline spoke of her children, she briefly mentioned that her years at residential school caused the ill-fated loss of time spent with her Inuvialuit family to learn parenting skills, which resulted in Pauline’s ordeals as a young mother. She said:

I struggle[d a lot with raising my children] but my saving grace was that I became a teacher. At a very young age and my kids were already like, kindergarten. Chuck was … Janine was in kindergarten and Chuck was in preschool. And then I had Ryan later. [My teaching] helped me to, like theoretically think about parenting and how I could do things. And so they spend a lot of time with me at the school, our family was quite dysfunctional 'cause their father was an alcoholic. So um, I did lots of things with them to cover up for that. So we spent lots of quality time together, I was very poor because I was a first year teacher without her degree. Until I got my degree three years later, and my ex-husband worked for um, the oil company, but he would come off for two weeks and be drunk the whole time. So we had very little. (First interview, November 13, 2013, p. 13-14)

Through her resilient and responsible nature Pauline made the best of those poverty years in spite of the hardships. Later she completed her full Bachelor of Education degree at the University of Saskatchewan, and climbed the ranks of educational leadership and salary grids. She was so happy when she was able to take her children travelling to far away fun locations. However, years later when she asked her children, what their best childhood memories were, they said:

It [was at school with me] making all those Easter egg baskets out of construction paper, making garlands out of popcorn and cranberries. They remember[ed] the poor phase. I thought they would say, you know, San Diego, Disneyland … But it was like, all those little things. (First interview, November 13, 2013, p. 13)

And those little things are what counted. Pauline made sure that she made up for not having all parenting skills that are learned in a full-time family, and not having a fully functioning husband. She compensated by ensuring that her children had her time, instruction and even some occasional sass: she created as much normalcy in their lives as she could muster. She said:

I lived vicariously through them, if that makes sense. 'Cause I didn't have a lot, like I gave them lots of things. But we were also old-school, 'cause my father said, "We all had to sit down to eat, at the same time." Breakfast, lunch and supper, we always sat down. And we always
shared, you know, whatever. And because I'm a teacher, I'd always say, "How was your day?" And I remember this response, when Janine was in grade 4. I think and Chuck was in grade 3. I said, "How was your day?" And Janine said, "Good." [And] I said, "Good is not a descriptive word." She said, "Not bad." She got me back. (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 14)

In many ways, Pauline’s beloved father shaped her maternal instincts: his loving words guided her interactions with her children. The reciprocity that she practiced as a mother were evident in how she sat down for dinner with them, and ensured conversation with her children, putting into life his “method of warmness,” and trying to maintain his wise counsel of not going to bed “with anger in her heart.” (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 10) She tried to abide by those words, and lived them through her children as they developed their sense of self and relationality as capable people too.
**Sliding back and forth in dysfunction:**

Sadly, early-married life for Pauline was a virtual roller coaster of dysfunction, which made working as a full time mother, teacher and later administrator even more challenging. She tried to promote the balance of family living that she had experienced as a youngster at whale camp, but she continued to struggle, again reminding me of the detrimental effects that she experienced in residential schooling. Often as a single parent she was left alone trying to raise young children in a holistic manner, but bereft of support, she had many experiences of utter despair, sometimes juxtaposed with unexpected humour. She described:

I think I did more with them in the physical and the mind thing. I did less with the spirit, I think now that I would have if I wasn't so angry with the church. But I still allowed them to recognize that there was things that they needed to be thankful for ... I struggled lots with their, with them when they were emotional. If they got emotional, then I would. So, it was almost like I was growing with them, emotionally 'cause I hadn't been there. So, I mean they were little babies, I remember my mom came over one time and we couldn't stop laughing. Janine was two and Chuck was one, both babies right, now both of them were crying. My mom came in the door, there I'm just crying (big voice), trying to rock them to bed. She just looked at me, without even thinking, she just burst out laughing. Instead of grabbing one of my babies, she just started laughing! (First interview, November 13, 2013, p. 14)

Her mothering practice was a learning experience – on the job training. Fortunately for Pauline, she had a life of making mistakes, and learning from them; her optimism and sheer grit got her through the rough stages of motherhood. Reflecting on my notes and our many conversations, I realized that Pauline treated each day as a learning experience (Journal Notes, February 6, 2015). I believed that her thoughtfulness, sensitivity, openness and gifted insight were major influences in her journey as a capable person. The qualities were the same ones that took her through life in understanding that the passage to developing self and relationality are a constant venture. Her narrative account touched on deep emotions on her continued journey of being a mother and ‘a capable person’ citing the outward impressions that people had of her, and her own inner
struggle with life’s journey towards being ‘a capable person.’ She shared with me her sacred story:

I think outwardly, people see me as capable because of what I’ve been able to accomplish in the Western society. But what it did to me was it separated me from a lot more from who I always thought that my father wanted me to be. So, I think I’ve accomplished some things but I still struggle endlessly. So, and I don’t have addictions problems, I’ve never had those kinds of things. But as far as capable, it’s in the Western society. I’m extremely capable ‘cause I learned to survive. As far as doing things that I think in my mind would make me a better person, I’m still a long way from where I want to be. You know I want to be able to, not have so much anger. I want to be able to ... I do lots of things for people and people think I’m very capable. Like I’m emcee functions, I’m very out there, outgoing, I can do all those things. But when I talk to myself. I’m still not there ... I want so badly to be there. And Mike has really helped me. But I want to be like my dad so much ... And I try to make changes where I can. 'Cause I always think, "If it's going to be, it's got to be me." So I try and I try really hard but there are times, and I think we're like this as a people, we're really hard on ourselves. Others will say, “oh you do so much.” You know, I still have people knock me down ... and that's the journey of life ...

So, that's a challenge for me and so, I don't know if I'm full yet, you know what I mean. I'm full here to being accomplished. I think part of it, too, is that we were taught when we were really young, not to brag 'cause it could come back on our children. So I think that's why I said that's what I struggle with. 'Cause when somebody says, "Oh man, you done all this, and I so no, I've done little compared to what I want to do." Because you see the outside facade, but inside here is still kind of empty. Like, I said my mom wasn't functional; she became an alcoholic. My dad was a paraplegic. We were very, very poor. Really poor. Sometimes, anger comes out and I don't want it to. More so since that whole stuff, with residential school came out when, take away those blocks ... I know where I'm at, and it's not nearly where people think I'm at, you know. So I want to become a really capable person and I think I could but I still have to work on it. (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 11-12)

I will be forever grateful to Pauline for sharing this story, as not only did it reveal the blatant honesty of life’s battles, including the realities of inferiority, dysfunctions, alcoholism, mental health, disabilities, poverty, residential schooling – all huge challenges that Aboriginal people like Pauline had to endure to keep living a capable life. I believe that for Pauline both the demons of anger and the angels of hope keep her continued
journey alive, questioning, and forever moving forward to find meaning, direction and happiness in her capable life.

**Noticing experiences of how she viewed children “raised” in the modern NWT schools**

As I moved Pauline ahead to the final set of questions about the modern education system and how she viewed children “raised” in the modern schools, I realized that she was moving into her definite comfort zone, as a veteran educator and recent Elder. With many years of experience, she offered wise narratives of observation and counsel.

**Moving ahead to education today:**

Straightaway, the first reference to modern education on which Pauline commented was technology. Although noting the benefits of such an ubiquitous means of communication, she also cautioned against the risks. She recounted:

I struggle with a few things, one is that, with technology, people are so insular, like they don't communicate with each other. We're texting all the time, even though sitting next to each other. And so there isn't that interaction that used to be there so that I think all of those things ... Yeah, so I think um, not just the system but the system in relation ...

(First interview, November 13, 2013, p. 15)

With children constantly interacting with these electronic gadgets, Pauline noted the paradoxical wonder: they're communicating but not with each other, even when they're sitting next to each other. They are not practicing the most basic human action of talking with words, sharing stories, storytelling, playing with stories that express humour, fear, surprise, or being together. So what does this mean for modern schools? Definitely time has changed the regular business of modern schools, particularly with the advances of such immediate access to vaults of information and social media lures as, “Google, Wikipedia, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook.” As Pauline noted:

Now we don't need to feed them the information, and the content, it's there, they just have to pull it up. They just have to learn how to pull it up. (First interview, November 13, 2013, p. 15)
In describing this shift in how schools deal with subject matter content, Pauline highlighted one of the major myths in modern education today that is still being practiced in this new century. That is, the overemphasis on cognitive functioning: the reign of the brain. The majority of modern schools remain in the mindset of focusing on academic and intellectual achievement, much to the demise of the soft skills of social-emotional learning and self-regulation. Pauline noted that:

So I think what happens then is that, as trusting as we are as parents. We send them off to school thinking, "Okay this is what the education system is suppose to do for us." And it's really about the mind, right. Lots of parents think that. (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 17)

As Pauline emphasized most NWT Aboriginal parents believe that this is the main purpose of school to educate the mind, to achieve at the cognitive level, to graduate after a certain number of credits. As Paul Tough (2012) coined it: “the cognitive hypothesis: the belief, rarely expressed aloud but commonly held nonetheless, that success today depends on cognitive skills – the kind of intelligence that gets measured on IQ tests, including the abilities to recognize letters and words, to calculate, to detect patterns – and the best way to develop these skills is to practice them as much a possible, beginning as early as possible” (p. xiii). Pauline phrased it “cognitive dominance” (Journal Notes, February 6, 2015), and shared the story of her sister, Emily:

My sister was born a preemie, and she had challenges, [as she was so small] ... They used the oven as an incubator, when she was born. [A family friend’s] daughter had a doll and she used to dress Emily in those doll clothes, that's how tiny she was. They’d use an eyedropper ... But she was a really good baker and everything, like really, fend for herself ... people used to call her, "Oh she's simple," whatever. Well, she might not have the academics but she sure knew how to cook and clean and look after us ... So she used to make buns, so now, boy she would cut up the buns, have with hot milk ... ooh. (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 10)

As Pauline emphasized all children, including her sister, Emily, have gifts that educators need to celebrate, rather than highlighting only the intellectual capacities of literacy and numeracy skills. They are essential, but equally important are the soft skills of compassion, empathy, intuition, creativity, and many more. Or worse yet, through the standardized testing and hierarchical ratings of today’s education, children are shown
what they cannot do, a deficit-minded system (Dweck, 2006) that does much damage to the development of self and relationality. Pauline emphasized that modern schools have to consider a more holistic view towards education, and balance all aspects of children’s learning. Contemporary education places a lot of time and effort on the curricular pursuits of academic subjects, physical education and sport, and not enough on the heart and spirit part of raising children, definitely a missing component in the development of ‘a capable person’ (Journal Notes, February 6, 2015).

**Shifting into another missing piece that is lacking in modern schools:**

This was a disheartening section of the interview: one in which Pauline had to cast light onto the missing pieces that she noticed in schools today. As a result of her intimate experiences with schools, Pauline disclosed her honesty with a sad heart and complicated incongruous reference to residential schooling. She expressed:

> You know what I think is so lacking. It’s awful, and as horrific, as residential schools were. They taught us lots of values ... even though it was like a religious thing. About morals, what's right and what's wrong. I think now, when I see how kids treat each other and treat adults, I don’t see their respect anymore or their respect for adults. You know, long ago, when an adult told you not to do something, it didn't matter if they were related to you or not, you would just stop ... now we’re losing some of those key elements of morals and values that taught us ... helped us a long ago to respect each other. (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 15 and 16)

As Pauline spoke about the waning respect in modern schools compared with the fundamental respect that was instilled in children long ago in families and community, I identified so well with her words. For example, when my Grandfather gave an instruction in my day; I obeyed because I trusted him. As Pauline emphasized, morals and values connect to a sense of spirituality, which develops through trust and love as children develop their sense of self and others in community. She highlighted the Aboriginal way of knowing and doing that centred on relationality of sharing, helping one another, caring for the vulnerable, eating together and (Journal Notes, February 6, 2015). She added:

> This is what we need to do to take care of each other, to take care of ourselves, to take care of nature, and to make sure that we still become
the people our parents wanted us to be ... just like [a capable person].
(First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 21)

These are the key elements that are required in the development of children whether it is at home or school both long ago, and today.

**Remembering the traditional ways that worked:**

Pauline harkened back to the ways of raising children that were effective practices in traditional communities. She emphasized the importance that Aboriginal people placed on sharing food that related to the universal way that people connected with each other. She described her experience of working with student teachers in cultural responsive education:

Feeding and sharing, food is really critical to us as people. So when I was talking to those groups, I was telling them, when you see the Elder in there, the first thing you ask is, "Do you need anything? Your coffee's good? You want a piece of cookie?" 'Cause sharing food is who we are. (First interview, November 13, 2013, p. 19)

She said that food and kindness brings Aboriginal people together into community where children develop their sense of self and society, not only in their own circle of family, but also with visitors and friends. I believed that Pauline valued the Aboriginal collective of raising children, and deemed it essential in the development of self and relationality. Fondly she reached back in her memories to talk about how families “packed” children whether they were out berry picking, or when a child had a toothache. Children were held. They were never excluded; they were carried, cradled, raised in close proximity to their families, their community. Pauline said:

We were just given that sense that we mattered. (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 19)

She ended by saying that when children are raised in this way, they learn that that they matter and that caregivers have their best interests in mind and heart; they believe in them. By carrying them, by holding them, by whispering kind words to guide them, along with expressing tough love when they go astray, by validating them in all aspects of their
identity, culture and place – these are what count. All of these are the relational qualities that influence and guide the development of capable people, allowing them to soar and thrive, and show them the way to living a capable life they choose with confidence and courage, just like Pauline did.

5.5.4. Mike Beaver’s Story

The previous generation of Mike’s Beaver family had resided in the more northerly regions of Alberta in Cree country. But in the mid 1900s, the Beaver family had travelled north calling Fort Smith their home, where the majority of the fourteen family members born in the NWT, including Mike. As I walked to Mike and Pauline’s home on that crisp November evening down the street from the local Aurora College campus, I began to think back to when I had first met Mike. I recalled that it was at the annual NWT Educational Leadership Program’s (ELP) cultural camp in July 2011. The whole ELP group of new principals and teacher leaders had travelled to Ts’u Lake, a half-hour Cessna plane ride from Fort Smith. The camp was on the shore of the lake; ts’u was the Chipewyan word for the tall majestic South Slave spruce trees that surrounded the pristine lake. Mike was one of the camp’s capable Elders, although at that time, he wore the new title of Elder precariously, as he was only a few months shy of being 60 years old. But that did not matter, as Mike’s traditional knowledge and culture indicated that this place was Mike’s home, and he knew it well. These were his stomping grounds as a capable hunter, trapper, and traveller of the land. At that time, I had not yet met Mike, but had remembered meeting Mike’s brother, Henry Beaver, the former chief of the Salt River Nation about a decade earlier with my Chipewyan Dene mother-in-law; I called her Mamma. She knew Henry, and more intimately his wife, Eileen Beaver, who has been born and raised in Rocher River, the same community where Mamma was born and raised. As well, I knew that Mike was friends with Archie Smith, another member of the Rocher River community. I felt connected to Mike’s family with so many of my own Ts’o T’ine Rocher River people close by.

I knocked two loud thumps on the front door of Mike and Pauline’s two-story blue house, and then pushed the door open. Upon entry into their home, there was capable Mike whipping up dinner with the style and grace of a Red Seal chef. On the menu: fried
moose meat, potatoes and carrots, and bannock. Along with his ability to hunt the moose, he was also able to cook the meal that went along with it – now that’s ‘a capable person.’ When I asked where Pauline was, Mike pursed his lips in the direction of the door, indicating that she was out and would be returning soon. This Cree gesture made me feel right at home, as this was exactly how my stoic Métis Cree grandfather used to communicate, with his lips, eyebrows, and eyes. The Aboriginal way. I smiled; I knew this was going to be an inspiring visit in which I would learn more about ‘a capable person.’

As Mike was filling up the teakettle, I started talking with his older brother, Raymond, who was visiting for supper. He sat at the kitchen table covered by the typical red-checkered plastic tablecloth. My thoughts darted back again to Mamma who insisted that we get this kind of tablecloth for the cabin; she said it used to be in all the NWT Aboriginal homes. I smiled. Raymond, a fluent Cree speaker and instructor, was scheduled to teach his regular Tuesday evening Cree class at the college, so would only be with us for supper. It had been serendipitous to hear his stories; he spoke highly about the Cree scholars at the University of Alberta. As soon as Pauline arrived home, we sat down for the delicious supper. I felt privileged being invited into Mike and Pauline’s home; I knew this was going to be one of many visits that I would make to this home to learn about ‘a capable person.’ I held my breath in the anticipation of restorying their personal experience narratives, so I knew that I had to listen carefully with “three ears: two on the sides of our head and the one that is in our heart” (Archibald, 2008, p. 8) and be wide-awake (Clandinin, 2013).

His understanding of ‘a capable person:’

Mike’s opening description of ‘a capable person’ focused on the importance of family, Elders and the responsibility of passing down knowledge to the younger generation. He said:

A capable person is a person that knows how to raise a family, how to provide for the family, and ... how to pass down his knowledge to the younger generation ... He been taught to be a person that knows the things that he does, you know. And that’s from the older people, the Elders, that the one that teaches this person and he's the one that takes over. And then he passes it on. (Initial Interview, November 13, 2013)
He spoke with compassion and conviction not only from the experiences of his own large extended family and heart-felt love for his parents, but also from the sacrifices that he had to make in his own personal life to raise his sons. Indeed Mike believed in family, as during the several visits that I made to his home, there were always immediate or extended family at his home, either visiting, sharing a meal, or storytelling. Mike said that his family meant the world to him, especially the latest addition, his new grandson, Cole Hunter (Journal Notes, September 24, 2014). He surrounded himself with the people with whom he shared his extensive knowledge of his place, intuitively living the words that he used to describe his understanding of ‘a capable person.’

Growing up experiences of how he was raised:

As we moved to the next question about how he was raised, Mike became animated as he spoke about movement of his Cree family’s early days. He shared their knowledge, strength and resiliency as they travelled with their teams of horse-drawn wagons over the many miles of rough terrain of northern Alberta and southern NWT. He reminded me that there was no road system in those days, no gravel or paved highways like today. I imagined the scenes to be similar to the Louis L’Amour western storybooks that my own family Elder, Uncle Frank, loved to read. I listened wide-awake to these historic stories of the nomadic Cree along their journey to the wide expansive northern land base to what would become their new NWT homeland.

Shifting way back to making their way to their new home in the NWT:

Mike’s mother was born in Fort Vermillion; his father in Wabasca, Alberta. I could picture the young Mike as he listened to his mother’s stories of travelling and feasting. He described:

She used to tell stories about when, like they used to be in motion and that … used to travel by horses and wagon … it was really good. They’d go from one little place to another and where they think there’s some people. Because there was a lot … the people were just scattered, eh. So they wanted … they weren’t all living together. But they’d go there, like, go in the same direction as the other ones. You know, they’d meet up, and they’d have a gathering … If they had moose meat or whatever, they’d share it … have a little feast together there, you know, before
they carry on to go somewhere else. So that's what she said they used to do.  (Initial Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 3)

As Mike talked about his people’s earlier travel, I could see the them moving, travelling, stopping to rest, visiting with other families, sharing meals, on the land together, like the great herds of buffalo on the central plains in the previous century. But Mike emphasized that all was not all fun and fancy for his mother and father’s families, as the ubiquitous work existed for the entire travelling group. He said:

There was always chores to do, like they had to help cooking. They had to help to cook with their Mom. All the women would be cooking, the men cutting the wood. The younger boys would be hauling it to the fires and that. And then when that's all done, everything's done.  (Initial Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 3)

But they kept on moving. It seemed that the people were roaming, searching, following their instinctual nature to be on the land. As I listened to Mike, I began to wonder how the people knew what to do, how they planned their travels, and then Mike explained:

Before they leave [moved camp], the men would sit together and start telling stories. You know, telling about where they're planning on going, where they came from, stuff like that ... They would talk in their language, like Cree, Chipewyan, because my Grandfather, my Mom's Dad, talked, like he said, seven languages or something.  (Initial Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 3)

Again the necessity to speak many languages served a strong purpose when travelling on the land, meeting with other families, sharing meat, food and especially stories. Mike’s storytelling reminded me of the importance of oral history, “as the way of collecting and interpreting human memories to foster knowledge and human dignity” (Oral History Association, 2010). It amazed me that in such a grand expanse of country that they kept moving, travelling, like on an expedition. When Mike described his mom and dad’s meeting, I heard the spirit of freedom: the land calling out to these Cree people, showing them the natural human flow of attraction and families forming. As Mike ended his growing up stories, it was sometimes hard to follow for me as the times, the generations and places of his family blurred into each other, but Mike knew the pieces. He recounted:
My dad wanted to, like, go on an adventure, you know, wanted to see … to start a new life, too. To see the land. So, that’s why they ended up in Fort Smith, here. You know, and they done that. They met people that he never even knew, because there was some people from Fort Res, and you know. I forget exactly what year that they came to Fort Smith. And my mom was just … in her early teens when she got here. And, there was that place here, Bell Rock, just across the river from here, it’s called Gravel Point. We were already in the NWT and all that, moved in. They were portaging to, like, the barges that used to go to Fort Fitzgerald. So, what happened was my grandfather and my dad and them, I guess, at that time, well she met my dad here. And my dad came from Wabasca and he left home when he was only fourteen. Because his dad passed away when he was just a young kid, and so his mother remarried. So he used to want to go off on his own … he [Mike’s dad’s dad] came here [Fort Smith] in 1918, or something like that. [Then my dad] he married a woman in Fort Chip, you see. But she passed away in … From that relationship, she had a daughter when he first met her. So, my mom raised [his] daughter, my half sister. (Initial Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 4)

Only at the end, did I connect with Mike’s flow of generations, blended families, and appreciate the inter-weaving of time and people in stories that developed his sense of self and affirmed the strong relationality of his people. I believed that these two elements had a significant influence on him growing up and becoming the ‘capable person’ that he was today.

Shifting forward to his own immediate family living on the land:

With great reverence, Mike spoke about the safety, love and belonging that came along with being a part of his large immediate family. He said:

I was so grateful that I had parents like my mom and dad that taught me a lot when I was growing up. They really loved all of us, not only one person, they loved all of us, the whole fourteen of us. Even though I had a half-sister there, the oldest one, Therese, my Mom treat ‘em just like her own. She raised her, you know. (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 5)

From listening to the anecdotes of his family, I realized that the development of Mike’s capable qualities formed as he watched both his parents raise their children through hard work, responsibility and attention to the families’ needs. Mike described both his father and mother’s livelihoods that provided the means to raise such a large family. He told me:
In the summer he’d [Mike’s dad] work on the barge and stuff like that. But in the winter … like he’d be gone [for the whole season] … Cause he’s trapping in the park at that time. He had to go to Caribou Mountains. And Caribou Mountains, like with a dog team, it takes about, you know, maybe a week to get there. So, it’s a long ways. And, like if he leaves the first fall of snow, sometimes September, early September, he wouldn’t be back til Christmas time, you know. So [with his trapline departure] my Mom’s left with us now, us kids, with Therese, there was fourteen all together. [My mom] she used to make moccasins … sew moccasins. She was so good at it that … the priest always knew when my mom was sewing moccasins all the time. So, they used to ask to buy those. So she used to make moccasins, no mukluks, because she’d make mukluks for the kids. But the moccasins she… any size, you know, wrap-arounds with canvas. She could make three in one day … that was only $1, I mean $9, $3 each … But it used to buy lots. (First Interview, November 13, 2013, 4-5)

While Mike talked, I sensed the great respect that he had for his mother and father. He said:

That's the reason why, the way I am today, is from my mom and dad … You know that’s the way I learned things from him and I learned from my mom also … The memories that I got about them, like when we’re together as in a big family, well, we all stayed together. It didn’t matters, our older brothers … or whatever … [We were] always together as a family. (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 14)

Right up to the time she lay in her death bed, Mike’s mother guided her large brood. Her last words to them showed her strong love. She said to them:

You guys as a family, you got to take care of each other, you know. Help each other, don’t separate from each other, don’t go one way because somebody else tells you to go with them. You know … Because once you guys separate," she said, "then you're not stronger anymore …Your love for each other starts fading away." So she said "that's what I want you guys to do." [Mike adds] So that's why I stay close to my family here. That's why I didn't want to leave Fort Smith, you know. I always wanted to stay close to them, to try to help in any way I can. And so far … I'm doing a good job because I really care for them, in any way I can help, I'm there. (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 7)

Mike held true to his mother’s parting counsel committing his time and energy to his family through hunting and being on the land. I recognized that he gained his inner sense of self and strength from the time that he spent with them. His stories of his family
gatherings were incredibly powerful reflecting the qualities of community and relationality that shaped his development into ‘a capable person.’

**Sliding back and forth from innocent to intentional acts of kindness in his community:**

With his mom and dad as his role models, Mike learned kindness at a very young age. In fact, helping others, sharing, and kindness were an instinctive part of their traditional lifestyle. No one knew when the forces of nature would take a life. Mike tells about the time when an Elder had a heart attack on the trapline and lost his life, leaving his wife a widow. It was Christmas time, making it extra sad. Immediately Mike said his mom ordered the boys out to do work for the widow, especially since it was still a time of no running water, no electricity, no fuel tanks for heat. Mike described:

So my Mom used to take one of his youngest son, his young son, Matthew, and my brother Raymond, used to help my Mom go across the highway here, at that time there was no highway. With a little sleigh, [we] used to haul wood there for both houses. [When asked who told her to do that, Mike responded:] Nobody told her, she done it on her own, like she wanted to help ... 'cause she had a big heart. (First Interview, November 23, 2013, p. 5)

And Mike’s must have inherited that big heart from his mother, as he recalled a sweet little story about when he was only 5 years old. He told it like this:

[There was] this one time I was going to my friend’s, we were playing around outside, chasing each other around. We were getting closer to that little coffee shop where my mom was working [for Mrs. Russell.] And just before I got closer, there was about six of us altogether, before we got closer, I noticed something on the ground. I was only about 5 ... or 6 years old. It was a dime! So I took it and said, "I found money, I found money!" These other kids right away said, "Let's go buy ice-cream." So I said okay. So I went into there, I could hardly reach the counter like that [and] I put my little hand up. Mrs. Russell [asked], "what do you want, Mike?" I could remember telling Mrs. Russell, "I want ice-cream for everybody!" So I put my little dime there. And she just started to laugh, you know. "Mrs. Beaver, come here, Agnes come here, come look at your little boy!" She said, "buying ice-cream for everybody." My mom just started to laughed, "Oh okay, you guys will all get each an ice-cream." (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 7)
From the innocent stories of learning kindness to the more intentional acts, Mike walked his talk from childhood to adulthood. He was the epitome of kindness, even sharing the bounty of his windfall buffalo hunt. It was close to the end of the interview; Pauline was busy in the back room getting a “care package” for me before I left, when Mike shared a poignant example of the strength and energy that he received from practicing the traditional act of sharing meat that he learned. He recounted:

This one time there, I went hunting with my friends Lawrence Wandering Spirit and Lawrence Cheezie. And we went to this place, and Maggie and them were there that one time, Maggie and Freddy, and Freddy's two brothers, and his nephew, were all there. They went hunting, I guess, before us there, never seen anything. So I said, "Well let's go for a ride, let's go down there." We went down there, just when we got to the main prairie eh. Bunch of buffalos were crossing. From the park. Once they go in this area, you know, we [we're allowed to] shoot them eh. So, I shot 11 buffalos that time ... So, I brought 3 to [the people] over there in the camp, and the rest I brought home. I gave one to both Lawrences, I gave them each one. I kept one for myself and brought everything, were all skinned and everything cut up. And there was somebody passing by here, so I told them, I said, "You guys want some meat?" "Oh yeah!" they said. "Come and help yourself." Gave them some meat, so I said if you see somebody else who wants to eat some buffalo meat tell them to come. I tell you within 2 hours, there was 6 buffalos gone. There was no meat inside of that porch except mine, my one buffalo I kept. I shared with everybody, even people that came from Fort Chip just to visit. They came, too, and brought some home. It felt good in my heart. (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 20)

While listening to these stories, I witnessed the cycle of sharing that played an integral part in this capable Elder's life. As a child, his inner sense of self developed beyond meeting his own needs, as he watched his family care for others more vulnerable. He said that he believed wholeheartedly in the relational approach to caring for the Aboriginal collective when helping the widows, the orphans and the Elders (Journal Notes, September 24, 2014). This was ingrained in his childhood being that grew with practice revealing a kind-hearted hunter that even shared his harvest with passing acquaintances as he had more than his share.

**Parental experiences of how he had raised his children:**

Although Mike’s experiences of raising his children had its high and low periods, he adamantly professed his love for all his children. Unfortunately as a young father, Mike
Regrettably, his first experience with raising children did not go very well. With honesty he told the story of his first three children:

I got in a relationship when I was young eh? That time, I was still a user; I used to drink. So I wasn't very much of a [father], although I had my mom, 'cause she was living next door. You know, but still, alcohol got the best of me. So I wasn't a good father, [for] my three children, three oldest ones. So, I didn't have a good life with them. We kept on separating, she'd take them with her when she move[d] home, she's from Fort Chip. Talked to her and get her back here, or she'll leave the kids with me and she'll go back. You know, it was going back and forth, so they really never, they never really were raised too much by me, you know. What I really regret now. So, that's still, to this day, those three kids are mine, like they really love me. Just like, they don't blame me for anything. You know, which I'm really thankful. (First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 13)

This kind of story reigned true for many young Aboriginal couples who are still dealing with substance abuse and mental health issues. While Mike talked, I could sense his sadness and regret. When I asked him about his next two sons, he had a happier story to share. He told me:

[I] was in another relationship where I had those other two boys, and ...That wasn't going good, although when I quit in 1993, I quit drinking. Just to change my life around, you know. We ended up before I went to Poundmakers, we separated that time. She went with another guy and I kept my two boys. One was four years old, the other one was just five and a half. And I had to raise them myself. Yeah. I gave them all, all I could provide, you know. 'Cause as a father, I try to do the best for them. Even decided to go Poundmakers to straighten my life out. To see what's there for me, to help me. And I even got my sister, Maggie, to come, she was really good to me and wanted me to change my life around. So, she said she babysit for me for 28 days. So, that's how I was able to go down there. And when I came back now, I had my two
boys with me, you know. Ever since that time, I always raised them.  
(First Interview, November 13, 2013, p. 13)

I could sense the heavy adversity and addictions that he had to overcome to raise his two sons; fortunately he had his family once again to help when the hardship seemed impossible. But fueled with love for his sons, he made it through, spending as much time doing the things that he loved to do with them, hunting, being on the land. Mike recalled the story of dealing with his youngest son’s fear of hunting. With affection and synergy of a young father, he told me how he gently eased his fears and helped his young son connect to what he liked. Mike said:

We’d go hunting together, even though they were small, go for a ride, like especially in moose season. Got a moose, that one time. And that time here, I went out, I didn’t only have my two with me. I had Maggie’s two grandsons, plus my brother’s son. Yeah, lots of kids with me in this small little truck. You know, successful, got a moose. Only one was scared of a moose that time was youngest one, Ryan … He wouldn’t even go to the moose after it was laying there, he stayed in the truck. Every time somebody going, we’d say, "Come on Ryan!" [But on the next hunt], I killed another one, but he was about two years older, after that. [This time] I used to let them, you know, touch the gun and everything. You know, and I tell them, "I used this gun to kill the moose or buffalo … And that’s to feed us. And dry meat I make, you guys like. We eat dry meat, you eat meat, so that’s what I get from that moose. And I start telling them, you know, "Nothing to be scared of. Doing this for the family." And after that, he didn’t want to stop hunting. (First interview, November 13, 2013, p. 13-14)

Mike ensured that he stayed close with these sons sharing time together by involving himself in his sons’ learning and songs from school. He recalled one particularly hilarious ride when the humour backfired on him. He described:

It was good too 'cause ... when we use to go for a ride, there was three of us. We'd be singing ... like what they're singing in school. We singing little songs and making up jokes. There was one song we even made up. Peter, Peter, pumpkin-eater. Boy, that's a cute one 'cause he was only five eh, and he said, "We'll sing you a song Dad, that's okay. [So he began to sing] Peter, Peter, pumpkin-eater. Had a wife and couldn't keep her, just like Michael Beaver. Well I just burst out laughing, couldn't help it eh! (First interview, November 13, 2013, p. 14)
By sharing laughter, time and energy with his sons, Mike showed them that his love knew no bounds, even when the playful fun threw the rhyming scheme off beat. He joined in the laughter; he participated in their lives; he shared his Aboriginal knowledge and skills with them; he carried on the cycle of life by supporting the growth of their sense of self and relationality by practicing the reverence and reciprocity that are part of being a capable father.

**Noticing experiences of how he viewed children “raised” in the modern NWT schools:**

Since Mike’s experience in the school system started only later in his life when he became an Elder involved in various Aboriginal cultural camp events and traditional knowledge classes, he acquiesced most of the time to his educationally experienced partner, Pauline. However, he did have two strong viewpoints about the inclusion of the drum, and having Elders present in educational settings. These showed his naturally capable ways of teaching and learning that were part of the holistic approach to Aboriginal education.

**Moving ahead to remembering the importance of two presences in modern schools:**

The first viewpoint reminded me of the heartbeat of the Aboriginal people that needs to be included in modern classrooms as often as possible. As Mike described his story, I was thrown back in time to the first occasion when I was part of a drum dance at an Aboriginal school, and witnessed the children come alive. When the drummers started drumming, the children moving to the beat, as if some one had plugged in their spirit, and energized them as they started the drum dance that connected them to their cultural identity and practice. Mike described an Aboriginal Head Start class that he attended:

[You should] have somebody with a drum ... To make them do the little dances, to make them ... happy. Some of them were sad there and they start hitting those drums and they jump up and started dancing ... especially when at tea dance ... They holding hands, well then they feel comfortable. (First interview, November 13, 2013, p. 20)

Along with ensuring that the Drum is included in modern school experiences, Mike also emphasized the need for Elders to have a regular presence in the schools. He added:
Another thing, too, is that, especially when you’re teaching young kids that ... Is that, you should have an Elder there. (First interview, November 13, 2013, p. 20)

I believed that Mike recognized the value of these two critical components of the drum and the Elders needing to be included in modern education. I admired his courage in putting forth his ideas at the end of the interview, and noticing two more integral influences in the development of children’s self and relationality in their journey towards becoming capable people.

5.5.5. Jane Dragon’s Story

I’ve known this extraordinary Elder as the Dragon Lady, brimming with mischief, wisdom and wit, since 1994 when my mother-in-law, Doris McQueen (I called her Mamma), and I were registered with Jane in the same Fort Smith Arctic College course. It was entitled, the “Aboriginal Interpreter/Translator” course facilitated by Phil Howard, the linguistic instructor. Both Mama and Jane were fluent speakers, but they needed extra help on the structure of the language, i.e.) nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc., and how it related to their spoken Chipewyan. As a language teacher, they asked me to provide after class lessons for them, as they thought it would help their progress. What a fiasco that was! I do not believe they learned a single thing from me, as it was next to impossible to teach them because they were so naughty and playful! But we laughed! After a few tutorials I quit because they were so bad; but really they had already processed the connections. Overall, we had such a good time, learning both to read and write the Chipewyan language, and at the end of the program even received certificates.

Jane is also known as the Matriarch of Fort Smith having provided endless hours of volunteer service, delicious home cooked meals, clothing and furniture, and especially wise counsel to many of the college students and instructors attending the Thebacha campus of Aurora College – for over fifty years at least. During one of my visits to Jane’s home, she showed me her warehouses of furniture, boxes of clothing, dishes: all the stuff that she stores for students and visitors who come and go in her life. The last time, I walked out of one of her warehouses was with an old Last Supper picture from the now demolished Fort Smith Saint Anne’s Hospital. People laughed at me at the airport upon
my return home, as there I was bordering the plane with picture of Jesus and a package of fresh moose meat from Jane. You never know what is going to happen when you visit Jane Dragon. As a matter of fact, on another visit, she showed me the casket that she had designed for herself. A what? I exclaimed. It was a beautifully designed small box, 12x12x12 in size, with rows of beadwork, quills, and moose hair tuftings and fur. Her casket! Ingenious! And she even showed me photos of the casket that she designed for her late husband, David Dragon. His was even more elaborate with all the furs that he had trapped in his life. What a Dragon Lady! Upon the three visits that I made to her home to conduct the interviews for my data collection, check-in for the restorying process, and final validation process, I always stayed at her house: a beautiful two-story log home where she and David has raised their six children, and housed thousands of visiting sports teams. Almost every athlete in the NWT has stayed at the Dragon home. You could tell their home was for a big family because immediately upon entry you felt at home. It reminded me a of grandparents’ home: so welcoming, comfortable and safe. Right away Jane would be putting on the kettle for tea, whipping up some bannock and some kind of meat for dinner. The last time I was there, we had a delicious buffalo roast and the fixings. And my most favourite part was always staying in the same cozy bedroom, downstairs, it was like a warm cocoon, in which I used to process all the stories and shenanigans that made up this amazing Elder’s capable life. Her personal experience narratives provided much fodder for reflection in its description of ‘a capable person’ through the stories of place, people, and happenings as the sets’u ne and setsíe (grandmothers and grandfathers) experienced them and passed them along to the next generation through oral history (Kovach, 2009).

**Her understanding of ‘a capable person:’**

After a moment of thought, Jane described her understanding of ‘a capable person’ as follows:

To me it means somebody that is respected in their culture and their way of life. I would say … somebody that teaches people. I find our culture is a way of life. It's the way so you can survive in life … [As a capable person, you have] to be honest and to be respected … you respect everything. In my way of being taught, I had to respect the animals, I had to respect the plants, I had to respect just the way of life. (First Interview, November 12, 2013, p. 1)
Jane’s emphasis on respect is in keeping with the traditional knowledge of both the Dene and Inuvialuit peoples of the NWT. Long ago, people placed a lot of emphasis on their honesty and their name, as life on the land during survival depended on that ultimate trust, respect in teaching, passing on the knowledge, and ensuring all parts of the land were respected when they were taken for eating, clothing or for survival. In many of the diverse NWT cultures, one common way of celebrating this respected cycle of life is “to pay the land,” which involved setting an offering (tobacco, tea, match sticks, a penny) onto the land with a prayer – a spiritual symbol of the reciprocity of give and take between human beings and the land. When I asked Jane later about this spiritual practice, she replied: “it’s just this way … the way of life.” (Journal Notes, September 23, 2014). An unequivocal acceptance of certain rituals and ceremonies that made up the activities of ‘a capable person.’

Growing up experiences of how she was raised:

Jane smiled in anticipation of sharing her childhood memories of the little northern village where she was born: Fond-du-Lac, Saskatchewan. As a child, she was raised in the Chipewyan language, only learning her prayers (the rosary) in the French language from her maternal grandmother. But stories of her Auntie Elizabeth’s big family, tasty traditional foods basted with bear grease and bone marrow, and unquestionable service to others when it came time for chores, especially for Elders – were all part of her upbringing.

Shifting back to childhood memories in Fond-du-Lac:

Since Jane came from a smaller family, only three children, her capable character started at a very young age with a natural tendency to give a helping hand. She described:

We used to have neighbours, like elderly neighbours, that we used to haul water for them. We used to ... my brother used to split wood and we used to bring them into the house for them ... and all kinds of things. People never had running water and there was a lot of elders that didn’t have their families. And, I don’t know, there was something about them, they lived all around us it seemed like. And that’s how we always...what we did then. (First Interview, November 12, 2013, p. 1)
When asked who directed her to help these Elders and others, Jane replied:

I didn't come from a big family so I had time on my own ... my time to do things like that. I know lots of people that had lots of families, big families. I even used to haul water with my cousins because there were eighteen in the family there and, you know, so I come from a family of three so I had lots of time on my hands to help other people. 'Cause it was just the way it was. The whole community is together. (First Interview, November 12, 2013, p. 1-2)

The attitude of "it was just the way it was" helped determine the flow of living in the small Chipewyan community replete with much hard work and many chores necessary for survival because of the time of no electricity or running water. But children like Jane did not question their role of discipline and diligence, particularly when they had role models like Jane's aunt. With reverence, Jane spoke about her Aunty Elizabeth, the typical matriarch with a huge heart for not only her own brood of eighteen children, but also Jane. She said:

She would find it in her heart to not only feed her own eighteen children but also ... kids around like me, I was one of them. After we hauled water and everything she used to make us hot chocolate and she used to give us a piece of cake. She had the best cake and she always used to give us some. [Aunty Elizabeth] she had such a big family but she had a big garden. She ... her family were fed very well. I remember that because she used to cook and everything was big pots. And she ... that's all she did I'm sure was cook and make babies. (First Interview, November 12, 2013, p. 2)

From listening to this story, I figured out how Jane had developed her own capable qualities of kindness, working hard, cooking for big groups, caring for family, and always being so busy helping, sharing, offering her huge repertoire of gifts. Her enthusiasm in describing Aunty Elizabeth was serendipitous because in many ways Jane was describing herself. These growing up experiences for Jane played such a large part in facilitating the development of her strong and natural characteristics as 'a capable person.'

Aside from the family responsibilities that she gleaned as a child, Jane was also influenced by the artistry of her people. With raw materials from the land, the women would work magic with moose hide, caribou hides and fur to design traditional clothing, in addition to deck out their dog teams, with silver bells for the festivities. Jane
emphasized that Christmas time at the church was the time for the exquisite displays of creativity and talent not only on the part of the women artisans, but also the men’s fur harvesting skills. She described:

I remember that people were so proud. There was no [regular clothing] ... everybody had to make everything like caribou hides, nice jackets, moccasins. I remember at Christmas time people used to come in. You’re going to the church and all you could smell was moosehides ... and beautiful parkas and beautiful jackets. Everything was for church. It seemed like everybody showed off their handiwork. It was just beautiful. Even right down to the dog teams, the dog teams had blankets with big balls of wool or a pompom with a bunch of ribbons on it. And you could tell the good trappers. Some people would leave in the fall and we wouldn’t see them until Christmas time. That’s when they all came in. And the church was just beautiful, everything about it. And I remember all the dogs had bells. And that was the only time they would use the bells because when they trap and that they never used bells. I don’t know if they really had the bells on the dog blankets, because the dog blankets were all decorated, all fancy work on it. (First Interview, November 12, 2013, p. 3)

The artistic impression left on the young Jane paid off years later, as she herself learned to hone her traditional handiwork with hides, fur and fancy beadwork into the masterful designs of an highly skilled traditional artist. She shared with me later that her traditional artwork has been proudly displayed at the Museum of Civilization in Hull, QC. (Journal Notes, September 23, 2013). As well, Jane is making quite a name for herself with her travelling northern display of furs, hides and crafts from all her years as a talented artisan. I believed Jane recognized how important it was for her to acknowledge the valuable place of traditional arts in the development of ‘a capable person,’ as so much can be learned through the arts as a vibrant way to celebrate identity, traditional knowledge, and place.

*Remembering her tough teenage choice to leave her parents and move to her Fort Smith’s grandparents’ home:*

Jane expressed many positive memories of growing up in Fond-du-Lac, but a dark part entered into her life when she became a teenager. Unfortunately, her parents went through several moves: one to Hay Camp in the Wood Buffalo National Park where Jane’s father was the park warden, and the next was a move to the adjacent community of Uranium City where they seemed to have got caught up in the revelry of a booming mine.
Jane did not share this growing up experience until later in the interview. It entered into the storytelling when she started talking about modern parents and their responsibilities. It seemed like the repressed anger and fear that she experienced as a young girl with her own parents evoked the sensitive memories. She gave a strict warning to the parents of today, saying:

> It's always about parents. You know, parents have to ... I mean, I'm not perfect, but my children came first. You know, it doesn't matter what was going on, I made sure. You know, David was busy lots of times and I was the one that had to go. And it just ... I mean, it's your own responsibility as a parent. I mean, if you don't do it [raise your children as a capable parent], somebody else's not going to do it for you. They'll do it, but not the way that you should've done it. (First Interview, November 12, 2013, p. 18)

In an upset tone, Jane proceeded to relate this topic to the time that she had to act like a parent, and make a challenging teenage choice of leaving her parents. She described:

> [Even if you’re not raised in a good home], you can change things, you know. Because I left home when I was thirteen ... It’s because my mom and dad were drinking. And that's why I moved with my grandparents where there was no drinking. I mean, I had that choice to move to a safer place. But, I mean, not everybody has that choice. But I made that choice when I was only thirteen ... I was alone at home. I just ... my parents started drinking, but they wouldn't drink at the house, they would drink somewhere else. And I just decided I'm not going to be like them. I'm just gonna move to my grandpa, and I said, "I wanna move back, this is what my parents are doing." [I moved] Not one place, to another town ... No, I just made up my own mind. I just didn't want to be there. You know, when you go to bed at night and you don't know where your parents is, it's not a good feeling. And it happens lots, to lots of students today. (First Interview, November 12, 2013, p. 18-19)

I thought Jane’s experiences during this time period exposed several complex issues: first her precocious nature of taking matters into her own thirteen year old hands, and finding a safe alternative living arrangement with her grandparents. As she mentioned, fortunately she had that choice. Secondly and more importantly, this story raised the ugly truth of many children having to tolerate, and even worse, experience adversity and stress as a result of their parents’ alcoholism. I admired little Jane for making such a tough choice at such a young age; as well as I applaud Elder Jane for
bringing to light such an ubiquitous issue in the homes of many Aboriginal children: alcoholic parents that cause trauma and despair for children as they are learning to develop their sense of self and identity, place and direction. In many cases this learning is debilitated, even damaged at both the physical, emotional, neurological levels (Perry, 2012). Most continue into the cycle of substance abuse and dysfunction; and other spend years trying to exit the cycle into healthier choices of education, culture and employment to find themselves, their identity, relationality and happiness. I know; I lived the latter.

**Leaving the traditional home life to the Western based education of correspondence courses and English:**

Jane’s move to her grandparents’ home in Fort Smith was a relief for the scared and shaken teenager. She learned quickly to adapt to her grandfather’s rules and structure. As a university-educated competent civil servant for the federal government who spoke five different languages, he ensured that his granddaughter was immediately registered in correspondence courses for her “to catch up,” as he tutored her with vigilance and compassion. When I noted that she was blessed to have had such caring grandparents, she replied with reverence:

> Oh yeah. I knew I’d be safe there and they’ll do the best they can with me. And I was willing to learn whenever I can ... I had lots of good people that would guide me. Talk to me, you know. Oh yeah, I know that. And I looked up to them [her grandparents]. (First Interview, November 12, 2013, p. 19)

Jane highly respected and loved her grandparents; they provided her with a safe, kind and caring home; however, there seemed to be something missing in her upbringing. As Jane described her upbringing I noticed that most of her formative years of education focused on a Western-based Eurocentric education concentrating on learning English and memorizing Geography. With humour, Jane recalled the difficult time she had pronouncing “Venezuela,” until her grandfather showed her on the map. He was patient with her when she was having trouble, but strict in terms of her progress. Unfortunately, Jane’s maternal Chipewyan language and culture were placed on hold, as was her grandmother’s French language. The household and school language was English, which was not at all a negative experience for Jane, but typical of the 20th century learning in which academic subjects, memorization and regurgitation, intellectual achievement and
marks were the priority. Although Jane acquiesced to the structure and strictness of this era, she found the balance that she required as such an extraverted, smart, mischievous and playful youngster with the remarkable Sister Sarrasin. Jane described her learning with the kind nun:

We used to go to school at night too, from 7 to 9. The high school teacher, Sister Sarrasin her name was. She used to be the high school nun, the teacher. And she would open the school and we were allowed to go. Whoever wanted to go could go. That was after I was in my teens. I could go there ... it was sort of a place where we all went. It was a hang out. But, I remember lots of times we used to say... we used to ask Sister Sarrasin, we used to say, "Sister what did you do when you were young, whenever we didn't feel like doing our schoolwork." And she would turn around and she would put her pencil down and she'd tell us a story about how she was raised. And then that was our class for the day ... it was fun time. It was good. It wasn't just school, it was... we could talk and we still could... As long as you don't fool around you're okay ... yeah, she was very special. She would teach high school during the day, and then she'd still come for us at night. (First Interview, November 12, 2013, p. 5)

I believe that Sister Sarrasin's style of teaching and learning was advanced in terms of reaching students with innovative techniques, such as making learning fun, connecting with students, using storytelling to reach their interests, showing kindness, balancing play and learning with a healthy dose of respect and obedience. This approach definitely appealed to the young Jane. As for learning her Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing, this came later in life when she married a partner who loved the outdoors, hunting, trapping and being on the land. Together this healthy partnership blossomed into a healthy family.

Parental experiences of how she had raised her children:

As Jane noted in her opening response regarding how she raised her own children, she mentioned the gap in her Aboriginal traditional learning that she experienced in Fond-du-Lac, and the more Western based education that she experienced in Fort Smith with her grandparents. She emphasized the responsibility of her children learning about their culture had been a definite priority in her own children’s upbringing. She said:
I left Fond Du Lac when I was quite young. So, I never really learned too much about my own culture until I was married. That's when I learned about my culture. I made sure so that my children could have that too. (First Interview, November 12, 2013, p. 5)

And as good fortune would have it (or rather bad fortune at that time), the town of Fort Smith experienced a landslide in 1967 due to velocity of the Pelican Rapids on banks of the Slave River. This was the place where many of the Aboriginal people lived, so as a result of the landslide, many Elders' homes had to be moved. Serendipitously, they all moved behind where Jane and David had their little shack. This is where her real Aboriginal cultural teachings began because she began to serve and look after the Elders just like she had as a youngster in Fond-du-Lac. In turn, the Elders taught Jane everything they knew: it was a perfect synergy. Jane described:

We ended up with a whole bunch of Elders there. And David used to love to hunt. So he always got the moose and everything, and they taught me. I went to see them everyday, as soon as my kids would go to school, I'd run to one of them, whoever's making moose hide, whoever's making dry meat, whoever's making whatever. And I made sure I was back home by 11 o'clock, so that I had two hours in the afternoon until the children come home. But I did that. And the children seen, as they were little, but they seen where I went, they came with me and they got to know the Elders too. And they were always around. And so they [Jane's children] looked after the Elders a lot too. Because I remember when I used to make soup sometimes Sabrina, or Brenda, or Joy, or Connie, all of them would say, "Can I take some of this Mom, if you have some leftover, can I take it to Granny?" You know different Grannies, they feel like different Grannies to them. (First Interview, November 12, 2013, p. 6)

When I questioned Jane about how her children learned the inter-relatedness of these kinds of activities: the give and take and sharing. She replied off handedly:

I don't know ... it's just because they see me do it, I guess. I don't know, it's just the way of looking after them. Yeah, what goes around comes around. I always tell my children. (First Interview, November 12, 2013, p. 6)

From Jane's story, I listened again as this capable woman, now a mother, showed the holism in her approach of how she valued the relationships with the Elders, how she made time to learn her traditions, and how she ensured that her children learned too. They
say that children learn what they live, and this is exactly the way that Jane raised her children through recurring examples of kindness, sharing, diligence and care, which served them well as they developed their sense of self as Aboriginal children, and its relationality to the time, people and place.

**Shifting forward to building year by year a good home and marriage:**

I admired the love that Jane displayed when she spoke of her marriage and home: it seemed like they grew in relation to each other. She said:

> [When we were first married], we stayed in a little shack. And every time we had a baby, we added another little shack to it. And because my husband never believed in owing money, and I didn't either, we made do ... We were good partners. So I sewed, he'd hunt, he trapped, and worked. He was a weekend trapper but he was very good trapper, you know. So we never lacked anything. But it took us ten years before we had our house. But when we moved into our house, it was our house. Our house was a log house. We cut the logs ourselves. We built it. (First Interview, November 12, 2013, p. 10)

The good partnership that she had with her husband paid off, as even though they had so many children, Jane was able to stay home with all six of them, providing the time that Jane needed not only to raise her children, but also to spend time with her Elders. I sensed Jane’s resourcefulness: she took advantage of good things that came her way, and multiplied them with the capable quality of reciprocity and responsibility. A perfect example of this was the experience of finding her adopted son.

**Sliding back to adopting their son a month after his birth:**

As fate would have it, Jane was in the hospital pregnant with her fourth child, not yet in labour but suffering from painful toxemia. There she met him. You could tell that she wanted a son. She tells the story of his adoption and secret breastfeeding:

> My adopted son was the in hospital while I was expecting my youngest daughter. And David and I, we had planned, I wanted six children and he wanted seven. So I was in the hospital with Joy, when I was ... just before I had her I had toxemia really bad. It was swollen, full of fluid in your body. So I had to go in the hospital ahead of time. In the meantime, my adopted son was born there. And he was to be given away. And I said to my husband, I said, "Gosh, you know, I've been feeding him.
Now she's going to give him away. Can we adopt him?” And he looks at me, and of course I was as big as a house. He said, "Do you think you can handle it?" And I said, "Yeah, I’ve always wanted twins.” So the next day, we went into her room and asked her if we can have her little boy, because she was going to give him away. And she said, "Well, I was going to, but now I’ve changed my mind." And I said, "Oh well, if you ever change your mind, I would love to have him because I’ve been feeding for the last couple of days.” And then when Joy was born, we had a little girl, then we had four girls. And then a month later she [the birth mother] called us, and she said we could have him. So we were on our way to pick him up. We were very happy. There, we were going to have a boy. So we were on our way to her place, and I said to him [her husband], "We must be crazy. Here we have four beautiful girls at home, and we’re going for another one!" He said, "I was just thinking the same thing!" Anyway, he's very nice. So we brought him home and he cried for three days straight. And I was breastfeeding Joy at that time. I breastfed all my children, even though the breastfeeding was a real taboo at that time. I knew it was right. That's why we have boobs. So anyway, I started feeding him at night because he was crying. And I said to my husband "we can't tell anybody about this, because they'll think we're starving Joy." You know our youngest daughter. And he says, "No, as long as he sleeps, that's all that matters". (First Interview, November 12, 2013, p. 11)

There she was with her first son, and then was blessed twofold with another son four years later. The sixth and last child for Jane and Dave. As an Elder that I know says: “Good things happen to good people.” Jane was emotional as she shared this part of the story, particularly in describing the surreptitious breastfeeding that she used to feed both her adopted son and his sister – her twins, she called them. Her defiant action of breastfeeding both children at the same time, showed the resilient part of her capable person, not acquiescing to the social taboo of a non-breastfeeding, ill-advised era of the 1960’s. Sometimes social trends need to be challenged in order to do good things. I believe that Jane made this her rule of thumb, as a spirited child, young mother, and respected Elder.

Moving back and forth from home, school and land-based learning:

Jane’s stories of raising her children revolved around the central feature of healthy and active living: there was only alcohol no social alcohol or smoking in their home, and much of their lives focused on sports. Their home was designed for all kinds of different athletic practice. She said:
They [her children] did all kinds of things. Everything that they can get involved with. We had a rink in our backyard, and we had a backstop in our backyard, they’d pitch, and do all kinds of things. (First Interview, November 12, 2013, p. 12).

They played baseball together in the summer, and the Dragon home was billet central in the winter during the hockey seasons: every NWT hockey player has stayed at least one overnight visit at the Dragon’s log home in their sports life. Along with a tremendous respect for school and sport, Jane also believed in school outside of the classroom. She described their family’s on-the-land learning:

We’d take them out [to their cabin on the Taltson River] in the fall. We used to take them out of school for ten days. And like they would miss a whole week of school, but they all did well so it didn't hurt them. As a matter of fact, they gained because they had to learn how to hunt, they had to learn how to prepare their foods, and all kinds of things like that. And then springtime, it’s spring hunt: beavers, muskrats, ducks, and all kinds of stuff. (First Interview, November 12, 2013, p. 10)

For Jane, raising her children fostered the healthy balance of both Indigenous and Western styles of learning. The Aboriginal woman and her non-Aboriginal husband found the best of both worlds fostering the development of their children’s identity into adults that respected and practiced bicultural education, which nourished all their learning spirits (Battiste, 2013). In turn, the cycle of life turned into her children’s healthy relationships and lives, which for Jane meant many happy family gatherings at their homes in Fort Smith, Pine Lake and Taltson River.

Noticing experiences of how she viewed children “raised” in the modern NWT schools:

For the last set of questions, I realized that Jane brought a good deal of experience to the conversation, as a highly respected Aboriginal teacher. She spoke with knowledge and conviction about the foibles and flaws that she noticed in the schools, along with offering hope for the future. After all, the capable Elder understood that her contributions to the education dialogue played a critical role in providing quality education for future generations of capable people.

Moving ahead to education today:
As Jane considered the question, her first response went immediately to the many positive experiences and relationships that she had had in the Fort Smith schools and on the college campus over the extended period that she spent in education. Reflecting on my notes and our many conversations together, I realized that so many of her stories involved her former students or teachers whom she guided in her role as a counsellor and advisor. (Journal Notes, September 23, 2014). People gravitated towards this knowledgeable, accessible, capable teacher. But along with the positive, Jane also brought forth the many shortcomings that she has noticed in the system. When she got down to business regarding the immediate concerns, she produced a litany of faults including: the overuse of electronics, large class sizes, too much homework, and more discipline. She recounted:

Well I find there's so much things going on now, you know, like TV for one thing. And they really don't communicate with the children ... I see teenagers, I mean I've been to different camps with the teenagers, they're just sick when they can't have their communication with somewhere else. It's a real ... it's bad. [And] I feel sorry for the schoolteachers right now, because I find how do you teach thirty kids in one class. Even my sewing class, if I have more than ten it's crazy. I mean, what are you trying to do, you're not superwoman. You know, if you want to teach them properly you have to have smaller. I would say fifteen, maybe, per class. Get more teachers. Make them healthy and not so hard on them ... [And] so much homework. I know lots of kids they don't have time to do homework. They'll never do it, because they just don't have the space, they don't have the... they just don't have a place to do it. [And finally] I think it just has to be more controlled ... like there should be some discipline of some sort. I remember when my children went to school, I went to all parenting teacher thing. Every month whenever they had anything going on for the children, I was there. And that's the only way you find out what's going on. And now, it seems like everything goes and nobody really keeps track of ... And then the children fail, fail. The children weren't born to fail, but the system makes them fail. Nobody's born bad. (First Interview, November 12, 2013, p. 13-14)

In reviewing the inventory, I realized that the advice was not only for the educators, but also for the students. In the end, she raised the purest maxim that is known in Indigenous spirituality. In fact, the words are hanging on a picture in her home: “Be good to children as they are only borrowed to you.” Children are not born bad; they come as gifts from the Creator, and require the holism of all elements to be raised to develop their sense of self and relationality, as ‘a capable person.’ And no one knows this better than
Jane, especially now as an Elder. I call her one of the “Rock Star Elders” because she is in such high demand from groups like the NWT Educational Leadership Program, the Dechinta Bush Program, Aurora College’s ENRTP, and the recent FOXY organization. Why? Largely because of her knowledge, skills and approaches to teaching and learning. I believe it had something to do with her own teachers who helped shape her capable self; teachers like her Auntie Elizabeth, Auntie Dora, her Grandfather, Madame Dube, Mrs. Suzie King, Mrs. Calamut, Mrs. Benwell, Mrs. Cheezie, and especially her beloved Sister Sarassin who created a learning atmosphere in which the young Jane thrived.

**Remembering that special nun from childhood as an example for future educators:**

Jane’s stories of her much-loved Grey Nun provided an example for future educators. Jane described the popular teacher:

> She just loved being with us. God only knows what for ... we used to have so much fun with her. It was the high school, and we were in elementary school. And we’d go to high school to go in the evening. I mean, that was really special place to go. (First Interview, November 12, 2013, p. 17)

This special nun opened up the school for them for extra help and guidance with their schoolwork, but she also opened up her heart by giving of her time, experiences, and love. On her own, she created a healthy and safe place for children to do their homework, but more importantly to learn to develop their sense of self and relationships. And Jane too, she followed suite. The cycle of learning came full circle for Jane. Now as a capable Elder, she too, keeps her door open, her love kind, her stories flowing, her ideas inventive, and her counsel wise along her continued capable journey.

### 5.5.6. Margaret Ireland’s Story

From a family whose culture and stories were recorded in June Helm’s ethnohistory of The People of Denedeh (2000), Margaret Ireland’s roots reach far back into Dene epistemology, history and traditions. Her late father was the highly respected chief of the Jean Marie River community, one of the nine Dehcho communities along the great Mackenzie River in the north-easter region of the NWT – “deh cho” meaning big river in Margaret's native South Slavey Dene language. Chief Louis Norwegian (1907-77)
was one of the Dene leaders who was instrumental in the Berger Inquiry that terminated the development of the oil and gas pipeline in lieu of the advancement of the Dene people’s land claims and self-government negotiations. With the diplomacy of a chief and discipline of a father, Louis Norwegian raised his children to respect their Dene traditions, Elders, culture and language. His legacy was eight capable children who contributed to NWT leadership that ensured a strong Dene focus, including his daughter, Margaret. Later in the expansion of Western education, the local school was named after Margaret’s father: Chief Louis Norwegian Community School, which opened its doors for its first year of K-6 education in September 1975.

As one of the younger daughters in the Norwegian family, Margaret, was protected on both sides by older and younger brothers, so she learned to side step the stricter discipline that her older siblings faced. In fact, when Margaret described herself as a child, she said that she was “a little brat … a tomboy, want[ing] to do what the boys did outside, like rabbit snaring not learning how to be a girl” (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 1). But those mischievous, tomboyish characteristics must have been the energy that fuelled the intelligence, creativity and poise of the Elder Margaret that I met on that cold December evening. Her warm welcoming home quickly dissipated the outside coldness and my nervous feelings. I had travelled to Hay River where Margaret was living on one of the coldest days of the year: 40 below with a snowstorm brewing in the east. Thankfully my husband was travelling with me, as our son was in a hockey camp in Hay River for the upcoming Arctic Winter Games. He spent his time at the arena; I visited for a good four hours with this lovely new Elder whom I was privileged to have as a part of my study.

I had never met Margaret Ireland in my many years in the NWT; however, her youngest sister, Gladys, was a close colleague and friend in our many years together in Aboriginal education. So when the former Jean Marie River Chief phoned me after receiving my study detail that was distributed to the NWT chiefs from the Aurora Research Institute earlier in the month in October 2013, and suggested that I interview Margaret, I was surprised and elated. I took the unexpected directive to mean an opportunity to meet another one of the well-known Jean Marie River Norwegians: the family was celebrated for their promotion, advocacy and leadership in the field of Aboriginal language and cultural maintenance, revitalization and promotion. Gladys acted as the “intermediary”
(Wilson, 2008), as Margaret and I developed our research relationship. I found that this support worked well when colleagues whom I knew through education assisted me in making the connections with the Elders. This introduction provided the initial trust that I was able to develop as I worked with the Elders’ in the data collection, restorying and validation processes. Without these community connections, in some instances, it would have been difficult to gain that important initial access into the homes of the Elders with whom I did not have that personal connection for the various stages of the interviewing. As such, I express my gratitude to Gladys as the “gatekeeper or key informant” (Creswell, 2012, p. 569), facilitating my meeting and communication with Margaret.

Her understanding of ‘a capable person:’

As an NWT Elder grounded in the rich traditions and culture of her homeland, Margaret drew an immediate parallel between ‘a capable person’ and her Dene value system that focused on identity, family and learning from Elders. She said:

What it means to me is that you truly know who you are, who your parents are and where you’re from and that you know your surroundings … your relationship with the land, and all the teachings that your parents, your grandparents and, sometimes, even your great grandparents had given you. And all these combined make you who you are and usually, the focus point for your elders is that they’ve taught you to survive, and that makes you a capable person. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 1)

As Margaret shared her beliefs, I sensed a powerful inner strength and knowledge base that was moderated by a soft gentle voice; I found myself leaning into her words, and being as quiet as I could to hear her. I was glad that her home was so peaceful because as she spoke it was like watching an artist, getting ready to reveal a secret painting or sculpture that had been in storage for far too long. I held my breath, as she took me into her life story that started in her childhood in the little Aboriginal community, where mischievous children defied their watchful guardians as they played in deep snow banks, in the crisp clean air of northern winters, or on moonlit evenings, along the shores of the watchful Jean Marie River.
Growing up experiences of how she was raised:

The small community of Jean Marie River where Margaret was raised was made of about ten large Dehcho families, including the Norwegians. There were eight children in her family who participated enthusiastically in the fun and play of the community children; in fact, there were many times when Margaret herself initiated the mischief. Together they created a whole roster of outdoor games, creating a synergy that often got them in trouble verging on the edge of risk and danger. This was why Margaret emphasized the old adage, “it takes a community to raise a child” as ringing true for her upbringing, as it took the community to watch over these children playing along the shores of the Jean Marie River, in the nearby bush and over the hills of the nearby community. As Margaret talked about her childhood, I was intrigued as I listened to stories of fun and frolicking that helped the little Margaret develop her sense of self and community. I began to sense that the flow of fresh air and freedom gauged the energy that fuelled the children’s fun and games that would sometimes approach trouble. But under the close responsible eye of community, the children were cared for, even when they were not aware. Margaret described:

It had taken all the community members to raise us. When you’re caught doing something that is not quite right, that could maybe be dangerous for you or the other children that are with you ... whichever elder was nearby, take that opportunity to set you down and talk to you about your action. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 1)

Margaret’s stories brought me back to the widespread spaces of my own childhood in the hay fields of my grandparents’ Métis mixed farm. There was never any shortage of mischief to get into: there were chickens to chase, pigs to ride, ponies to pet, cows to talk with, garter snakes to collect, bales to play on, and barns to jump off of, onto the hay stacks – so much opportunity to get into fun, and possible trouble. These were the conditions that I recognized, and from which I believed that Margaret, too, had developed her inner workings of fair play, choices between right and wrong, kindness to others, problem solving when stuck, which in turn most likely helped her to develop her understanding of relationality of the world around her. From listening to her stories, I sensed that from her big family, Margaret learned the basics of discipline, ethics and organizational development that boded well for her when she moved beyond the
fundamental structure of family. I believed that learning was so much more effective in family, in community under the wide-open spaces, with many natural consequences, and the strict discipline of family and caregivers if danger came too close – all stepping-stones to becoming ‘a capable person.’

*Remembering childhood play and obedience:*

I was curious to know more about Margaret’s upbringing, so I asked her to share a story to help me understand better how her childhood play interacted with obedience. She then shared the funny story about the little old community ladies that visited her home like well-meaning stool pigeons who ensured the overall safety of the children. They worked in tandem with her parents. Margaret related:

I remember, but there are times when ... we, as a group of kids, were doing something ... and my father was the chief of the community, and so there were times when we come home for lunch, and there will be whole bunch of ladies sitting there talking to our dad. And so we know that we’re in trouble. Yeah so, a couple of times, I remember, one of the times that we use to have a tugboat and we haul snow until the snow was so, so deep and then we climb up and we dive right into the snow. That was dangerous, thinking back about it. But that's when one day we came home and there was about 5 ladies sitting around, talking to my dad about it. And we just quietly ate and then left, and then we're all back where by the tugboat and some of the smaller boys were up, ready to jump, when someone yelled that my dad was coming with a big stick, so we just all took off. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 2)

The inter-relatedness of the community provided the best safeguards for the children. So with many eyes watching them, and scouts on the look out for the “big sticks,” the children learned to practice obedience, and find activities that were less dangerous. Margaret added another relevant reason for the strict discipline and the community responsibility to look after their children. She told me that:

Since we were a small community and I suppose it is with all other communities, it's not so easy to go for medical help if something happens. So I think as safety was also really driven home to us and to everybody. [So] if you're doing something that could be dangerous, somebody always stops you and talks to you about it. And it was like that, like if somebody stop and sat me down and talked to me about what I was doing and stuff. My parents didn’t get defensive or anything
like that, it just a norm you know that. Yeah so, thinking back about it, like I said, the statement, "It takes a whole community to raise a child." Right. Rang very true for how we were brought up. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 3)

Margaret added that in spite of the ultra strictness and safety, which guarded the children, she said that she never remembers being bored, or feeling isolated, in the small community so far away from major centres. Instead, they practiced their creativity and invention with the resources around them, such as icy sliding hills or moonlit hide and seek games, or even their chores of hauling water and wood. She added that even with the higher expectations of being the chief’s daughter, this did not pose too many negative barriers for her growth and development into a capable person. She recounted:

I always thought that being the daughter, the children of the chief, my father had greater expectation of us and so, being the tomboy, I thought it’s unfair sometimes. To really be, I guess in the sense, a role model for the other children … But still, we managed to get into a lot of things and do a lot of things and it was fun growing up. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 3)

In such a healthy community with strict but loving parents, the young Margaret’s sense of identity and relationality had a rich environment into which to grow and develop. But her growing up experiences were only the beginning of the influences that guided her in her capable journey. Next she took me into the extra cultural lessons from extended family, which strengthened the foundation laid by her own family.

Continuing into learning cultural practices and places with extended family:

As a result of being in such a small community, Margaret had many extended family members who provided the formative syllabus for her traditional training that grounded her in language and culture. From walks in the bush, to traditional medicine talks, to community traditions regarding death, to grave yard history lessons, the young Margaret’s bush education drew from the expertise of many traditional knowledge resource people that included aunties, uncles, grandparents and Elders. Being part of a larger community formed Margaret’s worldview into one of respect, reciprocity, and holism. She described some of the typical activities of her youth:
Occasionally one of my aunts or uncles would gather us all together and go into the bush with us ... I remember, my aunt, Celine, had taken us to a point just up the Jean Marie River that we call "carrot island" [where] wild carrots grew there ... she gathered us and ... and showed us how to identify a plant and how to dig for the roots. And when you pull it out, we found it was really sweet and very tasty ... And then there was another time, I remember where Mary Louise's mother, an elderly lady, everybody in the community called her "Etsu," grandmother. And she took us into the bush and ... showed us a piece of stick, how to sharpen it. For the younger ones, I think she sharpened the stick ... to start digging for the [spruce] roots for birch bark baskets ... so we made it into a game, like who would pull out the longest root without breaking it ... Then we went berry picking, how to go snaring and all these things, you know, hunt smaller animals, so I was taught to do all that. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 3-4)

I remember one time my cousin and I, Etsu lived with them, so throughout the summer, she made those birch bark baskets and then in the fall, she had them filled with berries and herbs and stuff. So, one day, during the lunch hour, we were going to walk over to the school, but first she says to go over to the warehouse and take a handful of cranberries. And so that's what we did. But then I saw the smallest birch bark basket, so I looked in it, and I saw flower pollen. And so I said, "What's this?" ... I wanted to know what you do with it, and she said, "Well you sniff it." And so she says, "Try it, it's really good." So I did, took a pinch and sniffed it into each nostril ... and I couldn't stop sneezing. I sneezed and sneezed, water just running down [from] my eyes ... I didn't realize then that's what was used to clear your sinus. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 4)

There was [also] one time ... One of the men got into an accident and died and for the whole year, we were not allowed to play outside for very long, and we were not allowed to be very, very loud ... we had to spend the year ... being quiet and respecting the family, that was you know. (First Interview, December 14, 2013 p. 3)

One of my aunts one day decided that she's going to take us into the graveyard 'cause that was a place that we hardly ever, ever go. And so we went over there and she stopped at a grave, and then she told me that this was my grandmother. And at the foot of the grave was a tall, tall pole ... And then she left me there to take the other children to ... where the grave of their relatives were. And so I stood there for the longest time and looked at the pole and to me, I thought that represented how tall my grandmother was ... And so, oh my goodness, my grandmother was a very tall woman. [Margaret never did find out what the pole was for] (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 5)
From learning all kinds of medicines, like willow bark, spruce gum, and Labrador tea, to unexpected smells, to respecting families during death, to family history in the cemetery, there did not seem to be one dull moment in Margaret’s upbringing where self and relationality developed in close proximity to time, people and place on the varied landscapes of her life. And if Margaret had any burning questions or challenging issues, she learned to rely on the bedrock of Aboriginal epistemology, ontology and axiology. Instinctively, she turned to storytelling. However, she added that she had to learn to pay attention, as the stories only worked their magic when the listeners practiced close listening and reflection. Margaret observed that the rich and complex nature of storytelling provided no straightforward advice and guidance, but rather hid the “answers” in the twists and turns of their plot, characters and conflict. Only later deliberation and thought may possibly lead the story listeners to a connection to their original questions. Such was the mystery and cycle of storytelling. Margaret’s Elders were gifted at this ploy. She described:

We don't have a written language and so, I think the focal point for all the adults in raising their children is to really develop your memory process. And so all the stories and things they're telling us were very descriptive. And so you could see the pictures in your mind. I remember later on in life, like if I have a question sometimes I go and talk to my elders and they always use to give me a story. And then one day I was talking to, with one of my uncles and he was telling me a story about how, when he was growing up, he had a question, a really serious question regarding his life. And he wanted to talk to this elder but he didn't know how to go about approaching the elder. So finally, he said he had enough nerve to go and talk to the old man. And then he said, he asked, and so the old man sat there for a long time and then ... And then he lifted up and looked at him and told him a story. And he said, my uncle said that he walked away just angry with the old man, you know, this is a serious question and all he tells me is a story. And then he says, later on, I sat alone and thought over the story that he had told him, so he says, he turned around look at me, "My goodness, my girl," he says, "The question, the answer I was searching for was in the story." And he said that's how the old people use to be, you ask them a question, they don't give you a direct reply, they always give you a story. And it is through that story that you find your answer, they never really directly answer your question. And I suppose like it's to help you, you know, like with your memory and your problem solving. So you solve it, they give it to you, you take it, take it apart, and find your answer and you have solved your problem. So, they kinda turn things around and make you responsible for it, for whatever. So that's what he was saying, that's how it use to be like you know, they never really directly answer your questions. And so, in the later years of his life, my
uncle ... After I came back north, I used to sit down a lot with him to talk to him about just certain things because ... he's really interested in passing on all the teachings and stuff he had. And he used to tell me you know like, he would take time with whoever that is curious enough to look for the answers to these links. (First Interview, December 13, 2013, p. 5)

While I listened to Margaret’s description, I was struck by the clever placement of this story to bring forth such an unexpected paradox. It was as if we were in the presence of the Ancestors. In recounting her growing up experiences with Elders’ storytelling, Margaret was not only describing her own experience, but also unknowingly relating the methodology that I was using for my own research in working with Elders’ stories like her own. I admired her wise offering of this story, which advised me to stay awake in this process. Like the Elder in her story, Margaret was willing to share her cultural teachings, but sagely cautioning me to pay attention. I do not believe that she was aware of this unanticipated connection, but I did, and perked my ears even more alertly, paying close attention to her stories, especially the next one that had her family make the difficult choice of sending their children to residential school.

**Shifting forward to father’s decision for his children to have an English (Western) education:**

In spite of the rich cultural surroundings and traditional knowledge of the people and place, Margaret’s father, and her Auntie Sarah, known as the community matriarch, they decided that they wanted more for their children. The upbringing of their children was a serious responsibility for these Dehcho people. So a meeting took place, and it was decided to send the children to the “English school.” Margaret said:

> I always remember that it was important to my father and Auntie Sarah to talk about it, how my dad had pulled everybody together and told them that English education would be important for the future, so we need to put our children in school to be taught. So I always remember, I think about that and that it was important to my father, my community that we get educated in English. (p. 7)

After this supposed opportune decision, the Norwegian children and other Jean Marie River families sent their children to Lapointe Hall in the nearby Fort Simpson. Margaret spent three years in the residential school; however, did not go into any detail
regarding her experiences, other than acknowledging the overall negative impact that the Indian Residential Schooling had in the history of the Dene people. She recounted:

I think that we were so grounded into our culture, we were very grounded, as to who we are and what we are about and ... I think the residential school kind of threw a monkey wrench into that ... Some of us had horrible experience, and whereas, some of us had not ... Unfortunately, some of us really suffered, really scarred. There were some other things that happened like to me, I just thought, well I don't need to ponder on it, to keep it alive. I just need to go beyond it. So that's what I did. (p. 9)

For Margaret, her solid grounding of self, language and culture, and the inevitable return to her community allowed her to continue her capable journey without too much damage. She was one of the fortunate ones who was able to move ahead. She successfully graduated from high school, married, and then began her family and work. She was happy.

**Parental experiences of how she had raised her children:**

After Margaret’s marriage to Leonard Ireland, the family stayed in Yellowknife for about three years before moving to a totally new life for this young Dene woman. They bought a farm about 14 miles from High Prairie, AB where they moved their young family: Misty was three; Ryan was only one. Margaret believed that being raised on a farm would be similar to being raised on the land, so she was content, until she began to miss her home. However, in the meantime, Margaret developed her skills as a young wife and mother. She was particularly attentive to ensuring that she knew as much as possible about parenting, so she took an early childhood course that took place on the weekend and in the evenings. She was determined to learn all she could. However, after only a few weeks into the course, her Indigenous child rearing practices of family influences, land based traditional knowledge, and wide-open spaces began to conflict with the stages theory of the early twentieth century European child psychologists that she was learning about in the course. These faraway, dominant European theorists made Margaret think that she was ruining her children, until she stepped back, and connected to her Aboriginal roots. She told me:
I got into a little bit of confusion, at one time, where I was taking a weekend courses and evening courses on early childhood. And the stuff that I learned in the book about what Piaget [and those other ones] said about the growing child. And I thought one time ... I'm doomed, you know. I am not raising my children! You know, good. So halfway through ... all the courses I was taking, is that I thought, "Wait a minute." That was for their culture, of the way they see as to how to raise their children. I continued to do what I was raising [on]. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 10)

When I talked to Margaret in the follow up visit, she shared with me that she always wondered why she had doubted herself (Journal Notes, November 7, 2014), as she knew how deeply she was rooted in her Aboriginal language and culture. All she had to do was remember her language, her spirituality, her Elder teachers, and her mother’s storytelling. She re-told the story about how her sense of self and culture developed on those Sunday winter days when her mother would draw in her children onto her warm cozy bed with her stories about their home, their family, their people – she realized that nothing is more powerful than being raised under a loving mother’s wing, not even Piaget could dispute this. So she returned to her traditional parenting style.

**Shifting between two worlds to raise her Métis children:**

However, the conflict that she experienced in deciding how to raise her children began to swell as her children grew. Her husband’s European family and value systems began to clash with her own Indigenous ways of knowing and doing. She described:

"There's conflict in, like ... they're Metis, the children, and so ... Leonard's belief, my belief, there's sometimes a little bit of conflict in that but I think... Thinking back, I'm deeper rooted, and so I was kind of a little bit overpowering in my belief as to how to go about raising the children. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 10)

I witnessed Margaret demonstrating the grounding strength of her sense of self and relationality that had expanded to her marriage and her children. Of course, she understood that her children were Métis and “had a foot in each world,” so she celebrated their bi-culturalism with a mother’s guidance and support, making sure that her children’s quandaries were met with healthy explanations and even laughter. She recounted her
son’s innocent question about his skin colour in explaining the complex nature of his identity in the simplest terms that she could muster. She described:

I had to also let them know that they're Métis, and they have a foot in each world ... One day it was, Ryan comes out with some really funny, funny things like. The way he thinks about stuff 'cause I remember telling him that his mother is Dene, his father's White, which makes him a Métis and he didn't understand Métis. So I said, in the olden days, they use to call a person like that a half-breed. "What does that mean?" That means you know, you're half white and you're half Dene. So he looks upon his body and says, "Well, which half?" (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 11 and p. 12)

Margaret ensured that she honoured both halves of her children. To do so, she drew from her Aboriginal roots, along with immersing them in the outdoor life of living on a farm, and learning from the animals, as she did. As well, she faithfully returned to her home community of Jean Marie River every summer with her children for them to connect with her Dene family. But most of all, she relied on her stories. She had had a lifetime of living on the land, in the bush, in her Aboriginal language, so she was able draw to from a rich well of experiences, of memories, of stories. She said:

I told stories, yeah, I told them stories all that I learned from my mother. I've brought it forward and share it with them ... all through the stories that my mother had told us, my dad had told us, that we've known ... that there's a Creator. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 11)

But she battled against many forces in upholding her Indigenous values and beliefs in the northern Alberta community so far from her NWT home; the most prevailing was the ubiquitous presence of prejudice, right in her own family. Unfortunately, Margaret’s father-in-law was prejudice, and shared his negative viewpoint with the children. I reviewed this challenging situation with Margaret in our follow-up interview (Journal Notes, November 7, 2014), asking her to relate her response to her husband’s father. This was very difficult for the humble and gentle mannered mother who did want to make matters worse. She only explained that it was unfortunate that her children did not get to know their other Grandfather, the formidable Louis Norwegian, who would have set them straight. His presence would have lessened the weight of prejudice that she and her children endured in the ignorant air of racism in that time in that place, albeit with her children’s own people.
Noticing experiences of how she viewed children “raised” in the modern NWT schools:

A few years later, Margaret started to experience homesickness after having spent close to two decades away from her home. She decided to return to her home community in 1997. She said that gradually she noticed the changes in her community. When I asked her the final set of questions about the modern education system and how children were “raised” in the modern schools, she bypassed the question, and went into describing the harsh realities of her community instead – a post-residential school era dealing with the intergenerational trauma and racism resulting from a previous generation of hegemonic Eurocentrism. Only at the end of the section did she make a brief commentary about modern schooling. I realized that her experience base was as a community advocate and counsellor, so I did not push the education question, but rather allowed the inquiry space to flow naturally.

Returning home to face her community’s harsh realities:

At the beginning of her time back in the community, she was asked to travel extensively as a community representative on various committees. She noted:

I did extensive travelling to regional meetings, Dene Nation meetings and elders’ council. At that time, I wasn’t … I was young and not considered an elder, so I went and I approach them and I’ve asked if I could attend their meeting. Provided I was told that, I just sit and listen and that's something hard for me to do, but nevertheless, I did it. But through that and they keep on saying, that we're losing our young people, our young people are falling through the cracks ... the elders were saying that they're losing their younger people. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 13)

Only after listening to her people, her Elders, did she begin to take real notice and develop authentic concern for her community; after all this was her home, her people. She went onto to describe several major flaws that she noticed in her community's activities related to the changes associated with the new century of modern conveniences, like television and “booze and drugs.” She recounted a story that was told to her:

I was talking to this other person, he was saying ... as the kids were growing up like, as our children were growing up, and as the grandchildren were growing up ... He said a lot of us from our generation
were so much into booze and drugs and that. By the time, sometimes, you know, we decide to sober up, we realize our children were grown up ... Yeah and then he says, "The hard part of this is that once you kind of you clean up and decide that you don't want your children to follow your footstep, they throw whatever you've done back into your face." And he says, "A lot of parents don't want to hear that, and so they kind of just... leave it alone. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 17)

As well, Margaret noticed deeper issues than the blatant problems that were visible. She described the next layer of complications as being lack of communication. She told me:

A sense of responsibility for raising your own children is not really, is not really there. I was talking to a couple of young people from Jean Marie, like they were getting married but they have family. And I always remember what the guy said, that they have to go to Yellowknife to the Trapper’s Lodge, for some sort of religious training before they were, they get married. And I remember they came back and I happen to be at their house when they came back and they were so excited and said, "I didn't realize you could sit down and talk to your children." So over and over, it was, I heard that. People really didn't, don't know how to talk to their children ... So there is the communication gap within a family. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 16)

And then she described the even deeper problem of lack of spirituality as the root cause of her community's detour on the road to capability and healthy living. She described:

I think while listening to all the elders and ... observing the young people and the older people. I think I came to realize the issue in that, the part is not very, very developed is their spirituality ... I find that there's ... It's lacking with the young people and I think it's also, had a lot to do with the young parents, they are raising their children totally different. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 14)

With these ubiquitous challenges ahead of her people, Margaret wondered about the period known as the Berger Inquiry in the mid 1970’s that finalized the demise of a major pipeline into the NWT. Berger’s completed two-volume report, Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland, highlighted the fact that the Mackenzie Valley was the home to many Indigenous peoples, and that an intended pipeline would immeasurably change their lives. Thus he recommended against such a pipeline while the Dene people worked towards
gaining strength as a nation. The era immediately afterwards initiated the talks on self-determination in the NWT, also known as self-government. In view of all the adverse issues that she saw in her community at the turn of the century, Margaret questioned whether her people were ready for such a huge step, so she went to consult her main source of information and history: her mother. She said that her discussion with her mother was an eye opening dialogue that not only made sense to her, but also made her realize that more healing time was of the essence. She described her mother’s words outlining personal responsibility as the main stumbling block for continued growth towards the capable steps of self-government. Her mother’s words said:

Personal responsibility for oneself is got to be given back to the person, I think ... Well okay, so it's one of the things I struggle with, with myself. And I remember one time I went to see my mother. I briefly worked for Dehcho First Nation negotiation ... whatever is being negotiated in the Dehcho region, it has to be brought back to all the people, so that people are on the same page as the negotiators. And so, self-government is one of the topics, so I went to see my mother, my mother was living at home then ... I went to her and ... talked to her about self-government and then she sat there for a long time. And she said, "That is impossible!" I said, "Why is it impossible ... for our people to be in the self-government position?" And she said, for years and years, when the government were first came over, it's almost like ... They've took our thinking away from us and wherever they are, they are like from Ottawa, they make decisions for us, as to how we're going to live. And she said, we never question it, we just went ahead and did what we was, we were told is good for us. "And so we have years and years of being so dependent upon the government, to make these life-decisions for us. There's just no way that we're going to go into self-government," she said ... So well, even with education and health, health is like you know, we were isolated, we've use our own herbs and our elders taught us about the herbs and we manage and to cure a lot of illnesses. And then the government came and told us, "Well no, there's no scientific thing to support that this is good." You know, so in a way, they've told us that what we do is not good, what they have for us is better so ... That's one of the things my mother talked about too, that you know, they got us to the point where, you know, it's so dependent on their methods and their medicines. And of course ... like they're so smart, they just know how to ... a lot of things, a lot of ... knowledge and things but ... She said what we knew also, you know was, and to, for us to just kind of let go of everything, was not how we should have went. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 15-16)

Her mother’s words reverberated as they continued into not only politics and health, but also into education. She continued:
Education was the same thing, like you know, we just kind of moved back and ... Send the kids to school and that was it, like yeah. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 16)

Margaret realized that her people, in fact the whole Dene Nation of the NWT, were still reeling from the detrimental, horrific effects of one of the worst chapters in the Dene history, namely the continued colonialism and racism, and past residential schooling period, and would require time to heal, time to re-establish their worldviews and strength as Dene people, essentially, time to re-build their communities. At this part of the conversation, Margaret made the critical reference to education, in pointing out the major responsibility that education had, to help restore the Dene people to their rightful balance of past traditions and future nation building. She said that it would begin with teaching and learning in schools, and highlighted the issue of not enough Aboriginal teachers. In bringing forth the issue, she implied that more has to be done to increase the number of Aboriginal teachers in this vulnerable state of rebuilding. She said:

I did read the, went through the K-6 Dene Kede. And I really like the way it was put together. But in order to, you know they talk about the spiritual part, you know what it means ... and stuff but ... In order I think for us to be successful in the Dene Kede is that, the teacher need to be about the same level as those elders that help put that together ... I was thinking in terms of Dene teachers that would have a truer understanding of ... the stuff that's in the Dene Kede. And we have so little of them. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 17-18)

Margaret's description revealed the complexity of Aboriginal education currently in the NWT. With so few trained Aboriginal teachers, many of whom are losing their languages and culture, and with so few parents who know the Dene traditions and languages, the efforts and strategies to re-vitalize NWT Aboriginal education become so apparent.

Moving ahead to a new century of hope rooted in traditions:

But Margaret’s stories did not end on a negative note, as she wanted to instill hope for the future capable generations. Her words resonated with wisdom that avoided the usual dysfunctional messages of denial, blame, anger or self-pity, and she directed her attention to the core of strength, healing and capability. Indeed this is where Margaret
gained her own capable qualities that grounded her identity and relationships. She said simply that change has to start at home, with the basic concepts of Dene language, culture, values beginning in the home. She emphasized:

They [young parents] were more into the Western culture than their own, so the spoken language at home is no longer Slavey, it's English and so ... Like I said the child's thinking language ends up being English and they really don't have too much knowledge of who they are. And one of my aunts has said that in order for her to communicate with her grandchildren, she's the one that had to learn English, not the other way. And then the young parents kind of look to the education system to teach their children the Dene values, cultural principles, whatever. Yeah so, I remember we were talking about that, at the DEA and the chief came and said that, "More emphasis should be put on language." And stuff but, I just told him that we need ... The responsibility starts at home, and we can't look at the education system to teach our children how to be Dene. It has to start at home. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 14)

With the Dene home as the core building block, Margaret also emphasized the continued attention and learning about traditional knowledge and traditional parenting. When I described Margaret as a living example of 'a capable person,' she diverted this attention to another story, of course. This one was about a young scholar whom she saw in Yellowknife, a recent Harvard graduate, who said that she was successful because of her strong Aboriginal upbringing and her sense of self. Margaret described:

She said it's because that her parents had grounded her in her culture that she was able, she's balanced and she's able to take on whatever. Yeah so I was always impressed with this young lady. (First Interview, December 13, 2013, p. 23)

Likewise with Margaret: I was honoured to have her as part of this study, as her personal experience narratives highlighted the essential components that influence the growth and development of 'a capable person,' on the landscape of her storied life in the NWT.

5.5.7. Denise McKay’s Story

My late mother-in-law’s (Mamma’s) older sister, Auntie Denise, was one of my first choices of Elders to involve in my study. With Mamma’s early passing from cancer in
2002 at only 61 years old; Auntie Denise served as our “mother” for years afterwards. We would phone her often. She was so gracious and patient with us. Whenever we had questions about family genealogies, or the Chipewyan language or culture, we would call Auntie Denise; she was like our NWT Aboriginal encyclopedia. I decided to involve my auntie in this study, because she is one of the most capable Elders that I know. As Wilson (2008) indicates it may seem like nepotism to involve your relatives in personal or professional matters “to people unfamiliar with the Indigenous ways of doing things; [however,] nepotism does not have to carry the negative stigma that it often does in the dominant society … In healthy Indigenous communities, the strength between already established bonds between people can be used to uplift” (p. 81) projects or endeavours. With this in mind, I invited Denise into the study.

For over thirty years, I have known this gentle and generous Elder whose heart is as big as her knowledge base. She was raised in the bush; her talents included an expert level of Chipewyan language use and traditional knowledge, both skill sets that are becoming increasingly rare and precious in this new century of Eurocentric dominance, scientific superiority, and digital technology. I was grateful when she agreed to be interviewed, as I wanted to preserve and learn from her personal experience narratives that related to ‘a capable person;’ as she was a definite example of one. As such, I drove through two early winter snowstorms to get Fort Resolution, NT where this wise Chipewyan Métis Elder resides. Fortunately, my husband was with me for safety and company. On both visits, we drove in the later part of the afternoon, just in time for the big fat snowflakes to hurl into our windshield, making the visibility low, the roads slippery and the drive slow. As a result, we did not arrive at her house until late in the evening, which was no problem for Auntie Denise. She would welcome us in with open arms, supper would be ready, and we would camp over at her house for several days because she would get mad if we stayed only one night. Her home was warm and welcoming: we loved her company, her hospitality, her storytelling, and her cooking; she reminded us of Mamma. Besides, as the McKay matriarch of eleven children and extended family who lived close by, her house was a flow of family: a constant stream of visitors and phone calls. The one I recall the most was when her granddaughter, Kaylee, brought her over three ptarmigan that she harvested the night before – skinned, cut up and packaged with
love for her grandmother. Such was the cycle of traditional skills, respect and reciprocity that Denise had instilled in the next generation of her family.

**Her understanding of ‘a capable person:’**

At the beginning of the interview, Denise did not fully understand the term, ‘a capable person,’ as her lived experiences of inferiority and poverty as an Aboriginal youngster, and later woman, made her believe that capable meant having Western scholastic and intellectual book knowledge that were deemed superior in her era of Eurocentric hegemony and Government Indian agents, which dictated movement for the Aboriginal people in her birth place on the Talton River region of the NWT. As Denise did not learn to read and write until her middle teens, she still harboured this habit, so when I started asking her questions about ‘a capable person,’ she became apprehensive and hesitant. I had never seen her this way, and then recognized what was happening. I remembered Linda Smith’s (2012) descriptions of Western anthropologists traveling to New Zealand to research the Aborigines, emphasizing later that these Indigenous peoples later deemed “research” as one of the dirtiest words in their language because of the exploitation and misrepresentation of those early researchers. Instinctively I realized that I was placing Denise in this same vulnerable state, albeit a different parallel, so I quickly sidestepped onto more familiar territory that would reveal her capable qualities. Still momentarily, I experienced the power that she assumed that I wielded simply because I was the researcher, the educator, almost like the Indian agent. I was shaken thinking of the damage done to the Aboriginal peoples of the past century because of those who enjoyed the command of dominance, authority, and control over those them deemed less knowledgeable. But because I knew that Denise carried her wisdom, gifts and beauties in her stories I proceeded in that direction. Once she felt comfortable in her storytelling zone, she could not stop illuminating her capable self. She described her understanding in terms of her bush life. She recounted:

Me I was brought up in the bush, yeah ... [A capable person] knows what to do in the bush ... Me and Doris [her younger sister] were really, really good in the bush ... we’d always set rabbit snares, first thing in the morning we set rabbit snares, we visit rabbit snares and then we pack cold water. Then we’d haul wood because my other brothers went fishing in other place too ... And then we pack spruce boughs for the floor, every second day ... Me, I know how to, you know, bring the spruce on the axe
handle, yeah. Big, just like big house, boy. Doris use to use that tarp eh. Yeah we do stuff, all kinds of stuff, my dad use to make ... like in the bush, make big house with spruce, keep the meat in there. ... And then my stepmother always made moose hide, we help her and caribou hide too ... Caribou hide you wash it and you scrape it. Some of them ... they use it like white stroud ... [In] April, you put it outside, it just gets really white, gets soft too eh. And then, most of them just smoke the hide. Me and Doris, we're always making babiche ... Yeah, and then, like sometimes you cut and you tie your babiche with the ashes and you never undo it. Never, never, yeah ... And my stepmom use to make, you know, thread with the sinew ... from the tenderloin yeah ... She teared little thin strips then she just twist it like this ... They use it for sewing, to make homemade nets too, fish nets ... I do everything in the bush with my parents, they taught us all kinds of ... And me and Doris, we could work outside and inside, just the same. [When asked about male and female work:] Dad use to go hunting, I use to go with him. And then he killed caribou, cut the neck off, cut right here, made skin ... Just a little bit froze, easy to skin. Takes about 15 minutes to skin one caribou ... And we use to go out on the lake, you know, with my dad, pull a string for him 'cause he's fishing. Yeah, it's so cold ... Holy cow, it's ever cold ... I don't know how in the heck we dress up, not very warm, but when it get cold, we use to chase each another to keep us warm ... [When asked about clothing:] caribou hide for parka ... rabbit hide for our ... just like a duffle, eh. We use that to keep us warm. And we use, rabbit hair both inside too, just keep our head warm. [When asked about all parts of the animals:] In the springtime too, they use to dry [musk]rats. They got to be just dry, dry, dry. Take all the kidney, the heart, the liver, you know, and lungs, take it out because got to be nothing inside 'cause that way, keep away from flies eh. Got to keep it smoked, got to keep it dry, dry, and then you put it away. Even make caribou hide, big bag, they keep it nice and fresh in there, like just fresh like. They do that to beaver too ... Mom dry all this, even fish, just dry, dry. Even rabbit, you got to dry, no fridge those days, got to dry, dry, dry and put it away. In summertime, everybody get together in town here, then when you're short of meat and you soak it over night and boil it ... My mom use to dry meat about half an inch thick, she cut and dry, dry, dry ... It was dried, it don't waste nothing ... [When asked about feasts:] So when we come to town like summer time, just like people get a little holiday eh? Till the treaty day and then soak it over night, use bacon to boil it, it's really good ... Yeah, and then after treaty day, everybody goes in the bush again, the Slave River. Hunting, you know, make meat again. [When asked about hunting:] Well they hunt for moose, then caribou. And those days, they eat bear too, yeah bear because it's really good too ... They make lots of lard too from bear grease ... Yeah, even moose. People work hard! They don't even throw bones away. [When asked about bones:] They chop it [bones] with an axe and then they boil it... and until they take its lard [marrow], it's just nice and, you know, soft eh. Really good for dry meat, too, yeah. [When asked about other foods:] Same thing with when the goose all coming back in spring, same thing they make dry meat with that too. They put it away, yeah. Ever work good on meat. Well it's the only way they could eat, they
don't eat from the store ... So there was no vegetables, you cook meat with bannock, cook fish, you eat it with bannock. [When asked what they get from store:] Yeah, we hardly didn't eat from the store, just you know ... flour, tea, baking powder, stuff like that, sugar, yeah. [When asked about treats:] And they get little, we get maybe biscuit kind of, we only get treats, only on Sunday ... Sometimes biscuits, sometimes you know, candies ... Once a week, Sunday! ... About four. Not very much eh. I was so happy for Sunday, all the time. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 3-5)

Although it could have gone on for longer, I ended Denise’s long description of capable traditional abilities on a funny note. As well, I wanted to include the whole narrative account, as it revealed the rich, resourceful, and relevant qualities that portrayed her image as ‘a capable person.’ From this wide range of traditional and seasonal activities, Denise learned to form her sense of self and relationality by using her competencies that developed in what may been perceived as adverse conditions in the modern sense, but showed the tenacity, resiliency, and ingenuity of her Dene people, which were passed onto the young Denise. In turn, she transferred these same abilities into her capable life as an adult, mother and Elder. At the end of her description; however, she compared her way of life to today’s children who live in a world of such modern conveniences and comfort. She said:

The kids, they live just like in heaven now, compared to my day. No fridge, stove, no running water. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 12)

Denise added later (Journal Notes, November 9, 2014) that because of the relative ease of living, people nowadays have a lot time because of refrigeration, electricity and water systems. As such, she advised that they need to use their time wisely, and honour not only how their people lived long ago, but also how to use the same capable qualities that they used to survive in the bush, to advance the Aboriginal way to raise good children, families and communities. She said that there is too much time spent on other more negative lifestyles that damage children. She said the Elders long ago worked hard for their children’s survival, now the children of today have to work hard for their children’s growth and well-being. Such is the Aboriginal cycle that has been overlooked and must be revitalized.
Growing up experiences of how she was raised:

Denise's Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing developed on the land, with a benevolent, spinster aunt who custom adopted Denise and six other children. At the time, she secretly questioned the situation, but never verbalized it. She related:

I was wondering why... Now my dad stayed in Rocher River. He come and visit, I call him my dad, and her my mom, but they don't live together. But you can't ask a question those days, never ask... My brothers, they stay with my dad, was wondering but ... (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 5)

Aside from the occasional musing, she really did not pursue the question, as she had no reason. She loved her mother / aunt wholeheartedly. She tells her sacred story of when her aunt disclosed the truth of their relationship to the young Denise. She described.

I was raised by my auntie, and I really think it's my really mother. I didn't know, she was my auntie yeah, and she ever treats you ... She's such a good woman, kind heart. [But] when I turned 13, mom told me, "Sit down I want to talk to you." It's the only time she talks to me when I do something wrong, like I tease kids or ... But I don't know, I didn't do nothing wrong but I was wondering, "Wonder why does she want to ... I didn't do nothing wrong." You know, I guess she wants to tell me something ... And then she told me, "My girl, you understand things now, I want to talk to you." She said, "Your mom died when you're two years old, I'm not your really mother, I'm your auntie, I raised you." I just start crying just like somebody beat me up. She start crying too. "Yeah you got to know my girl, said I love you. "I love you with all my heart," she said, "But you got to know. Your mom died, that's why I raised you, you're my girl. I love you with all my ... You got to know my girl." She said, "Your dad is my brother." Then I know eh, we have a good cry though. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 6)

In her aunt's home of kindness and love, Denise learned to develop her sense of self, unhindered by an odd situation between her mother and father. She had many other "siblings," meager but healthy food, religious instruction, and an attentive parent to guide her as she found her way into relationality in her extended family and community. She
described her aunt’s “strong voice” that was not overbearing but made sense to those in her care. Denise described:

Ah she’s kind woman, never gets mad at me, never yell at us, never swore at us. She's always cleaning in the morning when we get up or she's clean too. She gets us up at 5 o'clock in the morning, she cook, not very much stuff like I told you, just meat. In the morning we get up, cook porridge for us. The next day is hot cakes, those two every morning. And she use to make some syrup from the bush too, last us all winter, she makes it [for us to] use it for pancake, yeah. My mom, she ever treat us good, she always talk to us, she learn us how to pray. She's a good Catholic, strong Catholic too, goes to church. Even when we stay in the bush, she'll get together Sunday, we pray and we say rosaries. She always talk to us by the bible, she reads in Chipewyan. She always talk to us, she's got really strong voice, just like you want to listen to her. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 6)

As I reviewed my notes on the follow-up visit that I had with Denise, I noticed again that she emphasized her reverence for her auntie for raising her so well (Journal Notes, November 9, 2014), as otherwise, she did not know how she would have been raised. She explained that many of the children who were orphans, or with only a father like her; they ended up in the residential schools of the time. She said that she had to spend only one year in 1943 in St. Joseph’s Indian Residential School in Fort Resolution, NT. But she did not like it so she was able to return to Rocher River with her family. Thanks to her Auntie Harriet, she was one of the fortunate children.

**Shifting back to her childhood on the land:**

For Denise, life on the land was hard; however, I believed that she described it as challenging because of the lack of financial support for her aunt and the many children in her care. Although there was never enough money, her aunt's resourcefulness and resiliency taught the young Denise the capable qualities that she would carry forth into her own motherhood. She recounted:

Well there's no welfare those days, no family allowance, you know? It's a hard way we live on the land and they raise us like that. Makes us clothes, make dress for me, you know. Yeah, moccasins, parka, mitts. She teach me everything. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 7)
And those cultural teachings took advantage of the abundance of the land that provided for the families, in all its seasons. Her aunt ensured that her children learned in the fresh air and open spaces at Jean River and Stony Island, NT – places that were rich with cranberries in the summer, fish in the fall, caribou in the winter, and birch syrup in the spring. All the while, in between the endless responsibilities of harvesting, her aunt would be working on her moose hides, a cultural activity that would turn any weak-armed researcher exhausted after only a few minutes. I can remember scraping Mamma’s moose hides when we used to do school cultural camps in the mid 1990’s: after only an hour, I was beat and sweating, although I thought back to all those tough Dene women of long ago. Even back then almost twenty years ago, I made sure to honour them with a prayer for all their hard work scraping and preparing the moose hides for their families’ clothing, equipment and sled dog harnesses for their traveling. Now that is capable!

**Parental experiences of how she had raised her children:**

For Denise, she drew from her past experiences to raise her own her large family. Fortunately, she had a well of many useful and capable experiences from which to draw, thanks to her beloved Auntie Harriet. Denise’s children’s learning was shaped and guided by their great aunt’s generous child rearing techniques, demonstrating the cyclical development of identities, relationships, place and time of this family.

**Moving through the generations with how her auntie raised her, to how she raised her children, to caring for her auntie until her death:**

When asked how she raised her own children, without hesitation, Denise spoke of her generous aunt who raised her with the full love and attention of a mother. Denise never knew the difference. She told me:

> I raised my kids just like the way my mom raised me. Yeah I talk to them, and then I asked them to be kind … Like I talk to them how to be kind to people, you know, to love … My mom said, "If you see somebody right away, to be kind to them." You talk to somebody, you say hello … makes you feel good. You don't ... ignore them, makes you feel bad, don't care for you, yeah. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 10)

She taught her children the simple but powerful lessons that teaches the differences between right and wrong, exercises the kindness that knows no bounds,
understands that mistakes are a part of learning, and follows the respect of her Ancestors. As I listened to Denise’s stories of how she raised her children, I thought back to my own Grandmother who had the patience of a saint, but every now and then would lose it, especially when she was approaching menopause. Poor Grandma having to raise a hyperactive and mischievous kid like me along with my brothers. I recall one time when Grandma had made a whole batch of bread, about forty loaves carefully distributed over all the counter space in the kitchen, coming fresh from the oven, and certainly not ready to cut. But the smell was irresistible. I begged Grandma to cut off just one slice. No, she shouted, and busied herself in the bedroom. I skulked away down the hallway into the kitchen, turned my back, saw that she was busy, and quickly ran to the drawer, grabbed the bread knife, and sliced the crust. Just one, I thought. I was just finished cutting when I saw Grandma coming towards me, her nostrils flaring. But she was too late! I took off into the freedom of the Manitoba hay fields, with my prized crust of fresh bread. I can only imagine similar scenes that Denise had to endure with her own large brood children to feed, clothe and raise, particularly those with big appetites who had to wait and learn patience around her delicious cooking. Her care, cooking, attention to serving, kindness were part of her strong identity and relationality, that served her as a mother and caregiver, particularly for her aged aunt in her last months of living. She recounted one more sacred story about her aunt. She described:

When she was dying, I took her in, my goodness. I looked after her for 9 months. She's paralyzed, she can't take care of herself ... I look after her, just like baby ... Heavy, but I pack her, I was strong that time. Yeah, she feel bad because she think I work hard on her, yeah ... One time, I dressed her up, put her by the window, she's just crying. I thought maybe she miss her friends, I told mom, "You miss your friends?" "No." I said, "Why you're crying?" "Cause you work so hard on me, just like a baby." I said, "Mom, don't think that." I said, "It's my turn to look after you, you looked after me, you raised me, it's my turn to look after you." And she's happy ... Yeah, I look after her till almost ... she died at home. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 7)

The tears poured down her face when she told that story, remembering her beloved aunt who gave her life for the children in her care. Denise confessed in a later interview (Journal Notes, November 9, 2014) that she felt so guilty when she had to take her mother to the hospital in the last few days of her life. She thought the doctor could save her, or so she hoped, but when he informed her that there was nothing that could be
done, she brought her mother home. Right to her last breath, Denise was at her side like a genuine daughter following through the cycle of life and death. She was a true example of ‘a capable person’ as the spirit of her mother passed into the next life.

This deep respect that she had for her aunt was also instilled into the child rearing techniques that she used to raise her own children. Denise spoke not only about respect, but also learning with kindness, as well as making mistakes. She told me:

[When] I raised my kids ... I talk[ed] to them, and then I asked them to be kind ... Like I talk to them how to be kind to people, you know, to love ... My mom said, "If you see somebody right away, to be kind to them." You talk to somebody, you say hello ... makes you feel good. You don't ... ignore them, makes you feel bad, don't care for you, yeah ... But sometimes the kids they could make mistakes too, even when you talk nice to them ... [so you have to] talk to them. We [she and her husband] raised that many kids, not one of our kids talk back to us ... Because you know, they know that they have to respect us. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 10-11)

In raising her children, I recognized that Denise believed firmly in family values and kindness that she practiced in all aspects of her life. She and her husband, Edward, gained strength from each other, in spite of hardships and adversity, and developed a resilient marriage that lasted almost sixty years, and several generations. These capable qualities allowed Denise to develop a robust sense of self and relationality that provided her with the strength that she needed to continue in her life with so many children, and ensuing challenges.

**Moving from the bush to town for her children’s education:**

Denise’s life as a mother and caregiver involved many sacrifices that included moving from their familiar bush life to town when her children were young. Both Denise and Edward emphasized that since they did not learn to read and write until later in their lives, they believed that a more literate, Western-based education was better for their children. As such, they spent most of their family life in town, only returning occasionally to bush life. Denise described:

I never stayed in the bush with them most of the time [because] they got to go school, me I never went to school. And Edward said, him
doesn’t know how to read and write, nothing! I said, "Don’t want our kids to be like us." (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 10)

In this era of Eurocentric hegemony and superiority, this Aboriginal husband and wife team held the misguided belief that their Indigenous language and worldviews were inferior to the dominant society, judging solely on their literacy skills. Unfortunately, the political, social, moral and educational system placed little value on the vast knowledge base of this rich Indigenous land and people. It was only until much later into the new century, that Denise shared with me how the school system finally began celebrating her and her husband’s Aboriginal cultural teachings. She chuckled in saying that now all the kids in school wanted to be like them. (Journal Notes, November 9, 2014) Fortunately, the days, which made Denise and her husband feel ashamed and inferior, and having to endure the ill-fated and uncalled-for racism and prejudice of the twentieth century, were fewer. As Denise described later, instead the tables had turned, and they were invited to the schools.

**Noticing experiences of how she viewed children “raised” in the modern NWT schools:**

As we moved ahead to the final set of questions about the modern education system and how children were “raised” in the modern schools, I realized that Denise has finally come into her own. She is proud to be an Aboriginal person, a highly respected Elder at that, indeed ‘a capable person.’ She now spends her time and energy sharing her many talents, gifts, storytelling, as well as her superb cooking.

**Moving forward to education today:**

In an era of increasing respect for Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and believing, Denise added that both she and her late husband have contributed to Aboriginal culture based education in the new century. She shared with me that the school system had finally recognized and valued their Indigenous worldview, language and traditional knowledge. She described:

Yeah. Edward and me, we [would] go to school, talk to kids ... [telling stories] like how you survive in the bush and stuff like that. You know, learning how to set traps and how to cook something, how to make your
fire ... Tell them how they [need to] know culture, so tell them about it. Me, I knew lots about the bush 'cause I was brought up in the bush ... Yeah, they like it when you tell them stories, some of them, yeah ... they’re learning how to make dry fish, dry meat, making bannock ... We set rabbit snares, nets, you know, they go fishing, all that ... That's my job, that's why I tell story to kids that come to my tent, my tipi. (First Interview, December 14, 2013, p. 15-16)

In addition to her continued involvement in Aboriginal culture based education, Denise also shares her Chipewyan language skills with her community. Recently she was presented with a prestigious honour from the NWT South Slave Divisional Education Council. In 2012, she received the Excellence in Education Award in recognition for her exemplary contribution and outstanding commitment to the Chipewyan Dictionary Project. In spite of many challenging periods in her life, such as having to wage the battle of inferiority, shame, residential schooling, and racism, Denise kept her healthy sense of identity as an Aboriginal person, as well as continually providing an example of love and kindness for her late husband, family and community.

5.5.8. Ted Blondin’s Story

It was a sunny winter day in November on the road to Behchoko to conduct my first interview with the NWT Elder, Ted Blondin. Since the drive on the northern Highway #3, southwest of the NWT’s capital, Yellowknife, was only an hour away from where I lived, and the road was clear, it gave me a lot of time to gather my thoughts and ideas on how to begin my time with this well-known community leader, education advocate, and astute politician. As one of the main negotiators for the Tłı̨chǫ self-government agreement, Ted’s diplomatic prowess served his people well in negotiating a self-government landmark decision that took place in 2005, which established the newly formed Tłı̨chǫ Government (TG). Currently, Ted commits his time and leadership to act as the Chairperson of the Tłı̨chǫ Community Services Agency (TCSA), a TG association that provides services in the three fields of health, social services and education: a uniquely designed approach that delivers essential services in a more centralized way for the Tłı̨chǫ people.
As an advocate and champion for his people, Ted ensures that he stayed on top of many innovative and creative ways to provide the best services for his people: he keeps his pulse on the happenings in his community to make connections where they were needed. Ted also keeps himself busy in all avenues of development in the Tłı̨chǫ region. In addition, he has taken on a new role recently, as a grandfather, which I am sure adds much delight to his already full life. As a North Slavey born Mountain Dene, Ted Blondin was “adopted” into the Tłı̨chǫ fold when he married his Tłı̨chǫ wife, Violet Camsell, in the early 1970s. Because of his well-respected family lineage and background, his calm mannerisms, his quick intellect, and clear communication capabilities, Ted soon rose to power as one of the main spokespersons for the Tłı̨chǫ people, in areas of cultural, political, economic and social development. His innate leadership skills, and newly garnered role as an Elder, have made this gentle and patient man, a key player in the early stages of this new Aboriginal government.

I knew Ted through the NWT education and government circles, and had always admired his presence, particularly his focused manner of speaking, and ability to network ideas in such a way to bring people together. I can remember at a recent education meeting that I attended, Ted acted as a “gatekeeper” for Aboriginal peoples’ worldviews, ensuring that the conversation took into account the unique perspectives of his people’s traditions, culture and epistemology. In my mind, he is ‘a capable person,” so when he agreed to be a part of this study, I was elated. I knew there was going to be a lot to learn from this wise Elder, as his many years in the Tłı̨chǫ negotiations and politics, along with his leadership as the TSCA Board Chair, and his recent induction into the NWT Hall of Fame, would provide much fodder for this research on ‘a capable person.”

**His understanding of ‘a capable person:’**

Ted began the interview by describing his understanding of ‘a capable person’ in terms of his identity, family and the respect that he carried for his Aboriginal people. He started his description by referencing his father, the well-known Dene storyteller and author, George Blondin, from whom Ted gained his love for stories and the land. He shared:
Well from what my father has been telling me, and through his stories and raising me up, is that ... we have come from a very long line, of a proud family, and he's written a book that shows about our family. Both sides, the Ayha side and Blondin side. So... and a lot of the things that they use to do, so I have a lot to ... a big role to even try to maintain that role and that responsibility. To my children. So this is what he's taught me in his stories ... It's the respect that I have to carry ... and carry forward for my children ... And there's the respect for others too, like I deal with a lot of different family groups here and that respect is, this is why I'm bringing up in some of our discussions ... I remember our discussions with the elders, and even in school, that the young kids really have to understand that whole idea of respect. 'Cause it's a huge... it's a huge element of who they are, and they have to respect themselves. If they stay away from abusing alcohol and drugs. That respect has to be for themselves. And them to live in the community with others, there's that respect for others in their community that they live in also. And because in today's world ... we have to respect elders also and what they do and making sure that you don't upset their cultural ways. And so, I think respect falls a long ways that has a lot to do with capable person, throughout their life. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 1-2)

From this story, I realized the importance of respect and its close cousin, responsibility, in Ted's life. He made several emphatic references to these principles throughout the interview showing the major role that they played in his life. He spoke with empathy and conviction not only from his family's experiences, but also from their connection to the land. He added:

That’s the other part of being a capable person: knowing where you came from. They lived off the land and they lived ... on caribou, they went fishing. They’re many stories of them going on the land, living off the land for two years at a time. My father was out trapping with his father for two years. World War II started, he didn’t even know there was a war on, he was out in the bush ... they spent so much time on the land. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 3)

The reverence that Ted carried for his father, as well as his grandfather, resonated throughout our time together. Ted emphasized how his father taught him respect, right from when he was a small boy, along with setting high expectations for his son. As I sat listening, Ted went on to explain these expectations that were embedded into his sense of self at a young age, and to describe the reciprocity that he practiced in setting these same high expectations for his own grandchildren. He recounted:
Well, my father when, as early as I can remember, sat me on his lap and he said, "My son, you're going to get educated and then when you finish your school, you're going to continue to work for your people." And I'm 61 right now and I'm still working for them, in many different ways. And so that to me, what was embedded in me, at a young age is still something that I carry forward. It's that little element should be built into all of these little kids ... [So] I talked to my grandchildren. I walk around here, we stop by the lake down there, and we throw pebbles into the water. And I say, I tell them at a young age, "See this water here? There's fish in there and when you go to school, you're going to understand more about the fish. When you talk to your other grandparents, they're going to take you on the land and you're going eat that fish. You want that fish to be good, healthy fish. Now when you get older, you're the one who's going to be left looking after this land." And so, those kinds of thinking that you embed into the young kids, 'cause they understand responsibility. (First Interview, November 17, p. 2)

Ted believed that in setting expectations for his children, and in repeating these expectations throughout their childhood, so that these expectations stay with them into adulthood. Children learn to develop their sense of self, then can rise to the challenges set for them, remembering the stories of their grandparents, parents or other family members. In turn, as these young adults expand their thinking into their relationships outside of themselves, that is: with their people, community and culture, they remember the belief that their family had in them, giving them more confidence and conviction to rise to these expectations. I related to Ted's story about these teachings of responsibility, as when I young, my grandparents always told me that I would go to university like my auntie. Somewhere deep inside of me, I believed them because I loved them. My auntie completed university and became a teacher in northern Manitoba where she has taught Aboriginal children in elementary schools for the past forty years. Her success was my aspiration. I can remember staying with her in some cool apartments on Notre Dame Avenue, as she attended the University of Winnipeg. She set the example, and told me stories of her learning; I wanted to be like her. And so when Ted emphasized that the way to reinforce these cultural teachings was through stories, many stories, I concurred wholeheartedly. Ted went onto describe how stories played an important role in this spiral learning of expectation setting, responsibility and repetition. He said:

My father was a storyteller and so ... to make his, make what he says, what advice he gives me stronger. He would back it up with the stories, and some of these stories were very funny, they were entertaining. But
there’s meaning behind them and so he told lots of stories throughout my life. Lots of stories about my grandfather and my great grandfather, and these stories made me very proud of my family. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 3)

When I visited Ted on the follow-visit, he showed me a painting of his father’s and grandfather’s stories in the form of a series of images depicted by a local artist (Follow-up interview, December 1, 2014): the legends and the folklore seemed fictional, but Ted’s telling were full of animation and authenticity narrating the stories of: The Legend of the Talking Bear; Falling in the Ice Crack, Partner Left His Friend on an Island so He Could Have His Wife; Legend of the Giant Crocodile that Once Existed; and Stories of Yamoria. He described each scene with the details and delight of a storyteller, relishing in his people’s travels in the mountain region of the Sahtu, while his Ancestors smiled down upon him. He learned first hand the power and purpose of storytelling in the development of self and relationality towards becoming ‘a capable person.’

Growing up experiences of how he was raised:

As Ted began to tell the experiences of his upbringing, his storytelling moved deftly back and forth between his grandfather’s and his father’s generations. I realized that I had to pay close attention and be alert to the events and dates, as sometimes I would lose track of what era he was describing: I began confusing the generations, especially with the use of the similar antecedents of he and him to describe both his father and grandfather, while Ted moved with the ease through his personal experience narrative. Such was the fluid nature of the temporal, social and situational dimensions in telling, living, retelling and reliving (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of his stories. Without much prompting, Ted continued to describe not only his own upbringing, but first went into the fascinating details of the two generations of his capable grandfather and father. From listening to Ted’s stories, I realized the generative growth of his sense of identity, community and land, which drew from these extraordinary family members.

Sliding back and forth between the generations of his grandfather’s and father’s tragedy, and continued life on the land:
By sliding back and forth between two generations, Ted told the heartbreaking story of his grandfather and father losing their entire family in the flu epidemic that spread to the Sahtu region in the summer of 1928. History recorded that the virulent strain of the influenza virus was spread to the Dene and Inuvialuit people from the passengers aboard the Hudson’s Bay Company’s supply ship, SS Distributor, on its annual trip down the Mackenzie River (Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre Archives, 1995). In that era, the Dene people had scarcely any immunity against this merciless European disease that nearly wiped out a whole generation of NWT Aboriginal peoples. As I listened, Ted described the tragedy that both his grandfather and father endured. Ted recounted:

And when the flu epidemic hit when he (Ted’s grandfather, Edward Blondin) came to town to trade in Fort Norman … And people were just dying then, so they come off the land with moose and they would provide it to families. And they spent days, just digging graves and burying people but because they lived off the land, they were very healthy. And he didn't get hit by the flu. My father had came from a family of twelve, every one of them died, he was the only one that survived … So the flu hit everybody … They didn't have to do that but they did it because they worked for their people … What he did in those days, other people recognized him for doing that [taking care of others.] … I still travel and meet people in Deline and Tulita, and they have a lot of respect for my grandparents, my father and towards me. So that's very important to me. I think that helped me be the person I am, that capable person. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 4)

Through sheer grit and toughness, his grandfather survived and continued to live on the land, but his grandfather’s son was taken by the church of the day. It seemed that since the young son was without his mother, the missionaries “picked” the young boy because of his precocious nature, and to help the father continue his livelihood on the land. However, he stayed for only a few years, and then his father came to get him. Ted described the later reunion between father and son:

At an early age, they, the missionaries, picked him [Ted’s father]. He went to school in Fort Resolution and Fort Providence up to grade 3. Then from grade 3 … because my grandfather, they still lived off the land, and he's the only surviving son. So he had to, his father said, "I need my son to go trapping with me." So after grade 3, he left with my grandfather, and they did. They went out on the land, they trapped, they cut lumber for the mining camps out there. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 4)
Once Ted’s grandfather took his father out of the residential school, the very young George Blondin began his holistic land-based education full of travel, adventure, and learning about his traditional ways of knowing and doing. Ted described that as his father grew older, he and his grandfather got into many remarkable antics: most involved trapping and travelling on the land, but others were more spirited involving hand games, home brew, and of course, the inevitable hardship. He told me:

Well they would spend months on end trapping. But they [also] travelled into the Yukon. So when visitors come in, when people come together, they celebrate. When they celebrate, they dance and they play hand games ... And when they played hand games, like a bullet was a high demand because one bullet was one moose. And so they played for shells, sometimes really serious guys would play for dogs, like their lead dogs, worth a lot of money right? Like playing for a vehicle. So they mix with people from Ross River and they, ’cause they went over the mountain, a lot of mountains to get there. So my father’s from ... mountain people and so ... There too, they, of course when they mix people, some people also drink home-brew those days. So my father got his first sip of home brew and he was getting sick. So my father went to this bush, he had to throw it up in the bush to cover it up. He says, "You can't be doing that in front of other people. No respect, right?" So he always watched himself in front of other people. And respect was something that always came up in stories. They travelled with people. They had games and they did their share of winning ...There was so much stories, there's really hardship stories too. Like if you'd imagine that, if you travel across Great Bear Lake and you get thirsty. You can't just melt snow 'cause when you melt snow and you drink that, you get more thirsty again. So then he started, he had to dig into the ice [for drinking water]. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 5)

**Remembering his early upbringing from a log house to city living:**

Since his father made his living from trapping and working on the land, he had to leave his young family, including Ted and his siblings with his wife and her family in Deline. With his grandparents, Francis and Marie Aya, the young Ted lived in a log cabin, speaking his maternal language of North Slavey and moving with them to another community. As well, because his mother was ill, the family depended on its extended family to help raise the children, as was natural in many Aboriginal homes. Ted explained the importance of family bonding and the inter-relatedness that formed his sense of self and relationality that began in his childhood, and continued into his present life. He said:
I was raised by my grandparents so that started me off on the right track ... When they first had to leave, my mother was sick, as my father trapped, so I had to live with my grandparents [mother's parents], Francis and Marie Ayha. I was just a little baby then, I remember trying to get out of the house one time, when the snow was blowing from Great Bear Lake. The snow's piled higher than the door and then, so it was cold out there, the log house. I was raised by them, and they only spoke Slavey to me and I understood them. And then, when my father moved to Yellowknife to get a job, I moved with my grandfather to Rae Rock 'cause my uncle Joe was working at Rae Rock, so they worked there. And I lived there, and so people from Behchoko, Fort Rae at that time, they worked there also ... They had a camp right behind our tent frame, where we lived. There were kids there so I use to play with them, that's where I spoke Tlı̨cho ... [But] it wasn't just the grandparents, that raised us, sometimes ... Like when I was living in Franklin, sometimes I would stay with my aunt, my mother's sister. And I was raised with Jon Bekale, we're related, cousins ... So it's not just their grandparents but the aunties and uncles [too]. They all took part in raising you ... And so a family bond is, I think very strong, in Aboriginal families. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 7-8)

But then at the young age of five years old, Ted and his family joined his father in Yellowknife to begin school. This seems to be the time in Ted's life where he experienced a substantial shift in his traditional upbringing to city living and the beginning of his formal education. He described:

At 5 years old ... I spoke three different languages ... [Then] I moved to Yellowknife to go to grade 1 and all they concentrated on was English. And I'm living in Yellowknife, where that sense of family is not all around you. And on the land is, is harder to get there, 'cause he's [his father] working at the mine, underground at Giant Mines. So I don't get to go out on the land as much, and he really didn't want me to go on the land too much 'cause he knew I'd fall in love with it ... He wanted me to stay in school. If I missed school, if I missed the bus, they scrounge up the money to send me to school in a cab ... That was the focus for me. They wanted me to get, 'cause he knew that times were changing and to make it in these modern days, you had to be educated. So all my father's children, all my brothers and sisters went to school. And so to him, that was very important. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 8)

I listened as Ted described how proud he was of his childhood language learning and community living with his grandparents in the Sahtu; and then how accepting he seemed with his family's changing attitude affected by Western influence, city living and school in Yellowknife. At the beginning, his story highlighted the ease with which children learned languages, when they were spoken naturally in family, and through children's play.
However, the move to the urban centre showed the decision that his father made in the face of changing times: an era that placed the Aboriginal languages and culture in a vulnerable state when in opposition to the dominant English language and Western culture. The change involved many Aboriginal families placing more value on formal education, and believing that the Aboriginal traditional land-based learning and languages would hinder their children’s progress in this new age. Unfortunately, no one realized the neuroscience of today that provides evidence that children can learn many languages concurrently, and in so doing enrich their learning processes (Siegal, 2000). Ted spoke about this disappointment both in this interview, and in our follow-up conversation. He said that he regretted not placing more time and attention on retaining his Aboriginal languages, or ensuring that his children learned; he called them the missing parts for him, realizing only later that they were the connection to the land that his own people spoke about so adamantly. (Journal Notes, December 1, 2014). Instead, the Western modern education system took priority in his formative life, and his father’s Aboriginal land-based practices went to the wayside. That is, until Ted married, and met his wife’s father who understood Ted’s dilemma, and took him under his wing to re-claim the Aboriginal knowledge and skills that he had not learned in his younger years. Ted said:

I didn’t kill my first caribou until I moved here in Behchoko and it was Vi’s [his wife’s] family that I went with. And they taught me how to shoot a caribou and how to skin it. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 10)

Fortunately, Ted married into a highly skilled Aboriginal family who excelled in traditional knowledge and reciprocal practice of sharing and helping others. His newly married family helped Ted to continue to develop his sense of self and relationality as an Aboriginal person. Ted went on to express his gratitude.

Honouring his father-in-law for sharing his Tłı̨chǫ traditions and family:

Without mincing words, Ted expressed his reverence for his father-in-law, Ernie Camsell, who was one of his most considerate Aboriginal cultural teachers that he knew. This kind family member assisted Ted not only in the developing the Aboriginal cultural skills for which he yearned, but also instilled in him an approach to learning that involved patience, enjoyment and plenitude. Ted told me:
Like her father (his wife’s father), I really loved him, he ...like when you go with other people, they laugh at you 'cause you don't know. But I went with him, he understood why I didn't know. And so he says, "Ted, we do this, this way because this way we've always done it, if you do it the other way, you're doing it wrong." And he explained why to me, you do things a certain way. I loved hunting with him. [And] he set nets everyday and so Violet used to visit nets for him. So being close with the land, being strong on the land, he'd go out on the land all the time and cook out in the bush. And we would go with him 'cause he would make it fun, enjoyable. And he had everything, he had a food box there, he had a basin in there, you'd wash yourself, there's bannock and everything in there. He had everything in that little box of his. We'd go hunting with him, we'd overnight with him, and we would set a net, catch a lot of fish, we eat good, we'd laugh, and we'd go duck hunting, we'd go one area, he'd go another area ... When [he] went out on the land, we would go out there. When he cut wood, we'd help him ... I would help cut the trees, load it on the back of our truck, the more trucks we had, the more wood we'd bring back. We'd eat good. We'd laugh and [everyone] enjoy themselves. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 10)

As Ted was describing his father-in-law’s food box, I chuckled to myself thinking of my own father-in-law’s food box. I called my father-in-law, Pappa (and Mamma), nicknames that my daughter had given her grandparents when she was young. Mamma and Pappa were the centre of our life; I learned so much about the Dene people, the Land, the North from them. Pappa too, was a bushman, trapper, hunter, knowing how to travel on the land with sled dogs through his incredible internal GPS. He used to call his food box, a grub box, a well travelled old wooden box painted a light green that went with him wherever he would go: out to check his traps, out to get wood, or out on a family picnic. Everything would go into Pappa's grub box. Like Ted said, “he had everything in that little box of his.” I am sure that these father-in-laws also packed away kindness, happiness and play into those grub boxes: And whenever they opened them up, the stuff that made people happy, laugh and have fun as a family would appear.

Parental experiences of how he had raised his children:

After his education, and subsequent foray into university, Ted returned to his home community of Behchoko to begin working and raising their children. When the young couple arrived home, they wanted to build a new home, however, they needed a place to stay in the interim. So with the help of family, they moved into a little log house owned by
Ted’s wife’s brother, while they waited for their house to be built. Ted described their meagre beginnings:

> When I first came from university, we lived in that little log house, that was Vi’s brother’s house. And there’s no furnace in there, a wood stove, there’s no running water, big barrel of water we had and that’s the water we used, [also had] a honey bucket. And that’s, coming out of university, that’s where we stayed. So in order for us to build this house, we lived in that house for a couple of years so we had to cut our own wood. So our kids would get up in the morning, and be cold, we'd make fire, and the house got warm very quickly. And we'd feed them, take them to school, and everything else. But the kids actually seen how people use to live in the past and how hard it was. We had to go outside and cut wood, with a chain saw and use an axe, and haul it all in. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 11)

Through reflection of the time that they lived in the log cabin while they were building their home, I believed that Ted realized that as a result of this humble lodging and close proximity to each other, his children experienced the same lifestyle that Ted had lived when he was raised in his own grandparents’ log cabin in the Sahtu region when he was young. It seemed that Ted had come full circle in his life, and wanted his children to have the same holistic experience. Although the chores were many and hard, Ted insisted on the lifestyle, as he wanted his children to appreciate the Dene values of hard work, responsibility, family sharing, and using resources from the land. Through these experiences, Ted shaped the way that he raised his children in developing their sense of self and relationality that honoured the Aboriginal values and ways of knowing and doing, and his children loved this Aboriginal lifestyle.

_Moving from the log cabin to the big house that he built for his larger family:_

From listening to this part of Ted’s story, I realized that although the young family must have encountered many challenges without the modern amenities of running water, central heating and electricity, I was convinced that the time held a special place in their memories, especially as the children were developing their identity and place within the Aboriginal community. After that time, Ted’s young family moved into their new home; the big house, he called it. Although living in the big house was far from a traditional Aboriginal lifestyle, Ted spoke with much reverence about having both grandfathers live close by. He noted the tremendous value in having their almost daily presence, as not only did it...
influence the development of his children’s sense of self, but also their relationality as they listened to the countless stories, and joined them on the many northern outings. Ted voiced his thankfulness:

I was very happy, that they [his children] were born at a time, both our fathers were still alive. They gained that knowledge and experience from them. So I think that my children were lucky [that their] grandfathers lived close by, and they had that exposure to them … And their grandfathers still lived traditional lifestyles and shared stories with them … they were very lucky that we, that when they were young, both grandfathers were still alive. So my dad would come over to the house all the time, and while they’re eating porridge before they go to school, my dad would eat beside them and tell them stories. And they would go over there to listen to his stories when he was staying at the seniors’ home. He’d come over and tell them, "Talk to me about everything." … And they also went, when we went on land with [their other grandfather]. They also enjoyed going out on the land with him, so they were hands-on. Out there, we actually pitched camp, tent out there overnight, when we were cutting wood. Well they loved it. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 11-13)

The inter-relatedness and synergy from these family gatherings were passed on to Ted’s children as they learned to understand and practice the traditions, the togetherness, the storytelling that developed their grounding sense of self, and connected them to their family and customs. The honoured respect that Ted emphasized throughout our time together was alive in his children, which made him content. Ted valued the holistic development of his children. He shared:

She's [Ted’s daughter] very proud of who we are, she's very proud of where she came from. So all that is keeping us together. [And] my son also is that same way, looking after people, looking after his family. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 14)

But the road to healthy living and grounded children is not an easy endeavour, as any parent will admit. Ted explained the challenging responsibility involved in raising children, and expressed his appreciation of the support that he received from the many corners of the community. Because he trusted his people and community, Ted took advantage of the support from extended family and community as his children faced the tough choices that were part of growing up, part of developing their identity and understanding of their people and place.
Receiving support from all angles of his community when raising his children:

As Ted told me his story of receiving support when raising his children, I was reminded of my own experiences as a principal in an Aboriginal community school. On a united front, the amazing team of educators and I used to elicit the support of as many community agencies as were within our reach. In turn, these agencies would spread the word, and within several years of opening the new school, we had wide range of occupations working with us from the public health nurses to the speech therapists to the wrestling and judo coaches, to pediatricians who made special school calls, and even the construction foreman who built the new school. I asked them to take on connecting roles, so they were named Nurse Jane, Judo Mario, Coach Himmelman, Speech Therapist Tracy, OT Lady Andrea, Drs. Young and Chatel, and Bob the Builder – all who served the children and families with their own unique expertise and capacities. From the common core of providing quality education and services to the Aboriginal children and families, these talented people were happy to oblige, especially if the school added healthy doses of friendliness, food and reciprocated kindness and gratitude. I believed that this was the kind of support to which Ted was referring, along with the understandable step of his children reaching out to family first. He said:

There's always support there when you run into trouble... And that they [his children], if they got themselves into trouble and they're scared to talk to me or Vi because we might give them heck or something. Or then they'll talk to one of Vi's brothers and sisters and sort of get some advice from them or let them come in and they explain to us what they did and how we shouldn't be so harsh on them. And so they know there's support there ... Like my daughter use to go see Father Pochat or Sister Diane, you know, and they use to explain to us what my daughter was having concerns about it and they also ... In school, like when Glen was on the soccer team, he was always talked to Mike Botermans, the coach ... There was certain teachers would talk to us, but they would talk about some of the difficulties they were having, we would deal with it. Sometimes they would come to us, they say, "Ted, I wouldn't recommend Glen hanging around with these kids so often, because they're just a bad influence." And so we tried to steer them the right way, so we get that kind of information, that kind of help. So I think there is, there is a connection we have with the schools. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 20-21)

From listening to Ted’s story, I realized that although he appreciated the support that he received from so many avenues, he also valued the commitment and accessibility
of these kind people. I believed that in accessing these support people, his children got
the best of all worlds: they were guided by their parents, their extended family, and by
goaches, religious counsellors, along with the school teachers - all strong influences that
shaped the development of their sense of self and relationality in their growth towards
adulthood.

Noticing experiences of how he viewed children “raised” in the modern NWT schools:

With his many years of experience at the political, cultural and social level of
leadership and governance on his region’s education board, Ted had a lot to say about
what he noticed in the modern schools regarding how children were being “raised.” He
covered a range of areas because his view was wide reaching, respecting past traditions
and worldviews, recognizing best practices, as well as understanding future technologies.
Although he covered much ground, his most emphatic stories described the wretched part
of history that nearly wiped out the Aboriginal people’s traditions, languages, beliefs and
knowledge, making the present journey towards becoming capable people still susceptible
to the residual effects of intergenerational trauma (Truth and Reconciliation Report,
Volume 1, 2015), substance abuse and dysfunctions. Ted noted that the TG and TSCA
have contributed healing resources and innovative programs to helping children, families
and community heal from the horrific effects of Indian Residential Schools. He added that
progress has been made to date, but noted the many steps still needed to take towards
reconciliation, restoration and growth of children developing their grounding circle of self
and connecting constructs of relationships.

Moving from the aftermath of residential schooling to family healing in his
community:

From listening to Ted talk about residential schools, I believed that he realized the
devastating and far reaching damage that it caused the Aboriginal peoples in the last
century, and the complicated problems that ensued into the new century. He described:

There’s lot of trauma in each of the communities and families that
stemmed from residential school. I think what has happened, to some
people anyways, is that because they experienced residential school.
[Then] they ran into … social problems. In the meantime, they’re having
children. So now we’re having to do something to try to [help] out those
As a community member, Ted understood the breadth and depth of these social problems, as he called them; he saw them daily, but he did not rest in a defeatist mode. He realized that the social agencies had to go into the offensive, and involve community members to find solutions towards healing and recovery. He also held out hope for the modern education system in its release of a new Residential School curriculum (NWT Government, 2012). Ted explained that now NWT teachers have an effective learning tool that provides a fuller picture of the history, current issues and next steps in healing process. He noted:

So the residential school curriculum is making teachers understand that and making the students understand that, it's not the parents' fault. 'Cause of the alcohol and drug and addictions that they're in, that's probably been handed down because their parents were just weren't, in residential school, weren't taught parenting, or any of that. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 9)

As well, Ted provided a more expansive view of the whole organization and its systemic changes regarding curriculum and instruction. He added:

We managed to change the school system, you don't have more of those Dick and Jane books anymore ... And we have books that are written in Tłı̨chǫ and my father's book are a part of the curriculum, so Aboriginal culture really is part of the school system, which is new now. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 9)

But aside from the internal improvements in the education system, and the many steps taken towards alleviating the social problems, Ted emphasized that all these steps are for naught if the most critical component is not involved. He said:

As much as we want to build a strong education base, we have to deal with a lot of social issues, at the same time. All that involves parents, who are key partners in the education system ... I think they have to do
everything they can to make parents understand that they are key partners in this process. And the more the parents are involved, the better because if the parents come to school complaining and everything else, it's because they're not being informed. And so what we got to do is to stop all the yelling and pointing fingers, is to keep them informed. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 17 and p. 21)

In listening to these ways to improve the playing field for children and families, I believed that Ted had a realistic attitude towards the issues in his Aboriginal community, and the ways that the education system could enhance the communication and information between the homes and schools. However, Ted added another component whose purpose was to get to the root cause of the social problems. He said that the Aboriginal people needed healing opportunities; and it was for this reason that the leadership drew from the expertise of professional healers. Ted explained:

This is why we bring in healers, the healers only just don't deal with people that have problems, they also deal with the kids in school. And the kids are open to that. Kids are open to go through the same healing process as I did. Go down that journey, go around a campfire and talk and think about things that are really traumatizing, things that really bothering them. And heal that and sometimes they say, "I need my parents here." So these healers would have a session in the evening, where they're bring in parents. So when a healer comes in, it doesn't just like, they don't only just zero in on a child, they don't just zero in on a father or a mother. They zero in on the whole family 'cause that's mother, father, child, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles if they could. And so people understand what's really going on and this is why we offer counseling to some of our students because they need all the help they can get, to graduate and to be that ... capable person. And they have to know that everybody's supporting them from their family, to the school system and the leaders ... and the elders, all supporting them. And they need that, they need to see it, and feel it, and know it, that all that's behind them. (First Interview, November 17, p. 17)

With this holistic approach into all avenues of support, Ted expressed his passion and optimism for this people, which extended beyond his call of duty as a leader. Ted understood that the commitment towards healing involved a lot of work, and he was prepared to serve. He then went on to describe the personal steps that he has taken to touch base with students to talk about all the opportunities available to them, in addition to the importance of NWT culture based education and reciprocity.
Shifting forward to empowering conversations with Tłı̨chǫ students:

With commitment and connection, Ted described his ancillary work of going to the school to talk with students about topics that related to their success. As I listened to him, I believed that Ted was making a difference in taking the extra steps to make change happen. He recounted:

I was one of the negotiators that negotiated the land claims. I go to the school all the time and talk to the kids about land claims. And really, we look at the land claims, it's words for them ... they really don't understand the stories that built up to them ... [But] they got to think ahead, how those words empower them to do certain things, they got to be innovative. And so, I'll give them ideas how to take certain words and look to the future now, [and how they will] govern themselves. So I think that education is very important but it has to be, the education has to be not something that's taught from down south, by itself. It has to be something that the community is contributing [to], so that when they graduate ... They understand the background, the language, where they come from, the community, the family bond that's there ... [and] understand the Western ways when they go down south [for their continued education] ... That's what we want them to do as capable people is to go out and get the education, come back and work for us here. And make the Tłı̨chǫ Nation a bit stronger down the road. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 16 and p. 19)

With synergy and hope, Ted described the advanced prospects for the Tłı̨chǫ Nation’s Aboriginal young people to develop their sense of self and relationality in knowing, not only their background, language and culture, but also in recognizing the opportunities that were open for them if they chose “the right path.” Ted described that the TG leadership encourages the youth to see the big picture of later rewards, which held the possibility of future employment, related experience and making a difference in their lives if they made the choices that counted towards becoming capable people. Ted explained:

Young people come back from school [post-secondary] and they're working for the Tłı̨chǫ government. And we see somebody that's capable enough and we give them further training and we put them in charge on certain projects ...so these kids are, they've gone through the whole gamet of going school, going down south, getting a job with the Tłı̨chǫ government, getting recognized for what they do and giving them a certain position and responsibility. And they ... That's a reward that a lot of young people are getting ... so that's how we sort of round things off.
'Cause once they're in those positions, they themselves get up into a family way ... They're getting good experience, of what they've done and how they raised their children. So I think that more of those capable people that we've developed in our education system, come back to the community and contribute ... As an elder ... I feel very comfortable that we, we set them on the right path. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 18)

As Ted talked about these exciting educational and work related openings for the Tłı̨chǫ young people, I was intrigued as I listened to these opportunities of responsibility and reciprocity that were being presented to the young people. I began to sense the hard work and planning that Ted committed to his people, to help influence them towards developing their sense of identity and place in their community as future professionals, managers, trades people, living in healthy families and becoming the capable people that they chose to be.

Moving ahead to “new technologies” and approaches for his people and beyond:

In addition to educational opportunities and support, Ted also spoke about the “new technologies” that inevitably influence young people (and even himself as an Elder) in this new age of digital communication and global connections. But unlike the other Elders in the study, Ted embraced the use of technology in all aspects of community living both in schools, and at community meetings. He said:

I think that they're, a lot of young people are very engrossed in the computer age. I think what we have to do is ... to use that, use that high technology ... like we talk about for instance ... teach languages on computers ... [and put prayers] ... Hail Mary and Our Father ... so you can hear it and you can pray with it. So when you go to meetings, you pray right along with the elders and your parents, they're very proud of you ... So those types of things, we have to use new technologies to make them understand your language. We have to understand new technologies to understand the political issues that are in front of us and we have to understand the different hurdles ... So we're getting to utilize all that stuff [technology] ... So I think we have to utilize new technologies better, in a big way, to get ... To build in all these things through the computer to reach young people. We have to use everything we can, to reach those young people. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 22-23)
With this positive attitude towards innovation and growth in the “computer age,” Ted added another component that had the potential to influence people’s journey towards becoming ‘a capable person.’ He called it adaptability. When I asked him how he believed this ability to adapt can influence people, he shared a story from father’s past, stating that possessing the ability to adapt to the changing landscapes and hardships was in large part the saving grace for many the Aboriginal people long ago. He described:

I think what’s important is that Aboriginal people have learned to adapt, well not everybody, because a lot of people have a hard time adapting, that’s why we’re getting to have all these social problems. But we have to learn to adapt to the changing ways that are surrounding us. In my grandfather’s days, they lived off the land. A capable person from there was somebody who can hunt and trap and keep their family fed. If they did that, they were a good person, a capable person. And there’s no alcohol and drugs in those days, [they] lived a clean and healthy life ... Now what’s happened in during like [what] Chief Dan George talked about his life, coming from a cave, from coming from a cave and getting ordered into space age. And I saw a picture of my dad, coming from that same thing ... living in the bush and living off the land where people are [and then] going into space and to the computer. So he’s managed to live through all that, and somehow he’s managed to adapt to all that. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 15)

Ted emphasized that through adaptability, the Aboriginal people of the past were able to move through much change and adversity, and still survive. He believed that this same characteristic of adaptability had a lot of potential to influence the young people as they developed their sense of self and relationality, through drawing from their Ancestors’ understanding of change and being resilient to it. While listening to Ted’s conviction, I realized another era of tremendous change was upon this generation, and understood the importance of helping youth develop this characteristic that had boded so well for their people long ago. Ted stressed:

We just got to adapt, as quickly as we can and they’re doing that, young people are. Old folks like me have to adapt all of the sudden. But that’s the same for everything, we’re adapting to climate change, we’re adapting to all kinds of things in our lives. We have to adapt to survive ... In the school system, we have to go with the flow, we have to adapt and understand why certain things are the way they are. (First Interview, November 17, 2013, p. 23)
But as passionately as Ted spoke about change and adaptability, he also defined another critical element that influences the development of ‘a capable person.’ He called it a Tłı̨chǫ belief, underscoring its incredible impact in balancing his people’s view towards Aboriginal and Western ways of learning and living:

I strongly believe that ... in order to make, to build a strong future for yourself, yet it comes from a strong foundation ... [of] pride and about respect: proud of your family, where you came from, and your people, your community ... your region ... Because it is always our belief that, understanding that first part from where they came from. Build a strong foundation from their education, [and then] to be strong like two people ... This means that you understand where you came from, you understand your language, that you can make a living in the bush, and that you’re also in school. And you're [also] learning the Western ways of how they operate, learning arithmetic and what they teach you in school. And that you’d be able to have all the tools by the time you finish grade 12, all the tools you need to be ... a capable person. (p. 9)

Ted believed in this Tłı̨chǫ maxim that was first expressed by one of the influential Tłı̨chǫ chiefs, the late Chief Jimmy Bruneau in 1972: “to be strong like two people.” Ted understood that this balanced approach was the way forward in helping young people celebrate their identity, family and place, but also to understand the importance of connecting to the Western world to enrich their worldview, as they grew towards becoming capable people.

5.6. Summary

In completing this chapter, I realized the many blessings that I experienced in being privileged to work with the NWT Aboriginal Elders so closely and restory their narratives related to their ‘capable person’ understandings, growing up, parental and noticing stories about raising children in their homes, communities, and local schools. Although challenging, writing this summary in light of the deeply moving nature of the stories, showed me the wide expanse of traditional, cultural, political and educational teachings that the Elders shared. Through this process of expressing the first part of the findings in this study, I learned that narrative research in this restorying mode allowed me to learn essential capable qualities pertaining to the importance of discovering one’s self, identity, relationships, culture, community, history and spiritual understandings. From this story-
based meaning-making chapter, the next chapter (Chapter 7) presents the findings into thematic groupings that emerged from both the restorying and original raw data from the Elders’ narratives. But before moving ahead, I have also included another unique section of the study, that being Chapter 6, which outlines the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ biographies, which allows the reader more information and details related to these amazing individuals.
Chapter 6. The NWT Aboriginal Elders’ Biographies

“That’s what I want to leave for the young people is to remember that the best teachers are elders.” (Mary Effie Elder, Fort McPherson November 23, 2013)

Whenever Aboriginal people gather, they immediately start with a flurry of questions until they find the personal, familial, social, community, or historical connections among each other. Questions like who are your parents, who are your grandparents, where are you from, where do you live now, what languages do you speak, are the ones that draw them together. Usually the questions are in a spirit of understanding and play, which involves a lot of laughter and storytelling that are the strongest, bonding tactics that Indigenous people employ. I can remember my own Chipewyan Dene mother-in-law bringing me into her circle of friends, sometimes at meetings or culture camps, at other times at bingo, or simply when people dropped over to her home for a visit. Usually it would take a few angles of connecting questions for her to help me find the link to know that particular person and family, but I was always astounded by such a tenacious effort to ensure connection and relationship. As Manu Meyer says, “For a Hawaiian, a discussion of where one was raised, and by whom, is a basic protocol when meeting people for the first time” (2003, p. 132).

It is for these reasons that I have decided to include the biographies and photos of the NWT Aboriginal Elders who were an integral part of this study, in order to situate them for the reader. As Creswell (2012) notes, biographies are a form of narrative research to highlight and record “the experiences of another person’s life” (p. 504). By helping to connect the Elders’ restoried narratives with their personal biographies, I hope to achieve connection and understanding of who the Elders are, their families, communities, and a few unique features of their capable lives.

Charlie’s Biography
Charlie Snowshoe was born on the Peel River, fifty-five miles up river from Fort McPherson, NWT on October 12, 1934. His father and mother were Edward and Elizabeth Snowshoe. His father’s parents were Peter and Mary Snowshoe. Charlie’s mother died when he was eleven years old while he was attending All Saints Residential School in Aklavik, NWT, so he does not remember this part of his family. In Charlie’s family, there were seven children; Charlie was the eldest. His brothers and sisters were: John, Edward, John Wilfred, Ellen, Eileen and William.

Charlie explained that both his parents spoke Gwich’in; however, because he was taken to residential schooling at the age of six years old, he did not learn to speak fluent Gwich’in; however, he can understand the spoken language. When speaking Gwich’in, Charlie acquiesces to his wife, Mary Effie’s, more fluent language abilities.

As a child, Charlie spent many hours reading and exploring the Western world through books, magazines and encyclopedias that were available at the residential school. At times, he would read about his Indigenous cultures, but usually they were limited in their capacity to explain the richness of the traditional knowledge, values and culture that was missing. He admitted to being quiet as a child, but as he got older, he learned to love dances and having a good time. After Charlie left residential school at the age of fifteen years old, he remembers staying with his Uncle William for three fall seasons. His uncle’s family treated Charlie well; he was a part of their family. At times, they would suggest that Charlie go across the lake to go trapping, suggesting that he may catch a mink or two, but they understood that Charlie was raised at residential school, and had difficulty adjusting to the traditional Gwich’in lifestyle.

Charlie spent ten years in residential school, attaining a Grade 7 level of Western education. He added that he completed one year of upgrading at the local community college in Fort McPherson, and attained a Grade 10 level of education. Unfortunately, the Western
agricultural levels of education did not do any justice to the overall education that Charlie received from his involvement with Indigenous self government and environmental rights and responsibility of the Berger Inquiry of the 1970’s or the Gwich’in land claims settlement of the late 80’s.

Charlie’s own children included his oldest daughter, Winnie, then Norman, Stanley, Shirley, Elizabeth, Bella, and Charlie Jr. (who died in an accident at nineteen years of age), and an adopted daughter, Sheena, and two foster children, Colleen and Cheyenne. They were raised in the Gwich’in community of Fort McPherson. His oldest son, Norman, is President of the Gwich’in Tribal Council, and his second youngest daughter, Shirley, is the principal of the Chief Julius Kindergarten to Grade 12 School.

Charlie’s fondest memory of raising his children and grand children is when they all get together for family gatherings and celebrations. He loves having all his family together; it makes him feel like part of a family, something that was taken away from him as a child in residential schooling.

Charlie is a self-professed Gwich’in environmentalist, having spent over fifty years in protecting the Peel River watershed, and surrounding rivers and lands of the traditional Gwich’in lands. He is still involved in many meetings and negotiations involving Gwich’in lands and Dene Nation self-government talks. University equivalency – honorary doctorate His latest concern is the water systems of the NWT. He suggests that youth and visitors go up to Mile 8 with a surveyor. His words of advice: “Take a pole and mark down how far the water went down, and keep a record.”

The capable people that most impressed Charlie in his life were his father-in-law, Ronnie Pascal, and his brother-in-law, Michael Pascal. Charlie remembers that from his wife’s family he learned many of the land-based skills that he did not learn as a young man. They taught him how to hunt moose and trap beavers, traditional knowledge skills that take years to develop. To him, they were trusting family members and mentors who took the time and patience to teach him the things that he longed to learn as a young boy.

The legacy that Charlie described is he would like to be remembered for his involvement with the Dene Nation, with the Gwich’in land claims, and for his work in the
environmental protection and sustainability of the Gwich'in lands and water of the NWT. For this relentless commitment, Charlie recently received a Canadian Indspire award for Environmental and Natural Resources in 2014.

Mary Effie’s Biography

Mary Effie Snowshoe was born in a tent on the Peel River, thirty-two miles up river from Fort McPherson, NWT on May 29, 1938. Her parents were Laura and Ronnie Pascal. Her grandparents on her mother’s parents were Mary and Andrew Diyah; Mary Effie knew only her grandmother on her father’s side as Louisa Pascal. Mary Effie came from a family of twelve children; Mary Effie was the fourth oldest. Her two older sisters and brother died while in residential school: the eldest sister was only eight years old in Aklavik, and another five year old sister and three year old brother in Hay River, NT. Her remaining siblings are Edith, Agnes (deceased), Louisa (deceased), Michael, Martha, and Neil.

Because of these sorrowful deaths, the Pascal family refused to send any of their remaining children to residential school, resulting in Mary Effie being raised at home by her family, growing up in a traditional lifestyle, and speaking fluent Gwich’in.

As a child, Mary Effie loved to be with her father on the land, following the seasonal cycle of activities, like mountain hunting in the winter, and beaver and muskrats in the spring. She said that she spent about only a week or two in school during the year when her family was in Fort McPherson. Mary Effie’s education was on the land, learning from her family and Elders. Her main teacher was her father who taught her to hunt, trap and fish, and travel by dog team; her classroom was the snow sloped Richardson Mountains and rivers of the Bonnetplume, Win, Peel and Snake teaming with fish and beaver, and plenty of fresh air and wide open spaces.

As Mary Effie was raising her children, she also committed to part-time studies to work on her Aboriginal language-teaching certificate with the local Arctic College.
community based programs not only in Fort McPherson, but also in Inuvik, Fort Providence, Fort Smith and even Whitehorse, YK. Through prayer and perseverance, Mary Effie successfully graduated in May 1992, learning to read and write her Gwich’in language, which accentuated her spoken language. Then for 24 years, Mary Effie worked at the Chief Julius School in Fort McPherson as the Aboriginal language and culture teacher, having guided the culture-based learning for many children and young people.

Mary Effie’s seven children include her oldest daughter, Winnie, then Norman, Stanley, Shirley, Bella, Charlie Jr. (whom they lost at age nineteen), Elizabeth, with one adopted, Sheena, and two foster children, Colleen and Shyanne.

Mary Effie’s fondest memories highlight taking her children, then her grand children to her fish camp on the Peel River. To Mary Effie the camp is not only for fishing, but more importantly for learning about family, eating together, being outside and camping overnight with many hours spent storytelling about Gwich’in traditions and culture.

The capable people in Mary Effie’s life have always been her Elders: Annie G. Robert who died at 106 years old; and Mary Effie’s aunt, Edith Kay, and her friend, Doris Itsi. Mary Effie remembers that anytime she got stuck in life, she would go and visit with the Elders who were able to respond to a whole variety of her questions.

Mary Effie wishes to be remembered for passing on her traditional knowledge. She said that the knowledge was given to her by her Elders, and the Gwich’in way is not to keep it to yourself but rather share, especially with the young people. Mary Effie emphasized the importance of sharing, as when you share, it gives you a good feeling inside. Mary Effie’s legacy is the generosity of sharing and remembering that Elders are the best teachers.

Mike’s Biography
Mike Frank Beaver was born in Fort Smith, NWT on April 8, 1952. His father and mother were Maglor and Agnes Beaver (nee Beaulieu). His mother was from Fort Vermillion, AB; his father from Wabasca, AB where he returned to visit afterwards only in his late sixties. Mike’s father passed away when Mike was young, so Mike never learned about his father’s family. His mother’s family was Alexie and Victoria Beaulieu (nee Cardinal). As Mike explained his father, Maglor, had a child before he married Agnes; his first-born was named Therese. However, this made no difference to the Beaver family; Therese was considered a bona fide Beaver, along with Mike’s other brothers and sisters that included: Louie, Jack (died at 11 years old), Felix, Maggie, Mary, Raymond, Emily, Henry, Malcolm (died in childbirth), Mike, Nora, Edna and James. Fourteen altogether – Mike had to use both hands to count his siblings, which he listed with ultimate precision. Family was incredibly important to Mike Beaver.

Mike explained that both his parents spoke Cree, and so did the older Beaver children. However, the increased English language usage showed the decline of the Cree language in Mike’s family, as the older children spoke and understood Cree, and the younger children only understood Cree and spoke it sparingly.

As a child, Mike enjoyed listening to old-time stories from his mother and older brother, Felix. He also spoke about the back strapping chores that were part of such a big family’s livelihood. He remembers cutting and hauling wood, and filling the 40-gallon water barrel in their home, which took about 20 heavy pails to fill every three days. Sometimes, he would try to make it easier by taking 10-gallon barrels by sleigh to the different water pumps in the Indian village, but nothing was easy in thirty below temperatures. He worked hard and grew to be tough. As a young man, he was in good shape not only for the essential family work, but also for the sports that he loved: baseball, running, soccer.

He took especially to boxing, when one of his friends put the gloves on him at a makeshift boxing match. Mike said that he started sparring around, against a bigger boy, and all of a sudden, he won. Mike found out quickly that he was a pretty decent boxer, so
when he found out about the local Fort Smith boxing club, he joined at eleven years of age, a full sixty pounds soaking wet. Before too long though, with training, coaching and a few more pounds, Mike developed his natural southpaw lead, quick feet and unassuming calm. These gave him the edge he needed, which led him to several championships, and more confidence. Most of all, Mike loved the camaraderie and competition of the Fort Smith boxing club, which provided the young man with confidence and an avenue into which he channelled his talent, energy and dreams. Mike also said that he loved wearing jeans and a jean-jacket. He added that he spent considerable time and effort washing his clothes on the washboard, ironing them, then walking around town, and pretending he was a cowboy with clean jeans, no rips and a big imagination.

Mike’s own education concentrated on traditional schooling, an education on the land; however, he did complete Grade 10 at the local high school in Fort Smith. From there, Mike entered in the trade of painting where he worked for Wood Buffalo National Park as a sign painter and maintenance worker for about ten years. To cut down on his cost of living, Mike also started a wood cutting business with his brother, Raymond. For thirty-five years, Mike cut wood for himself, his family and his community, as many used wood stoves as their main heating source.

Mike’s own children included Jennifer, Michael Jr., and Myrna from his first marriage, and then Felix and Ryan from his second. Mike raised his two younger sons with the help of his beloved sister, Maggie, who kept a close eye on her younger brother’s safety and well being. Mike prides himself for overcoming alcoholism after his first marriage, and for living a sober life to raise his two younger sons. He wanted to teach them the right way, so he spent a lot of time with them hunting, travelling on the land, as well as playing baseball. His youngest son, Ryan, currently lives with Mike, along with his four-month old son, Mike’s beloved grandson.

The people who impressed him the most were his parents, as their kindness resonated throughout his whole life: he became the epitome of kindness practicing it as naturally as he breathed. He also spoke about the importance of teaching young people to be honest, be able to learn things from Elders. He encouraged his Salt River First Nation to ensure that this became their priority – as children are our future fires.
Mike wants to be remembered for helping his Aboriginal people through leadership and dialogue. His vision was to become the Chief one day, and through consulting with his people, visiting, talking with them without swearing and arguing, he hoped to achieve unity and healthy lifestyles for his people. His legacy was to ensure a healthy and happy community for his grandchildren, thinking especially of new great-grandson. Tongue in check, he expressed wanting to write his own eulogy so no lies would be told about him.

Pauline’s Biography

Annie Pauline Sutargan Gordon (nee Tardiff) was born at the Stanton outpost camp on the Anderson River on October 28, 1952. Her Inuit name is Sutargan. Pauline father’s name was Augustin Tardiff, known as Gus. He was a Métis Cree man from Fort Vermillion, AB. Pauline’s mother was Jean Kisoun Allen who was adopted from an Alaskan reindeer herding family. Her grandparents on her father’s side were Joseph Tardiff from Belgium who married Mary Anne Lafferty who was raised in Fort Vermillion, AB. In Pauline’s family, there were eleven children; Pauline was a middle child, eighth eldest in the large family. Her brothers and sisters were: Florence, George, Mona, Emily, Andy, Lily, Richard, Pauline, Agnes, Jackie, and Mary Anne.

Pauline was raised in Aklavik, NT, and never went into town (Aklavik) until she was older. She spent her childhood at Martin’s Creek fish camp on the Delta coast and Kendall Island whaling camp on the Beaufort coast. Although her predominant language is English, Pauline understands and can speak some of her maternal language of Inupiatun, from Alaska.

As a child, Pauline loved being near the water at fish or whale camps where she spent her days going for long walks along the shore doing pukok (picking perfectly shaped round rocks on the sea shore) with her friends. She said that she watched her coastal land and water very closely, noting their usual coastline spectrum of matte greens, greys, cranberries and ochres, and would marvel at the unexpected beauties of little flowers and shells. When they did go into town, because Pauline’s father was a strong Catholic, the
family did a lot of activities with the church. She said that even though the local priest, Father Phillip, was scary looking, they still had fun going sliding during catechism, and when he was the first to get a snowmobile, they enjoyed the excitement of a faster pace of fun.

Pauline spent ten years in residential school beginning at Grolier Hall Residence, then transferring to Grandin Hall College for Grades 7 to 9 in Fort Smith. While she was in Fort Smith, Pauline was under the leadership of the Grandin administrator, Father Jean Pochat. Pauline had many fond memories of this kind-spirited priest-principal. She said that he raised children as if they were his own, showing a fair balance of discipline, play and love. Pauline remembers being only twelve years old in his office, spinning around in his swivel chair without any repercussions. She said that he believed in the Aboriginal youth in his care: asking them questions about what they were reading, ensuring that they completed their studying, challenging them to do better, and modeled leadership through fun activities, athletic teams, regular chores and routine structure. During her time there, Pauline was involved in many activities, including piano and photography. With her creative gifts and energy, Pauline said that in Grade 8 she set up the talent show to rave reviews from students and supervisors. Once she graduated from Grade 9, she returned to Inuvik’s Grolier Residence for Grades 10 to 12. Pauline did not speak about her time in her final years of residential school.

Pauline went onto to pursue post-secondary education at the Arctic College Teacher Education Program in Fort Smith, and then received her Bachelor of Education from the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. During her many years in education, Pauline said that some of her proudest moments were when she was twelve years old and got her baby sitting certificate, and then at thirteen years old, she got her first job as the playground supervisor at Aklavik Native Band. Always aspiring to leadership roles, Pauline went onto to become the vice principal at Sir Alexander Mackenzie Elementary School in Inuvik, then Assistant Director of the Beaufort Delta Divisional Education Council, then took over the Superintendent’s role, before moving over to the territorial Department of Education’s Assistant Deputy Minister, a position that she held until 2008.
Pauline was married to Billy Gordon, and they had three children: the eldest daughter, Janine, and two sons, Chuck and Ryan. Her proudest accomplishments are her grandchildren Vaughn, Lexie, Charlie, and Taneisha, and her great grandchildren, Farrah and Camdyn. Pauline always showed her children unconditional love, which her eldest grandson emulated. She said that Vaughn was her male namesake, never being shy to express his liveliness and love; he was so confident and comfortable in his skin, just like his grandmother.

The capable person that most impressed Pauline was her beloved father, the fiddle loving warm hearted, teasing father who taught her to express her feelings, never go to sleep angry and be merry, as he was, in spite of his paraplegic disability. As well, Pauline noted Father Pochant again, as his inspirational and kind leadership rose above the other darker residential school personnel who confined and belittled her Aboriginal traditions, language and culture, causing her to experience later inferiority and anger. She said of Father Pochant: “I loved him; he believed in us.”

Pauline described a simple but powerful legacy as wanting to be remembered as a kind-hearted caring person who loved kids. She described her legacy in a soft almost inaudible voice, as Pauline’s belief was never to brag about herself. But there really was no need, as Pauline’s living legacy spoke loud and clear representing all she stood for. Her voice, input and contributions to Aboriginal education in the NWT ensured that Aboriginal children, families and communities received the full benefits of pedagogy, practice and policy leadership that honoured the traditions, languages and culture of the North.
Jane’s Biography

Jane Rose Dragon was born in Fond du Lac, SK on September 2, 1940. Jane’s parents were Ignacie and Bernadette Mercredi (nee Daniels). Her grandparents on her father’s side were Leon and Mary Rose Mercredi (nee Lafferty); and on her mother’s side, Vincent and Elise Mercredi (nee Daniels). Jane came from a relatively small family for her era with only three children; Jane was the youngest child, with her older brother, William, and older sister, Agnes.

Jane was raised in Fond du Lac, and moved to Fort Smith, NT when she was nine years old when her father took a job at Wood Buffalo National Park. Her family then moved to Uranium City when Jane was twelve; she lived there for one year before returning to Fort Smith one year later at thirteen. Since then she has called Fort Smith her home. She speaks fluent Chipewyan and English, and can say her rosary prayers in French, thanks to her paternal grandmother.

As a child, Jane used to love to play dolls with her friends. She was resourceful even as a young child, learning to knit her dolls clothing like socks, and sewed them little parkas. She remembers travelling to a little island by the shore with her friends, playing dolls and pretend-games, making a little fire, and eating out there. Jane carries on her same creative activities as an Elder, having mastered the art of sewing with more difficult materials like moose hide, fur, and beads. She learned through the rigorous practice of precision, patterning and accuracy, adding that if the craft wasn’t perfect then you would had to re-do it until flawless – she took pride in her artwork adding that sewing keeps her young and alert.

Jane started elementary school in Fond du Lac, and then transferred to Fort Smith day school. Under the tutelage of her grandfather, she succeeded in her education through extra correspondence courses and much studying. She said her grandfather had a disciplined approach that balanced strictness with laughter, so Jane learned to love learning. She became a hard worker thanks to her grandfather’s high expectations. During high school, she also used to work at the same time: peeling potatoes at the Pine
Crest Café, filling shelves at Kaiser’s Grocery Store, and then waiting tables at the Mackenzie Hotel. Her resourceful, diligent attitude and work ethic proved beneficial for Jane, as after raising her six children, she returned to college to complete post-secondary programs.

First she successfully completed the two-year Aboriginal teaching diploma, and then completed the School Community Counselling certificate program. With credentials under her belt, Jane worked for many years at both the Joseph Byre Terrell Elementary and Paul W. Kaeser High Schools for many years in a variety of capacities as the Aboriginal language and culture teacher, as well as the school counsellor helping children and youth throughout their education. Most of all children loved her kind good-natured maternal instincts, along with her expert culture based educational knowledge and skills. As well, Jane taught Chipewyan language classes at the local Aurora College. For her contributions to NWT traditional knowledge, culture and education, Jane has been awarded four Queen’s Jubilee medals in 1997, 1992, 2002, and the Diamond one in 2012, which was presented to her by the Governor General, David Johnson in Ottawa.

Jane was married to David Dragon for fifty-three blissful years. She said that she married her high school sweetheart, and loved him passionately to the day he died. Together the Dragons had six children: the eldest daughter, Sabrina, followed by three more daughters, Brenda, Connie and Joy, before she adopted her first son, Brian Bud. She fondly called Joy and Buddy her “twins” as they were only five days apart. After a full household of five children, the Dragons had one last child: their baby, Joseph who had little strands of blond and black hair on his head when he was born, so his father nicknamed him Pinto. Only recently, two little great-granddaughters, Charly and Reilly, were added to the large “Dragon” family, joining seven grandchildren. Jane and Dave Dragon ensured that their family learned traditional land-based skills along with the regular Western education. Every fall, the whole Dragon clan travel to their cabin on the Taltson River to hunt moose: making moose hide, dry meat, harvesting the meat, along with fishing, eating and being together as a family.
The capable person that most impressed Jane was her beloved husband. They did everything together, enjoying a partnership of marriage and children. David Dragon was an excellent hunter and provider for his family; Jane said he taught her to preserve not only food but also their love. As well, Jane credits her Elder teachers for the formative development of her traditional knowledge skills like tanning moose hide, making dry meat, cooking country foods, making bannock, canning fish, fleshing beaver. Jane said that she has all their traditional knowledge secrets and holds them preciously in her heart. She honours Mrs. Calamut, Mrs. Suzie King, Mrs. Benwell, Mrs. Cheezie, Aunty Dora Tourangeau, and especially Madame Dubé.

Jane’s legacy is being a caregiver. She learned so much from caring for people, her family, her Elder teachers, her students. She said that when you care for people, you always get rewards some way, not as monetary payments but through good things, good health and good living. As well, Jane wants to ensure that people respect the animals. Jane honours these animals with her colossal northern fur / hide collection. It fits into eighteen action packers that travel around with her as she delivers “Call of the Wild Tales” to schools, colleges, tourists, governments and the like. All the furs of the North are included in this collection. Along with the furs and hides, she has a variety of unique treasures and traditional medicines like: mink oil, otter oil, bear grease, rat root, spruce gum, dried berries, and even mice droppings. Jane’s favourite saying is: “Thá húna,” which are Chipewyan parting words that means bless you, live a long life.

Margaret’s Biography

On November 13, 1948 Margaret Laura Ireland (nee Norwegian) was born to the Dehcho family of Louis and Bella Norwegian (nee Hope). Margaret was the third youngest of a family of eight children that included: Douglas, the eldest, then Billy, Minnie (deceased), Freddie (deceased), Horace (deceased), Margaret, Andy and Gladys. There were two infants who were born before Margaret, but sadly died at only six months old. Her family also took in a young foster son, Jerry, at four years of age. Her grandparents on her father’s side were Joseph

Margaret Ireland
Nov 7, 2014
and Margaret Norwegian; on her mother’s side, William and Bella Hope. Margaret was
born at her home in Jean Marie River, NT. She is a fluent speaker of her maternal South
Slavey language having learned it at home as her first language.

Margaret reminded me that as a youth since she was born between two brothers,
she did everything they got into, ranging from rabbit snaring, ptarmigan hunting, hauling
wood, to having fun playing and wandering along the river and in the bush of their home
town. Having so much outdoor play as a youngster, now Margaret says that as an Elder,
she is content to be at home reading and crocheting.

Margaret spent five years in residential school at Lapointe Hall in Fort Simpson,
and Akaitcho Hall in Yellowknife, NT. At times, it was difficult for Margaret to stay in
school, as her mother was ill in the hospital, so she was brought home often to look after
her younger brother and sister. However, she entered Grade 12, Sir John Franklin
Regional High School having completed five credits short of graduation. She was
industrious and worked three jobs, babysitting, folding newspaper at News North, and
ironing clothes as an extra job. After high school, she went to college in Grouard, AB,
starting an early childhood education program, then moving into business administration,
learning many skills that carried her well into her adulthood in the many community,
environmental, and political realms in which she became involved later in life.

Her professional career was as a teacher’s assistant working for ten years with
medically disabled children at the school in High Prairie, AB. She said that she learned a
lot from the children and their illnesses, including one young boy, in particular, who
functioned on half a kidney. She described that he went through three kidney transplant
operations, and that his poor body rejected all three, leaving the poor child weak, defeated,
and angry. Margaret would have to go to his house to tutor him through homework
assignments, and often encountered his temper tantrums and gloomy mood swings. But
through her gentle patience and constant dialogue with him and his mother, they
persevered. Margaret had to leave the position when she returned to Jean Marie River in
1997; however years later, she received a letter from him sharing his news that he had
graduated from Grade 12. This made Margaret very happy.
Margaret had two children from her marriage with Leonard Ireland: their daughter, Misty, and son, Ryan. The children were born in Yellowknife, but the family moved to High Prairie when Misty was three years old, and Ryan was an infant. They lived for 17 years in the northern Alberta community where they raised their children on a farm outside of town.

As an educator, Margaret had the summer holidays off, so she always enjoyed spending time with her family. They were always together, and she made sure that she returned to her home community, as it was important for her to ensure that her children had a strong connection to their Dene people and place. Her children learned about their Dene culture in the strong Norwegian family, learning the traditions, customs and culture of her Dehcho people.

The people who most impressed Margaret in her lifetime were her parents. Her mother was a great storyteller. Margaret remembers climbing up onto her mother’s bed on Sundays, and listening to her stories, special stories that provided the young daughter with knowledge and details of her Dene family and traditional ways of knowing and doing. Margaret’s father was a formidable presence who not only provided for his family with the adept skills of hunting, trapping and driving dogs, but also for his community through his leadership as the chief.

Margaret’s legacy is as a mother, grandmother and Dene person who speaks her language and is grounded in her culture. She has come into her own leadership style and capacity upon returning to her traditional community, having served as the community representative on many cultural and environmental organizations such as the Jean Marie River Climate Change Initiative, Jean Marie River First Nation Elders’ Committee, and the Dene Cultural Institute. She is also very excited about her continuing work on climate with her own community and the community of Old Crow, University of Saskatchewan and Yukon College. She added that when Elders ask who you are, they are not really asking for your name, but more so who your family is and what community you are from. So often she introduces herself as Louis Norwegian’s daughter, or Andy or Gladys’s older sister. But really she is Margaret Ireland, the knowledgeable, unassuming, gentle Elder who now lives in Hay River, NT, and enjoys her family, and her namesake granddaughter, who lives
nearby and goes to elementary school. She is the one who has a tight hold on her grandmother’s heart, and from whom Margaret learns about her next position in life, a Grandmother.

Denise’s Biography

On April 15, 1935 Denise Veronique McKay (nee King) was born to the Dene Dedline (Chipewyan Métis) family of Francois King and Sarah Houle. Sadly, when Denise was only 2 years old, her mother passed away from an unknown illness, and Denise was custom adopted by her Auntie Harriet, her father’s biological sister, who raised her at Jean River, Stony Island and Rocher River, on the south side of Tunedhe (Great Slave Lake). It was only at the age of 13, that Auntie Harriet informed the teenager that she was not her biological mother; both auntie and niece cried thinking that their relationship would be changed. However, they remained as close as any real mother and daughter, until Auntie Harriet’s death at 82 years of age, at which time Denise cared for her elderly auntie / mother until her passing. Both loved each other profoundly; Denise learning about motherhood and kindness through the generous matriarch. Auntie Harriet was not able to have any of her own children, so she poured her love, kindness and maternal skills into six other children, besides Denise.

In her own biological family, Denise was the second youngest child in a family of six children from the marriage of Francois and Sarah, whose children included Flora (deceased), twins Pete and George (deceased), Freddie, Denise and Elizabeth who died at the age of 2 months. Upon her passing, Sarah gave her two daughters Flora and Denise to her sister-in-law, Harriet King. When Denise was 15 years old, her father married his second wife, Mary Louise King (nee Lockhart). Three more children were added to Denise’s family, as half siblings: Doris, Frank and Agnes. As an older teenager, Denise lived with the new blended family, and grew very close to her half sister, Doris.

As a youth, Denise loved to be with her sister, Doris. Together they lived in their Rocher River family, speaking fluent Chipewyan, learning the land-based skills set of young Aboriginal women, and getting into a lot of mischief in which the younger sister,
Doris, took the blame for many mistakes of the accident prone older sister, Denise. Although there was a seven-year difference between the two sisters, they spent countless hours together forming a close-knit relationship that lasted well into their later years.

At the age of 17, Denise wed Edward McKay with whom she started her married life in the community of Fort Resolution. They had eleven children: Joanne, then Ronald, Linda, Elizabeth Ann, Frank, Andy, Richard (deceased), Janet, Dean, Lorraine and Eddie. All of Denise’s children live in Fort Resolution, and the nearby community of Hay River, except her eldest daughters, Joanne and Janet who live in Edmonton, AB. Denise enjoys her large family that includes 34 grandchildren and 32 great grandchildren, and one great-great granddaughter.

Denise spent one year in residential school at St. Joseph’s Mission in Fort Resolution at the age of 9; she then returned to Rocher River attending the local school to Grade 7. She said that her profession was a full-time mother to such a large family. To make ends meet, she spent many hours beading and sewing moose hide and fur crafts to local visitors, while her husband worked at the Cominco Mine in the nearby community of Pine Point, NT. When her children were all in school, Denise also took a job at the mine, working as a janitor for several years, then moving to Hay River where she worked at the well known Back Eddy’s Restaurant, as a cook. She and her husband then moved back to Fort Resolution in 1990 where she worked in all community capacities at the community hall, forestry office, welfare division, settlement / band office, and later as a storytelling Elder at the Deninu School, guiding students in culture based activities, such as making bannock, sewing and teaching her native Chipewyan language. Denise was also part of the team of six wise Elders who published the Dene Súline Chipewyan dictionary in 2010.

Spending time with her children and extended family was one of Denise’s favourite memories. As she loved her children so much, she constantly worried about their safety.
and well-being, but realized as they got older they were able to handle their own mistakes and make their way in life, which lessened her worrisome ways.

The person who most impressed Denise in her lifetime was her auntie whom she called her mother, Harriet King. From this loving caregiver, Denise learned generosity, diligence and patience. She said that her auntie had such a good heart, and was good to so many people – truly a role model for her.

Denise’s legacy is as a loving mother and grandmother, whose delicious cooking always brought her family close to her, and loving words and hugs guided them throughout their lives. Denise has also mentored many of the visiting educators, inviting them to her place for home cooked dinners and acting as their adopted Mother / Elder during their time spent in education in Fort Resolution, away from their homes throughout Canada. She is truly the biggest heart and kindest spirit for so many who have the privilege of knowing her.

**Ted’s Biography**

Arthur Ted Blondin was born on November 14, 1952 at Hunter Bay, NWT. It was a mining camp on the east coast of the Great Bear Lake in the Sahtu region where his father worked cutting lumber for a mining camp. His father and mother were George and Julia Blondin (nee Aya). His grandparents on his father’s side were Edward and Liza Blondin; and his grandparents on his mother’s side were Francis and Marie Aya. Ted’s grandmother, Marie, was a well-known midwife who delivered countless babies in challenging conditions on the land. For her midwifery knowledge and contributions, she received the GNWT Commissioner’s award in 1969. As the third youngest child, Ted came from a large family. His brothers and sisters include: Evelyne, Georgina, Bertha, Walter (died of pneumonia at 2 years of age), Ted, Betty, and John (deceased).

Ted explained that his people all spoke the North Slavey language of the Sahtut’ine; however, when his father relocated to Yellowknife for employment purposes, the emphasis was on learning the English language and going to school, so unfortunately,
he did not retain his maternal language. Although this was a major regret for Ted, he continues to be a strong advocate for young people’s language learning, as he described that his language loss as a missing part for him.

As a child, Ted enjoyed playing outdoors with his friends. One of his favourite activities was “playing skin,” an Aboriginal rendition of the common baseball game, only with less equipment, fewer rules and more fun. As he grew older, Ted loved reading with his favourite genre being adventure and mystery novels.

Ted graduated from Grade 12 at Sir John Franklin Territorial High School in Yellowknife in 1970 excelling in such courses as English 30 and Photography. After high school, he started his first job at the Native Press newspaper company. Then in November 1974, Ted moved his talents to begin work at the Rae Edzo School Society, one of the first locally controlled Aboriginal school boards in Canada. After twelve years as a school board trustee, Ted went onto post-secondary studies at the University of Lethbridge where he completed two management certificates in Business Enterprise and Self-Government Systems & Management. When he returned to the NWT, he continued his long career in northern leadership working with such organizations as the Rae Edzo Development Corporation, Association of Municipalities, and Dene-Métis Secretariat. His pinnacle achievement was as a chief negotiator with the Tłı̨chǫ Self Government agreement, which was settled in 2015, as the one of the first self-government settlements in Canada. Over his long career as a northern leader, Ted held a myriad of responsibilities as a consultant and professional board member, as he called it: “the guy in the background pressing the buttons.”

Ted lives in Behchoko, NT with his wife, Violet Camsell whom he married in 1992. They have two children: Colinda and Glen, and three grandchildren who are the joy in Ted’s life. He loves to take his family on holidays down south, as he enjoys time spent with his family. Ted said that his job as a grandfather is to spoil his grandchildren because he loves them so dearly.
The person who most impresses Ted is his wife because of her traditional Aboriginal knowledge and language. Violet is a fluent speaker of the Tłı̨chǫ language, well educated, and serves her Tłı̨chǫ people in many community capacities, along with being highly family oriented. Ted says that he depends on her a lot as his wife and partner. As well, Ted admired his own father, George Blondin, as well as Grand Chief Joe Rabesca. Throughout their political lives together, working on the land claim processes, there were many times when the Grand Chief wanted to quit, but he persevered and worked towards the successful completion of an historic land claims victory.

Ted’s legacy is using his education to help his Aboriginal people through leadership. He is a strong believer in education and training, for which he advocated during his time involved in the Chief Jimmy Bruneau School in Edzo, NT. As well, during his leadership as Chairperson on the Aurora College Board, the Mine Training Society, and Tłı̨chǫ Community Services Agency, Ted has worked relentlessly to ensure that education and training & health were the top priority for these organizations. Another legacy that Ted wishes to leave is to teach the young people the importance of the NWT land. Through education and training, he hopes that they will be more responsible and good stewards of the land, as through the land, you understand your place, people and identity.
Chapter 7. Discussion of Themes as Four Shaping Influences

“Traditional Native storytellers were held in high esteem. Elders, often the teachers in a community, were often regarded as ‘carriers of the history.’ They were greatly respected, not only for their experience and wisdom, but also for their ability to remember and recite stories of the past” (Denise Kurszewski, Breaking Trail (in NWT Education), Unpublished Master’s Thesis).

In this chapter I present the secondary part of my research findings in the form of the major themes. These themes emerged from the Elders’ narratives, from which I articulated my conceptual framework during the research ceremony that brought about the turning points in this study. Four major themes arose. In turn, I recognized these themes as the consistent patterns in the stories that inspired the shaping influences, which I identified as those that guide the growth and development of ‘a capable person.’ For me, it was a celebration of consciousness and spirituality, when I experienced the revelatory connection that transformed the major themes into the four shaping influences about which the Elders spoke in their traditional voices of experience and wisdom. The Elders transmitted the salient cultural teachings and philosophical knowings that expressed the major themes. I recognized and connected the patterns that developed into the proposed knowledge claims of this research. Piantanida & Garmin (2009) cite that “the primary purpose of educational research is to create new knowledge” and when “conceptualizing a study, it is useful to sort out what form of knowledge claims one hopes to make by the end of the research process” (pp. 48, 51). As such, I bring forth these four shaping influences of ‘a capable person’ as the epistemological constructs, in other words, major themes, to consider in processing and making meaning from this study.

In the previous findings chapter, my approach was to try to capture the essence of the research processes by restorying the Elders’ personal life-experience narratives about ‘a capable person.’ To summarize, the aim of creating the restoried narratives in that form was twofold: a) to introduce the Elders and reflect the Elders' voice, and b) to present the stories in as close to their natural form as possible, allowing the readers to engage with the ideas and develop their own interpretive perspective. In this findings chapter, my approach now is to explore the themes in a more inductive manner by beginning with the
four shaping influences that emerged from the Elders’ stories, and then by providing more focused details that further examine ‘a capable person.’ As such, from the restorying form of presentation in the last chapter, this chapter will present the data into thematic groupings that attempt to pull out teachings from the stories into the theoretical constructs that I call shaping influences. From this point onward, I use the terms, major themes and four shaping influences, interchangeably. Essentially, I celebrate the themes as the shaping influences, which act as symbolic forces that guide the growth and development of ‘a capable person.’

These four shaping influences (epistemological structures) set the stage for the more specific sub-themes developed through reflection, deliberation, and consideration of the Elders’ traditional knowledge in their Indigenous ecology. Each of the more specific sub-themes will be discussed at length by using the Elders’ own words to highlight the meaning. This chapter closes with a presentation of the Elders’ Indigenous interpretations of ‘a capable person’ in the Aboriginal languages of the NWT Elders who were interviewed for this study. These translations will provide the summary that will lead to the concluding chapter, which will “translate” the traditional themes into modern Aboriginal education talk.

7.1. Image of ‘A Capable Person’

This findings chapter addresses the data in the four data viewpoints (shaping influences) from the stories that the Elders shared with me. As Meyer (2003) expresses, “When stories are shared, they are filtered through the listener’s own historical lens, sensuous training, gender and political context” (p. 141). I concur, as through my lens, I observed so many sights, communities, homes, road signs, and images on the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ narrative landscape, as the Elders shared their stories. In reflecting and writing this chapter on the thematic groupings, I was struck by the strong images of ‘a capable person’ as I experienced the Elders’ narrative space, viewpoints and teachings. From my perspective, I considered some of the images as eye opening, even awe inspiring, others were expected, but the images that resonated with me the most made me remember a poem that I had read several years earlier. For me, it connected and captured the consistent images that the Elders were describing about ‘a capable person’ in the many hues and tones of their storytelling. The poem to which I refer was written by
the well-known and much loved northern photographer, author, and former priest of the NWT Sahtu region, Rene Fumoleau (1997). It is entitled: Two Worlds:

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When Albert set a fishnet in the winter,
His ice chisel danced as in a ballet.
Saw, axe, pliers, hammer, screwdriver
Worked as if parts of his hands.
He had built two log cabins in the bush,
and a modern house in Dettah.
He prepared nutritious meals
on an electric range or on the crudest campfire.
When his wife lay sick in the hospital for three months,
Albert sat at the old sewing machine
and sewed clothes for their children.
He could drive his canoe through ten kilometres of fog,
and land three hundred metres from his aim.
Prospecting and mining companies hired him to stake claims
or to operate any kind of heavy equipment.
His forecasts were as accurate as any weather office’s
and he had a direct line to all animals (p. 17).
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The poem provides a glimpse into the two worldviews of living a land-based and evolving lifestyle that combines the Aboriginal and Western ways of living and doing. Overall, it captures ‘a capable person’ qualities from a traditional perspective that understands the impacts of modern change, to which the main character, Albert, adapts. These images align with the main teachings of ‘a capable person’ in what NWT Elders described when they wrote the original Aboriginal curricula, Dene Kede (1993). These images are likewise captured in the consistent themes presented by the NWT Elders in this study. They are presented in the following discussion on the shaping influences, as seen through thematic groupings of concepts related to ‘a capable person’ conceptualization.

### 7.2. Research Purpose

The purpose of my research was to identify and examine the influences that shape the development of ‘a capable person’ through Elders’ narratives of raising children and relationality in order to inform Aboriginal education in the NWT. From the Elders’ storytelling, my focus was on understanding the themes that emerged as I attempted to
interpret and find meaning from the Elders’ traditional perspectives. The process formed the basis of understanding and articulating the shaping influences.

The Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools (1998) outline the importance of implementing standards that provide educators with a way for schools and communities to ensure attention on their children's cultural and educational well being. Their guiding “cultural standards” are developed on “the belief that a firm grounding in the heritage language and culture indigenous to a particular place is a fundamental prerequisite for the development of culturally-healthy students and communities associated with that place, and thus is an essential ingredient for identifying the appropriate qualities and practices associated with culturally-responsive educators, curriculum and schools” (p. 2). From this broad view, I sought to draw out the themes that emerged from the stories of the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ approaches to Indigenous knowledges pertaining to ‘a capable person’ in the traditional sense of education.

7.3. Research Methodology

In working from the teachings from the Elders’ stories, I went back to the original transcript of each conversation. There will be an overlap between quotes used in the restorying (from the previous chapter) and the themes that are presented in this chapter. This overlap is a consequence of presenting the same data in different forms to formulate the research methodology in this study.

7.4. Research Data Analysis

This process became the second part of my narrative research data analysis plan, called the “analysis of narrative” (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2014, p. 356). This stage of analysis is not to be confused with the closely worded analysis form, namely, “narrative analysis” (p. 356), which is the story form of analysis. This more theme-based approach takes from the literature to highlight the themes that related to the shaping influences of ‘a capable person.’ After receiving the spiritual direction and insight from the research ceremony, I returned to the raw data in a methodical way again to read and re-read the
raw data in order to complete the coding ["small categories of information from the dataset"], and draw out the common patterns and themes ["broad units of information that consist of several codes"] (Creswell, 2013, p. 184 and 186). From this analysis of the Elders’ stories, the themes that emerged provided the touchstones that connected to the shaping influences of ‘a capable person that emanate throughout this study.

7.5. Four Major Themes Revealing the Shaping Influences of ‘A Capable Person’

The four major themes outline the encompassing philosophical and pedagogical teachings that were discussed during the Elders’ narratives, which transformed into four shaping influences. These teachings revealed themselves through the stories. Also, the Elders’ particular style of storytelling and personal emphasis on their experiences, beliefs, and values added the contours and textures of my developing conceptual framework. As Piantanida & Garmin (2009) advise, “without a well-reasoned and clearly articulated conceptual frame for the study, it is exceptionally difficult to engage in an interpretive knowledge-generating process” (p. 52). Through this conceptual processing, I noticed not only that the Elders’ stories all differed, but also that they provided the synergy that helped build a strong structure on which to fasten nineteen more specific epistemological principles that focused on understanding ‘a capable person.’ The structure that I envisioned was an Indigenous tipi consisting of four main shapes that helped me conduct the study into deeper meanings of ‘a capable person.’ These deeper meanings became apparent as one considers the beginning of wholeness and the emergence of potential as one is guided by the shaping influences. This is the life-giving meaning and inspiration to ‘a capable person’ conceptualization that is discussed below in the explanation of the four constructs (shapes), and then more specifically through the Elders’ words that discuss the finer details of nineteen more specific (underlying) themes. Again, these more specific themes are organized by the four shaping influences of ‘a capable person.’

It is important to acknowledge that the four shaping influences paradigm is not a model, but rather a way of thinking and being aware of the influential forces that can shape human development into ‘a capable person,’ from an Indigenous perspective. Of note, it was difficult to separate the shaping influences into defined categories because of the
fluidity, flow, and movement of the principles (concepts), much like the Elders’ storytelling that describes ways of living and being. Like Hampton’s (1995) six directions, it is a “way of thinking about existing in the universe. This pattern organizes and clarifies thoughts. It directs us to think of Indian education as dynamic. There is movement” (p. 16), energy, symbolism to consider as I describe shaping influences theory in terms of the figurative constructs as follows.

The first construct is the circle, which shows the grounding influences of ‘a capable person,’ and becomes the foundational structure on which all the other knowledge cultivating influences (themes) are based. The second is the tripod (triangle), the belief that relational influences raise the interactions that maintain good relationships, which are critical components for the growth and development of ‘a capable person.’ The third, the spirals, reveal the recurring influences that revolve around the fundamental notions of how ‘a capable person’ best understands learning and life through remembering the ancient and sacred cultural teachings that become strong through passing on knowledge, practice, repetition, and responsibility. The fourth construct is the “canvas,” stemming from the Fort McPherson, NWT canvas tipi cover, which illustrates the outside influences that broaden the role of integrity and honour involved in becoming, believing and being ‘a capable person,’ particularly with respect to the many choices encountered in life centering on doing the right thing and living a good and capable life.

On a pictorial level, the four constructs (shaping influences) are featured in the diagram outlined in Figure 4 below.
Figure 4. Shaping influences of ‘A Capable Person’

They provide a visual representation of my findings, which are divided into the four sections contained in this chapter as follows: Grounding Influences, Relational Influences, Recurring Influences, and Outside Influences. (Since I was not able to find the appropriate shapes in computer software, I drew them in pencil, pencil crayon, and black ink.) Through
these four shaping influences (major themes) discussion, the distinctive characteristics of ‘a capable person’ conceptualization (curriculum/pedagogy) emerge from the insights of the eight Elders’ traditional perspectives. There is considerable overlap in how these guiding influences present themselves in shaping the development of ‘a capable person,’ which adds to the richness of humanity as it molds itself through experiences, learning and living. The next, and final chapter will then translate these traditional perspectives into modern Aboriginal education talk.

7.5.1. Grounding Influences – The Circle (self, identity)

The grounding influences originated from the data collection questions that were used in the interviews to invite thinking about ‘a capable person’ based on the longstanding symbolic medicine wheel philosophy (Bopp, et al., 1984). As mentioned earlier, only a few of the Elders were familiar with the medicine wheel concept, but they intuitively understood this circle of learning, as it shows the natural development of one’s wholeness, health, well being. It shows the processes involved in developing one’s fullness in a cycle of energies that expand into four dimensions of learning and development in one’s body, mind, heart and spirit. These four aspects of human nature show one’s self, or identity, essentially the foundational base of human development. By recognizing and examining the four grounding influences that shape the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects within ourselves, there is the potential to grow towards becoming ‘a capable person’ when awareness and understanding are raised in a cyclical manner.

The Body (physical)

The physical one is that as you’re growing up, you got to be healthy. You got to be strong enough to do things. You got to be able to take care of yourself ... try not to get sick ... eat and sleep good. (Mike Beaver, November 13, 2013)

This grounding influence makes basic sense as it shapes the ways one cares for the physical self through proper diet, exercise and sleeping routines. The nourishment that is needed to grow and live with food, water, and medicines, being active, and through practice and basic routines as in Dene Law #7, “work in the day and sleep at night” (Dene Cultural Institute, 1998). The Elders noted that traditional activities enhanced bodily
awareness in 'a capable person,' and were strengthened from natural foods, avoiding certain parts of wild meat, physical work activities like hunting, fishing, and trapping, limiting alcohol use, and being out on the land either collecting berries, digging roots, "picking pukok," or gathering medicines. It was all part of self-care in developing one's physical self and identity through guidance from parents, self awareness, and even making mistakes, which sometimes proved fatal, like in the death of Pauline's young friend at the whale camp when she ate the meat that had been aside for the sled dogs (5.4.2 Pauline Gordon's story).

We never ever were just told ... you need to eat this stuff, for whatever, it's good for you ... that was part of your self-care. You would learn about different plants or parts to pick. (Pauline Gordon, November 13, 2013)

They gotta watch what they eat, and they gotta watch, you know, don't sweat too much. There's certain part in the caribou that makes you sweat. They don't allow them to eat that [in training young boys to hunt]. (Charlie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

We were never into alcohol and things like that. (Jane Dragon, November 12, 2013)

Looking after your physical self: I think that there's a big part of the teaching, is that you had to be proud of who you are, so that you have to go on the land, that's why you want to go on the land 'cause the more you're on the land, you're looking after your body. (Ted Blondin, November 17, 2013)

The land was an integral part of experiencing healthy living in the development of 'a capable person.' Through walking on the land, sliding on snow banks or icy hills, playing hide and seek in the moonlight, digging roots for birch bark baskets, picking cranberries, snaring small game, and learning to gather traditional medicines with family members, all these physical activities developed from birth, to childhood to adulthood. When Margaret Ireland attended an Elders' meeting, they were talking about the use of moss bags long ago instead of plastic diapers, the importance of breastfeeding, and preparing babies for naps in their moose-hide laced baby bags. When the child was ready, the mother would place the baby bag carefully on a tree branch. In this way, the mother would be able to carry on with her daily chores, and the baby developed its bodily senses of sight, smell,
hearing, touch, taste, and most poignantly, a sense of Mother Earth and the vitality and energy of nature.

The reason why they did this is that it allows the child to develop its senses. So the only thing that could be moving is the head, the eyes, the ears, and his mouth. And so he hears the birds singing and feels the wind and he hears other things and sees the trees. In time the child identifies the bird and identifies which way the wind was blowing and all these things. (Margaret Ireland, December 14, 2013)

Another view on the grounding influence of physical well being as shaping one’s growth and development was noting the importance of moderation, and not abusing the body with drugs, alcohol, and other harmful substances. As well, the Elders spoke about the over exposure to modern amenities such as watching television, computers or gaming. They were quite clear regarding the balance of healthy lifestyles, and the overuse of anything like modern electronics, substance abuse and other inactive lifestyles, making the physical individual susceptible to illness, disease and even disrespect.

I think it’s just you don’t abuse your body by anything. I mean, you do ... you play ball, you exercise, you just live a clean life. You have good sleeps. That’s what it is. (Jane Dragon, November 12, 2013)

I think it was 1986. That was the year television was introduced [to] Jean Marie. So the time that we were in Jean Marie, like you noticed blankets all covering all the windows and everybody was just inside, watching TV. One day I went over to my brother’s house, I wanted to borrow something. And I remember that little guy was just little. They're all sitting around there, around watching TV. And I started to talk and that little guy, he was just little, he turned around, "Shhh!" to me ... The kids were no longer interested in going out and playing and stuff. And they're more interested in just staying in the house and watching TV ... That really changed the community. (Margaret Ireland, December 14, 2013)

For young kids, it talks about, it starts off with obesity, the risk of that, being diabetic, risk of that, getting into a wheelchair because of strokes and heart attacks and stuff like that. How to avoid all of that is to be active. Be healthy ... Because kids nowadays, they're all wrapped around computers. They're not as active as they do, so... We try to come with ways for them to be active, so again ... Working with the body, not just the mind, the body itself also. (Ted Blondin, November 17, 2013)
The grounding influence of the body in shaping the development of ‘a capable person’ is essential for learners in ensuring an understanding of bodily senses and physical health and well-being.

**The Head (mental, intellectual, cognitive)**

The head and mind, like your head, you’re always thinking of things. You’re always thinking of what’s going to be good for you, what you got to do, what’s your plans, what you’re going to do next, and how you’re going to do it. It’s always in your head. You got to focus on things because in life, if you don’t focus, you wouldn’t get anywhere. You wouldn’t, like you know, meant to be strong, you got to be able to do it. What you’re thinking of, if you only do a part of it, then you’re going to fail. But you got to do the whole thing, you got to do it when it’s done, and it’s finish. That’s the only way to get to where you want to be. (Mike Beaver, November 13, 2013)

This grounding influence helps to develop the ability to use the mind, to activate the mental processes in thinking, learning and making meaning. These essential cognitive skills assist the most basic functions of human development such as learning to walk, talk, find patterns and connections in the world, process thoughts, as well as learning to read, write and work with numbers and ideas. In incremental experiences of simplicity, complexity, even ambiguity, one learns intellectual systems of communicating, making decisions, problem solving, managing time, etc. Using one’s mind well is equivalent to being knowledgeable, intelligent, sometimes even referred to amusingly as being brainy. Often the Elders’ traditional reference to this grounding influence of using one’s head meant being “smart,” or capable of certain well-developed skills, such as the caribou hunting, as explained by Charlie Snowshoe.

But there’s certain people in the group, you know, are really capable of getting ... capable of getting caribou. Sometimes people have hard time. But these people who are smart, and people that know them. They always depend on that person, like you know. They have a legend story about them. From way back, you know. (Charlie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

Long ago whether in legends or not, the Aboriginal people depended on these family or communal members who developed these highly valued traditional skills of hunting, fishing, trapping, reading the animals and the weather, and travelling on the land.
This land-based knowledge was critical for survival in the sense of being purposeful, economical and most of all resourceful. Whether knowing all the methods of trapping and providing for one’s family, planning ahead for a spring camp, focusing on the seasons and land patterns, learning the differences in heating sources, or ascertaining good knowledge by being in tune with harvesting techniques, the Elders understood the importance of developing one’s thinking abilities. It was the grounding influence foundational for the development of ‘a capable person’ who knew their way on the land.

He was very good trapper, you know (referring to her husband). So we never lacked anything. (Jane Dragon, November 12, 2013)

Mike went and got all the wood, the right kind of wood. He went and hunted for buffalo, fresh buffalo. Archie and them made sure we had fish, and we had geese and ducks and beavers and everything else. (Pauline Gordon, November 13, 2013)

That one time there, we went spring hunting, near Raymond's trapline at Hanging Ice. And I brought my family and he had his family there, and my dad and my mom were there … After that, my brother, Felix, he came later. He walked to over there, even though he had to, it took him … like when there was still ice on the river here, he had to use a canoe though. He pulled a canoe across, across the river, to the other side, where it was open a little bit. So he had to go across it. And he was carrying his canoe all the way, 23 miles. (Mike Beaver, November 13, 2013)

"I'm going for wood and I want you to come with me." So I go with her. And she tell me this is really dry wood and this is straight, this is the kind of wood that we people burn. But this is green wood. And some green wood got really, it's really frozen. You can't get heat from that, but some is very skinny. She showed me all that. At the age of twelve years old, I remember that. (Mary Effie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

However, even when family members did not possess a well-honed level of mental intelligence, which exhibited such advanced land-based intellectual capacities, they were not de-valued. In many cases, they became even more valued because they learned the skills that were necessary for thriving in family and camp life, such as cooking, cleaning, and camp setup. It took all levels of knowledge to function in traditional communities to create comfort, ease, and happiness.
My sister was born a preemie, and she had challenges, but she was ... a really good baker and everything, like really, fend for herself. People used to call her, "Oh she's simple," whatever. Well, she might not have the academics but she sure knew how to cook and clean and look after us. She used to make buns, so now, boy she would cut up the buns, have the hot milk and everything, ohhh so good. I loved her. (Pauline Gordon, November 13, 2013)

Understanding those with varying intellectual levels, as well as being aware of these implicit good teachers and life lessons present the many ways for the mind to learn to process life’s intricate maneuverings. Several Elders spoke about this grounding influence that affected their children’s learning, and their own learning as youngsters, both on the intellectual level, in addition to the emotional level, which is the next grounding influence to be discussed. But first, through the method of modeling the Elders showed how learning can take hold and stick for life to establish one’s foundational thinking, one’s “clean mind” to influence choices between right from wrong in the development of one’s grounding self.

You have to have a good conscience, your mind is ... when you know when something is wrong ... when something is not right, you have that conscience. I think lots of times, long time ago, people ... had clean minds, and they all had conscience ... they know what's right from wrong. (Jane Dragon, November 12, 2013)

We always helped the Elders and people that needed help. You, know, like not only the Elders because we would hunt with them. People also didn’t have vehicles, he always took them out and they always got their meats and stuff like that. And the kids always watched all that, you know, they just learn from that. (Jane Dragon, November 12, 2013)

Well like, mine, my mom use to talk to us, what is right, what is wrong, what is no good, you know? To be kind, stuff like that. (Denise McKay, December 14, 2013)

My dad really was a good teacher for me. Now, I think back, and I think to myself. You know, everything was my dad. My mom was a tanner. Good teacher is that everywhere he went. He would take me along. How they call, he's got no book. He don't know how to write, he's not going to write and say, "ok you learn this." ... Everything he had to show. (Mary Effie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)
As the old adage goes, “children learn what they live,” so in paying attention, keeping their minds alert and connecting to the traditional activities that their families taught them, these young Elders observed and put into practice their knowledge to learn and live on the land. This grounding influence affected the way that they developed their thinking processes in deciding how and when to use their intelligences, and contribute to life in the north.

Most of all, the Elders made reference to schooling in the discussion of the developing the cognitive aspects of ‘a capable person,’ with forthright ideas about learning with the mind. These ideas outlined that in education, content learning was an important part of school, but they also acknowledged other ways to learn, rather than just with the mind. For example, Pauline emphasized that education needs to pay attention to the heart and spirit of learning, balanced with the cognitive content.

The Heart (emotional, feelings, social)

I have a big heart. (Jane Dragon, November 12, 2013)

Having a big heart, being shaped by goodness and kindness, making heartfelt decisions, these are the many ways to describe the grounding influence of feelings and emotions that shape the development of ‘a capable person.’ When children are raised in loving homes where acceptance, encouragement and patience guide their growth, they learn to feel safe, confident, and even joyful. The Elders emphasized the importance of feeling love, and expressing love to children and family in clear and candid forms.

My father taught me the “joy of life.” He always made us feel so special because he played the fiddle and he made up a song for each of us. (Pauline Gordon, November 13, 2013)

It’s good saying to their kids, you know. I love you. It’s not hard for me to tell my grandchildren, I love you. I remember my youngest boy, the one that passed on. That I use to sit on that couch beside him and just going like this to head (gesture of stroking his head) and he know that, I love him. There's ways that Gwich’in people would show that they’re caring and loving and kindness and all these things. (Mary Effie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)
You got to show kids that you care. (Charlie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

My mom said, if you see somebody right away, to be kind to them. You talk to somebody, you say hello you know, makes you feel good. You don’t... You just ignore them, makes you feel bad, don’t care for you. (Denise McKay, December 14, 2013)

But some people try to hide their feelings and emotions believing that they are inferior influences, or ones that show weakness, flaws, or inadequacy. Long ago, this was the case, especially with men who had to appear tough on the land, ruling their emotions with strictness and severity. Mike Beaver speaks of his learning about the loving influences that shaped his development later in life when he realized how important the expression of love was to the healthy development and raising his children.

The heart, it’s like the feelings and emotional, emotions. A lot of times, you even think about hardships that they went through … Some especially men, they got it hard but they don’t want to show it, they want to keep it hidden because they don’t want to be laughed at. You know, they want to show that they’re a man. And they don’t even want to cry or anything like that. But they got a lot of feelings, they got lots of feelings. That’s the reason why they raise their children and they raise their children, it was feelings that helped. To lead them in the right direction. But sometimes, they don’t show their emotions there, if they’re by their selves, they go for a walk or something. That’s when the emotions start crying, they think about the things, that hurt them, even in the past. And once they do that, they feel a lot better because they brought it out. (Mike Beaver, November 13, 2013)

As Mike so perceptively acknowledged this ability to recognize that the power of the heart in raising children is the key “to lead them in the right direction.” Consistently, the Elders highlighted the significance for young people to experience the grounding influence of love and support. Sadly evidence shows that if youngsters do not have loving influences, they will seek acceptance elsewhere, more often than not in negative situations like alcohol, drugs and bullying. Fortunately when Ted Blondin was raising his children, they were many loving hearts that helped support his children in a small community, particularly when they had made egregious errors, which were too much to admit to their parents.
It's good that there's always support there when they run into trouble... And that they, if they got themselves into trouble and they're scared to talk to me or Vi because we might give them hell or something. Or then they'll talk to one of Vi's brothers and sisters and sort of get some advice from them or let them come in and they explain to us what they did and how we shouldn't be so harsh on them. And so... so they know there's support there. Like my daughter use to go see Father Pochat or Sister Diane, you know, and they use to explain to us what my daughter was having concerns about it and they also... In schools, like when Glen was on the soccer team, he was always talked to Mike Bottermans, so the coach... There was certain teachers would talk to us, but they would talk about some of the difficulties they were having, we would deal with it... And so we tried to steer them the right way, so we get that kind of information, that kind of help. So I think there is, there is a connection we have with the schools, I don't know about... That's the experience I 've had. (Ted Blondin, November 17, 2013)

Support systems in a community happen because people cared for each other through loving-kindness, and often by taking the time to reach out to those in need, by guiding, counseling, and providing advice. Fortunately for Ted, his wide support system included those from extended family, community members in the church, in sports and in school. The grounding influence of the heart in shaping the development of 'a capable person' is crucial for learners in feeling loved, accepted, and encouraged.

The Spirit (spiritual, cultural)

Spirituality is something that is kind of hard to really grasp. It's just one of the things I had mentioned ... that it's throughout your life experience and ... you have this knowing and within you that you don't really know where it came from but you have it. (Margaret Ireland, December 14, 2013)

Although invisible, the profound spiritual context for this grounding influence covers many dimensions of beliefs, values, faith, family, and potentialities that can shape the development of 'a capable person.' The inner growth of one's spiritual awareness and development depends on many essences that originate from family, culture, religious denominations, as well as contemplative dialogue through dreams, visions, and ceremony. This grounding influence is the one that was most difficult to grasp as Margaret noted above; however, it does shape the development 'a capable person' through choice, interpretation, place and manner of worship, whether it was in the home, church, school,
community meetings or on the land. There was no real consensus from the Elders in expressing their spiritual insights and practices; however, there was an implicit acceptance in the Indigenous belief in Creator, God, also known as the Great Spirit, and the importance of prayer and ceremony. As such, all the interview sessions began and ended in prayer, most often in the Elders’ Aboriginal languages, to honour the understanding of gaining knowledge through the spiritual realm of Creator, recognition of the Ancestors’ presence, gratitude of place, promise of responsibility, and acknowledgement that their capable person knowledge and stories would benefit the children, families and communities of the NWT. Inevitably every Elder spoke and lingered within the arena of how ‘a capable person’ is affected, formed and shaped by spiritual forces. These forces included the environment, family members long passed, old souls, medicine powers, traditional medicines, and rosary beads. The Elders’ spiritual beliefs varied from each other, but most were influenced by the Catholic Church, and expressed their faith in one God through prayer, ceremony, medicines, and a spirit of family togetherness.

I know that there’s only one God. And you know there’s so many religions in the world. And I always told my children, and I was always told them, there is only one God in this world. (Jane Dragon, November 12, 2013)

"We’re blessed by having all of this, to have that sense of spirit in ourselves. I think that's missing. That institution (schools) is just too hard for us to instill that. Because before I said, "As much as we struggled with the Catholic Church, it allowed some spirituality in there and yes, it’s a different name, it’s a God. But now we believe as Aboriginal people, it’s a Creator, same thing, and then those morals and values are intrinsic to that. (Pauline Gordon, November 13, 2013)

And spiritual, the spirit, like I was taught by my grandfathers and my brother, my dad, and my mom even. Because they were really, my grandfather knew a lot of medicine. Like my mom too, she always gathered roots and stuff like that, and able to use it if we're sick or something like that, and my dad same way. And yeah, they used to tell us, "not to touch it," or, because it's medicine and it's spiritual, healing like that. So we use to listen to them. If they put us some place, we'd sit there, never bothered, never touch it. (Mike Beaver, November 13, 2013)

Long ago, people had medicine power. They don't know about God and what was their power. What was the Gwich’in power? And Gwich’in
power, like I would say medicine people. Everybody was, that was their power. They don't know about God, until missionary came into the communities and start talking about God … But I question, that's who I question. My dad, and I said, "What was your power? Who do you pray to?" He said, "The power we had was medicine people. I had my own power;" he said. I said, "What about the sun and the stars, and that." He said, "No, we don't pray to the sun, we don't pray to the star. Gwich'in people never did that." You know. So, after I questioned my dad, I questioned my mom. Or else I tried to find out, I go to old Annie G. Roberts, she's an old woman. I use to sit with her, I questioned her. (Mary Effie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

We had a party ... in our house ... And all our children come. There were at that time around here. We have Thanksgiving dinner, we had Christmas, everything we have in here. And after they finished eating. You know, they all sit on the floor, sit on the couch. They're laughing away over one other. And I was sitting right there, and I look, it just hit me right there. That's what I miss in life. That's what I miss in life, family life ... From there on, you know, only after, when I found out myself, only then after that. They started talking about residential school. And um, so it really hurts. Have all that taken away from you. What they took away from you was the family love, family get together. (Charlie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

I believe in God, I was... And they're small, they're sitting in a circle (her children). I can't sit down, so when I was working, I pray, they pray after me. So they learn all the prayers on the rosary beads. (Denise McKay, December 14, 2013).

The local preacher, Father Pochat, probably push those beliefs, that religion in with the Tłı̨chǫ culture. So it’s easy for Aboriginal people to blend in their beliefs into Catholicism. (Ted Blondin, November 17, 2013)

In questioning medicine power as Mary Effie describes, or in recognizing medicines were sacred and not to be played with as Mike cautions, or in revelling in the spirit of family togetherness as Charlie discovers, the acknowledgement of the spirit in its many different shapes, sizes and styles is unequivocal. The grounding influence of a spiritual realm, as a centre for balancing and understanding ourselves as human beings has a lot of credence in Aboriginal axiology that “blends into” many with other internalized spiritual knowledges. From the appearance of old souls to rosary beads to medicine powers, the Elders agreed that they all seek inspiration sometimes looking for signs, listening for voices, or hoping for dreams or visions that will show the spiritual way. They
all had their stories that were beyond the breadth of this inquiry, but I had to include this one story of faith expressed by Margaret Ireland in her description of prayer and ceremony before leaving her home community to begin her cancer treatment. It was a story of courage that dovetailed into spiritual understanding and hope.

Before I left for that five weeks in Edmonton, there use to be a big rock beside my house and there was a pile of little rocks beside it. I use to spend time just sitting there. I try not to think about it or anything. I just be and I feel the sunshine and I feel the wind, I hear the birds and the water along the Jean Marie creek. And I just sit and just be, whatever comes like a thought or worry, I just kind of thank it and push it on its way. And I got to the point where I think ... Keep my mind just blank for a while. Anyways that one day I prayed, I don't realize I don't know enough about cancer, I don't realize whether I'm going to come back in person or a body bag, I've no idea. But I still want to live and so I prayed that the Creator and my Ancestors are with me, to help me, whatever I'm going to go through. And that, I take this experience as you know, part of my journey through life. But I said, you know like, "Give me something, like you know. Give me something that would tell me that you heard me." And after that, I left and went back home. The next day in the afternoon, I have to go to Fort Simpson, get on the plane and... So I went back to my rock and I sat there for a while and I kind of, my heart just kind of sunk and you know. I looked around, didn't see anything and all the sudden, right in front of me, like the pile of rocks were there. There was a rock about, just smooth and shaped just like an egg, it fits in my palm. It was right there, it never was there, so I picked it up and I thank the Creator and my Ancestors and off I went. (Margaret Ireland, December 14, 2013)

Such is a story of spiritual strength that sustains many 'a capable person' in times of uncertainty, illness, and hardships. With such an acknowledgement and acceptance in the power of one’s spiritual beliefs, life reaches a fullness of self. One’s identity is strengthened through this relational influence of the spirit through prayer, standing in the centre of ceremony, and realizing the essence of a higher power, for many it is the Great Spirit who has many names in the religions of the world. Through the guiding forces of one’s belief system in faith, family, and relationships with the earth’s elements of air, earth, fire, and water, one reaches wholeness in spirit that provides the life giving breath and energy to grow and to develop into ‘a capable person.’ As the Elders brought forth their understanding of the grounding influences of the spirit, their stories show the rich potential to grow an abundant understanding of the spiritual influences that shape the innermost processes of ‘a capable person,’ that being the spirit.
With these four grounding influences that shape the development of ‘a capable person,’ one can immediately sense the need for balance in this cycle of self and identity. All parts illustrate the interconnectedness and relationality of the circle of grounding influences. Merging together these grounding influences in the development of ‘a capable person’ increases the likelihood of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual strength and wholeness in the growth of learners. Raising children with these grounding influences prepares them at any time on their growth journey to encounter the next level of influences that further strengthen the development of ‘a capable person’ in a relational manner.

7.5.2. Relational Influences – The Tripod / Triangle (relationships with time, people, place)

Like the four grounding influences illustrated through the circle paradigm that shows symbolically how the self is physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually formed and connected, the next dimension of the shaping forces is also interconnected and rises up equally symbolic like a tipi tripod to reveal the relational influences. The Elders showed that the growth and development of ‘a capable person’ does not take place in a hierarchical manner, but more organically and continuously as the flux of experiences and knowledges present themselves in learning and life. A deeper understanding of the relational influences comes about through awareness of the interactions with three guiding energies that surround the foundation of one’s circle of self as a raised triangle inviting growth in trilateral metaphorical directions. These three guiding poles of understanding, or relational influences, have to do with developing one’s ways of knowing and beliefs in relation to time, people and place. In ‘a capable person’ epistemology (curriculum/pedagogy), learners grow from their central core outward and upward by the interactions with these relational influences. They are the guiding forces that shape the development of ‘a capable person.’ It is essential to understand that the relational influences do not present themselves in a neat, predictable step-by-step order guiding the learner in a linear, rote manner. Conversely, the opposite is true. These three relational influences guide learners only when they are ready and open to considering this development towards the wholeness of ‘a capable person.’ This development manifests itself as learners interact and pay attention to the three forces of: being aware of the time and history in which they live, understanding their people and culture, and recognizing the importance of their place.
or environment. The ways and extent to which these relational influences shaped each Elder’s life wove throughout their stories, which showed a clear and diverse picture of the Elders’ sense of time, people and place in developing into ‘a capable person.’ These relational influences are described below: first time (seasons and history), then people (culture and community), and finally place (the environment or the land).

**Time (seasons, past, present, future, history)**

Our people use to live out on the land. Our people use to have a cycle. Like right now, it’s fall time, they go out and start trapping. Right until March. And then from there, it’s springtime and they have rats. Right until June. From June, July 1st they come to town after about a week or two. They all move out to start fishing. They start fishing and they make dry fish, and come freeze-up, they set net under ice. With all that, they were doing for dog feed. In those days, people used to have sled dogs. That's the cycle they had. Go around every year. Every year, they do the same thing and they all have their own camp. That’s what we call traditional land. Oh I forgot about in fall time they go hunting for caribou too. You know, they just go from the camp to go hunting. So after New Year, they all move up into the mountain, for caribou. Same time you do the trapping for fine fur, mostly they trap for marten, mink, wolverine maybe lynx. So that’s what the cycle that they had, the way our people used to live, and you know, and the cycle. And they do that every year. (Charlie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

In conceptualizing the growth and development of ‘a capable person,’ the aspect of time, seasonal change, and history play a key role in being aware of the experiential and natural world. Time passes in the expression of temporal intervals on clocks, calendars, computers, and even in satellites that circle the world. Time functions to show the past, present and future age of the learners, family records, oral histories, momentous events, and the same seasonal cycles to which Charlie refers above in speaking about his Gwich’in people. Long ago, the Elders lived according to these seasonal cycles that determined the traditional activities according to the migration of animals, weather conditions, and the changes in the environment. They lived in relation to time and place. Their modes of travel, hunting patterns, nomadic lifestyles, traditional food and clothing choices were related to the cycle of seasons, which passed with ultimate precision in relation to temporal and environmental powers. The Elders all spoke about a period of time when large extended families were the norm, along with subsistence harvesting, sled dogs, moccasins and wrap-around mukluks, deep snow, months on end on the trapline,
or hunting, or fishing, custom adoption, and even when daily supplies were shipped up to
the north in big brown barrels. It was a time from the past with no modern amenities such
as running water, electricity, or central heating systems.

We used to haul water for them (the Elders). We used to...my brother
used to split wood and we used to bring them into the house for
them...and all kinds of things. People never had running water in them
days. (Jane Dragon, November 12, 2013)

I know lots of people that had lots of families, big families. I even used
to haul water with my cousins because there were eighteen in the family
there (Jane Dragon, November 12, 2013)

You know, years ago, we never used to have milk, we just had powdered
milk it was called klim, and it came in this big brown barrels, like this.
It was called klim, milk backwards, it was powdered. (Pauline)

My grandparents, my grandfather was the last special constable on
Herschel Island, so he never came to town because RCMP needed a
presence out there. So they, through our custom adoption, took one of
my sisters so she could take care of them. So my grandparents never
came to town til I was thirteen. (Pauline)

But in the winter he's (his father) gone, like he'd be gone ... Cause he's
trapping in the park at that time. He had to go to Caribou Mountains
with his dog team, it takes about, you know, maybe a week to get there.
So, it's a long ways. And, like if he leaves the first fall of snow,
sometimes September, early September, he wouldn't be back til
Christmas time, you know. (Mike)

She used to make moccasins and, you know, sew moccasins. She was
so good at it that, like the priest, you know, the priest always knew
when my Mom was sewing moccasins all the time. So, they used to ask
to buy those, you know. So she used to make moccasins, no mukluks,
because she'd make mukluks for the kids or something like that. But,
the moccasins she... any size, you know, wrap-around with canvas.
She could make three in one day. (Mike)

I was taught how to do everything. Everything that he named. How to
hunt, how to trap, how to fish, all these things. Everything that he
mentioned. That's how I was taught. I was a person that was outdoors,
not inside. (Mary Effie, November 26, 2013)
I was walking ahead of dogs. Pretty deep snow. All at once my dogs are right here, right here (points to his waist). And the guy behind me, he'd never forget that, he's gone now. Then they smelled caribou, you know. Crazy as they were smelling caribou, you tell them stop, they stop. Put my snowshoes back in the sled and just took off. (Charlie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

Mom says, "Look out the window!" Just point eh, "Look." Big line, dog team coming. So mom start cooking for them right away and come back from Rocher River, they give us meat for eating. And then lots of trout those days too. (Denise McKay, December 14, 2013)

They spent ... months on end, sometimes years just travelling. Travelling by dog team. (Ted Blondin, November 17, 2013)

These excerpts from the past provide a glimpse in time, into the Elders' traditional lives when life seemed simple unhindered by the fast pace of technology and industry. Many of the Elders expressed that life was hard, but most agreed that there were many good times, and fond memories of such a traditional lifestyle. Attention to time, particularly seasonal time, and the traditional activities related to the awareness that was necessary to survive. Seasonal time had a clear purpose and function to guide the decisions and planning that was necessary to live and raise a family on the land. Elders were very aware of time as it played a natural role of utility and context in shaping the cycle of traditional activities that made up their lives. But as time evolved, the Elders also spoke about the difficulties in dealing with changing attitudes and lifestyles, especially in the transition from land-based economies to more urban community living. As Ted Blondin expresses, the huge saving grace for the Aboriginal people in those days was the natural process of adaptation.

I think what's important is that Aboriginal people have learned to adapt, well not everybody, because a lot of people have a hard time adapting, that's why we're getting to have all these social problems. But we have to learn to adapt to the changing ways that are surrounding us. In my grandfather's days, they lived off the land. A capable person from there was somebody who can hunt and trap and keep their family fed. If they did that, they were a good person, a capable person. And there's no alcohol and drugs in those days, we lived a clean and healthy life ... Yes, now what's happened in during like... Like Chief Dan George talked about his life, coming from a cave, from coming from a cave and getting ordered into space age. And I saw a picture of my dad, coming from that same thing, living in the bush and living off the land where people
are. Going into space and to the computers so he's managed to live through all that, and somehow he's managed to adapt to all that. (Ted Blondin, November 17, 2013)

Like the flow of natural responsibilities, the cyclical passing of time and the balance of learning, the Elders spoke about the importance of adapting to change. Since the Aboriginal people lived such shrewd and resilient lives in relation with the land, this process of adaptation allowed the Aboriginal people to acclimatize to the nature flow of change. A lot of Aboriginal families survived the changes in time due to this adaptation, as well as resiliency, resourcefulness and strength. But many did not survive, particularly when they had to deal with the many negative historical events, such as colonialism, racism and residential schooling. These times made up a very difficult chapter in the history of Aboriginal peoples; some even call it a time of cultural genocide (Sinclair, 2015). However in this modern age, in the spirit of adaptation, resiliency and reconciliation, many Aboriginal people are taking the time to heal, as well as recording the history through testimonial contributions (TRCC, 2015), and recognizing the critical importance of remembering the history, largely to ensure that history does not ever repeat itself in promoting the inferiority of any race of people.

By being aware of temporal stages and history in the growth and development of 'a capable person,’ one can understand the importance of recognizing the relational influences of time, such as these cyclical seasons, and changing socio-historical, political and cultural attitudes. These time elements play an important role in developing 'a capable person’ mindset, particularly in relation to a life-long process of limitless possibilities of imagination and learning. In addition to time, people and cultural awareness play an equally important role, which is discussed in the next section of relational influences.

**People (family, Elders, community, culture)**

As community members, as family members, as parents, you were entrusted with giving to the community, even as children. Those elements that bring promise, joy, love, pride, respect, all of those elements to a community, even as a very young girl I remember hearing that. (Pauline Gordon November 13, 2013)
As celebrated in Pauline’s words above, one’s wholeness (physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually) that forms identity was developed and strengthened by those around the child. Whether they were immediate family, extended family, or community members, long ago one’s people and culture helped to develop one’s sense of self and identity. The Elders agreed that a strong identity linked positively with all facets of cultural and community knowledge, understanding and learning. These were the relational influences that shaped “promise, joy, love, pride and respect” in the growth and development of ‘a capable person.’ The Elders referred to lessons in relationship as important vehicles for understanding, helping others, naming children, passing on knowledge, being disciplined, being raised by grandparents and extended family, and developing strong bonds in family.

You sort of just did it (helping with errands and chores in the community). ‘Cause it was just the way it was. The whole community is together. (Jane Dragon, November 12, 2013)

We had our naming system, like I was named after this old man, so these two older ladies, who were kind of my grandmothers. Because they would take care of me, ‘cause I was named after their dad … now when they got really old, I had to make sure that my brothers, whoever that got meat, brought them food. So it's all at home, like that communal way of responsibility. (Pauline Gordon, November 13, 2013)

I was brought up with my people and my parents and my grandparents. What they taught me, I still got it. I fish in the summer up there too. I didn't want to make lots and lots of dry fish but I never ever stole a fish, I don't think so. And that's what I tried to pass on to my kids too. (Mary Effie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

Our community was a very small community with just a handful of families, but we were big families … When I think back where there was a saying that "It takes a whole community to raise a child." It rings very true to me because it had taken all the community members to raise us. When you're caught doing something that is not quite right, that could maybe be dangerous for you or the other children that are with you. Whichever elder was nearby, take that opportunity to set you down and talk to you about your actions. (Margaret Ireland, December 14, 2013)

Well I was raised by my grandparents so that started me off, on the right track … but it wasn't just the grandparents, that raised us, sometimes … sometimes I would stay with my aunt, my mother's sister. And I was raised with [my] cousins so, so it's not just their grandparents but the aunties and uncles. They all took part in raising you. And so, so
a family bond is I think very strong, in Aboriginal families. (Ted Blondin, November 17, 2013)

The wide array of different family bonds was substantial in the Elders’ stories; however, this display of familial ties is not specific to the NWT Aboriginal people. What is different though is the emphatic and consistent intensity about which many of the Elders described in these relational influences of family that shaped and guided decisions about where to live, family roles, staying together as a family, sharing knowledge, and familial references to people in community. To people long ago, family was everything.

We stayed in a little shack. And every time we had a baby, we added another little shack to it. And because my husband never believed in owing money, and I didn't either, so we were good partners. So I sewed, he'd hunt, he trapped, and worked. (Jane Dragon, November 12, 2013)

As a part of a family, we had roles, some of them gender specific, others not. And I think in that way our parents were trying to build us into somebody that could take care of themselves and could take care of others (Pauline Gordon, November 13, 2013)

When we're together as in a big family, well, we all stayed together, it didn't matter, our older brothers in their twenties or whatever. Always together as a family. So that's the reason why like when my mom was still alive, she passed away in 1987 ... but what she used to say to us was, "you know, you guys as a family, you got to take care of each other ... help each other, don't separate from each other, don't go one way because somebody else tells you to go with them ... Because once you guys separate," she said, "then you're not stronger anymore. Your love for each other starts fading away." So she said "that's what I want you guys to do." So that's why I stay close to my family here. That's why I didn't want to leave Fort Smith. I always wanted to stay close to my family, to try to help in any way I can. (Mike Beaver, November 13, 2013)

The knowledge that I have from my parents but also from the elders. And what I was taught, how I was taught, how to respect people and I share what I have. Why I always think to myself that I don't have to keep it, I have to share this. (Mary Effie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

I remember when Mary Louise's mother, an elderly lady, and everybody in that community called her "Etsu," grandmother. (Margaret Ireland, December 14, 2013)
The relational influences of family that the Elders felt and acted upon showed how they developed the continuity and purpose in becoming ‘a capable person’ through reverence and responsibility to family, culture, and community.

Throughout the stories of relationships in family and community, I was also reminded of the strong relational influences that Elders hold in the cultural realm of developing the ways of knowing and acting as ‘a capable person.’ The stories emphasized how Elders are at the heart and spiritual core of learning cultural practices, values and beliefs fundamental to developing a sense of identity, culture and community. These relational influences touched the participant Elders in many ways, expressing virtuous accolades for the shaping lessons that they received from their own Elders, such as a strong motivation to learn their traditional skills, profound respect for them as teachers, high praise for their supportive strength, and deep respect for their place in family and community.

I went to see them (the Elders) everyday, as soon as my kids would go to school, I'd run to one of them, whoever's making moose hide, whoever's making dry meat, whoever's making whatever. And I made sure I was back home by 11 o'clock, so that I had two hours in the afternoon until the children come home. But I did that. And the children seen, as they were little, but they seen where I went, they came with me and they got to know the Elders too. (Jane Dragon, November 12, 2013)

The best teachers that you could have is the elders. In the past and now. I think everybody had their knowledge, it's not on their own, you got all that knowledge. And it comes from a lot of elders ... That's what I want to leave for the young people. The best teachers are elders. (Mary Effie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

After I came out of the school, it took me a long time to find out. The elders were the best people! They were there to help you in every way they can. They were there to make you laugh. They always got something funny to say. They were playful too. That's what I learned from them. They never put you down. They never think of you in a bad way. (Charlie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

My children know that they have to respect us (their parents) and our elders eh. So you have to respect elders, if they need help, help them, you know. My mom, that's how she brought me up to teach me to
respect elders. That was a strong teaching. (Denise McKay, December 14, 2013)

In reflecting on the stories, I recognized the integral significance of these relational influences on the Elders as they were learning how best to live their lives in respect of traditions family, community and culture. So much depends on the relational connections of the people around the learner, as one develops one’s identity, traditions, and culture as ‘a capable person.’ It is for this reason that whenever one is around Aboriginal people in their circles of conversations, there are always three immediate questions that become the basis of trying to find relational connections. Inevitably they ask: what is your name; who is your family; and most often, where do you come from? Why? Because place also plays a critical role in the relational influences that shape the development of ‘a capable person,’ which is discussed in the next section.

Place (land, environment, the bush)

Me, I was brought up in the bush. (Denise McKay, December 14, 2013)

There are many ways to refer to place in the discussion of this last relational influence that shapes the development of ‘a capable person.’ Some Elders, like Denise, refer to it as “the bush,” or other Elders call it the land, environment, and even Mother Earth. Whatever the terminology used, there is one thing that is clear in the reference to place as a guiding force, and it is that the place of one’s origin, upbringing and background is an instinctive and powerful foundation. The relational influences that the Elders described with themselves and their surrounding environment were significant themes throughout the stories. By portraying place, in essence, many of the Elders considered that it was an extension of their spiritual beliefs. In this way, the land becomes the constant, or the sturdiest tipi pole, of the relational influences that profoundly affected the Elders’ sense of identity, culture and community. Many viewed the land as the source of subsistence, education, and even inspiration.

We were all born like on the land... Our families were very much subsistence harvesters. So the things that we learned very early on in life was to help with that. (Pauline Gordon, November 13, 2013)
Our days, there was no radio. No TV. No running water. Everything was off the land. Our food comes from the land. Everything, water, all that food is coming from that land. We're one healthy Gwich'in people. (Mary Effie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

They have good knowledge (referring to his wife's people). They're partly animal. That's how much knowledge they have. It's from their dad ... That's the kind of understanding that they have on the land. (Charlie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

It's just amazing how you've learned while you're in the bush." He (Margaret's older brother) gave me one example when he was hunting, hunting with dad and while they were travelling, dad stopped his dog team and step over. So he stopped, he just walked over to see what he was doing. So he said, "A moose travelled here." And he used the handle of the axe, and measured, and it's been like how many days that the moose had passed through here, and it was going that way. And so he said, "I can't remember how old I was." But I looked and I thought, "How on earth did he know? That the moose was a heavier moose and how many days ago it went there, it walked through and what direction it was going." So my dad in the end says, "We'll just keep this area in mind." I think that all the people had a built in GPS, and so they knew just the spots and stuff, they went and finished checking their traps and came back and stopped there and dad went hunting and shot the moose. So that was one of the stories that my brother shared with me. (Margaret Ireland, December 14, 2013)

They lived off the land and they, they lived on caribou, they went fishing. They're many stories of them going on the land, living off the land for two years at a time. My father was out trapping with his father for two years. World War II started, he didn't even know there was a war going on, he was out in the bush. And then they spent so much time on the land. (Ted Blondin, November 17, 2013)

Like Pauline's reference to her place of birth, this is where the Elders began their narratives of who they were, and where they came from, which shaped the expressions of their values, beliefs and worldviews. The most prevalent pattern described within the stories were the Elders' ideas of how their behaviours, customs and traditions linked to how they grew up on that explicit region. As an example, whether they lived in the north or south Slave regions of the NWT, knowing the land and being in tune with the animals was the "good knowledge" about which Charlie speaks to indicate the revered attitude towards land-based skills and traditions. Margaret uses the term of having a “built in GPS," to describe her father's innate understanding of his place. The land was the traditional
classroom for the children; the parents and the Elders were the teachers. Even to this day, Ted Blondin explains that environmental knowledge and culture-based traditions remain greatly valued as indicators of leadership, stewardship, and hope.

And so hopefully in their (NWT students’) education, they become more responsible and better stewards of the land. Because as a leader, that's the legacy that I would like to leave behind is that, our children look after the land, for future generations. (Ted Blondin, November 17, 2013)

The land, the mountains, the lakes, the rivers were viewed as their place of learning, and a place for providing the people with the wares to sustain their lifestyles and celebrate their artistry. As Jane Dragon explained, the community church was the place for showcasing the land’s commodities, which were displayed in the clothing and other decorative details like the furs, animal hides, and handiwork of people who hunted and trapped, and lived from the land.

I remember that people were so proud ... everybody had to make everything [from the land] like caribou hides, nice jackets, moccasins. I remember at Christmas time people used to come in. You're going to the church and all you could smell was moose hides ... and beautiful parkas and beautiful jackets. Everything was for church. It seemed like everybody showed off their handiwork. It was just beautiful. Even right down to the dog teams, the dog teams had blankets with big ball of wool or a pompom with a bunch of ribbons on it. And you could tell the good trappers. Some people would leave in the fall and we wouldn't see them until Christmas time. That's when they all came in. And the church was just beautiful, everything about it. And I remember all the dogs had bells. And that was the only time they would use the bells because when they trap and that they never used bells. I don't know if they really had the bells on the dog blankets, because the dog blankets were all decorated, all fancy work on it. (Jane Dragon, November 12, 2013)

Jane understood instinctively how important the land was, as shown throughout her memories as a child and then as a mother. Later in time, when her children were older, Jane and her husband use to transfer their children from school, and take them out every fall on the land to learn the outdoor cultural skills. This is how much they valued their traditional knowledge by ensuring their children learned too.

We’d take them out in the fall. We used to take them out of school for ten days. And, like they would miss a while, a week of school, but they all did well so it didn't hurt them. As a matter of fact, they gained
because they had to learn how to hunt, they had to learn how to prepare their foods, and all kinds of things like that. And then springtime, it's spring hunt: beavers, muskrats, ducks, and all kinds of stuff. (Jane Dragon, November 12, 2013)

The gain as Jane calls it, that she and her family made as a result of learning from the land, is synonymous with understanding the formational power of the relational influence that place has on the development of ‘a capable person.’ People depended on the land. It was a critical guiding force for traditional learning, cultural development and family unity. Together these three guiding forces – time, people, and place – raise up like the main tipi poles of the tripod to show how these forces work together to guide one’s journey towards becoming ‘a capable person.’ Margaret Ireland sums it up very well.

You truly know who you are, who your parents are and where you're from and that you know your surroundings. Your relationship with the land, and all the teachings that your parents, your grandparents and, sometimes, even your great grandparents had given you. And all these combined make you who you are and usually, the focus point for your elders is that they've taught you to survive, and that makes you a capable person. (Margaret Ireland, December 14, 2013)

Like a triangular structure of forces to guide one’s formative growth, these three relational influences stand as tall as the sturdy poles of a tipi tripod symbolizing the energy that focuses one’s way of understanding the relationships of history, identity, culture and place. Together the three relational influences work with the next metaphorical dimension of shaping influences that spirals from the centre of one’s being and emanate into the many spheres of learning and living in a recursive manner circling incessantly throughout one’s life as a reminder never to forget these critical lessons of time, people and place in the development of one’s cultural ways of knowing, doing and believing. These are the recurring influences that take the shape of spiralling over and over again to reveal the recursive cultural teachings of time immemorial.

7.5.3. Recurring Influences – The Spirals (sacred cultural and spiritual teachings)

From the relational influences that affect ‘a capable person’ consciousness, the recurring influences work in a similar manner only with a different symbolic shape to
describe the process of developing one’s unique qualities. These recurring influences originate from the centre of the circle of self, moving upward like the never-ending spirals of learning in the growth and development of ‘a capable person.’ These recurring influences are shaped by continuous exposure to the ancient cultural teachings told time and again in the storytelling and passing-on of knowledge in the many places of learning in family, with Elders, in communal settings, or travelling on the land. They are similar to the processes of oral traditions in their recursive nature of sharing knowledge, languages and traditions. In the Elders’ stories, the recurring influences moved in a repetitive manner, describing the different times, places and events of knowledge sharing. Over time and through committed analysis and synthesis, I identified ten patterns, or sub-themes, that formed consistently in the Elders’ storytelling. I have termed them recurring influences, but really they appeared to me like sacred influences in the ceremony that led me to understanding and processing them. They revealed the accumulated wisdom and experience of the Elders and the Ancestors in the form of ancient cultural teachings to honour the past, guide the present, and plan for the future. In this study, although I identified ten spirals that emerged from the Elders’ stories as strong and consistent patterns, there were many more. These ten I believed represented the lifeblood that guides the growth and development of ‘a capable person.’

I have chosen this sequence of discussion for the ten spiral guides based on the intuitive energy that guided me as I thought of the natural growth of ‘a capable person.’ However, the recurring influences are not hierarchical in influencing nature; rather they all equally show the ways of knowing, doing and believing as ‘a capable person.’ Learners pay attention and engage with them when needed, as the energy, frequency and intensity of the recurring influences are unique to the learners as they experience learning and life. In the presentation below, it was difficult to limit the discussion to only a few quotations that describe the recurring influences, as all the Elders spoke so passionately about these sacred spiral guides. As such, I chose not to reduce this presentation. I have included all of the Elders’ excerpts from the original data, which represented the most prominent cultural and spiritual teachings as the recurring influences.

Belonging, acceptance, nurturing, and trust
• She would find it in her heart to not only feed her own eighteen children but also kids around like me, I was one of them. (Jane Dragon)

• We were just given that sense that we mattered. (Pauline Gordon)

• I was so grateful that I had parents like my mom and dad that taught me a lot when I was growing up, you know. They really loved all of us, not only one person, they loved all of us, the whole thirteen of us. Even though I had a half-sister there, the oldest one ... my Mom treat her just like her own. (Mike Beaver)

• You were sick and you're lying there sick and your grandmother or your mom or your auntie. Whoever comes, and you know, the feelings that they give you. They may wrap your head, rub your back. And the touch and then put you away, nice and warm. And that's a good medicine. (Mary Effie Snowshoe)

• He found a little bit of good in me. (Charlie Snowshoe)

• I was raised by my auntie, and I really think it's my really mother. I didn't know, she was my auntie yeah, and she ever treats you... She's such a good woman, kind heart. (Denise McKay)

• The community raised the children, so there was lots of teachers. (Margaret Ireland)

• Because I was accepted by the family in a big way, they all liked me and so... They all did things with me, so that means they all did things with my children. (Ted Blondin)

Sharing, helping, kindness

• It was all about the sharing. (Jane Dragon)

• I don't remember any of my brothers not packing one of us, when we went berry picking. Not struggling with us when we had a toothache, so it was all a family thing. (Pauline Gordon)

• The way I was watching my mom and dad, through life, you know, all my life. I had their kindness, and their thoughtfulness, and all that. (Mike Beaver)

• They're training you, how to share with other people. Share what you have. Later on, I caught on to what he was doing. (Mary Effie Snowshoe)

• Sharing and kindness, very important for our people. (Charlie Snowshoe)

• It's my turn to look after you, you looked after me, you raised me, it's my turn to look after you." And she's happy. (Denise McKay)

• And after we moved, I received a card from him that he had graduated from grade 12 so that was so good (after helping the young boy with a kidney illness). (Margaret Ireland)
• So I helped a lot of people, to this day, a lot of people call me if they need me. (Ted Blondin)

Laughter, fun, play

• Yeah, it was fun time. It was good. It wasn't just school, it was... we could talk and we still could... As long as you don't fool around you're okay ... yeah, she was very special (talking about the kind nun). (Jane Dragon)

• My father was very nurturing. He was Metis, so he teased us a lot, played the violin, taught us how to play guitar, taught us how to dance. (Pauline Gordon)

• When we use to go for a ride, there was three of us. We'd be singing you know, like what they're singing in school. We singing little and making up jokes (with his sons). (Mike Beaver)

• My mother always do something to make a person laugh. We'd tell them stories, like that, and they'd laugh. And you know, there's laughing is a good medicine for them. (Mary Effie Snowshoe)

• They were there to make you laugh. They always got something funny to say. They were playful too. That's what I learned from them (referring to his Elders). (Charlie Snowshoe)

• We didn't have any TV or anything, anything like that, so, we were pretty creative in some of the things we did, in how we played. (Margaret Ireland)

Responsibility and hard work

• She had such a big family but she had a big garden. She ... her family were fed very well. I remember that because she used to cook and everything was big pots. (Jane Dragon)

• We would get the fish pick ready for the dogs, cause you needed that to feed the dogs. We were all trained to take... to look after dogs too, cause they were very much part of our survival. So that was really clearly an area that we were responsible for. (Pauline Gordon)

• And there was always chores to do. (Mike Beaver)

• And like in the morning, you have to take camp down. And go and put up camp at night until you get to a lot of caribou ... But it's nothing for them [to do all the work and butcher the meat]. It's nothing for them. Those days, mens are so smart. And it's just nothing for them. Just skin the caribou. It's just nothing for them. (Mary Effie Snowshoe)

• They were more harder workers than the hunters. That's what I say about the womens. They had to do everything. (Charlie Snowshoe)

• And then we pack spruce boughs for the floor, every second day. Me, I know how to, you know, bring the spruce on the axe handle, yeah. Big, just like big house, boy. I always worked so hard. (Denise McKay)
• We have chores to do because we didn't have electricity, running water, heating, nothing like that so. We had chores to do hauling water, and hauling in wood, and these kinds of things. (Margaret Ireland)

• I think that a lot of it is, they're too dependent on things, like... Like if they want to do something, they'll get their parents to pay for it, or their grandparents to pay for it. You can't do that! They get in trouble, you can't just... You know, they got to, first of all, be responsible for themselves. (Ted Blondin)
Respect and honesty

- To be honest and to be respected ... you respect everything. In my way of being taught, I had to respect the animals, I had to respect the plants, I had to respect just the way of life. (Jane Dragon)

- All of that I think was done with so much respect for us as learners. (Pauline Gordon)

- First of all, it’s about respect. (Mike Beaver)

- The biggest strong word that our Gwich’in people use was to respect. You respect yourself and respect people around you. (Mary Effie Snowshoe)

- There’s the respect for others too, you know, like I deal with a lot of different family groups here and that respect is, this is why I’m bringing up in some of our discussions... I remember our discussions and the, with the elders, and even in school, that the young kids really have to understand that whole idea of respect. ’Cause it's a huge ... it's a huge element of who they are, and they have to respect themselves. (Ted Blondin)

Languages and culture

- I find our culture is a way of life. It's the way so you can survive in life. That's what it is. (Jane Dragon)

- At the whale camp, all in our language. But you have to remember, even though my Dad understood Inuvialuktun, he rarely spoke it, unless he spoke it to my Mom. Because we had two separate languages. But he never ever, because of proximity I guess, never spoke Cree to us, or Michif, or French, except when his friends were there. There were a couple of older men in Aklavik, they would get together. [Altogether he spoke] six languages. (Pauline Gordon)

- Before they leave, the men would sit together and start telling stories. You know, telling about where they're planning on going, where they came from, stuff like that, you know. They would talk in their language, like Cree, Chipewyan, because my Grandfather, my Mom's Dad, talked about seven languages. (Mike Beaver)

- I still find myself telling my kids, you know. You meet anybody, doesn't matter who it is, old, young, whatever. You say hello to that person or say good morning. And all in Gwich’in, you could say, vanh gwinzii, drinh gwinzii. And say hello because that might be your last hello too. (Mary Effie Snowshoe)

- One of the elders told me that there's three components to the language. There is the community, harvesters and then elders. And the reason why I'm struggling with this is I'm coming from the elementary level, the community level, so I needed to kind of upgrade myself. (Margaret Ireland)

- And that's why I'm a really strong believer in Aboriginal kids understanding their language, because when they understand their language, they
understand their culture, they understand their relationship to others and to the land. So this is why I’m so strong on the language side of things. (Ted Blondin)

Passing on knowledge

- A capable person is a person that knows how to raise a family, how to provide for the family, and how to pass down his knowledge to the younger generation. (Mike Beaver)

- It was like way back how my dad was brought up and then he brought me up like that and I brought my kids up. I'm still doing it with my kids. (Mary Effie Snowshoe, first reference)

- And I think that it's exactly how they brought me up. But my dad knows how he was brought up and that was the same way that he brought me up. Everything he had to show. (Mary Effie Snowshoe, second reference)

- It's life, that's my life. So how you call. It was like way back how my dad was brought up and then he brought me up like that and I brought my kids up. I'm still doing it with my kids. (Mary Effie Snowshoe, third reference)

- I always said to my, I passed all this on to my kids, I tell them story, be at fish camp, every summer. And I tell them about it and I said, tell them how my dad brought me up. (Mary Effie Snowshoe, fourth reference)

- What I heard, what I was taught and that's what I tried to pass over to my kids. (Mary Effie Snowshoe, fifth reference)

- So, here I am, I try to pass it on to my kids. Because my wish is that one day that my kids will pass it on to their kids, you know. Already some of my grandchildren is around with me and the way I look at my family, is who's going to carry that on. (Mary Effie Snowshoe, sixth reference)

- So, in the later year of his life, my uncle... After I came back north, I use to sit down a lot with him to talk to him about just certain things because he's really interested in passing on all the teachings and stuff he had. And he use to tell me you know like, he would take time with whoever that is curious enough to look for the answers to these links. (Margaret Ireland)

Storytelling

- My grandfather, my dad, they were storytellers. My grandfather was a storyteller, it went to my dad, and then it came to me. That's why I picked up quite a bit. It's not only from parents, too. I used to go out and sit with old people to try to find out as much as I could. (Mary Effie Snowshoe)

- Yeah, they like it when you tell them stories, some of them, yeah ... they're learning how to make dry fish, dry meat, making bannock ... We set rabbit snares, nets, you know, they go fishing, all that ... That's my job, that’s why I tell story to kids that come to my tent, my teepee. (Denise McKay)
• We don't have a written language and so, I think the focal point for all the adults in raising their children is to really develop your memory process. And so all the stories and things they're telling us were very descriptive. And so you could see the pictures in your mind. I remember later on in life, like if I have a question sometimes I go and talk to my elders and they always use to give me a story. And then one day I was talking to, with one of my uncles and he was telling me a story about how, when he was growing up, he had a question, a really serious question regarding his life. And he wanted to talk to this elder but he didn't know how to go about approaching the elder. So finally, he said he had enough nerve to go and talk to the old man. And then he said, he asked, and so the old man sat there for a long time and then ... And then he lifted up and looked at him and told him a story. And he said, my uncle said that he walked away just angry with the old man, you know, this is a serious question and all he tells me is a story. And then he says, later on, I sat alone and thought over the story that he had told him, so he says, he turned around look at me, "My goodness, my girl," he says, "The question, the answer I was searching for was in the story." And he said that's how the old people use to be, you ask them a question, they don't give you a direct reply, they always give you a story. And it is through that story that you find your answer, they never really directly answer your question. And I suppose like it's to help you, you know, like with your memory and your problem solving. So you solve it, they give it to you, you take it, take it apart, and find your answer and you have solved your problem. So, they kinda turn things around and make you responsible for it, for whatever. So that's what he was saying, that's how it use to be like you know, they never really directly answer your questions. (Margaret Ireland)

• My father was a storyteller, and so to make his, make what he says, what advice he gives me, stronger. He would back it up with the stories, and some of these stories were very funny, they were entertaining. But there's meaning behind them and so he told lots of stories throughout my life. Lots of stories about my grandfather and my great grandfather and these stories made me very proud of my family. (Ted Blondin)

Food and medicines

• I remember in the fall she used to tell us how she made bear grease to cook with and she would make marrow grease. They were really into the grease stuff because that's how they made the food to taste good and to fry meat and to make bannock and all kinds of things like that. But it was all... they all lived on wild meat... they all lived on fish, meat, caribou. (Jane Dragon)

• Feeding and sharing, food is really critical to us as people. So when I was talking to those groups, I was telling them, when you see the Elder in there, the first thing you ask is, "Do you need anything? Your coffee's good? You want a piece of cookie?" 'Cause sharing food is who we are. (Pauline Gordon)

• My grandfather knew a lot of medicine. Like my mom too, she always gathered roots and stuff like that, and able to use it if we're sick or
something like that, and my dad same way. And yeah, they used to tell us, "not to touch it," or, because it's medicine and it's spiritual, healing like that. So we use to listen to them. If they put us some place, we'd sit there, never bothered, never touch it. (Mike Beaver)

- The lands and rivers were sure plentiful with everything to eat, moose meat, caribou, fish. We go for berries in the fall, cranberries for the winter. (Denise McKay)

- I remember my aunt ... had taken us to a point just up the Jean Marie River that we call "carrot island." [It was called] carrot island, because wild carrots grew there ... I remember one time that she gathered us and took us all over there and showed us how to identify a plant and how to dig for the roots. And when you pull it out, we found it was really sweet and very tasty and so, she taught us how to identify that plant. (Margaret Ireland)

**Prayer and ceremony**

- His name was Father Kesterman. And I said to him, I said, "I feel so guilty when I'm saying my prayers and I'm not really thinking about God." And he said to me, "Oh, you shouldn't feel guilty. Just say thank you Lord, and mean it. And you can say it fifty times a day, twenty times a day, whatever it is." And that saved my life. (Jane Dragon)

- But this morning, I ran over there because I saw the circle, but I didn't know that it was a prayer circle, because Evelyn was really sick. I just remember really being struck by the fact that all these people, like there was a whole circle of people praying there for her. (Pauline Gordon)

- My mom, she ever treat us good, she always talk to us, she learn us how to pray. She's a good Catholic, strong Catholic too, goes to church. Even when we stay in the bush, she'll get together Sunday, we pray and we say rosaries. She always talk to us by the bible, she reads in Chipewyan. She always talk to us, she's got really strong voice, just like you want to listen to her. (Denise McKay)

- "Yes, that we have a Creator that really, really takes good care of us. And that we do, if we're very respectful of all things, of all life." And she [her auntie] says, "Where do we get help, not only from our Creator, but we get help from our Ancestors, that had gone by too." (Margaret Ireland)

- Well the serious part of our culture is to share eh, that's when Creator is with us. (Ted Blondin)

These recurring influences highlight the cultural and spiritual teachings of the Elders in their own words. Although I decided to “substitute” the terminology to calling them recurring influences (after a long discussion with my husband), really for me, they were the sacred influences that swirled and energized the conversations that I had with the Elders. In essence, I called them the “spiral guides” as the nature of their recurring messages kept reminding me of my responsibility, reciprocity and synergy in this study.
7.5.4. Outside Influences – The “Canvas” (negative, positive)

From the recurring influences that observe the sacred teachings from the Elders’ ideologies, the last dimension of shaping guides is the outside influences. These influences are represented by looking outside of one’s centre of being, the self, and also out from all the relations, and further out from the spiralling stories of the recurring influences. If one is in the centre of these shaping influences and looks around oneself, one can notice the “canvas” of learning and life that surrounds the other shapes. The nature of the outside influences are determined by the Indigenous learners’ surroundings, or covering: it could be a caribou or moose hide, a canvas covering like the Fort McPherson tipis, or invisible, or strips of flowing colourful yarn, silk, or natural coloured stroud – whatever the imagination brings to the learners as they consider what is surrounding them, around them, influencing from them from outside.

In this study, I move beyond the imagined “canvas” covering to discuss two major outside influences that impact the growth and development of ‘a capable person.’ I realize that this section of discussing the outside influences could be a dissertation in its own, but for the purpose of this study, I attempt to discuss only two categories, as they cover the overall gamut of outside influences that shape ‘a capable person’ growth in either a negative way or a positive way. I begin with the negatives influences about which the Elders spoke, as I wish to end this chapter on a positive, hopeful note.

Negative Influences

But thinking about other people that went to residential school ... That strong family bond, they were yanked from that and raised, and they weren’t even taught parenting. So now they come back, they don’t speak their own language, no parenting skills, and so they are frustrated, everybody else, they turn to drugs and alcohol. And so, that caused all kinds of destruction. (Ted Blondin, November 17, 2013)

As the kids were growing up like, as our children were growing up, and as the grandchildren were growing up, he said (Margaret’s uncle) said a lot of us from our generation were into so much booze and drugs and that by the time, sometimes, you know, we decide to sober up, we realize our children were grown up too. Yeah and then he says, the hardest part of this is that once you kind of clean up and decide that you don’t want your children to following in your footsteps, they throw whatever you’ve done back into your face. And he says, a lot of parents don’t want to hear that, and so they kind of just, leave it
alone. So there is a communication gap within families. (Margaret Ireland, December 14, 2013)

The school system right now, like some people ... if they would have a couple of white friends that are in the team. They’re the ones going to be picked, they are the ones who you think are good. Well they kind of leave the others back. That’s not the way to treat people. That’s racism. We’re all human beings ... [but] we’re not treated evenly.” (Mike Beaver, November 13, 2013)

I went to her (Margaret’s mother) and talked to her about self-government and then she sat there for a long time and she said, "That is impossible," she said. I said, "Why is it? That it's impossible? To be in ... For our people to be in the self-government position." And she said, for years and years, when the government were first came over, it's almost like ... They've took our thinking away from us and whereever they are, they are like from Ottawa, they make decisions for us, as to how we're going to live. And she said, "We never question it, we just went ahead and did what we were told is good for us." And so we have years and years of being so dependent upon the government, to make these life decisions for us. There's just no way that we're going to go into self-government," she said. Even with health is like you know, we were isolated, we've use our own herbs and our elders taught us about the herbs and we manage and to cure a lot of illnesses. And then the government came and told us, "Well no, there's no scientific thing to support that, this is good." You know, so in a way, they've told us that what we do is not good, what they have is for us is better so... That's one of the things my mother talked about too, that you know, they got us to the point where, you know, it's so dependent on their methods of their medicine. And of course, like you know, like to this day, like they're so smart, they just know how to you know, a lot of things, a lot of you know, knowledge and things but... She said what we knew also, you know was, and to, for us to just kind of let go of everything, was not how we should have went about this. Education was the same thing, like you know, we just kind of um, moved back and ... Send the kids to school and that was it, like yeah. A sense of responsibility for raising your own children is not really, is not really there. (Margaret Ireland, December 14, 2013)

I was young and not considered an elder yet, so I went and I approach them and I've asked if I could attend their meeting. Provided I was told that, I just sit and listen and that's something hard for me to do but nevertheless, I did it. Um but through that and they keep on saying, that we're losing our young people, our young people are falling through the cracks. (Margaret Ireland, December 14, 2013)

In the Western system, there is no value placed on traditional knowledge. At that cultural camp that we did, they didn't even pay the elders and resource people to compensate them for their knowledge and skills. (Pauline Gordon, November 13, 2013)

Like TV and electronics ... I see teenagers, I mean I’ve been to different camps with the teenagers, they’re just sick when they can’t have their communication
with somewhere else. And it’s a real ... it’s bad like an addiction. (Jane Dragon, November 12, 2013)

The first thing we have to do, is tell them (youngsters) to get rid of their iPods ... Yeah, too much, not good in school. (Mary Effie and Charlie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

These negative influences run the gamut of outside stimuli that can impact a learner’s growth and development. The Elders raised such issues, as residential schooling and intergenerational trauma, drugs and alcohol use, a communication gap between parents and children, racism, passivity in decision making, losing young people, lack of value placed on traditional knowledge, and overuse of electronics. All of these negative influences have the potential to hinder, and sometimes debilitate, the growth and development of a learner towards becoming ‘a capable person,’ unless interventions are in place to guide the children and youth towards more positive guidance and experiences.

Positive Influences

The young parents kind of look to the education system to teach their children the Dene values, cultural principles. Yeah so, I remember we were talking about that at the DEA (school board) and the chief came and said that there should be more emphasis put on language. I just told him that we need it. The responsibility starts at home. We can't look at the education system to teach our children how to be Dene. It has to start at home. (Margaret Ireland, December 14, 2013)

The very good thing is that we stopped drinking in the 70's. Sobriety is the main thing for families. It was a good move that we made it, and we did that because today ... All our kids are pretty well sober now. You know that is the good thing we did. (Charlie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

You going to get yourself through school, and that you're going to have a good job, and going to take care of yourself, that you’re going to put yourself to school. Prove these things. That's what I tell my kids that education is so important. (Mary Effie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

We need them to get their education. (Charlie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

It’s the whole infusion ... so we recognize that our lifestyles as foundational teaching tools, and we got to keep working the infusion of those elements. The spirituality of the heart, you know, and try to work that in. (Pauline Gordon, November 13, 2013)
You have to serve your community ... Start getting involved ... I never gave up on my community. I keep going to meetings, being informed about what’s happening in your community. (Charlie Snowshoe, November 26, 2013)

Yeah. Edward and me, we use to go to school, talk to kids ... Well like, how you survive in the bush and stuff like that. You know, learning how to set traps and how to cook something, how to make your fire ... We teach the kids how to know their culture and the land. Me, I knew about the bush 'cause I was brought up in the bush. (Denise McKay)

We managed to change the school system, you don't have those Dick and Jane books anymore. And we have books that are written in Tłı̨chǫ and my father's book are a part of the curriculum, you know, so Aboriginal culture really is part of the school system, which is new now. (Ted Blondin, November 17, 2013)

There’s lots of trauma in the communities and families that stemmed from residential school. So the residential school curriculum is making teachers understand that and making the students understand that too, it's not the parents’ fault. 'Cause of the alcohol and drugs and addictions that they're in, that's probably been handed down because their parents were in residential school, weren't taught parenting, or any of that. (Ted Blondin, November 17, 2013)

As much as we want to build a strong education base, we have to deal with a lot of social issues, at the same time. All that involves parents, who are key partners in the education system ... I think they have to do everything they can to make parents understand that they are key partners in this process. And the more the parents are involved, the better because if the parents come to school complaining and everything else, it's because they're not being informed. And so what we got to do is to stop all the yelling and pointing fingers, is to keep them informed. (Ted Blondin, November 17, 2013)

I think that they're, a lot of young people are very engrossed in the computer age. I think what we have to do is... as an elder, as a school system, is to use that, use that high technology. Like we talk about for instance, when I was taking Tłı̨chǫ language class, just like they do to teach languages on computers. Talking also about Facebook and Google – They get the information right off of them .. So you might as well build into that ... So I think we have to utilize new technologies better, in a big way, to get ... To build in all these things through the computer to reach young people. We have to use everything we can, to reach those young people. If they’re not listening to elders and they’re not listening to their teachers, they're certainly learning lots on computers (Ted Blondin, November 17, 2013)

With the historic Tłı̨chǫ land claim. Now the people can create the conditions for success. Success begets success. Young people come back from school and they're working for the Tłı̨chǫ government. And we see somebody that's capable enough and we give them further training and we put them in charge on certain projects. Even department heads, so these kids are, they've gone the whole gamet of going school, going down south, getting a job with the
Tłı́chǫ government, getting recognized for what they do and giving them a certain position and responsibility. And they... That's a reward that a lot of young people are getting that and so, that's how we sort of round things off. 'Cause once they're in those positions, they themselves get up into a family way. And then that cycle begins. They're getting good experience, of what they've done and how they raised their children. So I think that more of those capable people that we've developed in our education system, come back to the community and contribute. And we recognize what they do and give them positions of responsibility. I think they are the capable people that we're looking for. I think that that's how we... As an elder, I feel very comfortable that we, we set them on the right path ... Today, under the land claims process, we have something like 52 companies that we're involved in with the mining companies, with the Tłı́chǫ government and responsible positions. (Ted Blondin, November 17, 2013)

Like the negative ones, these positive influences also show the range of outside influences that can guide a learner’s growth development. These positive influences are much more satisfying to write, as they show how in tune the Elders are with their youth and families. They celebrated such positive influences as ensuring that parents remember their parental responsibility, change starts at home, the critical significance of sobriety, the spirituality of the heart, culture based education, Indigenizing education with local stories and resources, the importance of involving parents as partners in education, and technology as a tool for learning. All of these positive influences bring hope and inspiration for the future of Aboriginal education in the NWT.

These shaping influences have to be taken into consideration by learners and teachers. They are not a formal, structured curriculum or plan in the sense that might be realized; they are, however, strong forces that guide and shape the development of ‘a capable person.’ Learners and teachers have to be aware of them, as they make choices based on that knowledge. To reflect and act upon the shaping influences is to renew the life of humanity in all its shaping forces that impact learning and life. To have them alive and bringing energy in a capable life is to move towards wholeness, and fulfilling the Elders’ interpretations of ‘a capable person’ in ways of teaching and learning.
7.6. Elders’ Indigenous Interpretations of ‘A Capable Person’

During the interviews at the Elders’ homes, my priority was to ensure that the Elders felt at ease, comfortable, and involved in the study. As such, as described in the previous chapters, the interviews always began with an opening prayer to ask Creator for blessings on our work, to learn together, and to ensure that the knowledge gleaned would result in benefiting the children, families and communities of the NWT. Depending on the Elders’ Aboriginal language proficiency, these prayers would be in their languages. As well, I would invite the Elders to think and process in their Aboriginal languages about the central concept of ‘a capable person’ if that was easier. If they were together with family members, or visiting Elders, I would ask them to speak in their languages together, in order to enliven their creative and insightful processes. Regarding the question of how does ‘a capable person’ translate into their Aboriginal languages, it was very interesting because all the Elders had different reference points depending on their perspectives. The varied Elders’ interpretations of the term, ‘a capable person,’ are outlined below

- *Pillaraaq inuk* – in the Uummarmiutun dialect of Inuvialuktun, it means a person who understands very well the Inuit ways of knowing and doing;
- *Dinji duuléh* – in Gwichin, it means a person who knows how to live on the land, and handle all that is involved in surviving and thriving;
- *Xáots’édíd edeghe nezǫ at’i* – in North Slavey, it means a proud, strong Dene;
- *Don sígítaj’ta* – in Tłı̨chǫ, it means a person who knows how to do many things;
- *Dene honettłèn horétha* – in Chipewyan, it means a person who teaches others;
- *Nétth’ih yaghe helna* – another Chipewyan meaning is, using all you have inside your head to figure out things;
- *Dene met’ow dedi* – in South Slavey, it means a person you can learn from;
- *Dene nawóddhe* – another South Slavey meaning is a person with a big spirit;
- *Dene náts’ezhe* – and even another meaning in South Slavey is a strong person.
As was apparent from the beginning, no matter how often I discussed the term ‘a capable person,’ with them, the interpretations presented a wide variety of responses depending on the Elders’ particular background, experiences and perspectives.

7.7. Summary

In this chapter, I attempt to provide the breadth of teachings that I was honoured to receive, through the common themes and patterns of expression among the Elders. I presented the major themes in the traditional ways that the Elders shared with me, as well as the different interpretations of the term ‘a capable person’ in the various Aboriginal languages in the NWT. In the next chapter, I will attempt to provide the “translations” of the themes into modern times, or “convert” them considering the modern demands of this new century, in such a way that allows the Aboriginal learners still to maintain their ancestry, while moving into what the future has in store for them, as they travel in their own unique ways to become ‘a capable person.’
Chapter 8. Conclusion

“Pass on the teachings. Elders are to tell stories about the past everyday. In this way young people learn to distinguish between good and unacceptable behaviour and when they are older, they will become the storytellers who will keep the circle of life going” (The late George Blondin, Dene Law #8, Yamoria the Lawmaker: Stories of the Dene, 1997).

In this final chapter, I discuss the interpretation of the findings from the Elders’ traditional stories of the shaping influences of ‘a capable person’ in relation to the current research in Aboriginal education. Within this discussion I attempt to present an interpretation (translation per se) of the themes that emerged from the Elders’ traditional perspectives into modern terms. In outlining the translation into contemporary Aboriginal education, I also highlight insights gained during the research process. These key epistemological ideas relating to the shaping influences of ‘a capable person’ will then be highlighted in light of the current paradigm of competency-based education, as its Eurocentric perspective may have significant impacts on learning for Aboriginal students.

Additionally, I present several recommendations for changing educational pedagogy and practice to inform Aboriginal education in the NWT, along with some outstanding questions that enter into the zone of difficult conversations still to be had. These suggestions for future research offer “a call to action” in keeping with the change-oriented language presented in the recently published Truth and Reconciliation Report Volume One: Summary (2015). I then provide an ending version of my own restorying outlining my ‘capable person’ learning and growth from an Aboriginal educator and leader, to a researcher-scholar in this study, as well as a summary of the study framed by the Indigenous belief of “gifting back,” as the Elders shared with me on my parting conversation with them.

Finally, I show how the concepts of reciprocity and responsibility work into the future in being influenced by the Indigenous qualities of becoming, being and believing as ‘a capable person’ in one closing story called, “the Creator and the Flea.” Through this story that originated from Archibald’s Elder, Kwulasulwut, Dr. Ellen White (2008, p. 122), I paraphrase its connection to ‘a capable person’ pedagogy to conclude my work by celebrating the overall learning of self-discovery, holism, relationality, and transformation
made by the Flea, thanks to Creator for working with it to become ‘a capable person’ (or rather Flea).

8.1. Purpose, Methodology and Research Processes

The purpose of this research study was to identify and examine the shaping influences that guide the development of ‘a capable person,’ in order to inform Aboriginal education in the NWT. I used a two-eyed seeing approach of Indigenous storywork and Western narrative inquiry methodology to explore and draw out the Elders’ perspectives about the central phenomenon of ‘a capable person.’ The guiding questions for my study were:

1. What is ‘a capable person?’ As outlined in the original NWT Aboriginal philosophy? And from the perspective of Indigenous educational theory and research?

2. What do the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ experiences show about raising children to become capable people?

3. How does this narrative research inform Aboriginal education in the NWT?

The data collection process during this inquiry included semi-structured interviews, observations during my travels to the NWT communities, accompanying Elders’ biographies, photographs of the Elders, their families and communities, along with the original Aboriginal philosophy document that introduced the term ‘a capable person.’ I used two processes of restorying and thematic coding to analyze the interviews and journal notes from the three visits to the Elders’ communities, as I wanted my methodology to be culturally worthy and grounded in the Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing. The knowledge presented by this collective of Aboriginal Elders indigenous to the NWT, although only a small sampling of the many wise Elders, showed the powerful essence of ‘a capable person,’ in the context of people who have existed in this place for many years, lived here, travelled the land, raised families and survived a challenging twentieth century, while still contributing to their families, homes and communities. As such, I practiced respect, authenticity and trust in receiving the approval to use the Elders’ real names and community references. By honouring the narrative landscape of the NWT Aboriginal
Elders, the oral traditions of storytelling, the Aboriginal protocols and ongoing involvement in Aboriginal “cultural catalyst” activities and ceremony, my conceptual framework emerged. These research processes allowed me to see the metaphor of raising children and raising a tipi to understand, find meaning, and interpret the shaping influences of ‘a capable person.’

8.2. Implications of the Findings – A Summary of the Translation of the Shaping Influences

As the Elders translated their understanding of ‘a capable person’ into their own Aboriginal languages in the previous chapter, I attempted to translate the Elders’ traditional perspectives of the four shaping influences into modern Indigenous education talk. In keeping with Graveline’s (2000) circle methodology,

“I now return to re-Search Patterns

Old thoughts made New.

Tradition re-made in modern contexts” (p. 369)

Anthropologist Julie Cruikshank (1990) who worked with Yukon Elders for almost three decades, suggests that stories are the means to gain access to Indigenous knowledges, which illustrates how narratives that have been passed on orally for generations continue to provide a foundation for modern education. The stories that she was privileged to access became the basis of her seminal work that she co-authored with three Yukon Elders. Cruikshank recalls the many lessons that she learned from the Elders and shows how the tradition of narratives passed on for generations continue to provide a wellspring of oral history for understanding ways to find meaning related to heritage, culture and education. Like Cruikshank, I dug deep into the heart and spirit of the stories through narrative research, rather than the more scientific conventions of ethnography or anthropology. As Ermine (2000) clarifies, “Aboriginal people have the responsibility and the birthright to take and develop an epistemology congruent with holism and the beneficial transformation of total human knowledge. The way to this affirmation is through our own Aboriginal sources” (p. 103). In this way, I acted as a storytelling apprentice.
walking alongside the Elders (Clandinin, 2013) to learn their history, languages, and approaches to raising children, as they related to ‘a capable person.’ As such, I heard stories about the NWT Indigenous peoples’ fight to survive during the great flu epidemic of 1928, the nomadic travels of the Cree and Chipewyan peoples of the south Slave around the turn of the last century, the traditional caribou hunting practices of the Gwich’in in the majestic Richardson Mountains since time immemorial, the traditional harvesting techniques of the Dene people in all the seasons, and an Inuvialuit family’s whale hunting summers on Herschel Island near the Arctic circle. These are only some of the stories that showed the fortitude and perseverance of capable Aboriginal people during the last century, in spite of the harrowing effects of Euro-Canadian contact, colonialism, residential schooling and racism. As well, through these stories, I saw the shaping influences of ‘a capable person’ in the traditional ecological sense, and discovered that the oral traditions are a vivacious ongoing process, a way of understanding Aboriginal education in the past, as well as in the present, and in providing glimpses into the future.

But before moving from the traditional perspective of the shaping influences of ‘a capable person’ into the modern terms, it becomes important to delineate my reference to the term ‘Aboriginal education.’ Hampton (1995) called it Indian education explaining the significance for “a recognition of Indian education as distinctive [indicating] a legitimate desire of Indian people to be self-defining, to have their ways of life respected, and to teach their children in a manner that enhances consciousness of being an Indian and a fully participating citizen of Canada or the United States” (p. 10). Chartrand (2012) sheds more light on the term, adding that the reference to Aboriginal education was too “homogenous,” not celebrating the “diversity that exists amongst Indigenous nations in Canada” (p. 145), which can prove difficult when Aboriginal education is viewed “from the lens of Western epistemology – an outsider perspective that is different from multiple Aboriginal / Indigenous perspectives” (p. 145). As outlined by Goulet & Goulet (2014), there are many references in the discussion of Aboriginal education, including Indigenous education, Indigenous pedagogy, decolonizing education, as well as indigenizing education. The references are many and sometimes coinciding, but most refer interchangeably to Aboriginal education or Indigenous education as “the education of Indigenous students, usually to quality education for Indigenous learners in formal education settings” (p. 11). This description clearly outlines my reference point throughout
In this study, without any preference for the more traditional term, Aboriginal education, or newly referenced term, Indigenous education. Both are used in a manner that respects the principles of storywork (Archibald, 2008) that honours Indigenous philosophies and cultures that tend “to adopt a mind, body, emotions and spirit dialogue” (McGabe, 2008, p. 143). Most of all, the dynamism of Aboriginal education can be found in the homes, families and communities in which “daily acts and decisions of thousands of Aboriginal Elders, parents, and educators who bring particular values, knowledge, and ideas to the development of children. Aboriginal dimensions of education come alive in the efforts of schools and communities to make education work in profound ways – to prepare students as Aboriginal citizens and as citizens of a world changing beyond our ability to grasp, except in broad contours” (Brant Castellano et al., 2000). These dimensions are the ones that enrich the shaping influences of ‘a capable person’ as they meld together in the theory and practice of educating Aboriginal children and youth.

The main idea developed in this study about Aboriginal education, and validated by the Elders’ traditional stories was that of shaping influences that guide the growth and development of ‘a capable person.” Four prevalent themes emerged from the Elders’ narratives, and the overall research process, which were organized in a developmental manner into four shaping constructs related to the guiding influences as follows:

1) The circle shows the grounding influences;

2) The tripod (triangle) raises the relational influences;

3) The spirals reveal the recurring influences; and

4) The “canvas” illustrates the outside influences.

Through these four shaping influences, I move into the contemporary approach of Aboriginal education associated with inquiry based learning, which draws from students exploring their own interests and expressing their own ideas (Robinson, 2011), rather than being passive learners waiting for the absolute truths of knowledge to be deposited into their vessels (Friere, 1990). Fortuitously, inquiry based learning, and its close cousins, play based education (Pascal, 2009) and relational learning (Noddings, 2013) bring education full circle, as its modern precepts resonate with pre-contact traditional Indian
education “in which the community was the classroom, its members were the teachers, and each adult was responsible to ensure that each child learned how to live a good life” (National Indian Brotherhood, 1973, as cited in Kirkness, 1999), and to be a good person; in this study, these ideals are accentuated as ‘a capable person.’ The idea of education leading to living a good life is celebrated throughout the Indigenous education scholarship (Cajete, 1994; Battiste, 2000; Toulouse, 2013), and is in close parallel to this study. For example, many scholars have expressed ‘a capable person’ philosophy in many ways, including these outlined below:

- "A happy, healthy human being” (Bopp et. al., 1984, p. 16)
- “Living a good life” (Cajete, 1994, p. 46)
- “Thinking the highest thoughts” (Cajete, 2000, p. 276)
- “Being more fully human” (Friere, 2000, p. 15)
- "Working towards a happy life” (Young, 2005, p. 91);
- "How to be a good human” (Atleo, p. 99, as cited in Battiste (2013);
- "A whole healthy person" (Battiste, 2013, p. 11);
- "A righteous human being” (Dorion, p. 34, as cited in Goulet & Goulet (2014)
- “I proceed with a good mind and a good heart, ready to listen and ready to act” (Toulouse, 2013, p. 21).
- If you are being a good human being you are accountable to relationships” (Wilson, 2014, YouTube video – Open forum on Indigenous research methodology presented at the University of Manitoba)
- "Doing things in a good way” (Dene nahjo, p. 60, as cited in Up Here Magazine, September 2015).

All of these varied citations refer to the many contemporary ways of looking at the representation of ‘a capable person’ that is holistic in nature echoing the discussion that has taken place in the contemporary discourses on Aboriginal education in this new century. In 2012, four waves of Indigenous scholars met to discuss their reflections since the ground breaking policy document, Indian Control of Indian Education (1972). Forty
years later, the article celebrates the successes of capable Indigenous peoples. Battiste (2013) calls these different generations, waves of Indigenous renaissance. However, it also emphasizes the responsibility that Indigenous peoples have to ensuring “the protection of the next seven generations’ rights to good quality education that truly honours Indigenous ways of knowing and being, languages, values, and cultures (Kirkness, Archibald, Pidgeon, Muñoz, 2013, p. 5). This commentary amplifies the importance of the storywork principles of responsibility, reciprocity, inter-relatedness, holism and synergy (Archibald, 2008) being celebrated in contemporary classrooms on Turtle Island (Toulouse, 2013). By presenting this retrospective look at Indigenous education and its journey over the last forty years, I cannot help but feel the weight of responsibility that lies with all Indigenous educators and leaders in viewing time and history: the relation to children and their personal learning; the connection to family, community, and the land; the understanding of the Elders’ spiral guides; the many outside influences; and the journey that they face into the future amidst the demanding challenges of globalization, racial and religious conflicts, climate change (i.e., spring floods, summer forest fires, high Arctic glacier melt, etc.), instant communication, and fast-paced technology, to name a few. This study aims to be a catalyst to transform current pedagogy and practice, and to change curriculum and resource development that balance the shaping influences of ‘a capable person’ to enhance understanding, learning, and praxis for Indigenous students.

8.2.1. The Circle Shows the Grounding Influences

During the study, all the Elders reflected on the circle as a foundational piece in the growth and development of their own lives, their children’s, and the children they worked with in the NWT school systems. Again, not all of the NWT Elders were familiar with circle methodology, but they intuitively understood its meaning in relation to raising children in the processes involved in developing one’s fullness in a cycle of energies that expand into four dimensions of learning and development in one’s body, mind, heart and spirit. As Bell (2014) shares, “there is no “right” or “wrong” way of representing or using the [Circle or] Medicine Wheel: all forms hold particular meaning to various Indigenous nations while all transmit a common understanding of the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of all things” (p. 14). Brant Castellano et al. (2000) concur noting that the “Medicine Wheel, a teaching device that originated among the First Nations of the Plains,
has gained broad acceptance as a means of maintaining awareness of the interrelatedness of all life while we deepen our understanding by focusing on segments of the whole (Brant et al., 2000, p. xiii). Applied to Aboriginal education in the NWT, the grounding circle shows the importance of paying attention to the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual dimensions of learning and personal development connected to ‘a capable person’ pedagogy. Recognizing and examining the grounding influences that shape the self and identity of young learners, there is the potential to grow towards becoming ‘a capable person’ when educators raise awareness and understanding in this cyclical manner.

The Elders’ connection to the four parts of the circle’s grounding influences emphasized the need to balance the growth in all areas of learning. In the physical sense, proper diet, exercise and sleeping routines are essential for healthy growth. Nourishment in the forms of food, water, and medicines, as well as being active, and practicing basic routines, such as working hard during the day, and sleeping at night were critical for healthy development. In the mental sense, cognitive skills assisted the most basic functions of human development such as learning to walk, talk, find patterns and connections in the world, process thoughts, as well as learning to read, write and work with numbers and ideas, in addition to developing more complex intellectual skills, such as communicating, making decisions, problem solving, managing time, etc. In the emotional sense, having a big heart, being shaped by goodness and kindness, making heartfelt decisions, these are the many ways to describe the grounding influence of feelings and emotions that shape the development of ‘a capable person.’ When children are raised in loving homes where acceptance, encouragement and patience guide their growth, they learn to feel safe and confident. The Elders emphasized the importance of feeling love, and expressing love to children and family in clear and candid ways. And finally in the spiritual sense, the inner growth of one’s spiritual awareness and development depends on many essences that originate from family, culture, religious denominations, as well as contemplative dialogue through dreams, visions, and ceremony. As such, in the Aboriginal way of believing, “a whole person consists of spirit, heart, mind and body – the capacity to see, feel, know, and do. Therefore, in the learning process, a whole person engages his or her physical, mental, emotional and spiritual capacities in receiving data or information for the brain to process” (Hill, 1999, p. 100, as
cited in Swanson, 2003). This finding resonated in the Elders’ stories that grounded their values and ways of raising children in the NWT.

Overall, the grounding circle of self develops distinctively for all learners in a way that leads them to their own unique ways of becoming ‘a capable person,’ particularly in expressing their talents, gifts, beauties, curiosity, play, imagination, confidence, and learning in the myriad of ways determined by their inner knowledge. The primary question of: Who am I? becomes grounded in the development of self-in-relation (Graveline, 1998). As Hampton (1995) asks, “How does the acorn [or a more relevant NWT example, a birch seedling] unfold into an oak [or a birch]? Deep inside itself it knows – and we are no different. We know deep inside ourselves the pattern of life. The source of our traditions is present” (p. 32). And so much depends on these traditions of raising children in a holistic manner consistent with grounding influences of the circle. This same way of familial thinking was echoed in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) in 1996 (Volume 3, Chapter 5) in outlining that,

For more than 25 years, Aboriginal people have been articulating their goals for Aboriginal education. They want education to prepare them to participate fully in the economic life of their communities and in Canadian society. But this is only part of their vision. Presenters told us that education must develop children and youth as Aboriginal citizens, linguistically and culturally competent to assume the responsibilities of their nations. Youth that emerge from school must be grounded in a strong, positive Aboriginal identity. Consistent with Aboriginal traditions, education must develop the whole child, intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically (p. 479)

These expectations from Aboriginal parents, community members, and Elders have remained solid after more than twenty years since the release of the RCAP recommendations, into the recently released TRCC’s (2015) Calls to Action committed to changing education. There is different wording, but the essence remains the same: the 94 calls for action are highlighted “in order to redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation” (p. 329), particularly in the healing components needed for children and families in this new century. As Graveline (1998) says, “we are like one big family with “all our relations.” Nothing we do, we do by ourselves; together we form a circle. That which the trees exhale, I inhale; that which I exhale, the trees inhale. We live in a world of many circles; these circles go out into the
universe and constitute our identity, our kinship, our relations” (p. 56). When these ways of cyclical thinking translate into modern Aboriginal education, the learner can understand the significant function of the circle to ground one’s sense of self and identity towards becoming ‘a capable person’ under the guidance of family, both immediate and extended, community, and the school system.

However, in today’s schools, Bell (2014) raises a critical question “that needs to be addressed in the creation of an Indigenous, culturally relevant educational process [in] how to create a school environment that reflects Indigenous culture and instills traditional values while providing the students with the skills that they need to “survive” in the modern world” (p. 14). How do educators and leaders in Aboriginal education ensure a balance in learning of all parts, for children to grow and develop into ‘a capable person?’ Undeniably Western education places a huge amount of effort in the cognitive development of students in the modern school system. The British philosopher, Ken Robinson (2011), concurs saying, “In general though, the emphasis in schools is on academic learning, which has tended to value only one mode of knowing and, in so doing, has displaced others” (p. 268). He goes onto to express, tongue in cheek, what the 1970s psychotherapist, Dr. Anthony Storr, called, “the ‘Oxford neurosis,’ which he described as “intellectual precocity combined with emotional immaturity” (p. 177, as cited in Robinson, 2011). Tough (2012) calls this same “neurosis,” or cognitive dominance in the contemporary school system, a “cognitive hypothesis: the belief, rarely expressed aloud but commonly held nonetheless, that success today depends primarily on cognitive skills” (p. xiii). It is a well known point that the modern school system places an inordinate amount of attention into the intellectual and physical development of children in core subjects, literacy, numeracy, and physical education and after school sports, much to the demise of their other parts, namely the heart and spirit – the inner development of core grounding influences. Unfortunately, the development of hard skills much outweighs the important soft skills such as, being curious, listening to another’s point of view, showing kindness, providing a gentle suggestion, being patient, practicing self control and/or social fluidity, or having fun and being playful. These inner parts are an essential and valued part of Aboriginal education as emphasized by Ermine (1995) who says, “the last great frontier and the most challenging one of all is this inner space of the individual” (p. 108), and it may well constitute the very essence of Aboriginal education” (Brant Castellano, et.
al., 2000, p. 7). This heart and spirit part of the human being provides the balance and holism that is necessary in education that honours the cyclical aspects of teaching and learning.

8.2.2. The Triangle (Tripod) Raises the Relational Influences

During the interviews, many of the Elders also spoke about raising children by being aware of and understanding three relational influences that rise above the circle of self into a symbolic triangle or tripod of relationships. The Elders showed that the growth and development of ‘a capable person’ does not take place in a hierarchical manner, but more organically, and contextually sensitive, as experiences and knowledges present themselves in learning and life. These three guiding poles of understanding, or relational influences, have to do with developing one’s ways of knowing and beliefs in relation to time, people and place: more specifically in being aware of the time and history in which they live, understanding their people, community, and culture, and recognizing the importance of their place or environment. In respect to time, the Elders spoke about life lived according to the seasonal cycles that determined the traditional activities according to the migration of animals, weather conditions, and the changes in the environment. They lived in relation to time and seasons that provided clear purpose and function to guide the decisions and planning that was necessary to live and raise a family on the land. As time evolved, the Elders also spoke about the difficulties in dealing with changing attitudes and lifestyles, especially in the transition from land-based economies to more urban community living, but through adaptation and resourcefulness they accomplished this transition in time. The Elders also made reference to a dark time in their history in which they endured the impacts of Eurocentric hegemony, colonialism, racism and residential schooling. The Elders recognized the critical importance of remembering and learning from time to ensure positive relationality among people’s languages, traditions, values and beliefs. In respect to people, the Elders described the relational influences of family that shaped and guided decisions about where to live, family roles, staying together as a family, sharing knowledge, and familial references to people in community. To people long ago, family was everything. Equally important in Aboriginal culture are the Elders who are at the spiritual core of learning cultural practices, values and beliefs fundamental to developing a sense of identity, family, culture and community. So much depends on the
relational connections of the people around the learner, as one develops one’s understandings, identity, and culture as ‘a capable person.’ In respect to place, the Elders celebrated the many ways to refer to place, such as the bush, the land, the environment, and even Mother Earth. Whatever the terminology used, there was one clear message in the reference to place-based learning as a guiding force: the land is an instinctive and powerful foundation. By portraying place, in essence, many of the Elders considered that it was an extension of their spiritual beliefs. The land was the traditional classroom for the children; the parents and the Elders were the teachers. People depended on the land. It was a critical guiding force for traditional learning, cultural development and family unity. Together these three guiding forces – time, people, and place – rise up like the main tipi poles of the tripod above the grounding circle to show how these forces work together to influence one’s journey towards becoming ‘a capable person.’

This finding is consistent with much of the Indigenous research studies that express emphatically: relationships matter (Meyer, 2003; Kovach, 2009; Kirkness, 2013) in living a capable life. Weber-Pillwax calls this shaping influence, relationality (as cited in Steinhauer, 2002), particularly in association to considering all aspects of life including the understanding of time in the past, present, and future, as well as people and the land. Newhouse (2013) adds another aspect of understanding relationality in the realm of spirituality; he underscores that “Indigenous spirituality focuses on ethical relationship between all aspects of the universe, not just human to human but human to nonhuman as well” (p. 420). Cajete (1994) concurs in expressing the seminal Lakota belief: “mitakuye oyasin – we are all related” (p. 165) in rising up to learn from the temporal, cultural and environmental influences that guide learning and living. Another Lakota spiritualist, Frank Black Elk (1982) synchronizes the relational influences in expressing that, “everything in the universe is related within the tradition of the Lakota spirituality; everything is relational, and can be understood in that way” (p. 148, as cited in Caillou, 1995, p. 50). Wilson (2008) calls upon “relational accountability” (p. 97) to oneself, among one’s people, to the cosmos, and with ideas in his Indigenous research paradigm that parallels ‘a capable person’ philosophy. He says, “of course all philosophy is based upon a culture, time, a place” (p. 91), which reinforces the understanding of the three relational forces that influence the development of self in relation (Graveline, 1998) to the relationships of
respect (ECE, 1993) in understanding how the guiding influences of time, people and place play such an integral role in the growth and development of ‘a capable person.’

But how do the relational influences connect to modern education, particularly Aboriginal education? Watt-Cloutier (2000) offers a response in presenting her views of education from a Nunavik perspective. She says, “Education is a means of learning, the way a people prepare themselves for life. All cultures and all peoples have education, but its form and effectiveness varies. The effectiveness of education is measured by how well it prepares people to handle the problems and opportunities in life in their own time and place” (p. 114), and to ensure all three relational influences are represented, I would add, with their own people, culture and community. This statement raises another critical question regarding whether modern schools understand the serious importance of learning history from an Indigenous perspective, as well as promoting place-based education, and ensuring culturally sensitive schooling for Aboriginal students throughout this country. As is well documented (TRCC, 2015), Aboriginal children have undergone a genocidal form of education in the last century, whose impacts are still rampant in the intergenerational trauma that wreaks havoc upon modern day Indigenous families, peoples, and communities. This finding is so real and horrific as one considers the present day realities, such as the murder trial of Daniel Faine killed at knife point in a home in the small Aboriginal community of Ndilo, NWT last year (NNSL, December 15, 2015), or the La Loche shootings in the small Saskatchewan community this past January (CBC, January 22, 2016), or the recent mass suicide attempts in another northern community of Attawapiskat, Ontario (Huffington Post, May 4, 2016). Are modern day schools systems, (or health and social services, and justice systems, for that matter) being effective in preparing these Aboriginal children, youth and families to handle the issues that are so real in this time, in these places, or within these communities? Many Indigenous scholars and educators would unilaterally say not (Battiste, 2013; St. Denis, 2014; TRCC, 2015); however, many also admit to some progress. Goulet & Goulet (2014) state that “gains have been made in Indigenous education but, at the same time, issues of dropout, poor attendance, and poor academic achievement indicate further changes are needed in schools to provide quality education for Indigenous students” (p. 46).
These findings point to the critical need for change, particularly for Aboriginal students, in finding ways for them to experience grounding and relational influences that can build on the development of self and identity, in relation to culture, community and place towards becoming ‘a capable person’ – not a young child isolated and in despair, continually besieged by the complicated problems of poverty, dysfunction, trauma, violence and alcoholism, without servant and moral leadership from the people and system around her. Currently, in several western jurisdictions across Canada, education systems are undergoing a process of reform and renewal (BC Education, 2011; Alberta Learning, 2012, and NWT ECE, 2013). My hope is that attention will be given to changing the pedagogy and practice to serve Aboriginal students in an education that provides the grounding and relational influences necessary to become ‘a capable person,’ confident in their identity, proud of their culture, speaking an Aboriginal language (or two), and experiencing positive achievement in school. A teacher in the NWT believes that the success of Aboriginal students happens when the whole family, community and teachers “believe students can and will achieve what they need to do and what they set out to do. That optimism is a defining factor in this region (Chief Jimmy Bruneau School)” (Fullford, 2008, p. 308, emphasis in original, as cited by Goulet & Goulet, 2014, p. 46). I agree wholeheartedly and remember one of my own students (during my principalship in an NWT school) celebrating his learning in his commentary, “I love my school. It is my family” (personal communication, S. Mackenzie, 2008). This student’s positive energy is witness to the findings that when the grounding influences of love, belonging, and kindness are in a school, along with relational influences that honour the languages, and that practices culture / place-based education for Aboriginal students – definite learning will take place in a holistic, inter-related, and synergistic way.

8.2.3. The Spirals Reveal the Recurring Influences

Even though there were no specific questions asked during the interviews about spiral learning or the circular qualities of narratives, the Elders spoke about raising children through stories that were told, and repeated over again, in different ways, but with recurrent themes. These shaping influences are those that originate from the centre of the circle of self, moving upward like the never-ending spirals of learning in the growth and
development of ‘a capable person.’ The recurring influences are shaped by continuous exposure to the ancient cultural teachings told time and again in the storytelling and passing-on of knowledge in the many places of learning in family, with Elders, in communal settings, or travelling on the land. They are similar to the processes of oral traditions in their recursive nature of sharing knowledge, languages and traditions. In the Elders’ stories, the recurring influences moved in a repetitive manner, describing the different times, places and events of knowledge sharing. I prefer to call the recurring influences that guide the growth and development of ‘a capable person,’ spiral guides, as they move in generative spirals of information that build upon each other as they continue spiralling. Like Hampton’s (1995) model of Indian education, the recurring influences are “iterative rather than linear. [They progress] in a spiral that add a little with each thematic repetition,” and “find[s] new meaning with each turn of the spiral” (p. 6). Hampton’s Western counterpart, Jerome Bruner (1960), spoke about spiral learning as well, a little earlier in the 20th century, calling it a spiral curriculum. In turn Bruner’s theory was adopted by the medical profession that explained the concept as: “A spiral curriculum is one in which there is iterative revisiting of topics, subjects or themes throughout the course. A spiral curriculum is not simply the repetition of a topic taught. It requires also the deepening of it, with each successive encounter building on the previous one” (Harden & Stamper, 1999, p. 141). This description outlines succinctly the way that the Elders’ spiral guides function as significant teachings that uplift and strengthen the ecology of Indigenous knowledge through recurring influences that guide the development of ‘a capable person.’

Not surprisingly, this finding of spiral guides is celebrated throughout the Indigenous scholarship, as ancient cultural and spiritual teachings (Cajete, 2000; Kovach, 2009; Battiste, 2013) shared in families, communities and educational organizations. In this study, the Elders shared these same teachings in a wide variety of prominent themes and methods for raising children. The Elders told many different stories; however, I captured only ten recurring influences that guide the growth and development of ‘a capable person,’ as follows: belonging and nurturing; sharing and kindness; laughter and play; responsibility and hard work; respect and honesty; language and culture; passing on knowledge; storytelling; foods and medicines; and prayer and ceremony. Even though there were most likely many more than ten, I believe that I captured the essential teachings, which were expressed by all the Elders in their own unique way.
When Aboriginal learners are guided by these spiral guides in a manner of recursive lessons, and in atmosphere of encouragement and love, the ensuing knowledge acquisition is layered and tenacious. Wilson (1998b) describes the recurring influences as, “the intimate hours I spend with my grandmother listening to her stories are reflections of more than a simple education process. The stories handed down from grandmother to granddaughter are rooted in a deep sense of kinship responsibility, a responsibility that relays a culture, an identity, and a sense of belonging essential to my life” (as cited in Thomas, 2005, p. 240). In modern schools, the spiral qualities of storytelling may seem repetitive and not motivating, even tedious; however, for Indigenous children, these recurring influences are critical in the development of patience, identity, language and culture. Thomas (2005) explains,

Traditionally, storytelling played an essential role in nurturing and educating First Nations children. I used to only half listen to the talk of my Grandparents, Aunties, Uncles and think that I probably would not have this type of “idle chat” with my own children. I now realize the wisdom that made up those stories. Now, as a parent and educator, I am always sharing these important stories that I once thought insignificant. (p. 237)

Sadly, I am moved by Thomas’s description, as I too, used to listen to my grandparents Manitoba Michif language and storytelling, and my late mother-in-law’s (Mamma) continuous use of the NWT Chipewyan language and stories, but did not pay them much attention; only today, years later, do I realize their grounding, relational and recurring power. As Thomas continues, “these stories leave us with a sense of purpose, pride, and give us guidance and direction” (p. 238), all truly recurring influences that shape the growth and development of ‘a capable person.’

As well, these spiral guides as recurring influences can help shape the developing spirituality of Aboriginal children and youth. Unfortunately, this spiritual aspect of human development is not promoted or encouraged in the modern school system due to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Canadian Constitution, 1982), which attempts to guard against the beliefs systems of dominant religious groups, over other Canadian’s spiritual and religious beliefs and values. For example, in some Canadian schools, Halloween, Christmas, and Valentine’s Day are being subdued in order to provide a more inclusive approach to all beliefs and values over the dominant ecumenical ones. However,
in many circumstances, this contemporary educational approach deprives the full development of Indigenous children in being influenced by the recurring qualities of the spiral guides that promote heart and spirit growth. Stonechild (2014) voices his understandings in expressing:

Spiritual teachings were derived through vision, ceremony and meditation, and stressed the need for establishing good relations as they pertained to personal and community behaviour. These teachings reflected traditional values including bravery, love, respect, honesty, generosity, humility and wisdom … Unfortunately many Aboriginal youth today have lost touch with their spiritual heritage, and elders believe that this is the reason why so many turn to substance abuse, crime and involvement in gangs. We as Aboriginal people need to heal ourselves by focusing on the spiritual mission of education, which often gets lost in the clamour for more funding and the politicization of schooling. The elders tell me that it is now time to research, write about and teach the principles of Aboriginal spirituality, something, which I and other academics at the First Nations University are attempting to do. (p. 11)

This finding reveals the essential nature of recurring influences that closely align with Indigenous knowledges research, and shows the downfalls of modern education for Aboriginal learners. Lorna Williams (2000) asserts that

… education is the most powerful institution in any society, and teachers are its most powerful agents. As Aboriginal people we know this very intimately. Education has been a force for destruction. It is also a powerful force for construction and it can produce citizens who are capable of determining their own future. (2000, p. 145)

Education is a powerful institution particularly when Aboriginal children and families are strengthened by the core values of Indigenous ways of knowing and learning. This includes embedding the spiral guides of Aboriginal cultural and spiritual teachings into the pedagogy and practice to celebrate recurring influences that shape the growth and development of ‘a capable person’ that draws from the Aboriginal traditions and balances these with modern approaches.

8.2.4. The “Canvas” Illustrates the Outside Influences

As with the spiral guides of the previous section, although there were no specific questions asked during the interviews about outside influences, the Elders spoke about
them in implicit ways. These shaping influences surround learners and reveal themselves in unique ways according to the different environment and substance of life. I like to think of this influence in an artistic or creative way, much like a “canvas” upon which learners can paint or create (or mess up) their own designs in life, depending on the colours, equipment, tools, styles, atmosphere or context in which they find themselves. Unfortunately, for many Aboriginal youth and families as described by the Elders, they struggle with many negative influences that take away from their growth and development. I call these the “devils of life” that cheat, steal and sometimes even kill the essence of existence. However, when circumstances are more positive, still many other Aboriginal youth and families to which the Elders referred, experience positive influences that enhance, enrich and bring joy to life.

The outside influences make me think of a rendition of the old story about the Cherokee grandfather who tells his grandson the story about the battle between two wolves. The grandfather says, “My son, in life there is a battle between two ‘wolves’ that live outside of us all (and in using flip methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 2008), the battle is also inside of us too, which influences outside behaviour). One is Unhappiness: fear, worry, anger, jealousy, sorrow, self-pity, resentment and inferiority (to name a few negative outside influences). The other is Happiness: joy, love, hope, serenity, kindness, generosity, truth and compassion (likewise, to name a few positive outside influences).” The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf wins battle?” The old Cherokee simply replied, “the one you feed.” This story reveals the negative and positive outside influences that can impact one’s decisions and shape the course of life. It shows how critical it is to create outside influences that bring positive energy and inspiration into learners’ lives as they figure out the life directions and choices that are out there for them.

8.3. ‘A Capable Person’ Philosophy through the Lens of Competency-Based Education

A little less than twenty years ago, Graveline (1998) presented some harsh words regarding competency-based education in her seminal contribution to Indigenous education. She expressed
As educators, we must examine our part in maintaining this discourse (speaking about Eurocentric bureaucracy in the previous paragraph). Competency-based educational models proliferate in schools. Competence means not only learning specific skills, but also acquiring the knowledge or theory base of the discipline, almost all of which is generated by middle-class, urban, White, male theorists. Skills and curriculum are based on notions of commonality within the human experience, and they tend to apply personal solutions to socio-structural problems. Little awareness of cultural diversity is present. Few culturally diverse members are represented as educators, and even fewer alternatives to Eurocentric models of education are available as curricula. (p. 9)

Much research has happened in the competency-based education dialogue since 1998, including diverse educational discourses from national and international organizations, such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), New Zealand Ministry of Education, Western and Northern Canadian Protocol (WNCP), Alberta Education, and NWT Education. Some of the competencies descriptors for these organizations have included:

- OECD (2005): a competence is more than just knowledge or skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilizing psycho-social resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context.

- UNESCO (2006): competence has been defined as a concept for organizing curriculum and as “the dynamic organizing structure of activity that allows a person to adapt to a class of situations on the basis of their experience, activity and practice.

- New Zealand (2010): identifies five key competencies: 1) thinking; 2) using language, symbols and texts; 3) managing self; 4) relating to others; and 5) participating and contributing.

- WNCP (2011): Competencies unite learning … One becomes competent, accomplished and masterful through the seamless integration of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Each informs the other, in a dynamic dialectic.

- Alberta Education (2011b): a competency is an interrelated set of attitudes, skills and knowledge that is drawn upon and applied to a particular context for successful learning and living.

- NWT Education (2013): the development of competencies is supported in all learners.
All of these educational organizations applaud the major shift in education that takes us away from the industrial factory based and agricultural models of education. As Shanker (2013) exclaims, “we are in the midst of a revolution in education thinking and practice” (p. ix). However, has this shift received the full attention of Indigenous audiences and Indigeneity, in general? How many Aboriginal education specialists / experts have contributed to the competencies movement of late? Are there remnants of Graveline’s (1998) Indigenous reproach against contemporary competency-based educational designs? I am left with these challenging questions, as I draw this Indigenous research inquiry to a close, after studying the competency-based products from these Western educational organizations. Notwithstanding, this work has shown itself to be progressive, thoughtful, strategic, and generative. However, for me, there remains that niggling feeling about which Basso (1996) speaks that gets under your skin. Something seems to be remiss, especially as I consider Battiste’s (2013) commentary:

Often, the purposes of the educational institutions betray this current explanatory theory (speaking about modern theory of society in the previous paragraph). Their purpose is to create and transmit an imagined culture of Canada or the provinces in a market-driven society. But the imagined culture remains elusive. It is a culture of nationalism imposed by the state. It is not reflective of the heritage, knowledge, or culture that the students bring to education, or their skills, and shared traditions. (p. 29)

In the NWT, there was a respectful movement in 2010, which had the Minister of Education conduct territorial forums on Aboriginal student achievement (ASA). Almost 6,000 NWT parents, educational leaders, Aboriginal governments, and students participated and provided in-depth, input and feedback. The ASA Education Plan (2011) that ensued was brought to the Dene National meeting that same summer, and endorsed by the NWT Aboriginal leaders. However, after two years, the Aboriginal flavour and focus of this document changed, got buried in the work of consulting, drafting, and designing the new educational policy document that was released in October 2013, the Educational Renewal and Innovation (ERI) Framework: Directions for Change report. The end result was an elaborate document, a full poster, and language that had limited Indigenous references, except for the spectacular photography, most of which celebrated Aboriginal peoples of the NWT. The ASA references got relegated to a few pages that described the theory as foundational to the new document, and the vision was replaced by language outlining “education for all,” (NWT Government, 2013). Unfortunately, Aboriginal student
achievement references got lost in the rhetoric of education for all, verging on a “strong assimilationist bent” (Brant Castellano et al., 2000, p. xiv). The version of ‘a capable person’ in the new ERI framework is in “the development of competencies that is supported in all learners” (p. 27). Definitely a Eurocentric mindset would not notice such a small reference, as education for all learners is an honourable pursuit in the 21st century. But certainly not in the face of a generation of Aboriginal children and families who suffered exorbitantly under horrendous legacy of forced assimilative education for Indigenous peoples in the 20th century.

Understandably, the new ERI document has received many accolades and awards, as it is an outstanding piece of work: cognizant of change, considerate of diversity, and celebrating the new brain research of neuroplasticity, and celebrating learners’ choices and agency in learning. All solid and reputable educational theory “based on research, grounded in data, and supported by experience” (NWT Government, 2013, p. 21). However, I question the Indigenous qualities of the document, particularly in a post-residential school era when much more attention needs to be on healing and recovery from the cultural genocide of the previous generation. The neutral, Eurocentric qualities of the policy document just do not cut it, in this time, place, and with the Indigenous peoples of the NWT, many still living in abject poverty, trauma and violence in homes. Battiste (2013) criticizes this insidious “education for all learners” rhetoric saying,

“These principles present the challenge to the Canadian education system and Aboriginal parents to design meaningful and honourable education for Aboriginal people that recognizes, respects, and integrates Aboriginal knowledges, heritages, and ways of life as an integral part of education, instead of biased fragmented concepts of culture buried in Eurocentric discourses” (p. 30).

Indeed, a more culturally sensitive example is Nunavut’s (2007) Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) principles that more closely align to an Indigenous perspective. Some of the cross-cultural principles focus on respecting others, fostering good spirits, serving and providing for family and community, and consensus decision making. (This is not the full listing of IQ principles.)

As such, I question the integrity of this NWT policy document for the Aboriginal peoples of the NWT. Has there been active participation of Indigenous parents,
educators, and leaders in designing the competency-based educational models that will guide the future of NWT education? And even more poignantly, have the Indigenous parents who are in a healing mode, been given a voice to express their viewpoints, such as Tom and Carol for whom I provided a ride at the beginning of this dissertation (p. 8)? Former Justice John Vertes (2011) advises, there is a need for governments to get to the root causes of poverty, unemployment, lack of opportunities and housing, and mental health issues, “particularly among the Aboriginal population” (p. 1, Northern News Services). Certainly the visionary document that will guide educational policy and practices for the next ten years would have at least some reference to the solutions to these NWT issues. My recommendation would be to insist on an Indigenization perspectives dialogue on the competencies-based educational approach to ensure that the Eurocentric perspective does not have significant impacts on learning for Aboriginal students, families and communities in the NWT.

8.4. Educational Pedagogy and Practice to Inform Aboriginal Education in the NWT – Recommendations

“Education is at the heart of the struggle of Aboriginal peoples to regain control over their lives as communities and nations” (Brant Castellano et al., 2000, p. xi), especially as they exit the difficult 20th century in which many people “never challenged their complicity in creating and sustaining poverty, racism, and colonization” (Battiste, 2013, p. 22). They merely accepted the status quo. As Margaret Ireland’s mother expressed,

they are like from Ottawa, they make decisions for us, as to how we’re going to live … we never questioned it, we just went ahead and did what we were told is good for us. And so we have years and years of being in so dependent upon the government, to make these life decisions for us.” (December 14, 2013, research interview in Hay River, NT).

My mother-in-law said the same thing, a Chipewyan Dene woman, whose family were told to move from Rocher River (Taltson River region) to Deninu Kų́ę́ (Fort Resolution), NT without question to make way for the Taltson River hydroelectric dam project. Suspiciously, the school also burned down in 1959. “We were like caribou; we just listened to the Indian agent” (personal communication, Doris McQueen, 1997). Now the move
forward into the new century brings with it a changed attitude for the Aboriginal peoples of the NWT: no longer do they sit passively and listen to what to do by a Eurocentric colonized system for their children’s education, health, and well-being. Fortunately, many models and educational options have arisen that attempt to change the approaches to Indigenous education by creating a vision of education rooted in Aboriginal wisdom, by placing Aboriginal knowledge, culture and values at the foundational heart of learning systems, and by developing designs that are based on the experiences of practitioners and researchers with understandings and experiences in Aboriginal communities. Much of this doctoral research has attempted to review and consider these many honourable visions and models by relating them to a re-interpreted lens in which to design strategies with four shaping influences as the primary catalysts for change in educational theory and practice. Based on the findings of this study, and the broader discourses related to Indigenous education and system-wide educational approaches, I offer the following recommendations for pedagogy and practice to inform Aboriginal education in the NWT:

1. I recommend that the shaping influences of ‘a capable person’ philosophy guide the development of future NWT curriculum and teaching resources. This means acknowledging and recognizing the grounding, relational, recurring and outside shaping influences from an Indigenous perspective to guide the pedagogy, educators’ mindset, instructional activities and assessment.

2. I recommend an Indigenous education division at the Ministry of Education level led by a Council of NWT Aboriginal Elders, cultural and spiritual leaders who have equal status in shaping pedagogy and curriculum, largely due to their inherent interest in NWT education to serve their children, grandchildren, families and communities.

3. I recommend that educators and education policy leaders continue to have meaningful dialogue with Indigenous parents, families and community members who have a role as partners in shaping educational policies on Indigenous pedagogy and curriculum. The answer is not in trying to return to the past or romanticize the traditional Elders’ stories of teaching and learning. The shaping influences philosophy came about more so to bring the essence of effective elements from the traditions to enhance modern Aboriginal education. For example, the idea of achievement has to change. For many of the Elders, celebrating the children in holistic ways – their whole learning self – physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, and ensuring they are happy with who they are, their identity, their traditions, their language, their community and culture, and their place – all of these are achievement. Such are the grounding, relational and recurring influences of the ancient cultural teachings to care for children in authentic ways. I envision an Aboriginal education system designed, instituted,
and maintained by Aboriginal people: in essence, Aboriginal education of the people, for the people, and by the people of the NWT.

4. I recommend that we revise the role of the educators to ensure that they teach all aspects of learning to enhance grounding, relational, recurring and outside influences to shape the growth and development of capable learners. Hodgson-Smith (2000) challenges us “to explore pedagogy (and practice) from a perspective that recognizes teaching as an act of love and to rethink the world from the inside out, rather than from the outside in world of teaching as a science” (p.100).

5. I recommend that we move from the content era of learning with an unmanageable number of outcomes, and concentrate on ‘a capable person’ achievement by connecting children to their inner self, the seasonal calendar, history, family, community, Elders, and positive influences. I remember speaking to one of my colleagues about a new recently launched NWT curriculum. From the perspective of the education ministry, I had believed that it was effective, forward thinking curriculum in its variety of concepts. The experienced Aboriginal community school (ACS) teacher shared the reality. Although she admitted to involving her multi-aged grouping classroom of Grades 4, 5 and 6 students into big ideas and thinking about this particular school discipline, she emphasized that the approach was too content focused and outcomes heavy. Admittedly, the content of the curriculum was abundant, varied, and well researched, but most ACS teachers did not use it. The pedagogy had to be in place for the students to enter into the lesson and progress at their level, pace, and with choices (personal communication, M. Wowk, December 2011). It was not the curriculum that was ineffective; it was the whole picture around it that mattered. ‘A capable person’ educational philosophy and pedagogy involved many components that were not quick, easy and pat answers to complicated processes. This teacher had over ten years of ACS experience and understood the big picture of honouring children’s ways of learning, their identity, choices, and pace of learning when given the permission of time, rather than heavy content. Learning was not a race to get through the curriculum with a thousand outcomes hindering what really mattered.

6. I recommend that more research take place regarding the healing elements involved in learning: that is, trauma-informed practices in schools. Many Aboriginal children, families and communities are experiencing the intergenerational trauma due to the past injustices in Canadian schools, and require attention to healing. This healing aspect to education is not to be confused with the important health and wellness movement – there is a subtle difference between the two, particularly in relation to children who have experienced trauma, dysfunctions, family alcoholism or witnessed violence and domestic disputes.

7. I recommend that healing components of education do not take away from a strengths oriented approach to education that celebrates the talents, skills, beauties and strengths of NWT Aboriginal learners.
8.5. Difficult Conversations and ‘A Call for Action’ for Further Research

In a seminal article, Battiste & Henderson (2009) showcase some promising practices in Canadian education that seek “to naturalize” Indigenous knowledge through applications on respectful and appropriate strategies. In a conscientious appeal to make Indigenous knowledge, worldviews, and pedagogies a more natural process in the Canadian school systems, they present a keen description of learning related to this inquiry:

Learning is viewed as sacred and holistic, as well as experiential, purposeful, relational and a lifelong responsibility. Traditions, ceremonies, and daily observations are all integral parts of the learning process, allowing for a spirit-connecting process to enable the gifts, visions and spirits to emerge in each person. (p. 5)

This same viewpoint of learning relates to the previous chapters of this inquiry in which I discuss the interpretation and meaning of ‘a capable person’ teaching and learning philosophy through the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ Indigenous knowledge about raising children and relationality, through their biographies and photographs that provide a glimpse into the Elders’ lives, and through the shaping influences themes from the Elders’ traditional perspectives. How is this educational theory about the shaping influences going to help future Indigenous generations in becoming, being and believing as ‘a capable person,’ if there is not a positive and proactive political will to ensure the sustained Indigenization of educational organizations?

As Battiste (2013) and other Indigenous scholars warn, this question does not present itself as an easy task largely due to the ubiquitous “cognitive imperialism, the white-washing of the mind as a result of forced assimilation, English education, Eurocentric humanities and sciences, and living in a Eurocentric context complete with media, books, laws, and values” (p. 26) in these modern times. Western scholars concur, only with comparable wording that concentrates not necessarily on Eurocentrism, but more on guarding against the old, worn out factory-designed, industrial-based images of education, which looks to schooling hours, class sizes, organizational hierarchy in the forms of grades, reward systems, and standardized testing to corroborate educational
achievement. Eisner (2002) outlines three curricula in school systems: the explicit, implicit, and the “null curriculum,” which he explains as: “It is my thesis that what schools do not teach may be as important as what to teach” (p. 97). Overall, I become discouraged in imagining what the “null curriculum” looks like in Canadian schools across the nation in relation to Indigenizing education or decolonizing education.

As such, I read the challenge presented by Battiste & Henderson (2009) that outlined:

the task for Indigenous scholars and educators has been to affirm and activate holistic paradigms of Indigenous knowledge to reveal the wealth and richness of Indigenous languages, worldviews, teachings and experiences, all of which have been systemically excluded from history, from contemporary educational institutions, and from Eurocentric knowledge systems. (p. 5)

This is the ultimate risk of bringing such rich and age-old cultural teachings about ‘a capable person’ into the modern world. The domination of the cognitive, linear, rationalistic Western views of education (Robinson, 2013) shows its hegemonic contrast against the Indigenous influences that are circular, recursive, and based on ancient cultural teachings from the Ancestors and Creator (Hampton, 1995).

These are the difficult conversations that must continue in the Indigenous discourses, along with the Western scholarship regarding Indigenizing and decolonizing education. The meanings that I attached to these two concepts align with Goulet & Goulet’s (2014) explanation of them:

Decolonizing education place more emphasis on the power relationships within education and serves to deconstruct past colonial systems of education and recreate new ones, usually based on equity and Indigenous principles. On the other hand, Indigenizing education usually refers to the integration of Indigenous content, understandings, and processes into the formal system. (p. 11)

The main suggestion that I have for future research is “a call to action” to acknowledge the original Indigenous education that was in place before 1492 when the grounding, relational, recurring, and outside influences were a natural part of teaching and learning. However, since this form of education has only traces of the original from five hundred years ago, instead a ferocious endeavour has to take place that ensures the
continued Indigenization and decolonization movement, particularly in locations like the NWT where the majority of the population is people of Dene, Métis, and Inuvialuit culture and ancestry (NWT Statistics, 2015). As Friere (1990) says it must be an act of liberation emancipating the Indigenous peoples from the Indian agent approach of sub-servitude education. In Kirkness (1992) and with the first wave of Indigenous scholars, they spoke of the need for Aboriginal education in the schools systems to ensure that multicultural and diversity discourses do not overshadow it. She says:

The gap between our people and those who have chosen, often gladly, to join us as residents on this beautiful and bountiful country, is vast when it comes to mutual understanding and appreciation of differences. To overcome this, it is essential that Canadian children of every racial original have the opportunity during their school days to learn about the history, customs, and cultures of this country’s original inhabitants and first citizens. We propose that education authorities, especially Ministries in Education, should provide for this in the Aboriginal education programming in use in Canadian schools. (p. 28)

The second, third and fourth wave (Battiste, 2013) of Indigenous scholars and advocates concur. Brant Castellano (2000) states that there is no simple answer in response to the Canadian education question, but highlights the need to Indigenize education in Canada, meaning that every subject at every level has to examine how current content and pedagogy reflect Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous peoples’ traditions, culture, and contributions to learning. In light of the past injustices of the colonial system of the last century, I concur unequivocally, and support the work of such forward thinking research as outlined in Smith’s (2012) twenty-five decolonizing projects that include activities, such as, “claiming, testimonies, story telling, celebrating survival, remembering and Indigenizing and Indigenist processes (pp. 144-147). Contemporary education must ensure the continued and sustained conversations on Indigenizing and decolonizing education, and move forward on the continued efforts to enliven the 94 calls for action in the TRC (2015) publication, which highlights critical change in areas such as child welfare, justice systems, and particularly education.
8.6. Restorying My Own Journey as an NWT Aboriginal Researcher and Scholar – My Narrative Ending

“If research doesn’t change you as a person, then you aren’t doing it right” (Wilson, 2008, p. 83). As I complete the difficult conversations in the previous section of this study, I realize the degree of change that I have reached in this research process in experiencing: the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ narratives about raising children; the travel to seven communities reaching from both the southern and northern regions of the NWT; the set-up of the CMEC Indian village at the Aboriginal Educators’ national symposium; the Indigenous “cultural catalyst activities” of prayer and ceremony; and the holistic immersion into the Indigenous scholarship and discourses on promising practices in Aboriginal community schools and other educational organizations. I have now transformed into an Aboriginal gatekeeper for Indigenous knowledges, values and beliefs, and a developing activist for Indigenizing education in the NWT. Like Struthers (2001) describes, “As a result of this research pilgrimage, the researcher is different, holds new impressions of life in general, and experiences a transformation” (p. 132). My transformation has been shaped by the forces of grounding, relational, recurring and outside influences that have brought me into full, meaningful, and continuing connections to the philosophy of ‘a capable person’ through this study.

From my role as an Aboriginal teacher and educational leader, I have transformed and expanded my responsibility in education by taking a place of critical inquiry to examine and understand, and put forth calls to action on ensuring Indigenous perspectives in the world of educational scholarship and academic discourses. After five years in the graduate world, I have become a bona fide researcher, and scholar, honouring the narrative space of NWT Aboriginal Elders with whom I have worked. Similar to Kathy Absolon (2005), I now “find myself trail-blazing, cutting through ideologies, attitudes, and structures ingrained in the Euro-Western thought” and I have become “a visionary with thoughts and dreams” (p. 99) of reaching and engaging Aboriginal children, families and communities beyond the present system of Eurocentrism, colonialism, and cognitive dominance. In this way, I have a platform from which to express my own ‘capable person’ theories based on restorying my lived experiences as an NWT Aboriginal advocate, and
in turn show how “to pass on the teachings” of this philosophy to inform Aboriginal education in the NWT.

I have been a teacher and educational leader for close to 30 years, mainly in the area of Aboriginal education, teaching in culture camps, classrooms, schools, boardrooms, and on a few stages. I have taught over 5,000 children during my career, and many educators and visitors who come to the N.W.T. to teach in (and learn about) Aboriginal community schools and Aboriginal education. I have done so, and will continue to conduct myself with the utmost humility, obedience, patience, and stewardship as a servant leader for Aboriginal children and families of the NWT. I am a living example of ‘a capable person’ who has been influenced by the grounding, relational, recurring, and outside guides that have formed my leadership, and current scholarship. Now as one of the Directors of Education with the Government of the NWT, I aim to reach teachers, principals, educational leaders, policy and decision makers, and thought leaders to reach and engage Aboriginal children, youth and families, in making space for the Indigenous perspective that honours Aboriginal student achievement. As Battiste (2013) explains,

To affect the needed reform, educators need to make a conscious decision to nurture Indigenous knowledge, its dignity, identity, and integrity by making a direct change in school philosophy, policy, and practice. They need to develop missions and purposes that carve out time and space, that affirm and connect with the wisdom and traditions of Indigenous knowledge, that are with the people themselves, their Elders and communities. They need to define what it means to teach in holistic ways and develop humanistic connections to local and collective relationships. They need to make educational opportunities for students that nourish their learning spirits and build strong minds, bodies, and spirits. (p. 100).

These are the ways to reach and engage Aboriginal learners, their families, communities and Elders into schools across the NWT. I hope be a part of the NWT educational transformation like the one I had experienced at my former Aboriginal community school, only this time on a bigger scale, a larger systems-level. I have been a part of the education reform in the NWT, at an arms length, being absent often due to education leave to work on this study. I affirm that the NWT is heading in good directions for change, but we need to pay more attention to Aboriginal educational pedagogy and practices that can reach and engage more Aboriginal learners, as this is their birthright. I
repeat the Dene, Métis and Inuvialuit people have nowhere else to go – the NWT is their homeland.

Most of all in my transformation, I am continuing to learn about living a good life, doing things in a good way, as ‘a capable person,’ myself. Like Archibald (2008), “Early this morning I asked for guidance from the Creator. The spiritual practice of prayer begins my day and my work” (p. 1). I then continued my day by looking after my physical self with a good breakfast, washing, brushing my teeth, taking my vitamins, and doing a session of yoga for mental clarity. While listening to the CBC news about the wild fires in Fort McMurray, AB, I remember to donate money to the Red Cross to help the families affected by the devastating fires. I then go outside to my tipi to make a tobacco offering and prayers for these families, as well as for my own children travelling to one of the local communities to pick up a sled dog. I also prayed for my mother on Mother’s Day, for my Simon Fraser University (SFU) professors, and especially for one of my cherished SFU cohort colleagues whose defence date has finally been set. I go back inside my house to kiss my sleeping husband and son as they are enjoying a Saturday morning sleep-in, after which I text my daughter to ensure that she lets me know when she is heading home to ensure her safe arrival home. Then I head into my home office to begin my day of writing, completing this dissertation study, methodically advancing towards the finish line. Daily, I examine myself according to the four shaping influences of ‘a capable person,’ and ask myself pointed questions related to this philosophy. Have I done my best when doing things for others? Have I been trustworthy in my dealings with my family, friends, and colleagues? Have I applied the emotional, cultural, and spiritual lessons I have been taught? Have I interpreted my learning into the complex technological world that we live in to show my own capable qualities that balance the fast-pace, global digitization of technology with holistic, time honoured qualities of Indigenous cultural teachings and spirituality? Am I walking my talk? Once my check-in’s are done, it is ready, set, go, in trying to live my life according to the seven principles of Indigenous storywork (respect, reverence, responsibility, reciprocity, inter-relatedness, holism, synergy) and the three narrative inquiry space elements of story (interaction, continuity and situation).

Clandinin (2013) asks narrative researchers to reflect on a very important question as they are doing their research: “Who are you in the narrative?” (p. 81). I provide it as a
closing question; as for me it made me attend to a poignant question that I had evaded for the first part of my story. Clandinin’s question made me consider and think deeply about my memories and experiences in relation to Aboriginal peoples, culture and history, and the phenomenon that I was researching. My answer to the question is presented throughout this narrative research that looks at the shaping influences that can impact the development of ‘a capable person.’ In the first part of my story, I believed that ‘a capable person’ could be attained only from a Western style of education that focused on Eurocentric epistemology, axiology and ontology. This is what I was taught in my previous post-secondary educational studies, and sadly because I was shamed by my Indigenous heritage and identity. But I have learned now who I am in this narrative research inquiry. As I conceptualized this research study, collected and analyzed the data, and “restoried” the narratives from the Aboriginal Elder participants, drew out the shaping influences themes, I did so as someone who approaches and stands in the “relational accountability” (Wilson, 2008, p. 97) to myself, my own children and husband, my former and future students, and the NWT Aboriginal Elders who contributed so much of their valuable life-experience stories, and particularly to the Ancestors and Creator who guided me on my adopted homeland, the NWT.

8.7. Gifting Back – The Parting Capable Person Stories from the Elders

“Sharing what one has learned is an important Indigenous tradition. This type of sharing can take the form of a story of personal life experience and is done with a compassionate mind and love for others” (Archibald, 2008, p. 2). Thanks to the active sharing of the NWT Aboriginal Elders’ narratives, I was able to bring their stories and lived curriculum alive in this study “with a compassionate mind and love” to conceptualize the shaping influences of ‘a capable person.’ For this act of sharing, I will always honour the Elders’ contributions to this research. The traditions that they shared along with their stories of personal experiences, cultural teachings, ceremonies, and prayers illuminate the true meaning of ‘a capable person.’ For these cultural teachings, I am forever grateful to the Elders, but also remember their unspoken reminder of responsibility and reciprocity in this research process.
Because of these Aboriginal Elders, so much learning continues to take place in the homes, schools, and communities as a result of their time and service to education in the NWT. They continue to be inspirations to so many, thus recurrently revealing their capable qualities. I witnessed these capable qualities first hand throughout all the visits, but especially on the last visit when everything had been signed off during the validation check. What happened was completely unexpected. First, I shared the final restoried versions of their stories and the themes with them. Again, the validation process was to ensure accuracy in the restorying and biographies, to receive consent for the use of their real names, themes, and photographs, and particularly, to continue the cycle of learning and sharing. The stories that ensued on this third visit after signing the validation forms were an unexpected highlight for me as a researcher. The Elders were pleasantly surprised to have me share back their stories and themes, and asked if they could use them in their own conversations and family storytelling, even as the beginnings of their own auto-biographies. Of course, I replied, they are your stories. Then it happened: since they saw themselves affirmed in the stories that I had shared with them, they gifted me back. I had not anticipated this response of full cyclical and cultural reciprocity. Then, their true capable stories came out. I was astounded by what I heard; the memories of these unexpected parting stories will remain with me forever. Stories of unending community service to one’s Aboriginal nation, stories of ending wicked alcoholism for the sake of one’s children, memories of one’s Ancestors for remarkable cultural skills in hunting, hide preparation, and challenging travel on the land, stories of grandchildren’s experiences with racism, stories of cherished keepsakes hidden in one’s brassiere, stories of experiencing the re-incarnation of one’s spirit into another person, memories of one’s beloved mother, stories of long lost relatives in other parts of the country. I will share them here, but am not able to reveal the names of who told what story due to confidentiality purposes. Overall the next layer of these ‘capable person’ stories revealed to me the full power of the principles of reverence, responsibility, and reciprocity. As Mathias (1992) expresses, “a good story can reach into you heart, mind, and soul, and really make you think hard about yourself in relationship to the world” (p. 79, as cited in Archibald, 2008, p. 140). The take-away in these intimate experiences was imprinted on my soul: the Elders’ spiral guides need continually to be rejuvenated, and shared with the next generation, over and over again. As Archibald shares, “Indigenous stories are at the core of our cultures. They have the power to make us think, feel, and be good human beings”
In other words, ‘a capable person.’ This was the power that became my calling for the real purpose of this study in the cycle of learning.

8.8. One Final Story – Ending with a New Beginning

“Looking to Indigenous traditional principles helps preserve the cultural power of stories and ensures that story pedagogy is educationally sound and beneficial” (Archibald, 2008, p. 138). Through the story pedagogy celebrated in this study, I have been privileged to work with Elders’ narratives, which provided the catalyst for the shaping influences of ‘a capable person’ philosophy based on the NWT Indigenous traditional values, beliefs and principles of raising children and relationality. To draw this study to a close, I would like to present one final story, one that I had first read when I began this doctoral journey, and since it made no sense to me, I closed it. Then I read it again, two years later after completing the Indigenous culturally sensitive research processes of this study, and was astounded. I asked myself why I had not connected earlier? I read it again, and could not contain my tears: it deeply connected to my own learning and to my study of the shaping influences of ‘a capable person.’ I experienced the power of the story to wake up my consciousness and discover the connections that I needed to move forward as a capable researcher. The story about which I speak is from Archibald’s Elder teacher, Dr. Ellen White, Kwulasulwut’s story about The Creator and the Flea, which is featured in Archibald’s seminal work, Indigenous Storywork (2008). Archibald explains in her end notes that the story is in Kwulasulwut’s family domain, meaning that Indigenous peoples “know this and respect the family’s cultural stewardship or ownership of the story … Ellen White’s family gave her the responsibility to continue telling “The Creator and the Flea.” Ellen White uses the publishing term “copyright” to show that she has cultural ownership of this story” (p. 159). From reading this information, I acknowledge and respect Kwulasulwut’s ownership of this story, and trust that the connection of her story to my study is to “honour the “practice of cultural reciprocity” (p. 146) and “keep the spirit of the story alive” (p. 147), in respect and reverence of my understandings of Indigenous knowledges and traditions.

In deep respect and honour, I move ahead in paraphrasing The Creator and the Flea’s connection to ‘a capable person’ pedagogy to conclude my work by celebrating the
deeply felt energies that touched me in reading about the Flea experiencing the grounding, relational, recurring and outside forces that guided his growth and development into 'a capable person,' or rather a capable Flea, graced by the love, attention, and patience of Creator. (For those who wish to experience a full reading of The Creator and the Flea, it is featured in Archibald’s book on p. 116. The following summary includes quotations from the actual story.)

The Creator and the Flea is a moving and inspirational tale of transformation that juxtaposes humour and sadness, anger and patience, fragmentation and healing, and many more enticing spirits and emotions for learning about self-discovery, relationality, ancient cultural teachings, and outside influences that can cause life trauma, as well as healing when the time is right. Elder Teacher Kwulasulwut begins by describing the Creator in such a zany manner that at first it does not appear credible. She says,

“The Creator was so great, he was a very special person. He could take a human form, with long flowing hair and holding a long staff. He had five souls. If he was needed somewhere else, all he had to do was clutch his chest and bring his right hand forward, and there in his hand would be a soft little ball of fluff, like feathers, and he would blow it away. That was his extra soul, so he could appear whenever he was needed.”

But Elder Teacher Kwulasulwut goes onto to show the true awe-inspiring power and gentleness of the Creator in helping Flea out of his pathetic state. When Creator hears Flea with his right ear that “could tune into things a long way away, good for long distance hearing,” and finally finds him, Creator is saddened by Flea’s pitiful state of disconnected and misunderstood parts that still require grounding influences to make him whole again. Poor Flea’s knees are bleeding, his bones are sticking out, he is dragging around his legs and feet that he doesn’t even know belong to him, his voice is full of self pity, his eyes are crying, his ears are full of pus – the Flea is in terrible shape, and even asks the Creator to help him commit suicide. The Flea exclaims to the Creator: “Why don’t you take me to that water, and hold me under until I am dead, because I want to die!” And he kept repeating, “I want to die, I want to die!” But Creator responded firmly:

“My son, I don’t take life, I create life. I help life be whole. We must start now.”
Elder Teacher Kwulasulwut also presents the relational influences of Flea’s people, time and place, which Creator knows will help the Flea on his healing journey. It is the evening hunting time for Flea’s people (“but they were animals”), Flea’s brothers and sisters, who are preparing the gathering place for the family meal. Elder Teacher Kwulasulwut mentions some of Flea’s family members like the seal, lady seal, otter, and snail lady who especially loves Flea and is trying to help him travel by carrying him on her back. But Flea is in total trauma. The negative forces that are causing his despair are too much for the poor little Flea. He is crying because of the pain of his bleeding knees, in denial of the real state of his problems, in anger and begins yelling and calling the Creator names, and in an absolute state of self pity because Creator won’t do all the healing work for him. All of these outside influences are negatively hindering his growth and learning. But Creator patiently guides him towards healing and transformation by presenting the recurring influences that Creator explains as the medicines that will restore the Flea to his real capable self:

I am your father, from far away. I am the father that helps to build, and I bring the message of the Universe that you are going to be a very, very strong, and you are going to be a teacher to others. Now, crawl over to that bush, and pick some of the little buds and leaves. Chew on them and you’ll rub the good juices on your eyes.”

The Creator provides the Flea with spiral guides, the ancient spiritual teachings, to help the Flea along his healing journey reminding him of the nurturing love of his brothers and sisters, acceptance and belonging in his family, the loving language of communication without words, the responsibility and hard work of healing, the natural medicines of leaf buds and plantain on the land, prayers and teaching him to speak to his parts that need healing. The Creator says to the Flea,

“We must try and work together so that you can become whole. My son, you don’t even know all of you.”

With less grumbling and more attention, the Flea finds the medicines that he needs to heal, and transforms into his whole self, understanding all his grounding parts, the relational and recurring influences that help him realize the importance of listening to Creator and all his relations, and dealing with the outside influences that caused him so
much negative trauma, and experiencing the positive joy and hope in discovering his whole self. Elder Teacher Kwulasulwut says that in the end, “Flea was so grateful.”

And so am I, in discovering this story that exemplified the shaping influences of ‘a capable person’ in the form of a Flea learning the Laws of the Universe with Creator. These laws written about by Elder Teacher Kwulasulwut reminded me of our own collective laws up here in the NWT. They are known as the Dene Laws (Aurora College Faculty and Staff Guidebook, 2010/2011), and are used much like Elder Teacher Kwulasulwut’s laws. They include the NWT Indigenous values and beliefs of:

1. Share what you have. This is the umbrella law. Under it sit all the other laws. It was of absolute importance that people share what they had long ago for survival, share today out of kindness, and share tomorrow for hope.
2. Help each other.
3. Love each other as much as possible.
4. Be respectful of Elders.
5. Sleep at night and work during the day.
6. Be polite and don’t argue with anyone.
7. Young girls and boys should behave respectfully.
8. Pass on the teachings.
9. Be happy at all times.
10. Pray with love and respect.

Overall they speak to doing things in a good way and to live a good life. Long ago, the shortened form for ‘a capable person’ was: Denezo, Denezu, or Denezi, meaning a good Dene – a good person. This is the key to successful Aboriginal students’ achievement in all aspects of their growth and development. Through promoting pedagogy and practices that acknowledge and embed the shaping influences of ‘a capable person,’ this will be the way to reach and engage Aboriginal children, families and communities. The conceptualization of these reaching and engaging guidelines are to serve as a re-interpreted lens that acknowledges and employs the shaping influences that guide Indigenous learners into becoming, being and believing as ‘a capable person’ that they are meant to be.

As Manulani Meyer (2003) says, “we are in a time of radical and transforming growth” (p. 236), and this is the time for change. A time for the next generation of Indigenous children and youth in the NWT to learn to be capable Dene, Métis, and Inuvialuit. Capable storytellers. Capable chiefs. Capable traditional artists. Capable
drummers. Capable athletes. Capable dog mushers. Capable hunters. Capable cooks. Capable parents. Capable Elders. Capable healers. Capable teachers. Capable learners, Capable writers. Overall, capable people. From my perspective after conceptualizing and completing this study about ‘a capable person’ philosophy, I am writing this story as an Aboriginal educator and leader, and now as a researcher and scholar who is part of the system trying to make change for Aboriginal children and youth. I bring this pedagogy of the shaping influences into the mainstream educational consciousness to shed light on the need for change, particularly towards Indigenizing education for Aboriginal students. They deserve so much better and when a strong team of Indigenous educators, leaders, and advocates, including post-colonial (Bouvier, 2013) and Indigenist (Wilson, 2013) educational allies who are committed to doing things differently is built; then things will start to change as it is meant to, especially after the damaging chapter of Aboriginal education in the 20th century. This will be a generation of transformation for Aboriginal education in the NWT, in essence, a new beginning.
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Appendix A. Introductory Script

Dear Elder:

Hello. I am Angela James. I am currently working on my doctoral degree in education with a school in Vancouver, British Columbia called Simon Fraser University. The title of my dissertation is: A Capable Person – Long Ago and Today: A narrative inquiry focusing on the stories of Northwest Territories Elders’ traditional Aboriginal pedagogies and comparing them to contemporary educational approaches.

I invite you to be a part of my research study, as your stories and traditional knowledge will add a deeper understanding of teaching and learning for students in the NWT. With you, I would like to explore the concept of a “capable person” and your understanding of a capable person – a Dene nezu (South Slavey) or Dene nezo (Chipewyan), depending on your Aboriginal language. In particular, I will be examining how long ago – before the formal school system in the Northwest Territories – one became a capable person.

I will be exploring your stories and your perspective of traditional Aboriginal pedagogy: that is, how you were taught by your parents, or grandparents, or family members to become a capable person; and how you taught your own children using Aboriginal traditional ways of teaching and learning. Once I review your stories, I will be comparing them to the modern ways of teaching and learning to see if there are similarities or differences. Overall, I hope to figure out if the combination of the traditional and the modern ways will help to improve the education system for students in the Northwest Territories, particularly those who attend small community schools.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you consent to participate in this study, I will arrange to meet with you in person to spend some time together. In this way, I will review an informed consent form with you very carefully to make sure that you understand all aspects of the study. If you consent to participate, I will ask you to sign and date the informed consent form.

In my study, I aim to use what is called an “Indigenous methodology of story” to gather your knowledge and experiences of traditional Aboriginal pedagogy. This means listening to and learning from your stories. As well, I will use several research questions to guide us in the storytelling process. The questions will serve as an outline for prompting your thoughts, as you think and tell your stories. The time that we spend together will be like an interview in which I ask you questions as follows:

1. What is your understanding of a capable person (Dene zhu / Dene horetha) from a traditional Aboriginal perspective?
2. Before the western education system (federal / residential schools) arrived in the NWT, what traditional family / parenting practices did you experience as a child?
3. As we know, in the Indigenous cultures of the world, it is said that there are four aspects of human being: the body, the mind, the heart, and the spirit. Have you heard about this Aboriginal belief?
4. How did your family teach you to become a capable person taking into consideration these four essential parts of being? The development of your body? Your mind? Your heart (emotions, feelings)? Your spirit?

5. And your own children? How did you raise your children in light of the four foundational parts?

6. And from your perspective as an Elder who works in the schools? What have you noticed in today’s education system as compared with the traditional methods that taught children to be good Dene/Inuvialuit working towards becoming a capable person?

As well, I would like to begin the storytelling session in the traditional Aboriginal way by offering a prayer. I will ask you if you feel comfortable saying an opening prayer in your language; and if you don’t, I will ask if it would be all right for me to say an opening prayer. I will follow this same Indigenous protocol at the end of our time together with a closing prayer.

I would like you to think of our time together as a conversation with me in which I will listen to your stories and experiences, and occasionally ask questions during the conversation to gain a clear understanding of your words during the interview. With your permission, the interview conversation will be digitally audio-recorded, and I will be taking notes to help me remember the details of the conversation. When the interview is completed, I will transcribe the stories into written text, and then will contact you to show the transcription to you to be sure that what is recorded is what you wanted to say. I will make sure that we work closely together on the accuracy of the transcription, especially if you want to add or delete any information. Once you have reviewed the transcription, I will get your signed permission to authorize its use in the study.

As well, as an Elder you are known in both the Aboriginal world and education circles as a very respected knowledge holder recognized for your special gifts of stories, ceremonies, and oral history. These all hold a special place in the First Nations, Metis and Inuvialuit communities, in addition to the various district educational councils in which you have worked. As such, I will seek your permission to receive support of this research from two relevant organizations as follows:

i. The Chief of the First Nations Band Council, President of the Metis Nation or President of the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation to which you belong, and

ii. The Superintendent of Education in the divisional education council where you have worked – presently or in the past five years.

The reason for this extra step of gaining approval is to ensure that both the Aboriginal and educational authorities are aware of this research and provide their support: that is with your permission.

Participation in this research will be completely confidential. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, you can do so without penalty or loss of benefit to yourself. The results of the research study will be published, but your identity will remain confidential. To do this, you have the option to choose a pseudonym for yourself, or use your own name.
In this research, there are no foreseeable risks to you. Although there may be no direct benefit to you, a possible benefit of your participation is that your stories of traditional ways of raising children long ago may provide understandings to the modern ways of teaching and learning, and help educators, leaders, families and community members make decisions that benefit learners in our NWT education system.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, you can contact me at any time at (867) xxx-xxxx or if you have e-mail at xxxxx@sfu.ca

Mahsi.
Appendix B. Elders’ Informed Consent

I, __________________________________________________, (print name) agree to participate in the following research project to be conducted by Angela James, in the Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University. I understand that the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics has approved this research study.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form, to be duly signed and dated. I further acknowledge that I have been provided an overview of the research protocol, as well as a detailed explanation of the informed consent process.

**Title of Research:** A Capable Person – Long Ago and Today: A narrative inquiry focusing on the stories of Northwest Territories Elders’ traditional Aboriginal pedagogies and comparing them to contemporary educational approaches

**Name of Principal Investigator:** V. Angela James

**Contact Information:** Email – xxxx@sfu.ca  Cell – (867) xxx-xxxx

**Name of Supervisor:** Dr. Carolyn Mamchur, Professor, Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University

**Department, School or Faculty:** Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University

**Purpose of the Study:** to compile stories from Northwest Territories Aboriginal Elders to determine how long ago families raised their children to become adults who were deemed a capable person. In turn, this information will be examined to compare traditional pedagogies with more the modern approaches to teaching and learning considered effective in creating capable learners and citizens who can navigate themselves in their schools, communities and the modern world.

**Research Participation:**

I understand that I am being asked to participate in this study on a voluntary basis. I may refuse to participate or withdraw my participation at any time without negative consequences. I can withdraw participation by informing Angela James of that wish verbally, by phone or e-mail.
Study Procedures:

In agreeing to partake in this study, the following procedures will take place:

- An interview will take place in my home community at a location that I choose for my convenience and comfort;
- The interview will consist of the Indigenous methodology of story and guiding questions in a semi-structured style of conversation;
- The interview will be approximately 2 to 3 hours, depending on my stories;
- The interview will be digitally audio-recorded;
- The researcher will take notes during the storytelling for purposes of clarity and further questions.
- Upon my permission, the researcher will seek the support to conduct this research study from my Band Council Chief, Metis Nation President, or the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation President; and the Superintendent of Education where I have worked as an employee, volunteer, or cultural expert in the past five years;
- The interview will begin with an opening prayer, and when completed will end with a closing prayer;
- The researcher will offer me a traditional gift of tobacco and a moose hide beaded billfold containing a fifty-dollar bill and the researcher’s business card for communication purposes or questions they I may have during the research process.

Potential Risks of the Study:

I understand that there are no foreseeable risks to my participating in this study.

Potential Benefits of the Study:

I understand that no one knows whether or not I will benefit from this study. There may or may not be direct benefits from taking part in this study, other than contributing to possible improvements to the education system in the NWT.

Confidentiality:

I understand that my confidentiality will be respected at all times. I also understand that if the interview cannot take place in person, and has to be conducted over the telephone, that the telephone is not considered to be a confidential medium, and my confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Overall, information that discloses my identity will not be released without my consent unless required by law. All recordings will be labeled with a code to protect my identity. The electronic data will be stored on a memory stick that will be password protected and encrypted. The memory stick, along with the hard copies of the field notes will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. In 2016, representing two years after the study, all data will be destroyed: the digital data on the memory stock will be permanently deleted and any paper documents will be shredded.
Study Results:

The results of this study will be reported in a graduate thesis and may be published in journal articles and books.

Upon completion of the research, the researcher will contact me by phone to provide me with an opportunity for feedback on the findings and/or results of the research.

Contact for Complaints:

If I have any concerns about my rights as a research subject and/or my experiences while participating in this study, I may contact Dr. Dina Shafey, Associate Director, Office of the Research Ethics by phone at (778) xxx-xxxx, or by e-mail at xxxx@sfu.ca Application #: 2013s0715

Participant Consent and Signature:

Taking part in this study is entirely up to me. I have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If I decide to take part, I may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without any negative impact on my personal, working or community life.

My signature below indicates that I consent to participate in this study, and that I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

_______________________________________________  _______________
Participant’s Name – Please print

_______________________________________________  _______________
Participant’s Signature       Date:  yyyy/mm/dd

_______________________________________________  _______________
Researcher’s Name – Please print

_______________________________________________  _______________
Researcher’s Signature      Date:  yyyy/mm/dd

Researcher’s Information:
xxxxx@sfu.ca
Simon Fraser University
Application No.:  2013s0715
Appendix C. Validation Check

V. Angela James
xxxxx@sfu.ca
A Capable Person Research
Simon Fraser University
Application No. 2013s0715

Further to my Informed Consent given to V. Angela James on ____________________ for the Capable Person research, I give permission for the use, reproduction and publication of the following information by Angela James to complete her research thereof:

- Reference to my real name as: ______________________________________
- Biography reviewed in person on: _________________________________
- Photographs

Please be informed that I have also reviewed and collaborated on the RESTORYING of my personal experience narrative, and agreed to its accurate recording of information for the purposes of completing the said Capable Person research. I acknowledge that I have read and understand the contents of the restoried version and themes, and have been given full opportunity to discuss and revise it. I also have been given an opportunity to discuss the implications of this consent of my own free will, and my decision thereof.

I have read this release carefully. I understand its contents and I agree with its terms. I understand that by signing this consent form, I am waiving any legal rights I may have to the bibliography / photographs /restoried versions of my personal information. I am also consenting to the release of my real name and home community for the purposes of identifying me in the research.

I hereby give my consent, dated this __________ day of ________________________, 2015.

Name: ___________________________________________________________________

Address: __________________________________________________________________

Phone / Email / Cell Contacts: __________________________________________________________________

Signature: __________________________________________________________________