SITUATED SOCIAL IDENTITIES: THE STORIED EXPERIENCES OF TŁİCHǫ HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

Susan Hopkins

ABSTRACT

The lived experiences of 11 Tłı̨chǫ high school graduates from the Aboriginal community of Behchokǫ, Northwest Territories were explored. A blended identity-based and ecological lens facilitated holistic understandings of resilience processes, life course patterns, and domains of meaningful learning. Narratives revealed a bicultural tension embodied in late elder Elizabeth Mackenzie’s call for Tłı̨chǫ youth to become “strong like two people”: competent and confident in both an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultural world. Deeper understandings of social identities and resilience-enhancing supports, resources, and contexts informed the development of a model of dynamic resilience for Tłı̨chǫ students and three broad educational policy recommendations.

Key words: Aboriginal, high school graduation, identity, phenomenology, resilience, Tłı̨chǫ

The purpose of this research was to deepen understandings of resilience among high school graduates, in the community of Behchokǫ, Northwest Territories (See Figure 1). Kiel (2010) described Aboriginal resilience as healthy resistance, autonomy and nonconformity, and the continual construction and development of identity. Refortifying Aboriginal identities within contexts that have marinated for centuries in colonialism (Battiste, 2007) can be framed through a lens of cultural resilience (Lalonde, 2006). Through research with 1,500 youth in 11 countries, Ungar (2008) concluded that resilience was a culturally situated construct that could not be generalized across population.

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Footnote: Thank you to the 11 high school graduates for sharing stories of lived experience. The willingness of each of these young Tłı̨chǫ adults to share their lived experiences led to meaningful findings related to resilience and identity.

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their
wellbeing and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways. (Ungar, 2010, p. 426)

Research is emerging to support a premise debated by researchers for decades: resilience can be grown and fostered (Caspi and Moffitt, 2010; Doig, 2008; Frederickson, 2009; Mustard, 2010; Rutter, 2007; Seligman, 2002, 2011; Steele, 2010). Resilience is a process-based way of being that is dynamic, complex, socially experienced, and culturally situated. This perspective holds significant implications for educational policy development and decision making.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework connected the ecological principles of resilience (Ungar, 2011), the Tłíchǫ identity model (Gibson et al., 2007; Martin and Wedzin, 2010), and life course theory (Elder, 1994) within an Aboriginal social research context (Cooke, 2009). Collective wellbeing, and sources and domains of knowledge from the First Nations lifelong learning model (Canadian Council on Learning [CCL], 2007) form the model’s ceiling and floor (See Figure 2).

**Method and Design**

A qualitative method and phenomenological design (Giorgi, 1985; Husserl, [1931]1999; Schütz, [1932]1967; Van Manen, 1990) best suited the purpose of the research, and was compatible with the principles of relational accountability (Wilson, 2008). Specifically, the social phenomenology of Schütz ([1932]1967) allowed an exploration of lived experiences, social and cultural identities, and resilience processes. Three research questions framed the social phenomenological inquiry.

**Central research question:** How did Tłíchǫ high school graduates story their lived experiences?

**Subquestion 1:** How have Tłíchǫ high school graduates navigated their life-worlds?

**Subquestion 2:** Which sources and domains of knowledge mattered most to Tłíchǫ high school graduates?

**Relational Sampling**

Eleven high school graduates from Behchokǫ were recruited using a relationship-based snowball sampling method. The relational nature of the sampling method, embraced as appropriate for the context and research purpose, also warranted a thorough examination for the potential of bias (Chambers, 2009). The researcher lived in the community for seven years and had relationships with some participants. Bias, validity, and reliabil-

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<td>Respect land, way of life; language, culture;</td>
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<th>Sources and domains of knowledge (CCL, 2007)</th>
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ity for the study were examined through Schütz’s (1967[1932]) postulates of logical consistency, subjective interpretation, and adequacy from a perspective of rigour, trustworthiness, and quality.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data were collected through audio-recorded conversational interviews with study participants and the researcher’s observations and reflexive journaling. A two-phase process was used in the analysis. Descriptive summaries of the storied experiences of each participant formed what Schütz referred to as the first order of analysis. The theoretical foundation from Schütz’s work was enhanced using Giorgi’s (1985) five-step scientific phenomenological method to structure the analysis. Interpretations of the subjective meanings of described lived experiences, phase two of the data analysis, were derived through iterative and inductive processes of individual and collective theming of narratives.

FINDINGS

CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION CONCLUSIONS: HOW LIVED EXPERIENCES WERE STORIED

To explore the central research question, stories of Tłı̨chǫ high school graduates were holistically described and then thematically analyzed using the Tłı̨chǫ identity model derived from the Cosmology Project led by Tłı̨chǫ researcher John B. Zoe (Martin and Wedzin, 2010). Independence/self-reliance, and survival through adaptability, two of the five Tłı̨chǫ values, housed several significant themes in the data. The Tłı̨chǫ values of caring for others, and respect for the land, language, culture, and way of life, were present but not as significant in the graduates’ storied experiences. Peace, reconciliation, and the healing of relationships were not represented in the data (See Figure 3).

Ten themes emerged from the storied experiences of Tłı̨chǫ graduates and were interwoven into the conclusions discussion. Conclusions from the ten themes revealed that high school graduates’ lived experiences were complex and diverse, equifinal, and relational. Unfiltered openness coexisted with lifelong practices of social vigilance; underlyng the findings was evidence of a place-based bicultural tension.

Complex and diverse

Complexity and diversity characterized the data exploring how Tłı̨chǫ high school graduates storied their lived experiences. Many themes emerged with the finding of considerable diversity across experiences, expressions of resilience, and situated perceptions of social worlds. A theme such as the self-perception of intellectual capacity to graduate from high school was coupled with diversity in how the intelligence was experienced, perceived, and expressed.

The diversity in the data reflected the complexity of the lived resilience of Tłı̨chǫ graduates. The reflected complexity was situated in time and place (Lalonde, 2006; Ungar, 2011). Resilience was not a fixed trait possessed across context, time, and place. The common experience among study participants of earning a high school diploma in Behchokó and demonstrating the resilience to achieve this outcome did not, for example, translate into overall well-being across time, place, and circumstance. Considering resilience processes over time and place revealed that some of the study participants flourished during the high school years and during the transition into adult life. Other participants de-
scribed post-high-school circumstances of regret, uncertainty, and despair.

Ungar (2011) cautioned researchers against the lure of generalizing resilience findings across populations because each context changes the resilience processes of the people who live their everyday lives there. Extending Ungar’s point beyond generalizing across populations, the storied experiences of Tłı̨chǫ graduates suggested caution in generalizing findings even within a small, remote Aboriginal community. Considering lived experiences through a social identity (Steele, 2010) and ecological lens (Ungar, 2011) was more reflective of the diverse, complex lifeworld experiences of Tłı̨chǫ graduates than trying to create a recipe of generally applicable resilience factors or individual traits.

Equifinal
The concept of equifinality — multiple endpoints arrived at via multiple paths and processes — guided interpretations of the meaningfulness of storied experiences (Ungar, 2011). The diversity in the lifeworlds, life paths, and resilience processes of the high school graduates reinforced the importance of avoiding what Lalonde (2006) described as the trait trap. Resilience was a lived process and each expression and experience of the phenomenon was a little different. Viewing equifinality through an ecological lens provided a way to consider the individual processes, paths, and outcomes of the multiple resilienties experienced by Tłı̨chǫ graduates within the emergent data themes.

Relational
Reflecting congruency with the collective worldview found in Aboriginal populations around the world (Barnhardt, 2008; Gould, 2009; Wilson, 2008), Tłı̨chǫ graduates storied lived experiences relationally. Individual narratives were embedded in and inseparable from the social context within which they were situated (Wilson, 2008). Autonomy and independence — two of the Tłı̨chǫ identity values significant in the themed data (Martin and Wedzin, 2010) — were concepts coexisting comfortably with relationality. The independence and autonomy themes that emerged from the storied experiences of graduates were reactions to control of others, and a predefined norm, rule, or expectation.

I also knew how to use sarcasm, which I did a lot with teachers. I don’t know, I just really didn’t like school. I didn’t like being controlled. Yeah there was a lot of disturbing stuff about elementary school [laughs]. Yeah my sketches and doodles would set them off and so I was sent to counseling. And they were just disturbing sketches and that went on for a while. It was kind of fun to get everyone going. (Tom)

Tłı̨chǫ high school graduates perceived themselves not at the centre of their worlds but instead as members of a relationally experienced social location. Descriptions of lived experiences always involved other people; sometimes the relationships with others were described as sources of support, sometimes as sources of adversity, and sometimes just context defining. Relationality extended beyond self, peers, and family to others in the community in need, such as children, individuals with disabilities, and those grieving losses of loved ones. Relationships from an Aboriginal worldview were not only lifeworld enhancers; they were life defining (Wilson, 2008).

Another finding related to relational accountability and Aboriginal research ethics (Wilson, 2008). The relationship between the researcher and all participants reflected a co-researching collaborative experience. The shared inquiry, into personal experiences of resilience as sources of learning that could benefit others, involved reciprocal responsibilities built on a foundation of mutual caring and trust. Accountability conjures up images of definable, measurable, and evaluable actions. The experienced relational accountability was more about a spirit of collaboration and an underlying foundation of genuine caring for the well-being of others. As a philosophical foundation for decision making, the spirit of collaboration is reproducible by others, yet no specific recipe for recreating the experience exists in the literature.

Relational accountability also emerged as central to the population sampling method. Although the original research plan described a purposive
sampling technique, during the process it became apparent that the approach was ineffective and inappropriate for the population and context of the study. A form of snowball sampling led to a final sample size of 11. On reflection, the snowball technique used is better described as relational sampling because it was relationship based and moved significantly beyond a referral process. Irlbacher-Fox and Gibson (2010) called for an Aboriginal research paradigm that moved beyond a modified Western science approach. Lived experiences of the research process for the study indicated that relational sampling could be a sampling technique option with potential for an Aboriginal research paradigm.

Unfiltered
The relevance of relational accountability to gathering deeper understandings of how individuals storied their experiences is that in this context of caring and trust narratives emerged that were emotion filled, vulnerability exposing, and frank. The data analysis expanded from the experiences described to interpret the relevance of the nonjudgmental, nonapologetic way these young adults shared deeply personal stories. Self-regulation was one of the themes in the data that accompanied the frank recounting of stories. The frankness could be interpreted as reflecting some element of the Tłı̨chǫ identity model’s value of peace, healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation because of the nonjudgment that accompanied this frank truth-sharing. Yet, the unguarded nature of the story sharing appeared unintentional, a natural outcome of the building sense of trust between the participant and the researcher. Once they felt emotionally safe, Tłı̨chǫ graduates described their experiences without a filtering process.

I discovered marijuana that summer and it made school really interesting. I used pot to get through the workload. It made reading interesting and it made math sort of fun. (Tom)

My parents had a history of alcohol abuse and all kinds of stuff. And they really weren’t there for my older siblings until I guess they got help and they changed their ways. They stopped and I had a really different childhood. (Monica)

I was drinking too. I really had a problem but people didn’t really know because it was always behind closed doors and only with friends that I really trusted. (Michael)

I’d go meet random people and it was like scary. I’d be like maybe I’m going to meet some 40-year-old overweight trucker that’s going to kill me, so I’d always make sure that I had a pocket knife with me. It was like a thrill to go and do something that I don’t normally do. This was all before high school. (Max)

Socially vigilant
From a Western worldview, uninhibited openness means honesty or frankness. From a Tłı̨chǫ cultural frame, a way of being may be a more accurate description. This way of being creates a level of vulnerability for Tłı̨chǫ people socially interacting with non-Tłı̨chǫ others. The unfiltered, frank way of being (Martin and Wedzin, 2010) in the world puts individuals at risk for social harm.

Social vigilance, an interrelated theme in the data, was a resilience-enhancing protective mechanism for many participants. Relationships with the community as a whole were described as sources of adversity, in diverse ways for every participant. Vigilance was evident in the social world to avoid the direct or indirect harm to reputations and identity caused by having others “know [their personal] business” in the community.

It was hard having the whole community know my family business. I just wished people would mind their own business. They will come up to you and say like, “Hey where’s your dad?” and I’m like, “You already know so why are you asking?” I just ignored them, when I would see those people around town I’d just put on my headphones and ignore them. (Riley)

Place-based tension
Social vigilance, as a lived experience in cross-cultural interactions and contexts, was also present in the Tłı̨chǫ community context. Tensions between the resilience-enhancing aspects of the Tłı̨chǫ identity were partly limited by threats to social identities within the community. The place-based resilience of Tłı̨chǫ high school graduates was a complex process filled with barriers, obstacles, risk neutralizers, and resilience enhancers all within the relational experiences participants described with the community as
a whole and their identities as Tłı̨chǫ individuals living in a Behchokö lifeworld.

Martin and Wedzin’s (2010) description of the Tłı̨chǫ identity involved five relationships, one of which was with the land. Although Tłı̨chǫ graduates valued land-based cultural experiences, a relationship with the land in the everyday lives of participants was not revealed in the data. McGuire-Kishebakabaykwe (2010) described place and identity as inseparable concepts for many Aboriginal people. Half the participants expressed a sense of awe over how Tłı̨chǫ ancestors lived in the past. The finding indicated that many participants did feel proud of their Tłı̨chǫ roots, if not connected to an everyday land-based sense of being Tłı̨chǫ.

The missing sense of a 21st century place-based identity in the lived experiences described by Tłı̨chǫ graduates might indicate a weakened sense of the identity as described by McGuire-Kishebakabaykwe (2010). Alternatively, place-based identities and meaningful relationships with Tłı̨chǫ land might exist, but were not described. Relationships with the land and a personal place-based Tłı̨chǫ identity might also be still developing in the young adults. Regardless, Tłı̨chǫ graduates’ descriptions of relationships and experiences on the land were either nonexistent or primarily involved school organized camps, revealing a gap between the Tłı̨chǫ identity model (Martin and Wedzin, 2010) and the everyday lived experiences of young Tłı̨chǫ people.

A theme related to the place-based tensions was the wide-ranging resilience of reflexive thinking practiced by most Tłı̨chǫ high school graduates. The practice of action following reflection was an expression of resilience in the Behchokö social worlds of the individual study participants. Adaptive capacity (Masten and Obradovic, 2008) and personally developed coping strategies were two themes in the data relevant to the reflexive practices of high school graduates. Yet the reflexive capacity of Tłı̨chǫ individuals may be bound to place. For those individuals who attended school outside of Behchokö after high school, reflexive decision-making processes were limited by the foreignness of the physical, social, and service ecologies in those contexts.

The transition to college was a little awkward only because I came from a smaller community. It was a change because I came from an all Aboriginal community and school and then to a big melting pot. The majority of people that were living there were Newfoundlanders, so lots of blond hair and blue eyes. I didn’t see many all-Aboriginal students, it was more Metis, so I didn’t really feel like down to earth. But then I noticed moving from here to there, going to college, lifestyle living in dormitories, and having other girls not enjoying my presence very often, it was kind of a down side of it all. (Kate)

After graduation, I tried to go to school in Grand Prairie. I couldn’t take my daughter because I had no way to transport her to the day home and all the daycares were full so she stayed with my mom. All the bills were so overwhelming ... everything was so overwhelming. (Denise)

While a sense of Tłı̨chǫ identity provided a source of strength, many individuals found the external experiences overwhelming and returned to their home community where they felt a greater sense of emotional safety and belonging. Reflexive thinking revealed internal thought processes but also perceived life path limitations described as a sense of helplessness, lack of control, or inability to act.

Subquestion 1 Conclusions: Lifecourse Paths and Processes

An ecological lens with physical, social, and service categories (Masten and Obradovic, 2008; Ungar, 2011) provided the broad theoretical framework for the analysis. Participant transcripts were analyzed individually and then collectively themed. Ten themes relevant to how Tłı̨chǫ graduates navigated their lifecourses emerged in the data (See figure 4).

Themes were analyzed for conclusions about high school graduates’ lifecourse paths and processes and revealed social situating, spacial-temporal diversity, and perceptions of power limitations. Meaningful support services and structures were identified and three categories of social world identities emerged.

Socially situated

The Tłı̨chǫ high school graduates navigated their lifeworlds in ways that revealed deeper understandings
of the meaning ascribed to their lived experiences. Oscillating between multiple social worlds was an ever-present experience for individuals. The diversity in types of social world ecologies were culture, school, gender, sexuality, culture, family, and peer-based. Perceived social location in the Behchokö context affected the identity contingencies constraining lifecourse options and decisions (Steele, 2010). These social locations and Behchokö-based identity contingencies had both commonalities and uniquenesses across storied experiences.

After individuals relocated outside of Behchokö, the sense of identity as a Tłı̨chǫ person became more similar than different.

I never went to a [high] school with 2,000 students before. I felt like a number. There weren’t a lot of Native people there. You come here and you’re used to seeing a whole bunch of beautiful brown faces and then you go down there and it was hard to tell which ones were the Native ones. That’s what I was trying to look for. In my opinion, I needed to recharge my Indian battery. (Max)

Steele (2010, p. 79) found that “identities don’t travel well” — a finding confirmed in the study with Tłı̨chǫ graduates that needs further research. Many participants experienced an increased burden of adversity and struggled in external contexts such as postsecondary schools. Yet, being Tłı̨chǫ and from Behchokö emerged as resilience-enhancing personal coping strategies for individuals who lived elsewhere. Recognizing that this sense of a Tłı̨chǫ identity was not as great a source of resilience internally in the community of Behchokö as externally exposed the dynamic nature and contextual dependence of a Tłı̨chǫ identity.

Spatial-temporal lifecourse diversity
Taking a dynamic view of an individual’s world through a lifecourse lens (Cooke, 2009) revealed diverse paths, processes, and change patterns over time. Some participants described a linear experience during the schooling years. Others experienced their lifeworlds with highs and lows and a continual momentum forward despite regularly occurring setbacks and stalls in the process. Another group of high school graduates described spiraling experiential growth paths, continually moving to the next level with spurts of positive activity and then patterns of staying the course in the process.

Processes of change involved saturation points, a recognition that some ongoing pattern or practice needed to change and then taking immediate action. Pivot points were also reflected in the data. Individuals described events that significantly changed their perceived lifeworlds and resulted in a decision to change something immediately, pivoting toward a new direction. Schools also externally designed, directed, and imposed many changes. Of significance to the latter category of change processes was a finding that the self-advocacy strength that emerged in some contexts was often not evoked in the face of externally imposed expectations. Individuals who were strong self-advocates in some contexts lost their voices and submitted unquestioningly to authority figures’ decisions in other situations. This finding revealed that Tłı̨chǫ graduates generally did not feel an adequate sense of personal and collective power to challenge the authority of the school directly. Some storied experiences of passive resistance as a form of self-regulating and maintaining a sense of control were revealed. Two participants did describe experiences of challenging perceived injustices.
They tried to make me take five credits and I said, “I won’t do anything more than I have to do” because I worked my ass off to finish and there was no way that that was going to hold me back. So we had another meeting, one of many with the principal — again, thank God for that principal. So they had the original list of requirements and they had to make an exception. (Jaclyn)

The principal made everybody, the whole Grade 9 class, repeat half a year except for me because I fought tooth and nail not to do it. At that point, I went to my family and they said just bear with it for half a year but I didn’t want to, I was outraged so I got some support from other family members and fought it. (Ian)

Embedded perceptions of power limitations
The physical location of the school was embedded in stories of lived experiences. The school location, which was a 20 minute bus ride from the community of Behchokö, was a source of adversity for half the participants. The location of the school was a symbolic representation of the territorial government’s attempt to relocate the Ṭłı̨chǫ community of Behchokö to a location that would be less costly to sustain.

Power differentials change with each unique context (Fowler, 2004). Ṭłı̨chǫ high school graduates’ resilience processes were either confined within limits of perceived personal control or forms of resistance in reaction to that source of power. The perceived limits of the power differential framed edges of choice (Mindell, 1990).

A thread running through the study’s design was that context was inseparable from understandings of the phenomenon of resilience (Ungar, 2011). Bussing was a service ecology theme and yet as the data analysis went deeper, an underlying assumption emerged: for many participants, the location of the school and the scheduling of bus routes and times were out of their control. Only one individual suggested relocating the school or changing the school start times.

And they should move [the school] to Behchokö, move it into the sports centre. Having the school in Edzo is crazy. There are always people who wake up late and it’s hard, it really is. There would be days, like a whole week, when I’d be late for school because it was 20 minutes away and there were no late buses. (Denise)

This finding had implications for how participants perceived the fixed nature of the physical structures of their community.

Meaningful support services and structures
Themes related to support services and provision also affected how individuals navigated their lifeworlds toward the goal of graduating high school. Lived experiences of service ecologies were underrepresented in the data. Resources in the service ecology were mostly described with an emphasis on what was not available for themselves or their peers. Narratives of Ṭłı̨chǫ graduates did illuminate beneficial service offerings that could be strengthened and opportunities for provision developments to better serve the needs of Ṭłı̨chǫ students. Tipping point services were community resources study participants described as crucial to their well-being at critical points on their life paths. The services were thematically titled tipping points because the option available in the community augmented the lifeworld well-being of individuals just enough to tip the balance toward positive momentum and eventual high school graduation.

Free child care in the high school and grief and loss counselling support were two tipping point services described.

The daycare helped so much because they had it at the school and it was so easy to just get my daughter up and ready and take her to school with me and drop her off there. I didn’t have to worry about her all day and they were there every day; it was a guaranteed place to bring her and it was reliable. (Denise)

The arts provide a creative outlet and a way to self-manage overwhelming emotions for some Ṭłı̨chǫ graduates.

That really strengthened me — music and having a creative outlet. Music really helped even if it was just me in my room singing about how I felt. I think the suicidal tendencies just came from life and not knowing how to deal with how I was feeling. (Ian)

Participants also described services perceived as lacking in their environment that could have posi-
tively supported their well-being and educational attainment considerably. More support for learning disabilities, school counselling services, programs to foster and facilitate peer support, transition preparation for post-high-school life, and tutoring were all noted as services the schools needed in Behchökö.

I really wanted to learn to read and write. We really need to look at people who are struggling to understand them, what kind of problems they are having and how we can help. I told my mom that if I had went to Edmonton they could have helped me with my reading and writing. I kept imagining how my life would be different if I had gone to Edmonton for those 2 years. (Michael)

The services participants described as needed in the community could be explored for deeper understandings and, if currently in existence, evaluated. A living map of community programs, services, and supports could provide a framework for developing the service ecology and closing gaps in available resources, their accessibility, and use to support the well-being of young people in the community.

**Social world identities**

Schütz (1967[1932]) was interested in exploring social world experiences of the development and identity patterns, or “ideal types.” Ideal types are not fixed trait descriptions, but typifications of actors in a social world (Schütz, 1967[1932]). In the study, ideal types among research subjects were most apparent through the research question exploring lifecourse paths. The patterns of participants moving through time and space on lifecourse paths related to psychological, social, cultural, and physical resource engagement (Ungar, 2011).

Three lifecourse path ideal types emerged. Many common themes were present across ideal types, with some diversity related specifically to lifecourse patterns.

Descriptors of the three ideal types as peak and valley persisters, spiral flourishers, and path plodders developed through a holistic immersion and emergent theming of the narrative data. Peak and valley persisters (persisters) lived lifecourse patterns marked by inconsistencies. Processes of resilience varied widely and these individuals storied their experiences with highs and lows. Spiral flourishers (flourishers) were more consistently developing, growing, and achieving. While the persisters were moving forward and then sliding back, flourishers tended to continue on positive growth paths with experiences of sustaining the momentum. Path plodders (plodders) followed linear courses, but the linearity was externally defined and structured.

**Peak and valley persisters**

Persisters described lived experiences of their life courses as processes of self-determination, overcoming obstacles, taking advantage of opportunities, and experiencing repetitive patterns of struggle, success, struggle, and success. Some persisters faced ongoing patterns of adversity they had little or no control over; others made choices that led to adversity that was then overcome. Struggles were barriers to high school graduation for all persisters, but each had inner reflexive processes leading to goal focusing and decisions to get back on track. Persisters made choices to change independently but were very resourceful at finding the supports and strategies they needed to meet goals. Unhealthiness in the lives of persisters involved peer circles with lifestyles that were detrimental to well-being. Persisters struggled to separate themselves from peers’ unhealthy social world pressures, but eventually reached saturation points and made decisions to change course. The peak and valley profile reflected an ongoing climb toward increased well-being with continual battles to stay on the upward momentum. Although persisters each faced very different external pressures and personal well-being battles, the pattern of continually trying to overcome and rise above was consistent over their life courses.

After my friends all had babies, we lost touch and I don’t know it was just really hard because I really needed them in a way. Peer pressure in high school was tough — kids even teased about clothing. When I think about it now it doesn’t really matter but back then I was criticized and they’d say like, “How come you don’t want to party?” or “How come you don’t want to smoke?” and like “How come you wear those kind of shoes?” Now when I think about it, it was just so dumb but then it was hard. So I finally decided to just change my group of friends. (Riley)
**Spiral flourishers**

Flourishers storied lived experiences as a more continuously upward lifecourse than persisters, but with resilience processes that were more spiraling than linear. Flourishers used strategies and personal strengths to buffer and deflect adversity in their lifeworlds. Because flourishers felt growing confidence in their identities, they welcomed opportunities to reinforce, validate, and live these identities in their social worlds. Flourishers had all experienced feelings of aloneness or disconnection from certain groups in their social world at some point in their lives. A sense of being different from peers eventually grew into a sense of personal identity through intense, ongoing, inner world reflexive processes.

Flourishers expressed confidence in their abilities to succeed at whatever they took on and were apt at advocating for and navigating resources in their environments. The lives of flourishers still included considerable ongoing adversities and their resilience processes varied across contexts, but resilience was part of the lived identities that flowed from flourishers as they resourcefully navigated their environment and relationships. All flourishers described life as a journey, with an inner drive to grow constantly in personally meaningful ways.

I was performing well enough in school to graduate. I had all these opportunities to travel and have fun. But I decided to buckle down and do my work once [my girlfriend] was pregnant. And in my acceptance [speech] when I said what I wanted to do in the future and that was to be a great father. (Ian)

Path floaters

Three participants’ lived experiences did not fit into the spiral flourishing ideal type profile or the peak and valley persister descriptions. This ideal type group had significant diversity in life circumstances and social world experiences but a common thread was that they centred their lifecourse path to graduation around the expectations of others. Someone in their lives expected them to go to school every day, work hard, and follow a linear path from kindergarten through Grade 12. The goal of high school graduation was clear; expectations to go to school and listen to teachers were reinforced continually by caregivers who advocated for them along with principals and teachers.

Floaters embodied the messages heard consistently over time and followed the expected path successfully as long as the path and goals were clear and the expectations, encouragement, and support continued. Path floaters did sometimes struggle under the external pressure of expectations and expressed resistance through outlets such as academic avoidance and nonengagement. When the guidance, expectations, and protection were no longer ever-present (i.e., attending postsecondary or caregiver changes), floaters drifted off course. Floaters were the least self-regulating, self-determining, and reflexive of the three ideal types.

I had to do my homework, to do my chores. There was no question about it; I just had to do it. Every day I’d just go to school all day, then after school go home, do chores and homework. Then after I was done those, I’d just go out and hang out with my friends. My dad got me up for school ever since I started kindergarten right until I started high school when I started waking myself up. (Monica)

We just need to be dedicated to completing [high school] and excelling. That was my goal and that’s what got me through, just going and finishing. Then having all these doors open for you. I couldn’t wait to finish school … but now I’m back at square one. (Monica)

Nothing in the data suggested these patterns were fixed, permanent, or even identical in expression among participants. Diversity, as previously discussed, was an ever-present theme in the data, even as ideal types were emerging. The benefit of identifying ideal types of high school graduates from Behchokö is that they provided a deeper understanding of multiple layers of complexity in lifeworlds. Making sense of how these diverse ideal types navigated and negotiated resources within their social and physical ecologies provided information that could inform the development of service ecologies in ways accessible to more high school students in Behchokö. So the ideal types in and of themselves are only frameworks for envisioning a developed service ecology from which other students in Behchokö could negotiate and navigate support in multiple ways.
Subquestion 2 Conclusions: Multiple Dimensions of Meaningful Learning
Sources and domains of meaningful knowledge-themed data were analyzed and filtered through a theoretical lens of the First Nation holistic lifelong learning model’s collective well-being dimensions: spiritual and cultural, social, economic, and political (CCL, 2007). Fifteen interrelated themes identified through the collective well-being dimensions provided deeper understandings of the learning experiences that mattered most to Tłı̨chǫ graduates (See Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Subquestion 2: Which Sources and Domains of Knowledge Mattered most to Tłı̨chǫ High School Graduates?**

Themed data were analyzed and filtered through a theoretical lens of the First Nation holistic lifelong learning model’s collective well-being dimensions: spiritual and cultural, social, economic, and political (CCL, 2007). Fifteen interrelated themes identified through the collective well-being dimensions provided deeper understandings of the learning experiences that mattered most to Tłı̨chǫ graduates.

**Relationally meaningful learning**
The analysis revealed the relationality of the learning to individual and collective lifeworlds; identities determined the meaningfulness of a given knowledge domain. The humanities and the arts were consistently described as the most enjoyed and valued subjects experienced in high school. Expressing selves creatively and feeling artistically talented gave meaning to the learning domain of high school art courses in the descriptions of 9 of the 11 participants. One participant resented having to take art in high school but all others considered the subject an important source of their personal well-being. Music and media studies were also described as meaningful by half the participants. The arts, which for Tłı̨chǫ graduates included media studies, were domains of learning that fostered increased well-being, reinforced connections to individuals’ inner spirits, and strengthened senses of identity.

English language arts (ELA), history, and social studies offered learners an opportunity to visit other social and cultural worlds. Eight participants loved ELA in general but in the narratives emphasized the connections they felt to others through the literature and stories studied across various genres. Students who described loving history and social studies also felt connected to the subject area through the stories of others’ lifeworlds explored through the domain’s content. Battiste and Henderson (2009) advocated for inclusion of Indigenous Humanities in high school curricula, a recommendation that could build on the findings in the current study that high school graduates experienced learning through the domain of the humanities as meaningful.

Science and math evoked dichotomous descriptions. High school graduates either “loved,” “hated,” or did not describe the subjects as personally meaningful in their lived experiences. Seven individuals described loving science. Science, particularly biology and general studies related to the Northwest Territories, engaged learners in subject matter that participants described as meaningful and relevant to their worlds. One individual loved math and seven “hated” the subject. Descriptions of math as a barrier to overcome on the path to high school graduation accompanied explanations of feeling the purposelessness of math and the meaningless of formulas and the problems learners were asked to solve.
Data describing the meaningful sources of learning for Tłı̨chǫ graduates were difficult to theme because the range was so broad. Peers, selves, experiences, various family members, books, the internet, and teachers were all described as sources of learning.

But I also graduated with some amazing teachers. I had John who I started Grade 10 with and finished high school with David who did science. So if it wasn’t for both of them. Even just having them at the school helped. (Jaclyn)

Peers were the most significant source of learning and support for high school graduates. A pattern of peers as mentors and informal coaches was evident across most of the data. Peer roles involved contextually unique variations on conventional understandings of peer support.

I got through school with study groups, we had our volleyball team... Well we pretty much all grew up together. We lived within doors of each other or a few blocks away and we always helped each other, with like study groups. We'd get together and work. (Kate)

And so when I was doing drugs he didn’t want to hang out with me, he’d be like, “Hey man, you’re boring when you’re high ... you’re quiet, you don’t talk much. You write some good music but you’re really boring and lazy when you’re high.” So yeah, he didn’t want to hang out with me when I was high and that helped me get back on the right path. (Tom)

Relationships with family were sources of learning as well; however, families were described both as resilience enhancing and, for several participants, the source of the greatest adversity experienced.

My parents were strict and there were certain rules to be met but they also let me be me. My dad made me go to school every day. Being old fashioned as he was he’d always tell me, “When we were in residential school, we didn’t skip. There were no excuses, you went every day.” That made us kind of feel better, it was like if he was tough enough to do it we were tough enough too. (Kate)

I never had my own personal room. It was almost 8 years that I slept on the couch. That’s what I think about the most when I remember my elementary years. There was so much corruption when I was growing up — alcohol everywhere, my mom never around. Then after my mom sobered up, she started working her way up again and she worked really hard with my stepdad to get a house for our family. (Michael)

Strength-based skill development

The domains of the arts and team-based sports were the two areas of learning that all but one high school graduate described as resilience-enhancing opportunities to develop skills and talents. Sports were an important domain of learning and source of well-being for half the participants interviewed. Although framed as opportunities accessed through school, sports were not considered to be graduation related by participants. Individuals who loved sports described extracurricular team-based experiences. Like the domain of the arts, descriptions of learning and practice in the domain of sports were connected to individual diversity, personal well-being, and social identities.

Post-graduation learning priorities

Other domains of learning were described as skills and knowledge graduates regretted not acquiring in high school. The value of these domains was not recognized until adulthood, so contexts were related to the perceived relevance of these domains of learning. Some adult-realized regrets about gaps in learning during the high school years were situated in the context of lifeworld demands and understandings about identity-based values and goals. Although a learning domain was available in the school or community, it was not necessarily perceived as accessible, effective, or relevant across time and context.

Ten of the eleven participants described feeling unprepared for the post-high-school world. Descriptions included a sense of unpreparedness for postsecondary school expectations and career path choices. Adult responsibilities like financial planning, budgeting, paying expenses, and interviewing for jobs were all described as real-world learning domains that individuals wished they had studied in a way that helped them adapt better after high school.

After I graduated, we moved to Yellowknife and I got a job there. We were just couch surfing. My girlfriend was pregnant. I was 17 and she was 16. I guess we were just homeless really. I wish I had learned more about life and life skills in school. I
didn’t know how to do anything, like how to pay bills or do my taxes. Like the things you needed to continue life after high school. (Ian)

Speaking Tłı̨chǫ fluently was another domain described as a regretfully missed learning opportunity by seven high school graduates. No mention of the language classes available through the schooling system emerged — an interesting finding that could be explained by a conceptual separation of the learning of Tłı̨chǫ language from the institutionalized K–12 system. The post-high-school regrets could indicate that learning to speak Tłı̨chǫ was relevant later in life as part of an adult sense of identity or even in relation to the added job opportunities available to Tłı̨chǫ speakers who wanted to stay in their community. The finding could also indicate a perception that the opportunities and support to become a fluent Tłı̨chǫ speaker were not available.

Spatial-temporal factors
While interpreting theme relevance to the third research question, it became apparent that the data went beyond sources and domains of meaningful knowledge. Learning spaces, both physical and social, and temporality factors were connected to the sources and domains of learning the high school graduates perceived as relevant to their lives. The physical and social spaces of learning were interrelated with lived experiences of meaningful sources for domains of knowledge. Tłı̨chǫ graduates described physical learning spaces in the school, in places traveled to by bus or plane for field trips and events, and on the land during school-organized culture camps. Social spaces for learning carried a physical location but the social experience, not the location, was the source of the meaningfulness. One group of high school students created a study group around a sports team, using team members’ homes as the location for the self-directed collaborative learning and schoolwork. Several narratives also described experiences of social isolation and the learning spaces in these situations were private, internal, and lonely.

Participants generally stayed within the perceived parameters of the K–12 schooling system when describing meaningful learning experiences — an important finding in its own right. Learning was described as school-bound and separate from Tłı̨chǫ or Aboriginal knowledge and ways of knowing. This evidence may support a process of decolonization and restructuring of the education system to reflect the context and culture of the learners and community. It also suggests a degree of separation between school-based learning and cultural learning.

Gaps in identified sources of knowledge were also recognized through a lens of the First Nation holistic lifelong learning framework (CCL, 2007) and the five relationships and values of the Tłı̨chǫ identity (Martin and Wedzin, 2010). Five participants told stories of school-organized cultural experiences on the land that were delivered by elders and other cultural experts. Aside from these stories and the importance of grandparents in several individuals’ lives, the traditional Tłı̨chǫ relationships with elders and the land as sources of meaningful knowledge and learning experiences were not significantly represented in the data.

Community-based learning experiences were not described. Once again, these findings could reflect the perceived emphasis of the research on understanding processes of resilience related to high school graduation. If this is so, then individuals might not see the relevance of graduation of learning outside the school setting or they might not be aware of the learning that occurred in community contexts. The data could also reflect a finding that opportunities for community-based culturally relevant learning for young people were either not meaningful to individuals or not perceived as available. The sense of disconnection felt from the community as a whole was reinforced by the gaps in identified sources and domains of meaningful learning.

Symbolic implications of school structure
The school structure and system were physical and social learning spaces described relationally with the stories of meaningful domains of knowledge. School structure and process were sources of learning about the social world that influenced the life paths and well-being of students who lived their school days within the institution. Some structures were iden-
tity strengthening and resilience enhancing; others presented adversity to be endured or overcome. Structures of the school carried messages about roles, identities, expectations, and power relationships. Processes of resilience that strengthened individuals’ sense of identity were used to navigate the school system and resist being controlled by authority figures. Sometimes these processes of resistance were expressed as forms of deviance but were resilience enhancing nonetheless (Ungar, 2008).

Some stories of resisting authority could be viewed through a lens of historical colonialism and ongoing impacts on Aboriginal education systems (Battiste, 2002). The resistance could also be perceived as resilience based (Ungar, 2011), if normatively inappropriate. Power structures must be in place to resist and so the structure of the school system, like any school system, is an ecological component of a power differential (Fowler, 2009).

**Model of Dynamic Resilience for Tłı̨chǫ Learners**

A model to foster processes of resilience in Tłı̨chǫ students emerged (see Figure 6). Individual and collective levels of resilience-enhancing environmental

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Figure 6: Model of Dynamic Resilience for Tłı̨chǫ Learners
supports, processes, and practices would foster increased resilience in Tłı̨chǫ learners. Resilience processes are individually and collectively navigated and negotiated in complex and diverse ways. Dynamically responsive tensions of the lifeworlds of Tłı̨chǫ students are situated in the context of changing governance structures. The model of dynamic resilience for Tłı̨chǫ learners marries conclusions to the central and sub research questions from the study. Multiple educational destinations, paths, and processes are valued as equifinal measures of achievement. Diversity in life course paths — peak and valley persisters, spiral flourishers, and path floaters — were equally valued and supported.

**Discussion**

Irlbacher-Fox and Gibson (2010) suggested that recognition for Aboriginal self-governments in northern Canada is giving way to a time of political agency. As Aboriginal governments move toward the action side of political agency, deeper understandings of the lifeworlds and lifecourses of Aboriginal people, such as those gathered in the study of Tłı̨chǫ high school graduates, inform directions and policy making.

Steele (2010) found that excellence appeared to have an identity. This research revealed that resilience in Tłı̨chǫ high school graduates had multiple identities, dynamically situated in complex lifeworlds. The study revealed three overlapping yet diverse, complex, and dynamic types of resilience process patterns relevant to educational attainment. The benefit of exploring the similarities and differences between the three groups — peak and valley persisters, spiral flourishers, and path floaters — is the deeper understanding of the diversity strengths, challenges, and needs of potential high school graduates. Categorizing resilience patterns allows service providers to plan support services and programs that more comprehensively meet a variety of diverse learning path patterns and needs. Interpreting the diversity of educational goals, paths, and processes through a lens of equifinality further obliges school and community leaders to extend linear perspectives to more complex, comprehensive understandings of high school students.

Understanding the power of school contexts to affect identity perceptions which in turn affect cognition, performance, and learning is the foundation for an action plan. The study indicated that Behchokö school structures and processes were reinforcing the perceptions of a linear path to a common goal of high school graduation as the measuring stick of success for all Tłı̨chǫ learners. Course offerings, student timetables, school schedules, and perceived traits of a successful student were determined by what high school graduates perceived as a system that was non-Aboriginal, externally decided, and largely out of their control. Learning and education were also perceived as school-bound processes and Tłı̨chǫ culture was an add-on to the requirements for high school graduation that came in the form of school-organized camps.

Developing a Tłı̨chǫ Education Act could have identity-strengthening potential to foster resilience processes and increased well-being of the young people in Behchokö. Creating a Tłı̨chǫ Education Act would also have symbolic significance (Cooper et al., 2004; Fowler, 2009). Restoring the school system, renewing the “Strong like two people” mission, creating a multiple-stakeholder Tłı̨chǫ Education Coalition, and developing identity-strengthening, resilience-enhancing policies are some potential actions that could contribute to the development of a Tłı̨chǫ Education Act.

Ungar’s (2008) definition of resilience involved individuals navigating and negotiating resources to be delivered in ways that were culturally meaningful. To negotiate the way resources are delivered, the design of services offered to support the needs of Tłı̨chǫ within their own community context must be defined by Tłı̨chǫ people. Ecological parameters — the social, physical, and service realities of settings — provide the edges of choice for engagement of any context. Social, physical, and service contexts create a shared space within which people live their everyday lives, requiring that the edges of choice be culturally appropriate and defined from within the community.

Implications and opportunities for building healthier social ecologies could be envisioned as a refortifying of the Tłı̨chǫ identity of young people
from Behchokö (Martin and Wedzin, 2010). The 21st century lifeworlds of high school students in Behchokö, reframed as experiences of competing expectations and complex social worlds to navigate, suggests that individuals are not islands; academic achievements are embedded in complex environments. The more pressure-filled and resource-scarce a context, the more adversity an individual has to navigate while working towards goals such as high school graduation. Building more accessible, trustworthy, appropriate, and effective wellbeing resources and opportunities into the Tłįchǫ lifeworld of youth is vital to enhancing processes of resilience and ultimately educational outcomes.

The challenges facing Tłįchǫ youth and the meaningfulness of support resource options were unique to the 21st century. The term ecological implies geographic boundaries and yet social, physical, and virtual worlds flow into one another. Technology has broadened the potential for service offerings, and social media is forging new ways of relating, uniting, and collaborating. Using social media and other technologies as the medium for delivering the social supports and services that foster increased resilience and well-being in Tłįchǫ students holds potential.

A Tłįchǫ youth-driven support network using the tools of technology and social media could better meet the social, cultural, and educational wellbeing needs of students. Peers were sources of significant support for high school graduates and social worlds were priorities. The combined provision of peer relationship networks through social media offers support to Tłįchǫ young people, offering a potential of reducing the lifeworld bicultural and temporal tensions experienced by Tłįchǫ students.

**CONCLUSION**

Further research, honouring the principles of relational accountability, is needed to illuminate the policy actions that would enhance the resilience of Tłįchǫ young people. Research could extend this study to other Tłįchǫ populations like students who don’t finish high school, students who repeatedly register and never graduate, or to other Aboriginal populations. Deeper understandings of school-situated identity contingencies experienced by Tłįchǫ students and in other First Nations community schools are also needed. Unanswered questions remain about the lived experiences of Tłįchǫ young adults after graduation both in Behchokö and in non-Tłįchǫ contexts. Further research is also needed to determine the significance, if any, of relational population sampling and the direct resilience-enhancing benefits, if any, of a social phenomenological method and narrative story-telling.

Wilson (2008, p. 109) noted that through elders he learned, “that focusing on the positive in Indigenous research focuses on harmony.” I also explored the relevance of Chambers’ (1997, p. 1) questioning of whose reality counts while conducting research with Tłįchǫ young adults. I have learned that researching what I originally thought was “the positive” is really more about hearing someone’s storied experiences; positive or negative framing is a subjectively constructed distraction. Truth — unframed storytelling — is a way of being that builds deeper judgment-free understandings of lifeworlds of others. I realize that the reality of Aboriginal young people counts most in any discussion related to their well-being. By asking to hear their stories, and being trustworthy with the intended meanings of what is revealed, I can build bridges and partnerships. I now understand that young Aboriginal people have stories that offer everything needed to build policies for increasing educational attainment, well-being, and identity strengthening lifeworlds.

**References**


Susan Hopkins’ (Ed.D) educational career path, like her research interests, span a diverse range of contexts and experiences. After four years teaching in Milan, Italy, she spent the next 8 years teaching in Northern aboriginal communities. She has been a school administrator, a curriculum developer, and an educational researcher. While living in the Ḥeňhó people of Behchokó, her studies at the masters level and doctoral levels in education sparked a passion for moving beyond exploring the research of others, to conducting her own studies. She is interested in relationship-based participatory research methods and the stories of others, most especially Aboriginal children, youth, and young adults from the Northwest Territories. She received a Circumpolar Health Research Student Award in 2009 and a Research Presentation Award from the University of Phoenix’s School of Advanced Studies in 2011. She has presented research at the America Educational Research Association and the 17th and 18th annual Qualitative Health Research (QHR) conferences.

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