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CUTTING THE TRAIL: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF DISTANCE LEARNING IN REMOTE

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

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**CUTTING THE TRAIL: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR DISTANCE EDUCATION LEARNING
EXPERIENCES IN REMOTE POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION**

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my family ~ past, present, and future.

To my grandparents: to Baba, Klawdia, who taught me how to pray, have faith, and to believe in myself. To my Dido Nicholas, Grandma Margaret, Grandpa Charlie, and to Grandpa Kuhlman: I always feel your presence.

To my Mom who taught me to finish what I started and to my Dad who taught me to keep putting one foot in front of the other; without these skills I would not have finished this work. I am grateful to each of you for the sacrifices you have made for me in my life.

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And to our grandchildren: Seth, Anastasia, Hope, Kate, Eberle, Morrigan, Tomek, Aspen, Marsali, Vera, Willem, and Baby (2024). You are the shining beacons in our lives and our future.

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Abstract

Despite the many efforts to improve educational environments for remote postsecondary students, perennial problems of broadband capacity, limited access to programs, and needed supports persist. The geographical distance between students and instructors necessitates the use of distance education to improve access and equity to educational opportunities. Many forms of outreach have been tried, some with more success than others, depending on the location of each student, the pedagogies employed, and the supports provided. Improvements that resolve systemic issues are emerging as understanding of remote postsecondary distance education improves. A growing number of educators and administrators see the potential to improve systemic issues through various pedagogical and broadband solutions; however, understanding which solutions are most equitable at improving fair and accessible solutions to these environments requires a deeper understanding of students, their needs, and their challenges. To promote students' success, we need to understand what success is, how it is realized, and what gets in the way.

This research focuses on the experiences of an underrepresented population of postsecondary distance education students. Its contribution to knowledge lies in a deeper understanding of remote postsecondary students' perceptions of learning at a distance, given the various education formats and approaches used. This research seeks to expand understanding about which elements within distance education foster success, with the intention of improving postsecondary environments and including non-traditional, remote student experiences in scholarship. By contributing information about remote spaces, advocacy from this research has the potential to inform, promote, and improve the quality of education in remote communities.

This study is framed within a critical digital pedagogy lens using Laurillard's (2012) conversational framework. Critical digital pedagogy is a non-neutral approach to teaching and learning that challenges the status quo in education, supporting social change and raising consciousness while shaping society through liberatory praxis. Critical digital pedagogy fosters agency and empowers learners while deconstructing existing hierarchical structures, authorities, and traditional knowledge paradigms; it also advocates for non-traditional methodologies and making space for alternate forms of knowledge by re-developing and re-envisioning student-centered approaches to learning through discussion, practice, and collaboration (Laurillard, 2012; Stommel, 2014).

Keywords: students' perceptions, distance education, remote postsecondary education, socio-narratology, Laurillard's conversational framework, design science

Preface

This work is intended to share the perceptions and experiences of remote students on their educational journey in remote postsecondary distance education programs. The intention is to give these students an opportunity to express their views and to communicate their experiences in their own words, so the academic world may better understand of the needs, values, and expectations of these students.

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Glossary of Terms

The following glossary of terms is important in assisting readers' understanding about remote postsecondary education.

Adult literacy and basic education (ALBE) - college level programming, providing high school equivalency courses in English, math, and science. This programming is offered in most of the 33 communities and one reservation in the Northwest Territories. These courses are required for many adult students to qualify for and access college-level academic programming.

Community adult educator – an employee within the college system who provides instructional support, preforms administrative functions, and acts as a liaison between college, community, and students. Adult educators come from a variety of backgrounds and are not necessarily teachers or instructors by profession.

Community learning centers (CLCs) – buildings that provide access to educational opportunities, technology, and an adult educator in remote communities. These buildings are also used for community gatherings and sometimes act as a daycare.

Distance education – an educational environment in which the student and teacher may be separated by time or space; learning may occur synchronously and/or asynchronously.

Effective learning – an activity of construction, handled with (or in the context of) others, and driven by the learner's agency. This includes the monitoring and review of whether approaches and strategies are proving effective for the particular goals and context (Watkins, 2002).

Engagement – students' involvement with, and participation in, educational programming.

Meaningful education – education that acknowledges, supports, or adds value to students lives.

Postsecondary education – education that includes developmental studies (high school equivalencies, taught at both community learning centers and college campuses) and academic

programming (consisting of certificate, diploma, undergraduate degree, and masters-level programs).

Remote – a distance from, or disassociation with, others created by geographical, spatial, cognitive, or cultural separation.

Remote communities – communities separated geographically from urban centers. Access to communities is varied by road, air, or a combination of air access with seasonal ice roads.

Remote learner – includes all adult learners within the Northwest Territories. These learners may engage in learning through college campuses, CLCs, online, or at a distance.

Rural-remote communities – communities which may or may not have road access. Many are fly in communities and only have seasonal access on winter ice roads. These communities are significantly smaller than urban-remote communities, having populations under 1,000 people.

Success – "academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and post-college performance" (Kuh et al., 2006, p.7).

Urban-remote communities – include larger communities accessible by road with populations over 1,000 which have most major amenities expected in southern communities.

Prologue

Vignette

There is a woman in a small remote community of northern Canada. She is a mother of eight children, seven surviving. She has spent her life raising her family and pursuing postsecondary education. She is an elder, a leader in her community, a wife, mother, auntie, and grandmother to many. She is one of our northern success stories. Her story is not uncommon. It took her almost 20 years to obtain her diploma, but she has no regrets. She had many challenges and opportunities during that time and grew through her experiences. Those life experiences made her a stronger person and more able to meet the academic challenges she pursued. Her experiences tested her resolve and helped her attain the diploma for which she worked so hard. Her tenacity, dedication, and connection to the academic community all contributed to the successful completion of her educational journey. She is one in a population of 44,000, one that we celebrate, cherish, and stand beside because she has realized her goal and is *successful*.

Chapter 1. Introduction

Overview

The purpose of this study is to provide an understanding of learners' perceptions of their experiences in certificate and diploma programs offered at a distance and to identify and discuss elements of programs that support or detract from students' success. Contributions to knowledge of this research lies in a deeper understanding of remote postsecondary students' perceptions of learning at a distance in relation to scholarship on critical digital pedagogy, and Laurillard's (2012) conversational framework. Rather than focus on instructional components of Laurillard's (2012) communication cycle, as previous research has done, the present study focuses on learners' understanding and practice within the conversational framework as outlined by

Laurillard and the importance of student agency and relationality on distance learning. This relationship will be discussed later in this chapter.

This chapter began with a vignette to provide context for this study on student success in remote postsecondary education. Next, I will situate the proposed study, and state the research problem, purpose, research questions, and significance of the study. I will situate myself in the research, identify the research paradigm and theoretical framework, and explain the learning theories that support this study. This chapter will conclude with the study's limitations and the contributions this study aims to provide to academic discourse. Chapter 2 will provide a summary of related literature relevant to this study. Chapter 3 will outline the method and methodology for the proposed, institutionally bounded, multi-case study. Chapter 4 will provide 11 stories from each of the students who participated in this study. Chapter 5 will provide the interpretive analysis of common threads within these stories, and Chapter 6 will include discussion, recommendations, and conclusions of this research.

Background

This institutionally bound multiple case study is located at Aurora College, in the Northwest Territories (NWT). The NWT is Canada's west central territory, encompassing 1.36 million square kilometers with a population of 44,000 people. The population of the NWT is dispersed across this vast territory in 33 communities and one reservation. Community access varies depending on each community's geographical location and may include transportation by road, air, or seasonal winter roads. Broadband capacity also varies by community and may include connectivity using high orbiting satellite connections, digital subscriber lines (DSL), or coaxial or fibre optic cable (Soanes-White, 2022). Availability of educational programming also varies in each community depending on broadband connections, availability of programs, and

infrastructure within each community. Due to the sparsely populated regions, vastly dispersed

population, and variations in broadband connectivity, providing equitable access for

postsecondary education to all residents is challenging. Aurora College is the primary

postsecondary institution that provides programming across the NWT. The college supports

learning in 24 of the 33 communities through campuses in Inuvik, Fort Smith, and Yellowknife

and in community learning centers (CLCs) in 21 of the remaining smaller communities. Adult

educators are employed at the CLCs as liaisons among students, programs, and campuses.

As the opening vignette illustrates, remote postsecondary education can be a long and

complex process. These complexities stem from many aspects of living and learning in remote

environments. The predominant and obvious challenge is the vast geographical distance between

students and faculty, making face-to-face human connections difficult. In addition, challenges in

universal broadband standards across communities illustrate inequities between communities,

which will be discussed further in Chapter 2. Differences in socio-cultural knowledge and ways

of knowing and being create disconnects between informal learning and formal education.

Hampered by these challenges, completion of kindergarten to Grade 12 education necessitates

access to adult education for many of the most remote students if they want to access or pursue

postsecondary education. Many students navigate these complex postsecondary environments

and are confronted with problems including internet issues and limited access to, or ownership

of, technology. Other challenges include barriers such as English as a second language, and a

lack of resources or supports to gain entry to or complete postsecondary programming. There are

also no institutional policies, supports, or directives on distance programming so each program

has created their own solutions to these complex problems. Yet the postsecondary system in the

NWT persists and innovations and adaptations have emerged to mitigate the challenges that exist

for students. Due to the issues outlined above and the distance between students and programming, four programs at Aurora College have each embarked on different distance education solutions to expand learning options for students learning at a distance. The purpose of this research is to examine three of these various approaches to distance learning through students' perceptions of their postsecondary experience, to better understand which educational elements support and detract from students' success. The intention is to better understand students' needs and experiences so that changes can be identified and recommended, and learning conditions can be improved.

Statement of the Problem

Based on the vignette and conditions identified above, innovative distance education solutions are necessary to improve equitable access to postsecondary education in the NWT. Currently, no formal policies or supports exist for the development of structured, evidence-based distance education approaches. Also, little has been documented in scholarly literature about how remote postsecondary students define their success or which elements of distance education environments promote student engagement and lead to success (Astin, 1993; Cherubini, 2014; Corbett, 2007; Davey, 2019; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). However, responsive, and innovative approaches have been developed using design science, building pedagogical patterns for learning, and using technology in ways that are contextually relevant and supportive of remote students' learning needs.

As various forms of distance education have evolved, both the ability to accommodate students, and the methods used to expand programming across the NWT have grown. As educational needs have been identified, various programs within the college have created new and innovative ways to connect with and teach students at a distance. These forms of distance

education vary depending on where students are located, their access to education, and the approach used by specific programs. The four different distance education approaches currently used include cohort-based, guided independent study, video conferencing, and online learning. As stated above, currently no system-driven policies or standards exist to guide or support distance program development at Aurora College. To improve postsecondary distance learning opportunities, students' perceptions of their experiences must be better understood.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study is to better understand students' perceptions of their distance education experiences in remote postsecondary distance education and to identify which elements of those experiences foster success, with the intention of improving learning environments within these programs. My research question is: How do various elements in distance education approaches contribute to, or detract from, students' success?

My two sub-research questions are:

1. What elements of the distance education experience do remote learners perceive as necessary in order to experience educational success through learning at a distance?

2. What institutional conditions or supports do remote learners perceive as necessary when experiencing educational success through learning at a distance?

An underlying assumption in traditional mainstream education is that institutional and academic success are aligned almost exclusively with program or course completion (Astin, 1975; Astin & Antonio, 2012; Kuh, 2004; Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1987). However, success for many remote students is based on a broader definition that includes personal growth, knowledge acquisition, becoming a more capable person, and getting a job (James, 2016). These outcomes will be discussed further in Chapter 2. The incongruences

between institutional definitions of success and the broader definition above limit the development of policies and procedures to support students in their educational journey (Cherubini, 2014). It is necessary to consider an expanded notion of student success in this study which will be discussed further in Chapter 2. By understanding broader definitions of students' success, institutions in remote communities may acquire insights related to creating effective, supportive environments for learning.

The objectives of this study include the following: a) to better understand student perceptions of experiences in remote postsecondary distance education, b) to expand research on elements in distance education that contribute to positive performance and outcomes, c) to establish a baseline for future research into distance education in remote postsecondary education, and d) to inform institutional policies and practices for supporting learning at a distance. This research aims to stimulate interest, increase knowledge, and improve conditions that support student success in remote postsecondary distance education environments.

Significance

Learning from remote students about what they experience as success can provide a more comprehensive understanding of research and theory on student engagement and success in distance education. It has been my experience that students intimately understand which elements best support their learning. For example, course content and structure, personal behaviors and activities, and institutional communication and conditions are elements students find supportive. Listening to and collaborating with students to identify educational and environmental supports will inform institutions to develop formal distance education systems and improve current environments. Also, learning from students about the challenges they confront acknowledges students' voices, communicates effective practices, and can potentially

redirect educational efforts. On a broader scale, acknowledgement of ineffective methods and systemic issues can redefine institutional strategies and policies and change learning environments.

Researcher Positionality

My interest in student success is rooted in my personal experience as a remote community member and in my sense of identity and life purpose. Being a *good* community member means doing my part to contribute to the well-being and development of my community and its members. My community is the NWT. I define myself as a second generation bilingual academic Canadian, raised with an immigrant mentality, influenced by non-traditional higher education teaching and learning. These perceptions and experiences help me to see diversity in worldviews, encompassing multiple realities.

It has been my experience as a remote academic that epistemic tensions also exist with non-Aboriginal remote students who share life experiences and cultural mores with their Aboriginal colleagues. The use of contextually and culturally relevant pedagogy, and the development of trusting and respectful relationships within the classroom are not always aligned with institutional policies or practices. Students need to be invited to participate in sharing their needs and informing institutional practices to improve teaching and learning and student engagement.

As an academic and instructor, I have tried to resolve some of the inequities experienced in remote postsecondary education by non-traditional students, including students who are first in family, mature students, Indigenous students, or immigrant learners. From my experiences I also understand a multitude of worldviews exist and that scaffolding learning environments and providing relational supports increases success in remote distance learning environments. I also

understand that context driven practices support student engagement and persistence. Positive student engagement means making space within classrooms for diverse ways of knowing and being in learning. In pursuing this research, I aim to better understand which elements of the distance education experience support a strength-based, supportive, and meaningful educational experience.

My work within the college, supporting the development of distance education programming, positions me as an insider, as a community member, and as an advocate for students in remote postsecondary education. As an insider, I must ensure that I continually assess my thoughts and reflect on my feelings and conclusions, to distinguish my perceptions and experiences from those of the students interviewed. In analyzing the data, I have checked in with students to ensure the conclusions I drew, represent of their voices, not my own. This research is very important and can be used to inform research theories and practices so that more non-traditional students can be heard and understood in postsecondary spaces.

On a more personal note, I have spent my lifetime participating in intercultural research and evaluation. This goes deeper than merely being an active participant in my community. Being married to an Indigenous man means that I negotiate intercultural space everyday. Our shared space means that I have integrated many aspects of Indigenous culture and ways into my everyday living. After more than four decades, we continue to work hard to treat each other with integrity, respect, and reciprocity. I take these skills and gifts that I have developed over the years, and I apply them, with humility, to my relationships with students. Also, because of my upbringing, which held Indigenous people as strong, resilient, and compassionate, I am guided to connect from a place of respect. In addition, I come from an immigrant family which means many of my views differ from the normative Canadian culture that I belong to. I have

experienced a disassociation from some social, cultural, and educational practices which makes me aware of, and empathetic to, the many realities that represent our shared space and cultural differences. I am aware that many Indigenous people may see me as an outsider however, I work hard to negotiate a shared educational space that we create together. This influences they way I approach the research, design, development, and evaluation of my teaching, as well as my pedagogical practice. I work hard to slow down interactions, observe protocols, and to be respectful and responsive. I continue to grapple with intercultural challenges that arise and pursue integrity with all community members, adapting as required.

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed within a critical digital pedagogy (CDP) lens, using Laurillard's (2012) conversational framework. CDP is situated within critical pedagogy, a non-neutral approach to teaching and learning that challenges the status quo in education, supports social change, and raises consciousness while shaping society through liberatory praxis. CDP fosters agency and empowers learners through "reflective dialogue within web-based tools" (Stommel, 2014, p.7). CDP deconstructs power structures and social impediments to learning within digital spaces and is deeply personal, political, and subjective. CDP invites the whole person into an ongoing and recursive process of discovery (Hall, 2016).

CDP works through deconstructing current systems of hierarchical structures, authorities, and traditional knowledge paradigms, creating space for marginalized, voiceless, and underrepresented learners. The purpose behind these actions is not only to advocate for non-traditional methodologies in education but also to deconstruct dominant paradigms and to make space for alternate forms of knowledge. CDP works through deconstructing oppressive structures

to re-develop and re-envision student-centered approaches to learning through discussion, practice, and collaboration (Laurillard, 2012; Stommel, 2014).

It can be argued that CPD exists in (and emerged through) open, distance, and distributive education environments. The how, the what, and the why of teaching and learning in distance education is manifested through the ubiquitous presence of various forms of technology. For this reason, distance education is seen as leading the way in informing CDP and has the greatest potential to deconstruct educational limitations (Stommel et al., 2020). CDP is seen as central to the development of, and innovation in, distance education and as a means of supporting student success in remote postsecondary education.

CDP is more than just tools and interface. To reference Audrey Watters (2018), technologies have histories, are political, and support dominant ways of being in our society. Technologies infuse and support how we "do" education, what we teach, and how we expect students to learn. Technology-enabled practices entrench how we evaluate learning, privilege, and specific forms of knowledge. Conversely, CDP challenges us as educators to dislodge these histories and elevate alternate forms of knowledge. "[T]echnologies are never 'just tools'"; they are a conveyance of our ways of life and represent our values and social structures (Watters, Foreward, 2018, p. xii). If these technologies do not embody a comprehensive and holistic pedagogy, then it is our responsibility to dismantle these structures and tools to create more caring and compassionate spaces for learning.

Laurillard (2012) acknowledges that formal learning is different from spontaneous informal learning that occurs outside of structured institutional education. She also asserts that students need help and support in education, which is generally a product of someone else's thinking, not their own. In addition, course content is greatly influenced by teaching strategies

and digital pedagogies employed in the learning process that shape students' experiences.

"Formal learning has to take into account what both teacher and learner do" […] "and has to

embrace both individual and social learning" (Laurillard, 2012, p. 99). The conversational

framework illustrates the teacher-learner interrelationships through communication and

practice/modelling cycles representing the various roles students and teachers play in the

learning process. By understanding these cycles teachers are better equipped to guide and

support the learning process. This framework supports the learning influences of Vygotsky

(1978), that alignment of meaningful teaching strategies serves the functions of social

coordination with peers and instructors and that internalizing communication mediates

intellectual activities (Moll, 2013).

Learning Theory

Students need time and opportunity to connect the dots between their spontaneous,

everyday learning and formalized knowledge in school systems. Vygotsky (1978) suggests that

learning occurs through the systematic scaffolding of learning events and artifacts for learner

development based on mediated tasks (Moll, 2013). Vygotsky also suggests that "instruction

must be aimed, not at the actual developmental level, but at the proximal level, the 'buds' or

'flowers' of development that, if cultivated right, will mature tomorrow" (Moll, 2013, p.76). The

key to the zone of proximal development is that students have two levels of development: one

that they attain by themselves and another that they can attain with help using mediators.

Mediators are tools and include the following:

1. "social mediators" (human interaction);
2. "instrumental or tool mediation" (the use of tools like pencils and computers);
3. "semiotic mediation" (the use of language, symbols, or art);
4. "anatomic mediation" (the use of the physical body or environmental manipulation); and

5. "individual mediation" (the use of personal agency and metacognition) (Moll, 2014, p.31).

Vygotsky (1978) believed that "human development is … the process of individuation" and that human beings are simultaneously stimulated by and learn through their biology, social interactions, and cultural mores (Moll, 2013, p. 30). Vygotsky believed that learning could not be distilled into nice, neat, separate categories, but rather is messy, complex, and interconnected (1978). Today, much of western formal learning in post-secondary education privileges compartmentalized and scientifically based knowledge at the expense of a more fully integrative and holistic approach to learning (GNWT, 2016). By intellectualizing learning in formal education and deconstructing knowledge into scientific meaning making, situated and contextually based experiences of everyday life and the knowledge network of socio-cultural knowing are stripped away. In short, there are limited natural connections between "school" or "textbook" knowledge and the spontaneous learning that is central to informal learning and experiences of non-traditional postsecondary students (Moll, 2013). In these cases, learning is stunted by the lack of alignment between actual and proximal levels of development (Moll, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). Both Vygotsky's theory on proximal development and his use of mediators (social, instrumental, semiotic, anatomical, and individual) are used to produce qualitative transformation between where we begin and where we end up through our learning. Current scholarship based on Vygotsky's theories related to distance education and open learning is expanded on in Chapter 2.

Contributions to Academic Discourse

This research helps to elucidate the experiences of an underrepresented population of postsecondary distance education students. Its contribution to knowledge lies in a deeper

understanding of remote postsecondary student perceptions of learning at a distance, given the various educational formats and approaches used. This research expands understanding about which elements within distance education foster and detract from success and aims to improve postsecondary environments and to include non-traditional, remote student experiences in scholarship. In addition, this research also connects to, and supports research globally about students and systems in remote spaces. The findings in this research have the potential to inform, promote, and improve the quality of education; they also explore whether the factors identified within this paper align with life and living in other remote locations. The findings may also serve as the foundation for future research programs on related topics arising from this study.

Study Limitations

Study limitations are issues beyond the researcher's control that may impact the methods or approaches within the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These issues may be known or unknown to the researcher but must be managed to ensure that credibility and trustworthiness is maintained throughout the study. Known limitations of this proposed research include the following: a small sample size of 11 students in one institution; findings that are limited to an institutional study; and a limited sample set of students willing to share their experiences, which may not be representative of the entire population of distance students.

Summary

At the beginning of this chapter, I provided a story to contextualize student success in remote postsecondary education in the NWT. I provided a background to the research, a statement of the problem, and my research questions, emphasizing the need to understand students' perceptions of their distance education experiences. I shared the significance of the study and introduced my researcher position, including my personal connection to the study's

purpose and rationale, and I suggested that a documented understanding of students' experiences was necessary to understand and support students' learning in remote spaces. The literature is silent on which elements or distance education models best support student success in remote postsecondary education. I summarized of the research paradigm identified for this study and the theoretical framework and learning theory that guided this work. I concluded the chapter by recognizing this study's potential contributions to academic discourse, identifying its limitations. The following chapter summarizes the relevant literature related to this study.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Overview

In the previous chapter I provided an opening vignette, setting the context for this research. I also outlined the research purpose, questions, and significance, and situated myself in the research. I concluded the chapter with a discussion about the theoretical framework and learning theory that guided this research.

Chapter 2 summarizes the literature related to living remotely and remote learning and further expands on the importance of CDP and effective learning in remote spaces. I explain the unique characteristics of broadband capacity and its influence on distance education in the NWT. Next, I discuss operational definitions of success and other conditions identified in scholarship today as important in contributing to student success in distance education. I also discuss supports that are necessary for remote northern learners and include relevant literature from national and territorial perspectives. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of gaps in the literature.

In conducting my literature review for this proposal, I used library databases at Athabasca University and the University of Alberta to search for contemporary and seminal publications related to the main concepts of this proposed study published between 2015-2023, including peer-reviewed and grey literature. Terms used in the searches included "rural and remote," "postsecondary and higher education," "student success," "open and distance education," "critical digital pedagogy," and "broadband and telecommunications." I reviewed references in articles, books, and websites for further related literature to support my research. I also met with librarians at Athabasca University and University of Alberta who assisted me to narrow the literature search and gave recommendations for conducting a literature review. I consulted with

faculty advisors and instructors about scholars they felt were seminal and significant in relation

to the subject matter of this proposal. To summarize my findings, I grouped readings and books

into the various categories and compared literature for common and contrasting themes. I also

emailed and connected with scholars in the field and discussed their thoughts on what they felt

were the most prevalent issues related to the development of student success in remote

postsecondary education. The findings below summarize and synthesize the results of my

literature review.

Defining and Contextualizing "Remote"

The need for a definition of the term "remote" arises from the deeper need to understand

and express meaningful information about the term and to provide context to remoteness in

relation to education. Defining "rural" requires the "use of different operational indicators; the

most relevant indicators are those that match the researcher's theoretical perspective" (Koziol et

al., 2006, p.8). Contextualizing and providing local signifiers assists in defining, describing, and

understanding the social, cultural, and historical uniqueness that exists and helps to make explicit

what remote is (Roberts & Guenther, 2021). "Rural [and remote] education research exists at

complex intersections of human development, place and space, culture, pedagogy, demography,

and geography. Our definitions of rural [and remote] must be responsive to those intersections

and appropriate to the questions at hand." (Longhurst, 2021, p. 16). By examining and explaining

dimensions of remoteness it is possible to create a deeper, multi-dimensional understanding of

what remote is, how it appears, and how it can be measured.

Three relevant indicators discussed below include geo-spatial characteristics, socio-

cultural components, and social representation theories (Halfacree, 2006; Koziol et al., 2006).

Geo-spatial characteristics provide the reader with quantifiable values that describe elements that

are rural and remote in relation to those that are urban. Socio-cultural theories provide another layer of understanding by comparing cultural traits, language, physical structures, and land use. Social representation uses lay discourse to operationalize daily life and speaks to what is important through lived experiences and through understanding values and behaviours (Halfacree, 2006; Koziol et al., 2006). Contextualizing and providing local signifiers also helps in defining, describing, and understanding the social, cultural, and historical uniqueness that exists and to make explicit what remote is (Roberts & Guenther, 2021). By combining these theories with other scholarship identified in this literature review, I was better able to define "remote" and operationalize its meaning to remote education.

In the Glossary of Terms, I distinguished between remote as "rural remote" and "urban remote." In this section I expand on these definitions by relating "rural" to "remote" and by connecting these terms to additional indicators identified in scholarship, providing a more comprehensive perspective. In the literature, the predominant definitions of "rural" and "remote" stem from geo-spatial, place-based characteristics that are typically quantifiable and comparative to urban indicators. Place is defined by size of community, population, and planning and use characteristics, emphasizing quantifiable data about ruralism and remoteness. Examples of geo-spatial data include the following: population density, demographic and spatial characteristics, and political and economic characteristics. Emile Durkheim's (1964) work focused on population density and theorized that rural areas with low population density "lend themselves to a mechanical form of solidarity characterized by collectivist orientations, homogeneous backgrounds and belief systems, and agrarian lifestyles" (as cited in Koziol et al., 2006, p.2). Spatial conceptualizations identify the term "rural" as a location relative to urban centers. "Rural" is also defined in relation to its deficiencies when compared to resources and amenities

available within an urban space, while considering the unequal distribution of resources or opportunities (Lobao et al., 2007). Many scholars also focus on factors including statistical evaluation of political and economic events, emphasizing reliance on the government sector for subsistence, development, and industrialization of rural or remote areas (Cloke, 2006; Halfacree, 1993; Koziol et al., 2006). In addition, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has developed a classification system and has identified "four major locale classifications: *City, Suburb, Town, and Rural*. This system is referred to as the urban-centric classification system and has been in use since 2006" (Longhurst, 2021, p. 11). These classifications are further subdivided into more discrete categories with cities and suburbs defined by population and geographical proximity to urban centers, whereas towns and rural classifications are defined exclusively by the geographical distance from an urbanized center, negating any signifiers that directly define or explain what rural or remote are (Longhurst, 2021). Approaches using geo-spatial theories are typically quantifiable and provide descriptive analysis and evaluation of the terms "rural" and "remote" compared to urban environments, however they do not define what ruralism or remoteness are, but rather focus on what they *are not* compared to points of reference of urbanism. To provide deeper and more meaningful information, researchers must also examine qualitative data, more easily explained through socio-cultural and social representation theories.

Socio-cultural theories relate to social constructivism and are linked to behaviors and activities that are both quantitative and qualitative in nature (Koziol et al., 2006). These theories are also anchored in population density data to support assumptions drawn on affected behavior within low density populations and comparing dichotomies between urban and rural centers. For example, Redfield's work on the rural-urban continuum examines how low population density

affects behaviours, attitudes, and activities within a rural environment (as cited in Halfacree, 1993). This theoretical approach provides an opportunity to contextualize rurality and remoteness which is not possible through geo-spatial comparisons. Other researchers have identified differences between urban and rural characteristics by comparing religious beliefs (secular/sacred), solidarity (organic/mechanical), and structural/functional anthropology (rational/traditional) as well as Indigeneity (Indigenous/non-Indigenous) (Brown & Shafft, 2011; Halfacree, 1993; Ross, 2007). Socio-cultural theory can also be expressed through language, cultural activities, and the formation of society based on activities and behaviour. These socio-cultural characteristics attempt to define the behaviors, languages, and activities of ruralness. To understand rurality of a specific area we must understand the discreet characteristics of each community (Guenther, et al., 2017).

Social representation uses existentialism to value the lived experience of people within a rural landscape. Remoteness is expressed in values, beliefs, and daily interactions through "lay dialogue" (Halfacree, 1993, p.31). Halfacree (1993) states that social representation illustrates remoteness through the mundane of everyday living and is the essence of what embodies definable uniqueness by those within that experience. To understand remoteness from a social representational perspective, these lived experiences must be defined and expressed by those who have experienced these lived realities in a place and space of remoteness.

Taylor (2016) expands on Halfacree's work of demographic, social, and cultural dimensions of rurality to include historic and economic impacts and emphasizes that although communities may share relative "geographical proximity [each community] can exhibit highly divergent demographic and developmental pathways" (Taylor, 2016, p. 3). Although historical events may be experienced by communities within the same regions, such as resource

exploitation or impacts from residential schools, how each community responds to these events is contingent on its community members, resulting in unique and differentiated spaces. Remote space can be viewed as empty, vast, and underutilized when in fact there are a multitude of interactions and interrelationships which sustain and support flourishing. These spaces are seen as both exploitable potential and protected spaces of regeneration. Remote communities and their members impact and influence both how space is exploited or preserved and are sometimes caught in a tug-of-war between economic development and exploitation and preservation and active stewardship of the land (Halsey, 2010). Halsey states that spatiality "reveals the human constructedness of space and spaces" revealing human priorities within each community (Halsey, 2010, p. 5). "Space – the natural and physical properties, and spatiality – socially produced space, foreground two critical perspectives of place in a locational and possibilities sense", contextualizing a specific situated reality (Halsey, 2010, p. 8)

Rurality, and by proxy, remoteness is more than a spatially orientated descriptive comparison beyond geo-spatial theory, where we can point to a place or a given population and label it "rural" or "remote." Neither can regionalization, or groupings of communities into clusters, serve to define or explain rurality because the unique characteristics of each community may be lost within a larger regional view, generating inaccurate stereotypes of rural and remote spaces (Taylor, 2016). Taylor (2016) suggests that by using the 'Seven D's of Demographic Research at the Edge' by Carson and his colleagues (2011, 2014) that these descriptions "can highlight and explain differences between settlements in sparsely populated areas and urban centers" (Taylor, 2016, p. 12).

It is also unnecessary to restrict identification and definition through an urban–rural continuum because communities change as they grow and diminish. We also cannot definitively

classify social or cultural aspects of human identity as urban, rural, or remote, because many of these characteristics change over time as communities grow, diminish, and adapt. In addition, when people move from urban to remote areas and remote to urban areas, they carry their values, practices, and experiences with them. Social representation does, however, allow us to understand the essence of the lived experience through lay discourse and predominant norms and values even though these experiences are dynamic and ever-changing. Communities can transmute from urban to remote and remote to urban because cognition, values, and beliefs are adaptive. Lived experience changes as human beings adapt to their dynamic environments. Defining the term "remote" requires an understanding of the cognitive aspects of community such as the values, beliefs, and lay discourse of those engaged in remote existence, which arguably may be universal in nature. Halfacree (2006) believes it is through the dynamic interplay between the environment, community, and individual that the expression of remoteness is revealed. This is evident through the choices people make, how they live, what they believe, and how they allow their needs to shape their world. It is through living and being that remoteness is defined.

In contrast, Coates and Poelzer (1994) suggest that "northern images and stereotypes" are "deeply entrenched around the circumpolar world" and challenge that "there are special characteristics associated with being northern, [and that] they are much fewer in number than generally assumed" (p. 36). More recently, Roberts and Guenther (2021) challenged this assumption and state that naming of remote "has significant cultural and historic meaning" and suggests that naming provides historic insight of the researcher and the context in which the research is conducted (Roberts & Guenther, 2021, p. 13). Numerous scholars have developed criteria that differentiates remote spaces and encapsulates rurality, providing frameworks to

contrast urban and remote realities (Carson et al., 2011; Carson & Carson, 2014; Cloke, 2006; Halfacree, 1993; Koziol et al., 2006; Sucksmith & Brown, 2018). These theories and frameworks provide a variety of perspectives that characterize and define rurality, remote, and spatiality.

Coates and Poelzer (1994) state that no theories exist on remote postsecondary Canadian educational scholarship, however recent research has shown an increase in technology and design-based approaches to improving access for remote students and systemic improvements that promote access, mobility, and persistence for remote learners (Anderson, 2012; Anderson & Dron, 2012; Barbour, 2005; McKeown et al., 2018). In addition, Kahu's framework on engagement stresses the importance of self-efficacy, belonging, emotion, and well-being on remote students, emphasizing that supportive institutional policies and contextually relevant pedagogies improve remote students' experiences and success (Kahu, 2013). The COVID pandemic has also promoted deeper scholarly understanding as academics reflected on emergency distance education efforts and their impacts on remote learning from an instructional perspective (Durnford, et al., 2021). The focus of current research on this topic emphasizes systemic and institutional supports from administrative and educator voices, however there is limited research on students' perspectives about their success and improving current postsecondary experiences. By exploring students' perceptions of distance education experiences in remote postsecondary education, against mainstream scholarship as suggested by Coates and Poelzer (1994), this research can aid in creating a new set of concepts that can be compared and contrasted with traditional scholarship findings and position remote postsecondary scholarship within scholarship, instead of at the margins, or not within scholarship at all.

Understanding Remote Learning

Remote education research defines the term "rural" using characteristics of accessibility, provision of school supports, standards of education, staffing retention, proximity to urban areas, and educational quality and standards. The Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC) in the 2010-2011 Funding Manual for School Authorities in Alberta defined a rural district as: "'A district or division that is not an urban district.'" An urban district is defined as: "'1. A city district which is not included in a school division or regional division; and 2. A district, division or regional division, or portion thereof, designated by the Minister as an urban district.'" There is no definition for a remote district (Council, 2010). In contrast, Coates and Poelzer (1994), acknowledge geographical, spatial, and socio-cultural constructs when defining the North; and also include economic determinism, climate considerations, political structures, evolutionary concepts, and regions' conception of self as significant factors that characterize and define northern and remote areas. Coates and Poelzer (1994), further differentiate the Canadian North into Arctic and sub-Arctic regions, defining the sub-Arctic region as the provincial north within Canada. Defining and specifying remoteness is central to this research and is defined as the arctic North region of Canada, specifically within the NWT.

Connections exist between people who live in remote regions (Cherubini, 2014; Davey, 2019; Halfacree, 1993; Kovach, 2009). These connections are based partially out of necessity and partly out of sharing spaces as people ebb and flow in a current of independence and interdependence as needs arise. Remote scholars, such as James (2016) understand these connections exist and identify these connections through relationships, northern identity, community, kinship, and friendships. Halfacree (1993) calls this network of interrelationships socio-cultural connections. These connections between community members, who are co-joined

in layers of connectedness and separateness, pulled together in times of need, retracting when no longer necessary, creating community among northern residents. Individuals' paths may cross many times in a lifetime and with each connection further relational development occurs resulting in a deeper understanding of each other. Halfacree's socio-cultural connections exist between remote students across the various regions within the North (1993). The existence of, and participation in, these socio-cultural connections invite a pre-emptive sense of community into remote college environments and fosters safe and welcoming spaces for students to learn (Guenther & Disbray, 2015). More colleges and universities are also recognizing "the importance of belonging [that] is identified as being one of four critical psychological mechanisms that facilitate student engagement and success" for remote students (Pollard et al., 2021, p. 242). Local community involvement, supporting students' identity and culture, and respecting normative context also all contribute to improved understanding, student engagement, and educational success in remote learning (Guenther, et al., 2017).

Holistic development is necessary and formed by accepting and educating the cognitive, emotional, social, spiritual, and physical aspects of the whole student (James, 2016; Kovach, 2009). James (2016) and Kovach (2009) also consider it vital to acknowledge pluralistic knowledge and deep relational connections within education, conscious ecological considerations and stewardship of the land, ingrained identity in relation to actions and experiences, intra-relational reliance on and with nature, and a co-construction of self in relation to others. This is further affirmed by the importance of these needs and relationships in the opening vignette.

Peer-reviewed research studies and grey literature state that students in northern remote communities experience below average retention and completion rates compared to national

standards (Government of the Northwest Territories, 2013). Many of the issues that exist in

kindergarten to Grade 12 education are paralleled in postsecondary education and require an

understanding of effective supports and innovative approaches to improve conditions of student

engagement and success (Government of the Northwest Territories, 2013). Many of the issues

arising in kindergarten to Grade 12 experiences are precursors that contribute to low levels of

student success in remote postsecondary education. In addition, high school completion rates

from smaller rural-remote communities are lower than those within urban-remote centers,

providing evidence of disparity between rural-remote and urban-remote achievement

(Government of the Northwest Territories, 2013). Table 1, below, summarizes the academic

achievement based on educational levels in the urban remote communities of Hay River, Fort

Smith, Inuvik, and Yellowknife compared to rural-remote communities from the 2019 NWT

Bureau of Statistics data (Government of the Northwest Territories, 2019). There are notable

differences in achievement levels between the larger centers of Forth Smith, Hay River, and

Yellowknife, and the rest of the communities within the NWT which are predominantly

communities with Indigenous populations. These differences in achievement illustrate

discrepancies of equity and access, including teacher turnover, limited course choices, and

broadband capacity issues across remote communities. Statistics Canada (2020) states that

national high school graduation rates for the 2018-2019 academic year were 81%. These

outcomes support the need to better understand conditions that lead to these discrepancies

between students.

Table One

Highest Level of Schooling by Community Type

Communities		< Grade 9	No Diploma	High School Diploma	Certificate or Diploma	University Degree
	%	%	%	%	%	%
All persons	100.0	8.2	19.6	22.5	28.8	20.9
Yellowknife	100.0	3.7	12.2	25.7	29.7	28.8
Hay River, Ft. Smith, Inuvik	100.0	4.8	19.3	21.9	34.7	19.3
Rest of Communities	100.0	18.0	31.5	17.9	22.8	9.8

Research has also shown that remote learners, many of whom are first generation postsecondary students, require more time than students who come from familial backgrounds with intergenerational connections to formal education (Kuh, 2004; Kuh et al., 2005). Persistence declines with specific student characteristics such as being first-generation postsecondary learners in their families, having lower high school grade point averages (GPAs), and being mature students (Kuh, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Many non-traditional students characterized above also come from minority groups and underrepresented populations who are required to upgrade or enroll in remedial classes (Cherubini, 2014). Many students that study in remote postsecondary education environments belong to several higher risk groups who do not persist to graduation. Many of these students require upgrading prior to entering parent programs, are first generation learners, come from underrepresented populations, and are predominantly women (Government of the Northwest Territories, 2013). Improving equity and access requires an understanding of what these students need and value so that the supports provided are meaningful and effective.

Finally, understanding remote postsecondary education requires an understanding of student profiles and what learners need to be successful. Approximately 50% of the Northwest Territories population identified as Aboriginal in the 2016 territorial census, a decrease from the federal census of approximately 52% (Bureau of Statistics, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2016). This is important in understanding the context of many of the students represented in this study since Aboriginal paradigms and worldviews may be incongruent with institutional measures of success, program curricula, and teaching and learning practices (Cherubini, 2014; James, 2016). As James (2016) asserts, when knowledge paradigms and worldviews are disconnected from students' learning, higher levels of student frustration, lower course grades, and lower levels of student success occur. To effect student success, research has shown that students need to be supported in their learning with "an external representation of their knowledge" (Laurillard, 2012, p. 92) *and* be met within their own world (James, 2016; Kuh et al., 2005; Steinhauer, 1999). Teaching and learning must also be anchored in a context-driven reality and guided by inherent needs relevant to students' lives, experiences, and activities (Guenther & Disbray, 2015; Guenther et al., 2017; Steinhauer, 1999). Teaching and learning must also be supported by current knowledge traditions, including knowledge of geographical or cultural conditions, and must incorporate tasks and conditions that stretch, expand, and reveal students' learning (Laurillard, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978). Alignment among the student, the teacher, and the active pedagogical patterns needs to be consciously coordinated to improve and inform remote postsecondary distance education (James, 2016; Laurillard, 2012).

Critical Digital Pedagogy

Improving distance education learning environments requires digitizing teaching and learning practices (Morris & Stommel, 2014). Sean Michael Morris and Jesse Stommel (2014)

view pedagogy as praxis; this involves a method and practice of teaching, with learning as its

central tenet and praxis as the intersection of the philosophy and practice of teaching (Stommel,

2014). Praxis emphasizes recursive metacognition by examining the intersectionality of

educational philosophy and teaching practice. Critical pedagogy embeds in its philosophical

position liberatory praxis, dismantling traditional notions of teaching and learning by examining

issues related to power within classrooms, through examining grading practices, and encouraging

open pedagogy (Morris & Stommel, 2014). Critical pedagogy is deeply personal, subjective, and

learner centered; it is also politically anchored in learning spaces that foster agency and

emphasize learner empowerment (Stommel & Morris, 2018). Stommel (2014) advocates for a

"problem posing education" that "offers a space of mutual creation not consumption" and

"cognition not information." Critical digital pedagogy is a deeply human approach to teaching

and learning that emphasizes doing, constructing, and building knowledge from the inside out

rather than from the outside in. "Digital pedagogy is about human relationships, the complexity

of humans working together with other humans – the challenges of finding ways to teach through

a screen, not to a screen" (Stommel et al., 2020, p. 7).

Stommel (2020) states that instructors must be cognizant of both virtual and digital

spaces and that interaction can happen between these spaces. Many times, the underlying

dominant voices and philosophies, if unchecked, will transfer between these spaces, further

marginalizing non-traditional voices or, as Stommel puts it, will result in some students

"leav[ing] their true identities – their true voices – at the door" (Stommel, 2020, p. 174). CDP

permeates more than curricula by building caring relational practices and capitalizing on

available edtech and virtual connections to transform distance and hybrid education. CDP can

transform these spaces through reconstructing classroom culture, inviting multicultural

viewpoints, and accepting diverse ways of knowing to expand interaction, engagement, and learning. To really understand the limitations students face, instructors need to invest time and relational practice to really get to know their students.

Literature and scholarship state that CDP is messy work (Stommel, 2014). In my experience, increased equity and access across the North is challenged by inconsistencies across broadband and telecommunication connections, intergenerational trauma from residential school legacies, and a lack of alignment between learners' experiences and their formal educational pursuits. Employing digital strategies does not always mean investing in the most high-tech devices to assist in student learning (Watters, 2018). Sometimes the answer is to simplify rather than magnify the digital pedagogies employed, such as allowing for talking instead of writing, connecting by phone when the internet does not work, and dividing the class into small groups of students on their own campuses rather than forcing interaction on a Smartboard. Many of these approaches to teaching and learning at a distance are the result of persistent efforts to improve learning environments. Closing the gap on the digital divide which includes physical access to computers and other digital tools, necessary knowledge and skills to operate computers, and equitable access to broadband capacity and internet, are critical components to ensure equitable access for remote learners (van Dijk, 2020). In summary, reaching students who are dispersed across more than one million square kilometers requires creative and innovative approaches to bridge the digital divide and connect learners to preferred educational opportunities.

Broadband Capacity in the Northwest Territories

Many of the broadband and telecommunications issues of the NWT occur because of the vast geographical territory and the dispersion of its people. Due to these conditions, the North relies on several broadband solutions to promote internet access and respond to

telecommunication needs. Broadband connections travel in four forms across the NWT,

including satellite (both high-orbiting and low-orbiting satellites), digital subscriber lines (DSL),

fibre/coaxial cable, and mobile connections. When wired options are not available, wireless

satellite transmissions are used. The predominant forms of broadband used currently include

satellite or DSL. Currently, only eight communities in the NWT can access high speed fibre

optical or coaxial connections. Each form of broadband connection has its strengths and

challenges and its use is based on accessibility and availability across communities.

Communities with road access can connect to fibre optic and coaxial services. Other

communities with limited or seasonal winter road access must rely on existing wired options

including DSL. Remote fly-in communities rely predominantly on satellite connections

(DigitalNWT, 2021). The geographical dispersion of populations is only the beginning of the

challenge. The is no way to scale up investment for low populated areas, in the NWT meaning

that the return on investment does not exist for potential corporations to exploit broadband

development opportunities, leaving remote communities without high-speed broadband options.

In addition, once physical access is possible the problem becomes that of intellectual access, or

digital literacy, the ability to gain access to digital information once physical access is possible

(Thompson et al., 2014). "Digital literacy requires an understanding of how information needs

may be fulfilled systematically, as well as an evaluation of the various types of media that

convey that information" (Sharma et al., 2016, p.630). Simply stated, having access to the

internet or educational resources does not mean that individuals know how to access resources or

use software or other digital applications. To improve broadband capacity of remote NWT

communities, consideration needs to be given for both improved digital access and literacy.

The broadband reality of the NWT continues to challenge educators within every community, making it difficult to ensure equitable access for all northerners. These challenges, however, have not eliminated educational opportunities. Not surprisingly, all levels of education have been confronted with these limitations and have risen above them to offer creative solutions that develop, enhance, and extend secondary, postsecondary, and higher education. These global issues have found resolutions in remote spaces around the world and remote educators are leading the way in augmenting and advancing education within these constraints. It is through this continued work that real-time solutions emerge and connections continue to be made. Further discussions on changing broadband needs, capacities, and innovations will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Effective Learning

Much has been written about effective learning and educational practices. Learning occurs when "we acquire the meaning of the unfamiliar … until it becomes a part of us" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 100). Effective learning is the translation of the unknown into "transformed knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 100). Effective learning has also been defined as an "activity of construction, handled with (or in the context of) others, - driven by learner's agency, including the monitoring and review of whether approaches and strategies are proving effective for the particular goals and context" (Watkins, 2002, p.4). Effective learning can occur when students participate in educationally effective practices (Kuh et al., 2005). Kuh and colleagues (2005) identify five clusters of educational practices, as summarized from the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) that include: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interactions, supportive campus environments, and enriching educational experiences. In comparison

Chickering and Gamson (1987) have also identified seven categories of effective educational practices in face-to-face environments that include: student/faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, and respect for diverse talents and ways of learning. Cherubini (2014) cites in his research on student engagement and effective learning that when value alignment exists between students' values and a school's culture, higher levels of student engagement occur. In addition, Cherubini (2014) and Kuh et al. (2005) concur that culturally relevant learning environments, authentic and respectful relationships, and supportive pedagogical practices also encourage student engagement and foster effective learning and educational practices.

Conversely, disengagement occurs when learning environments lack diverse teaching perspectives, culturally sensitive supports, and culturally relevant pedagogy (Cherubini, 2014). Tensions arise when institutional practices are incongruent with students' learning needs, and student success diminishes. "Epistemic tensions and conflicts [can exist] between mainstream curricula, traditional pedagogy, and the learning needs of Aboriginal students" (Cherubini, p. 86). "For Indigenous people, effective learning must be grounded in, and able to reinforce, strong cultural identities and community relationships, integrated into a lifelong continuum of learning, growth, and development" (Milne & Wotherspoon, 2023, p. 15). In addition, curricula that promotes Indigenous philosophical and ontological foundations that "engage[s] at the cultural interface in taking account of the complex historical, social and political elements that underpin Indigenous knowledge and the communities that encompass the education context" promotes effective learning (Osborne & Guenther, 2013, p. 113). There are many curricula that address the western – Indigenous binary through contextually relevant pedagogy such as the Dene Kede, the Inuuqatigiit, and the Red Dirt curriculum (Government of the Northwest Territories, 2023;

James, 2016; Osborne & Guenther, 2011). To increase effective educational practices and improve student engagement and success institutions must know their students, remove epistemic and systemic barriers inherent in formal education, and support diverse learning traditions (Cherubini, 2014; Kuh et al., 2005).

Students learn through their experiences, through their thoughts, actions, and emotions (Merriam et al., 2007). Students are more than cognitive machines. The learner is a whole person, "made up of the mind and the body and comes to a learning situation with a history, a biography that interacts in individual ways with the experience that generates the nature of learning" (Merriam et al., 2007, p.101). It is through these sensations of knowing and unknowing that students grapple with how they learn, and discover what strategies are most effective. Cherubini (2014) asserts that students require teachers and support people to draw out their needs, people that have knowledge of how learning occurs, to assist them in better understanding what their needs are. In addition, learning experiences should consider and support "the importance of geography, culture, social relationships, and local history" of the students (Downey, 2021, p.63). It is through these relational connections that the learners are invited to share in the co-determination of their learning needs.

The northern context contributes to many barriers and opportunities for remote postsecondary students. Many of the barriers common to students studying in remote spaces include equity and access to facilities, instruction, and programs of choice (Government of the Northwest Territories, 2013). Lack of access to college prerequisites within small remote communities continues to restrict entrance into many programs (Education, Culture and Employment, 2019). Also, connectivity issues, perceptions of poor-quality instruction and hidden expenses (the higher cost of attending schools in the North compared to southern Canada)

may be perceived as barriers by students. However, there are also many benefits and opportunities that exist for students. Socio-cultural context and relational supports exist (James, 2016). Pedagogical approaches and contextually relevant examples make learning more meaningful (James). Lower student-to-teacher ratios support the interpersonal needs of remote postsecondary students (Cherubini, 2014). Studying within the North also means students are not separated from their families, communities, or traditions, improving student supports and engagement (Government of the Northwest Territories).

From an environment perspective, northern remote postsecondary education is in transition; "post-secondary education is a cooperative system that, in the context of the NWT, is dependent on continuous collaboration" (Education, Culture and Employment, 2019, p. 5). The government acknowledges that it "plays a critical role in supporting student success" and invites collaboration by "prioritizing student success" and "actively engaging students in the decision-making process" (Education, Culture and Employment, 2019, p. 10). In addition, Education, Culture and Employment (2019) acknowledges postsecondary education needs to be equitable, accessible, contextually relevant, student centered, and of high quality.

Operational Definitions of Student Success

There are many measures of success in postsecondary education. A well-used indicator of student success is course or program completion (Kuh et al., 2005). Other traditional definitions of student success, as identified by Kuh et al. (2005), include professional or postgraduate achievement tests, graduate enrollment and completion rates, professional exams and post-college employment, and income. Other less traditional and qualitative measures of student success have also been identified such as literacy levels, writing proficiency, aptitude for critical thinking, scientific literacy, quantitative and numeracy skills, personal competency, confidence

of self-worth, and sense of purpose (Sedlacek, 2017). These indicators of success are more difficult to measure due to their qualitative nature and subjectivity. The above indicators are based on personal standards and varying individual baseline measures (Kuh et al., 2006). Other qualitative measures of success that relate to this study include the following: personal growth, deeper levels of understanding, skill development, understanding the world better, and being a good and productive member of society (James, 2016; Steinhauer, 1999). Additionally, success is identified as "part of a process, arranged holistically and relationally, in which learners' spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional well-being are nurtured" (Milne & Wotherspoon, 2023, p. 15). Finally, other alternative measures of student success in current literature are anchored in skill development, competencies, and talent development (Astin, 1993; GNWT, 2016).

Success indicators are varied and support a diverse understanding of student success. Kuh and his colleagues (2006) define student success in relation to student engagement, whereas Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) are more concerned about effective educational practices in relation to students' experiences. Although Laurillard (2012) agrees with Kuh, she sees student engagement as an internal gauge based on self-efficacy and motivation. Whereas James' (2016) view of student success relates more to qualitative characteristics students learn through their educational experiences which are measured by their ability to become capable people in society and focuses more on achievement of personal characteristics as opposed to academic achievement. Steinhauer's view relates to students' "ability to be self directed, independent, and able to fulfill goals" (Steinhauer, 1999, p. 13). Finally, skill-based definitions of student success focus on attributes or skills students learn that will help them to become productive contributors in society. These skills are based on economic drivers and conditions, necessary in today's workforce (GNWT, 2016). Completion rates continue to support funding models, institutional

achievement levels, and cross institutional comparisons however, more emphasis is now being placed on "whole-of-student, whole-of-university strateg[ies]", which support student-centered practices and intentional policies that are directed at remotes students and their learning needs (Pollard, Skene, & Venville, 2021, p. 244). In support of this shift Street et al. (2021) states that indicators must be inclusive and express broader views beyond dominant, non-Indigenous, neoliberal priorities. Street and his colleagues (2021) also stress that historical completion rates are limiting and ignore a broader, more inclusive perspectives of success and how it is measured. For this study student success, as identified in the glossary of terms at the beginning of this paper, will be defined broadly as academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and post-college performance" (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 7).

Traditional face-to-face and distance education student success is measured and evaluated consistently, regardless of the modality of teaching and learning. However, the *approach*es used differ greatly between face-to-face and distance environments. For example, student success in face-to-face environments relies on student engagement involving high impact practices (such as service learning, studying abroad, or seminar supports) whereas distance education uses design science including synchronous and asynchronous connections (such as eportfolios, collaborative projects, or peer-to-peer interactions) to lead students through the learning process (Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Laurillard, 2012). The importance of interactions through synchronous and asynchronous learning components also differentiates time on task, course interactions, and learning design, leading to students' success. Distance education also relies heavily on asynchronous components to learning through separation of student and instructor (Moore, 2013), through modulating activities and the use of learning cycles to reinforce learning

(Laurillard, 2012), and emphasizes the importance of didactic conversations between students and instructors (Holmberg, 1989). Both Anderson (2003) and Moore (2013) take an interactionist view of bridging time and space whereas Stommel and Morris (2018) emphasize the importance of digital spaces and virtual connections (both synchronous and asynchronous) as an iterative process. Distance education also emphasizes the importance of peer-to-peer interactions and cohort-based learning through communities of practice (Wenger, 1999). Regardless of whether connections are synchronous or asynchronous, in distance education, causal relationships have been validated and confirmed that both "teaching and social presence have a significant perceived influence on cognitive presence and that teaching presence is perceived to influence social presence," signifying the importance of relational aspects in distance education within student success (Garrison et al., 2009, p. 2). Laurillard's (2012) conversational framework (see Appendix A – Conversational Framework) acknowledges the significance of instructor-to-student and student-to-student interactions, each enabling students to modulate between practices, activities, and interactions while continuously learning and developing. This design science approach aligns pedagogical patterns of course content with the use of mediators in the teaching and learning process to facilitate meaningful approaches to learning (Laurillard, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) identifies social mediators as human interactions, especially those interactions that further support and develop cultural practices. Although Vygotsky's work is silent on distance connections using social mediators, his research emphasized the importance of relational connections to reinforce and "stretch" students through collaborative interactions and sharing. Concerned with the use of language and social supports, Vygotsky believed that cognition and higher-order thought stemmed from social origins. He examined transformational moments through both individual (internal) and social (external) interactions with their

environment, emphasizing that transformations, could be further enhanced using mediators including cultural and social interactions, the use of tools, symbols such as language and art, or the use of physical experiences. Vygotsky also emphasized the importance of students' agency in their development, whereas Laurillard emphasizes the modulation between interactions with students and instructors through "the iterative relationship between teaching method and learning activity" (Laurillard, 2012, p. 93).

Examining Student Success Nationally and Territorially

> **National Student Success Literature.**

There are national concerns about the disparity in equitable access to postsecondary education for all Canadians. These concerns have manifested in reports, discussions, and debates about how to reduce barriers and create more open and equitable access (Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, 2011). Changing demographics including minority students, first generation learners, and late entry adult learners has resulted in more research and government supports for remote postsecondary students (Government of the Northwest Territories, 2013). Low literacy and high school graduation rates require facilitation of adult literacy before participation in higher education can occur, placing an even heavier emphasis on government supports and intervention. Lower high school graduation rates create a reliance on government to help fix the problem and to provide learning and development opportunities for many remote adult learners, so they can access adult basic education and pursue higher levels of postsecondary education. National organizations such as the Canadian Council on Learning raised awareness for the need to develop holistic approaches in measuring success (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). In addition, there have been major contributions and initiatives made by Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario, and Quebec Ministries in adult

education, about understanding delays in entering postsecondary education, enhancing provincial policy development, and improving distance education delivery systems in efforts to improve learning conditions and environments (Barbour, 2005; King et al., 2009; Laferriere et al., 2012; The College Sector Committee, 2008). National funding provides specific supports for provincial and territorial mandates, which is necessary to ensure that inherent rights to education for all Canadians exist and that everyone has the right and opportunity to chose postsecondary education. Increasing access and equity in remote learning is possible through enabling and supporting distance and distributive education systems.

      Territorial Student Success Literature.

      In northern Canada, Nunavut, has been the greatest contributor to research on remote education focusing on postsecondary development, success, and Inuit controls over education (Inuit Taririit Kanatami, 2017); areas of educational struggle such as racial pedagogy and decolonization (McGregor, 2013); and the role of language in education (Aylward, 2010). Governments in remote postsecondary education also weigh heavily into publications on student success, attrition, graduation, and evaluations (Government of the Northwest Territories, 2013; GNWT, 2016; Nunavut Government, 2006). There are many issues within remote education, as identified earlier, but central to each of these issues is the need to improve access and support student success. Several case studies involving pilot projects, language initiatives, technology considerations, and the evaluation of educational delivery systems exist in scholarship (Aylward, 2010; Bell et al., 2004; Fahy, 1988). Student perceptions are identified in many of these case studies, however little scholarship is devoted to understanding which efforts provide the greatest benefits to student success and academic achievement in distance education. Other than

government reports and publications, there has been little research within the NWT related to student success in remote postsecondary education, signifying a gap in current scholarship.

Gaps in the Literature – Expanding Understanding of Student Success

There are two important points to be made with regards to gaps in current literature. The first, as stated earlier in this chapter and in Chapter 1, relates to the gap that exists for underrepresented groups in remote postsecondary scholarship (such as minority groups, remote populations, first generation learners, and women), to which this research is central. Second, gaps in literature exist in understanding what makes distance education successful in remote postsecondary education. This study focuses on learners' perceptions of their distance education experiences to better inform current practices and approaches. Currently, no systemic policies or standards exist to guide or support distance education program development in the NWT. This research aims to expand our understanding of student engagement and success and improve distance education approaches in remote postsecondary education.

Summary

This chapter presents a preliminary review of the literature pertaining to defining and contextualizing student success in remote postsecondary education. The literature revealed that there are consistencies among and between rural spaces in terms of students' challenges and persistence. The importance of including situated knowledge, relational practices, and an understanding of necessary supports can not be overstated. In addition, there is a significant need for technologically adapted educational practices to improve students' success in remote learning. Another important conclusion drawn from the literature review is that many of the students that study in remote spaces are non-traditional students, and require an expanded understanding of persistence and success in postsecondary environments beyond that given in the

traditional literature. The importance of CDP and effective learning in remote spaces cannot be

overemphasized because of the importance of technologically enabled practices in reaching

remote postsecondary students. It is also important to acknowledge the challenges that exist due

to the geographical dispersion of students and teachers, and the existing issues related to

broadband and telecommunications connections that are prevalent in remote education. Increased

scholarship on remote and non-traditional students continues to grow. This research contributes

to a deeper understanding of students' success for remote populations.

The next chapter outlines the research method, specifically an institutionally bounded

multi-case study method. Chapter 3 identifies data sources, site selection, participant details and

recruitment, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques. Chapter 3 concludes with a

discussion of trustworthiness and ethics.

Chapter 3. Research Method and Methodological Approach

Overview

In Chapter 2 I defined and contextualized remoteness and remote learning and outlined the importance of CDP and effective learning practices in remote postsecondary education. I provided a summary of operational definitions of success and a comparison between how success is achieved through distance education compared to more traditional face-to-face approaches. I concluded Chapter 2 with a discussion on literature from national and territorial perspectives and existing gaps in literature.

In this chapter I situate the research paradigm for this study, provide the rationale for using an institutionally bounded, multi-case study, and describe my chosen approach. Next, I identify data sources, site selection, participant details and recruitment strategies, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques. I conclude with an overview of trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and limitations identified within this study.

Research Paradigm

This research is situated within a critical realism paradigm, a philosophically reflexive stance that considers both natural science and social science philosophies (Archer, et al., 2016). Critical realism embodies an interpretivist-constructivist epistemology where "multiple socially constructed realities" are recognized (Mertens, 2003, p. 140) and where reality is acknowledged as complex and human behaviour is influenced by agency and structural factors (Archer, 1995). My epistemological assumptions include an understanding that the relationship that exists between the researcher and the participants is "essential as they struggle together to make their values explicit and create knowledge that will be the results of the study" (Mertens, 2003, p. 141). These assumptions underscore the importance of interaction between the researcher and

participants and require that research is conducted sensitively and respectfully, representing students' voices in the research.

Critical theory is contextualized within the traditional realist ontology, where reality can exist outside of perception and where multiple perspectives can represent one event. Critical realism also acknowledges that no universal truth can be known and that theories are only partial representations of reality (Mertens, 2003). The goal of the critical realist is to measure and verify underlying structures, acknowledging objectivity can only be partially realized. Critical realism's ontology is represented through its practical use, complexity, and analytical dualism between structure and agency (Archer, 1995). The interplay between cultural perceptions and structural events can be observed and used to explain contextually relevant behaviours and theoretical generalizations. This creates an opportunity to observe perceptions, actions, and behaviors of a subset within society while still being able to link these experiences to broader theories and generalizations, "providing a balanced and complete view" (Mertens, 2003, p. 141). Critical theory compensates for gaps in traditional approaches by providing more detailed exploratory power in research. Critical theory also allows for a more predictive understanding of phenomena that do not fit into classically held theories or current research that contradicts some existing upheld beliefs.

Critical theory offers an approach that allows for the development of more refined theoretical insights while still attending to particular contexts, emphasizing both theory-generating possibilities and context-laden experiences. Critical theory also emphasizes how emotional and mental perspectives are important to the research process and places high importance on experiences, understanding different viewpoints, and representing diverse voices (Shannon-Baker, 2016). These diverse viewpoints can be the starting point for further theorizing.

Case Study Approach

I used an institutionally bound, multi-case study design emphasizing a narrative inquiry approach for this research study. Narrative inquiry "is a distinct form of communication: it is meaning making through the shaping of experience: a way of understanding one's own or others' actions: of organizing events, objects, feelings, or thoughts in relation to each other; of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions, events, feelings, or thoughts over time" Chase, 2018, p. 951). Merriam, Stake, and Yin are seminal methodologists on case study research (Yazan, 2015). My epistemological stance aligns more with Merriam (1998) and Stake's (1995, 2006) renditions of case study research than with Yin's (2003) whose epistemological orientation leans toward a positivist positioning (Yazan, 2015, p.146). Stake (1995) argues that most contemporary qualitative researchers believe that knowledge is constructed. Similarly, Merriam (1998) maintains that reality is constructed by "individuals interacting with their social worlds" (p. 6). I have been guided by elements of both Merriam and Stake's approaches to case study. Other methodologists that guided my work include Creswell and Creswell (2018), Creswell and Plano-Clark (2011), and Creswell and Poth (2017).

A case study method is pluralistic, descriptively heuristic, and inductive in generating a new understanding of individual students' perceptions of their experiences and across students' experiences (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2006). A case "requires experiencing the activity … as it occurs in its contexts and in its particular situation" (Stake, 2006, p. 2). The aim in the study was to elicit a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of their distance education experiences and to elevate their voices by describing how remote learning is offered (examining differences in critical digital pedagogy used), administered (how students access, register, and complete program requirements), and instructed (blended, online, or cohort-based instructional

approaches). This study allowed students to reflect on their experiences and invited them to co-inform postsecondary education approaches, providing deeper insights into course development and relational supports.

I chose a multi-case research approach to study each individual students' perceptions in depth for what they could tell me about each program. Each program is identified as a unique quintain. A quintain is a grouping of cases (students) within a program. For example, this study contained three quintains or programs. Students within each program are parts of their program's quintain or grouping. Each case, or student, is studied for what they can tell us about their program. "A multi-case study of a program is not so much a study of the quintain [program] as it is a study of cases [students] for what they tell us about the quintain" (Stake, 2006, p. 7). By listening to students' perceptions, I was able to understand student's experiences within their respective programs. This approach also allowed me to draw out common threads amongst the three programs. By establishing a multi-case study, each of the "individual cases should be studied to learn about their self-centering, complexity, and situational uniqueness" and "for what they [the cases] tell us about the quintain" (pp. 2-3). The quintains included three programs at Aurora College including the following: the Certificate in Adult Education, the Early Learning and Childcare, and the Personal Support Worker programs.

Self-selected students from within each program were interviewed and provided their stories related to their respective distance education environments. Storytelling is an integral part of Indigenous knowledge production and is used in this research to elevate students' voices. Kovach (2021) states, "qualitative inquiry is an approach to research that tells a story through words, not numbers. It is a story interpreted from experience with an aim of offering further insight into human experience *from* human experience … relationships, stories, and words mark

qualitative inquiry." (p. 24). Kovach (2021) goes on further to say "Indigenous methodologies, based as they are on Indigenous epistemologies, distinguish themselves from qualitative approaches embedded in Western history and intellectual tradition. However, Indigenous methodologies coexist with qualitative research" (pp. 24-25). Many of the participants within this research are Indigenous and this approach is used to both support the epistemological basis underlying this study and to support and uplift the students involved in this work. The data provided a narrative account of eleven stories collected using a socio-narratology approach (Frank, 2013) and was gathered using semi-structured interviews guided by Laurillard's conversational framework (Laurillard, 2012). Students' responses to the interview questions were used to answer the research questions from Chapter 1 and are restated below. My overarching research question is: how do various elements in distance education approaches contribute to, or detract from, students' success?

My two sub-research questions were:

1. What elements of the distance education experience do remote learners perceive as necessary in order to experience educational success through learning at a distance?

2. What institutional conditions or supports do remote learners perceive as necessary when experiencing educational success through learning at a distance?

Data Sources

Consistent with Merriam and Stake's data gathering approaches, I used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, and researcher's observations which I documented in field notes and journals (daily, personal, and methodological logs). The interview by nature "is a conversation, the art of asking questions and listening" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 519). Denzin and Lincoln (2018) explain further that, "the interview produces situated understandings

grounded in specific interactional episodes" and "is influenced by personal characteristics of the

interviewer" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 519). The intention of the interview is to invite a

conversation, and to elicit "a special kind of information" so the interviewer can understand

another's thoughts, feelings, and experiences, which cannot otherwise be observed (Merriam,

1988, p. 72). Viewing the interview through a Socratic lens, "the conversational goal is not to

end with a settled and frozen account but to continue the (ongoing) conversation not to arrive at

'fixed knowledge' once and for all but to help human beings improve the quality of their

conversational reality, to help them know their own society and debate the goals and values that

are important in their lives" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 592). The strengths of the semi-

structured interview are the ability of the researcher to probe deeper and to ask for elaboration on

responses given by the interviewee and to "make better use of the knowledge producing potential

of dialogues" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 579). I connected students' responses to the interview

questions in a narrative summary and refer to these responses as each student's story in Chapter

4. These stories were analyzed individually and collectively for common threads across student's

stories.

I collected verbal and non-verbal data from each interview and recorded students'

thoughts, feelings, expressions, and quotations to help uncover perceptions of their distance

learning experiences. Observational data are non-verbal data collected from interactions with,

and observations of, interviewees. I documented my observations to support verbal responses for

the video-conference interviews and summarized these observations in log record books. I used

non-verbal observational data, to clarify and deepen my understanding of students' responses

and to provide a basis for further questions and clarification. Students were consulted by email

communication and phone conversations to ensure data summaries accurately conveyed their views.

Site Selection

This was an institutionally and geographically bounded multi-case study, involving students enrolled at Aurora College, in the NWT. The study site included three Aurora College programs offered at a distance across the NWT. The map below illustrates the communities and Aurora College facilities where students are located. Campuses are located in the communities of Fort Smith, Inuvik, and Yellowknife and are identified by yellows stars on the map. Other community learning centers (CLCs) are indicated by red dots on the map and are centers where students can receive limited support throughout their programs.

Figure 1

Map of Aurora College Locations

Map of Aurora College campus and community learning center locations. Source: Aurora College website, http://www.auroracollege.nt.ca/_live/pages/wpPages/AboutMap.aspx

Inclusion Criterion and Recruitment Details

Inclusion Criterion

The inclusion criterion for student selection was that students had to be enrolled in a

distance education program at Aurora College. There were approximately 200 distance education

students who were eligible to participate in this study. Students who participated in this study

were enrolled in three distance education programs at Aurora College: the Certificate in Adult

Education, Early Learning and Childcare program, and the Personal Support Worker program.

Each program offers a different distance learning format to connect with and teach students

across the NWT. Table 2 identifies the programs, the distance education formats, and the

locations of instructors and students in each program.

Table Two

Distance Education Programs by Program Format and Location

Program	Program Format	Program Location	Location of Students
Certificate in Adult Education	Video Conferencing	At various locations	Across NWT communities
Early Learning and Childcare	Online with tutorial support	Located in Yellowknife	Across NWT communities
Personal Support Worker	Cohort-based, guided independent study	At various locations	Located in several selected communities

The Certificate in Adult Education connects students in all communities across the NWT

through teleconferencing and video conferencing. The Early Childhood program uses online

learning supported by instructional guidance through teleconferencing, videoconferencing,

tutorial interactions, and email communication. The Personal Support Worker program uses a

guided independent, cohort model for their distance delivery programming.

Recruitment Details

Program Heads were provided with the email invitation which they forwarded to all the distance education students in their respective programs. Eleven students self-identified as interested and willing to participate in this research and were interviewed on a first-come basis. The sample of students interviewed included four Aboriginal students, five non-Aboriginal students, and two immigrant/newcomers to Canada students. Two students were enrolled in the Certificate in Adult Education, seven students were enrolled in the Early Learning and Childcare program, and two students had graduated from the Personal Support Worker program. Students interviewed represented geographical and program dispersion. This is significant because the educational and environmental needs of students differ based on their study location. Appendix C – Email Invitation to Participate in a Research Study was sent to all potential students. Appendix D – Information Letter and Participant Consent Form was provided to each potential participant prior to the interview to inform them about the study and to obtain consent for their participation. Students expressed interest by responding to the email invitation and were sent the information letter and participant consent forms.

The student population at Aurora College, NWT is comprised of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The proportion of Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal students varies per program. Students involved in distance programs live across the North, and their locations vary from small, remote fly-in communities to larger urban centers. Student populations from rural-remote communities are primarily of Aboriginal descent, whereas student populations from urban-remote communities are comprised of Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal, and immigrant populations; approximately 54% of the student population identifies as Indigenous (GNWT, 2016).

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and student observations. All interviews were conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams where possible or through a phone interview. Although face-to-face interviews were possible with some of the students, all wanted to connect on Microsoft Teams. It was only necessary to conduct one telephone interview.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interview data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews with students on Microsoft Teams or on the telephone. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Students' responses were summarized in a narrative format based on the criteria identified in the interview questions. Both the interview transcription and the students' story summaries were sent to students to ensure the interview summaries fairly and accurately represented students' voices and meaning. Students' anonymity was protected unless they specified the wish to be acknowledged using their real names. There are many minority students who have been marginalized and their voices muted; as an act of reconciliation, I recognized those who wanted to be identified, and acknowledged their contributions and voices. If students wished to remain anonymous, all identifiers were removed from transcriptions and pseudonyms were used. Facts pertaining to students' anonymity that would put students at risk of being identified were removed from the study, and no identifiable characteristics of the students were used. Changes were made as requested by students regarding their interview summaries.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted using a planned and sincere approach. First, students were made comfortable and treated with dignity and respect. I clearly stated my motives and intentions for the research and provided students with my personal background, so that they were aware of my context and relationships. Students were informed that their

anonymity would be protected through pseudonyms. I discussed the interview process and

member checking procedures with each participant, so they were aware of the research process.

Member-checking was used to ensure that an accurate depiction of student's comments would be

portrayed in the research. Students were provided with interview questions and logistical

information (time and place of interviews) prior to their interview. Interview questions were

provided to students in advance, so they were able to reflect on their responses prior to our

meeting. The interview questions are summarized in Appendix E – Interview Questions.

Responses to the questions involved students' experiences, behaviours, opinions, emotions,

knowledge, sensory understanding, and demographic information; these guided my research

questions. Students were informed that they could stop the interview process at anytime and

could remove themselves from the study at any point before the data analysis phase of the

research. If a student had chosen to remove themselves from the study, all data pertaining to that

participant would have also been removed. No students removed themselves from the interviews

or the research.

Data Collection Procedures

The following procedures outline the data collection used in this study. The intention was

to interview at least three students per program, however only two students from the Certificate

in Adult education and two students from the Personal Support Worker programs self-identified

and participated in the research. Seven students from the Early Learning and Childcare program

chose to participate. One student also chose to bring her mentor to her interview for support.

Eleven students in total were interviewed. Interviews were scheduled for approximately one hour

each. Follow-up emails were necessary to forward the verbatim transcripts and the students'

narrative accounts to them to ensure the data accurately represented each student's perceptions,

thoughts, feelings, and experiences. All changes identified and requested by the students were modified or removed from the study.

Data Analysis

The purpose of the data analysis was to summarize and make sense of the data collected from each student, across students, and across programs. Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently in this study, as interviews were conducted over a three-month period. After the interviews were conducted, verbatim transcripts were created, cleaned, and anonymized. The data from each interview were examined several times, going back to the transcripts and video recordings using a rigorous and systematic approach in the analyses. During analysis I made notes and prepared narrative summaries of each interview, these were provided to the respective participants to confirm the accuracy of these summaries and to ensure each represented the student's voice. Narrative summaries are referred to as the "participants' stories." Each narrative account varied depending on the circumstances and topics shared by each student. Students provided feedback on their stories and changes were made, as requested.

I created a list of major ideas from each interview and associated observations. I also looked for patterns and meaningful regularities across programs and organized students' responses into major themes as they related to Laurillard's Conversational Framework (Laurillard, 2012). I used thematic analysis to determine the impacts of each theme across students and programs, looking for students' underlying meaning and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The data, categorized and coded using pre-existing criteria, emerged from interviews, observations, and field notes. Data were examined based on students' perceptions of their engagement, course format, assessment, and

challenges, and other thoughts as they arose for the students. The data were also examined for

pre-existing categories in design science related to Laurillard's conversational framework,

including student perceptions of communication cycles, learning activities, pedagogical

practices, and the use of digital technologies (Laurillard, 2012). Another component of thematic

analysis was to look at where data sources converged and diverged from other case records

between student-to-student interactions and student-to-instructor interactions (Merriam, 1988).

 Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest four guidelines for developing comprehensive

categories from data,

1. Identify the frequency with which specific data are reported and by what data sources,

2. Get students to identify which themes are most important,

3. Identify and document unique data,

4. Acknowledge unique data that is recognized in isolation by only one or a few sources.

 I used an inductive, comparative strategy to reflect the purpose of the research. In

addition, I ensured that categories within the research were exhaustive, mutually exclusive,

independent, and derived from a single classification principle (Merriam, 1988). In summary, the

data analysis procedures included transcription, summarization, verification of interview data,

sorting, classification of data by theme, coding of data into independent categories, and cross-

referencing between data sources. Finally, the data were cross-referenced with theoretical

constructs for consistency and divergence. The intention of this data analysis was to develop a

richly descriptive, interpretive summary of the participant's responses as individual case studies,

thereby documenting their experiences.

 Data synthesis occurred when stories conveyed the same information in a variety of

ways, where an understanding of the jointly shared experiences illustrated similarities with

individual ones, and where crystallization occurred. In my findings, crystallization showed the

multi-dimensional aspects of complex experiences, where students stories intersected and

converged but also where they pulled apart and showed uniqueness and diversity.

"Crystallization seeks to produce thick, complex interpretation…. It deploys multiple forms of

analysis, reflexively embeds the researcher's self into the inquiry process and eschews positivist

claims to objectivity… moving into and through methods, politics, and inquiry" (Denzin, 2012,

pp. 83-84). By conveying both the individual and the collective, my hope is that others will

better understand the reality for remote postsecondary students in their educational journeys.

Trustworthiness

A demonstration of trustworthiness requires the researcher to "persuade his or her

audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth

taking account of" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). The process of trustworthiness requires "that

certain measures be employed during the implementation of the inquiry" including the following:

maintaining field journals, mounting safeguards, arranging for onsite team interaction, gathering

referential materials, debriefing, and creating a project audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp.

281-284). Trustworthiness is measured by adhering to the criteria of credibility, transferability,

confirmability, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The summaries below provide

detailed accounts of how trustworthiness was met.

Credibility

Providing credibility in this study required substantiating truths. I committed to clarifying

the biases that I bring to this study through ongoing self-reflection and reflexivity. Creditability

was also confirmed through member checks with case participants during the interview process

and after transcription was completed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The

probability of high credibility occurs when triangulation of data sources occurs, member checks are completed, and persistent observations result in comparable conclusions. I conducted member checking by asking participants to review verbatim transcripts and the summary data from their interviews to ensure their voices were accurately represented. I also conducted a cross-participant analysis to look for consistencies and differences between participant responses and across programs.

Transferability

Transferability requires the provision of rich data so that transferability to another case is possible, given the interests of other researchers. It is not the task of a researcher to provide generalizable statements, but rather to provide detailed analysis that would enable another researcher to decide if transfer is possible between cases (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). Transferability occurs when other researchers see alignment between these research findings and those of their own work, for example comparable similarities between these findings and those found in other remote areas or with other remote learners, within Canada or in other global remote educational environments. To support transferability to other studies I have provided a detailed and accurate account about this research site, participant data, and data collection processes. Moreover, I have provided information about the analysis techniques used and a comprehensive summary of findings so other researchers can discern if the research conditions are applicable to their context. This is also how I mitigated some potential limitations of this study, as identified in Chapter 1.

Confirmability

To ensure confirmability I needed to "ascertain whether the findings are grounded in the data" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 323). To fulfill confirmability, I provided a well-documented

process and auditable trail throughout my analysis. I documented my research process from data collection, to my interview notes, to my thematic analysis, and finally to my interview summaries. I kept journal notes about my perceptions, thoughts, and feelings throughout the research process and critically reflected on how the research affected me. I have reflected on my biases in my journals and checked in with students to ensure that what I have recorded is representative of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences rather than my own perspective. I also consciously worked to ensure that the reality of the students' experiences was fully expressed by confirming and ensuring the conclusions drawn were based on students' views and experiences and not on my own.

Dependability

Dependability is met by examining the research process and records to ensure that the research findings can be followed and are coherent. The research process needs to be auditable, ensuring that due process, findings, and recommendations are aligned (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I ensured dependability by maintaining a fieldwork diary and meeting with my supervisor to ensure accountability of my research process. I also kept a reflexive journal, recording my reflections and identifying my viewpoints throughout this research process. Finally, I used my reflexive journal and fieldwork diary as auditable research trails both to demonstrate that I followed due process and as a check in for research concerns that I needed help with.

Poggenpoel and Myburgh (2003), in Chenail (2011), suggest that bias can occur if researchers are uncomfortable with truth values that emerge from interviews, are not prepared to conduct the interviews or research, or conduct inappropriate interviews, and can affect the trustworthiness of the study. The degree of affinity with the research participants may also impact research bias and may limit the researcher's "curiosities about [the] new or unknown, so

they only discover what they think they don't know rather than opening up their inquiries to encompass also what they don't know they don't know" (Chenail, 2011, p. 257). Acknowledging that researcher bias management can be potentially challenging I used two approaches to mitigate researcher bias. I conducted the interview process on myself, asking myself the interview questions, documenting my responses to the experience, and adjusting the interview process, questions, and methodologies as required. This process, as identified in Chenail (2011), allowed me to experience the flow of the interview process and to acknowledge my perceptions and experiences. The second approach I used to mitigate researcher bias was to maintain a researcher diary. The purpose of this diary was to allow me to reflexively evaluate the research process by critically reflecting on and examining my thoughts, feelings, and experiences as they relate to remote student perceptions of their distance education experiences throughout the research process. Maintaining researcher diaries supported my iterative research analysis and ongoing understanding of the data. Finally, my intent was not to impose my personal experiences on the participants in this research project, so I refrained from sharing my thoughts and experiences with participants.

Ethical Considerations

Research Ethics Approval

Research ethics approval was obtained through the Research Ethics Board of Athabasca University and through Aurora Research Institute of Aurora College. The research application process required consultation with Indigenous bands, organizations, and corporations as well as chartered communities and hamlets. These organizations were consulted to address their research questions or concerns, and to ensure that this research would meet with ethical requirements. See Appendix D for the Information Letter and Participant Consent form which was provided for

students prior to their participation in the research. My work required that I acted with integrity and was respectful and sensitive to the intercultural differences of all participants. It was important that I created a safe interview environment and made students aware of their rights and my responsibilities during the research process. I also ensured that I respected Indigenous protocols of respect and reciprocity and that I conducted my research in a good way.

Minimizing Risk to Participants

There was minimal risk to participants associated with this research. The risk to students was mitigated by allowing students to opt out of the study until data aggregation occurred. Students' anonymity was also maintained throughout the research process by having their participation and responses remain confidential. Students may have also experienced benefits in the form of developing increased insight and awareness into their own educational practices and having their voices heard.

Student Consent

Students were required to sign a consent form prior to participating in the interviews. When written consent was not possible, verbal consent was obtained and recorded on Teams prior to virtual interviews, or audio-taped prior to telephone interviews. Confidentiality of students' identity was protected, as the consent forms are not linked to student interview transcripts or data. Pseudonyms used for interviews protect students' anonymity. Student requests to be identified were also respected, as some wanted their voices heard and their identity to be acknowledged in the research.

Confidentiality

All students' identities remained confidential; pseudonyms were immediately applied to the interview transcripts and the metadata associated with the audio recordings of the interviews

and transcripts. Public reports of the research findings will not provide demographic or contextual information that could be used to identify the participants. To maintain confidentiality, any recorded interviews have been stored as audio or digital files by me in a non-networked folder on a password-protected computer. A copy of any audio or digital files of individual interviews will be shared with participants for their personal records, if requested. I will keep data files for five years, after which they will be deleted.

Limitations

The following limitations were identified for this research: limitations of only interviewing successful students; not interviewing faculty, staff, or administrators; and avoiding an analysis of systemic issues. First, only students who were successful in their programs were interviewed, excluding students who were not successful or did not complete their programs. By interviewing students who did not complete or were not successful in their programs, this research could have identified a broader view of students' experiences and provided deeper analysis. This may have provided other insights not experienced by successful students. Second, a case study approach also has limitations beyond those identified in Chapter 1 related to the limits of a small sample size. By only interviewing students this study provides a limited perspective on student success and the role distance education plays in the NWT. A more holistic perspective would have been gained by including data from faculty, staff, and administrators in the study. Finally, a further limitation of this study is the lack of analysis with regards to systemic challenges that exist in the NWT. Providing an environmental analysis would have identified issues, provided context, and illuminated pre-existing problems, impacting student success.

Summary

This study adds to current scholarship by synthesizing findings to provide a deeper level of understanding about distance education experiences in remote postsecondary education, from the students' perspectives. It fills a gap in scholarship giving weight to students' experiences while allowing for comparability of relationships among students in remote postsecondary distance education and across programs and distance education formats. It was important to determine students' perceptions of how these align or contrast with current scholarship on traditional postsecondary populations, and to document new evidence that is unique to remote populations.

Chapter 3 outlined the research process for this geographically and institutionally bounded multi-case study method and provided a summary of data sources, site selection, participant details, and recruitment strategy. This chapter also summarized the data collection methods, data analysis techniques, and data synthesis process. The chapter concluded with a discussion of trustworthiness, limitations, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4. Students' Distance Education Stories

Overview

This chapter is divided into three sections based on distance programming in the Certificate in Adult Education, the Early Learning Childcare, and the Personal Support Worker programs. This chapter summarizes 11 students' narratives, shared by 12 participants who are enrolled in, or have recently completed, a distance education certificate or diploma program through Aurora College. Ten of the 11 stories are shared by students about their perceptions of their experiences throughout their programs. The last story was shared by a recent graduate and her mentor, and both women are acknowledged within this story. Each of these stories situates

students spatially within the NWT, as well as within their specific programs. Each account maximizes students' words verbatim and conveys meaningful messages about their educational journey. Appendix E Interview Questions lists the interview questions that were asked of each participant. Some of the students have chosen to have their stories anonymized whereas others have chosen to self-identify. Each student's reason for their choice differs but their wishes have been respected throughout the process.

Stories have the capacity to "give form – temporal, spatial orientation, coherence, meaning, intention, and especially boundaries" (Frank, 2010, p. 2). "Stories [can] inform lives [and] be a gift"; they can "mobilize social movements" and inform 'others' of ways of life that may be unfamiliar but warrant time or intention (pp. 2 -3). It is my hope that the words on these pages resonate with others outside of remote spaces and provides those readers with an opportunity to better understand and appreciate these students for their strengths, beauty, and uniqueness.

Certificate in Adult Education Program

The Certificate in Adult Education is a professional certificate offered to instructional and administrative staff to satisfy employment requirements. The program consists of ten courses, offered virtually through Microsoft Team connections. Two stories collected from students within this program are summarized below.

#1 Greta's Distance Education Story

Greta is a Gwich'in, Inuvialuit woman, from the Western Arctic. She is also a lifelong learner with experience as both a student and an educator in programs at a distance. Greta was enrolled in, and graduated from, the Certificate in Adult Education (CAED) program and says, "I started CAED in 2016 when I got hired." Greta "had to do the certificate [in] adult education

because of my job" and completed the program at a distance "over six years… one class at a time."

Engagement. When asked about when she felt engaged in her courses at a distance Greta describes the importance of instructors and identifies an instructor named Kelsey. She says, "Kelsey's amazing!" What makes Kelsey amazing is that "Kelsey … engages us and keeps us part of the class … that helped me be successful." Greta provides examples and says, "she gives feedback, and she responds. She does check ins and she makes it relevant to the North like it's not… from [a] down south perspective." Greta also says, "She validated [us]… she heard our voice and brought it into the classroom so that's where I felt engaged." Greta also adds, "Kelsey, she lives in the north, we didn't use any books. She brought in things from the northern experience. I felt very engaged because she made it meaningful that way and it helped because she understood where we're coming from." Kelsey also used tools within Teams such as the chat function to engage students, Greta says, "she used the comments on the side [chat] and she would go… around and include all of us when you're talking about subjects." Greta also says that in the Teams environment, " I could see her [instructor] and I could read [students and the instructor's] expressions on … their face[s]… I felt more engaged … that helped me be successful." Greta feels that, "If I … were in [a face-to-face] class I would have the same experience. But Kelsey made it feel like there was no screen [like we were connected even though we were at a distance]. It didn't make us like feel like we're not in a [face-to-face] class … and not a lot of people can do that."

Greta appreciated how Kelsey integrated students learning from throughout the program and says, "her bringing [in] all the things that I learned" [in all of my CAED courses]… supported Greta's learning. Greta says, "What I really liked is the Elements [of Instruction

course]. I actually have a picture." Greta shares a picture and explains its impact on her, Greta says, "what I took away [from this course] is as an adult educator, *I facilitate* the learning process. Right? And it's coming from a place of privilege not of power… I got to apply everything that I've learned in the CAED… and the things that I was proud of when I was in this class." Greta also shares, "I got to share my culture … I learned [that] I have to be flexible when I'm teaching in Teams… remotely. I have to give feedback because… you need to let your students know how they're doing." Greta says, "I don't often need a post-assessment … I could do… a check in, a takeaway question… so you know they got what you're … teaching them." Greta reflects and says, "I need to give some wait time. … I learned that we could do things through technology and… when I'm giving feedback, it's not from a place of power but it's from a place as a learner. Pointing to Greta's diagram she says, "So… this is my thing. I wish I could like laminate this or frame it because this is… my combination of my [learning from the] CAED [program]."

When asked about her personal beliefs Greta says, "I think my own beliefs of being truthful and honest and having integrity like those matter, right? My parents always taught us about that. And we lived, if we got caught doing something wrong, we were held accountable. So, I think that's really played a part in my beliefs. And it's like my Dad always says 'do things in a good way' …. I would go every Friday when he was like, when he was with us, alive. And you'd know, I had a tough day because he'd bring tea. He'd say 'tough day?'". He wouldn't say anything … and then one time he said, 'look … if you ever break down in a bush with somebody, and you're still gonna work with him to get through it. So whatever you do, you got to do things in a good way. Even though like it's like, hard, you gotta to keep going.' And I like before he passed away … he said, I think it was like January three, he said, 'You wanna go check

traps with me?' … my Mom always pushed me through school like Western, Western, like go, do, you get your high school diploma because you're gonna get job you're gonna support yourself. My Dad is like always bringing, like balancing it off, with our cultural teachings. I said, 'Okay, I'll go check traps with you.' I didn't realize he's in his 70s, I'm in my 40s and he's on his skidoo and I'm on my skidoo, I'm following him on a skidoo trail and he's breaking trail. And he goes up a hill just like it's nothing and here I am trying to get over that little hill of sugar snow, get stuck, dragged down, can't get through. And I'm pushing some … snow … and he has to come back … I waited like geez! Dad's gonna come back from me and he said, he came back and he said, 'you got stuck.' I said, 'yeah, the sugar snow.' He said, 'you just gotta push. You gotta just, don't let go [of] that throttle.' I said, 'Okay.' So again, we're going, I get off the trail, get stuck. Can't get out because that machine is heavy. I'm like only five one and he comes back and he doesn't get upset. But he gets off his machine. He puts me back on the trail and he said, '*Look, if* you're gonna go off the trail, just keep going and just keep going. Just go don't let go of your throttle like okay.' And another time got off the trail and I said, I'm gonna keep [going] … I had my throttle down. But you know what underneath [the snow] was that stick and the front of the skidoo hit it and I stopped, the ski doo stopped, and I fell off on the side. I'm like, *Ahhh*, Dad's gonna come back again. But he came back like a little while later. And I was like, I had to wait here. He said '*well at least you tried like to get through this*' so he said 'at least you tried. You go ahead first and I'll follow you'. So, he was going to make sure I was gonna stay on the trail *so I had* to break the trail and we got to the lake. We stopped he said 'don't take off, like unzip, because you're working really hard, you're sweating, you're, you're gonna get cold.' And we had tea and he said, 'you're okay?' And I said, 'well, can we just turn around and go back?' He was like, so not impressed. He's like, '*we got here. We got to go there* and we're gonna get on

the trail. We'll be done. We're not gonna go back where we came from. Because this is the way we're going.' And I'm like, okay. But when I think of it, like he taught me about, keep pushing through, even though there's things underneath that are hard or you're getting off the trail. You're gonna get through but don't give up. Like I think those like that… like his Indigenous resilience, like that, that played right there, like that. I think how I'm formed with my beliefs like how they impacted my life."

Disengagement. Greta remembers when she began in the CAED program and says, "When I first started CAED… we would join by the phone, a teleconference, [it was] brutal. You know how hard it is to sit in your [chair from] … 8:30[am] to 5:00[pm], then you go home on whichever day from 7:00[pm] to 9:30[pm] and you got to be on the phone. You can hear your instructor or your peers and it's like you're just sitting there listening and then they forget you're there and you just feel like invisible. I did… a lot of classes by teleconference." Greta remembers connecting to her evening teleconference courses and says, "I'm literally just sitting in my bedroom on my chair with the telephone on … muted." Greta talks about why she invested the time into attending these early teleconference classes and says she attended "because it's for participation; if I don't join I will lose marks." Greta reflects about these experiences and says, "they had activities that … didn't even link us in it" and Greta remembers wondering, "why is the college delivering CAED by teleconference?" Because of the disengagement and lack of attentiveness towards the students Greta says, "I would just slip off my chair, go down to the kitchen, get some water and come back. But yeah, it was interesting like how I first started with my CAED in 2016 to last year 2021 using Teams and technology. I felt more engaged and then [2021] … the instructor let *me choose* what I'm interested in studying." When comparing this learning experience with the earlier teleconference options in the program Greta says, "those

[first courses] "the telephone ones, I just felt like they were depositing information in my brain. It's like, this is brutal. I'd read the chapters and then I sit in the class."

  Supportive Relationships. When Greta is asked about relationships that have sustained and supported her throughout her studies Greta says, "We had a really tough time one class … [Kelsey] … would do check ins at the start of our class and there was someone who … was making assumptions about our people." Greta acknowledges that she can share her frustration and anger in these situations, and says, "I have a voice and I can use it but I can use it in a good way" to respond to others. Greta says, "I unmuted and I put my camera on and I said excuse me, can I say something Kelsey and she's like, 'okay', and I said 'you need to stop talking. You are making assumptions about the North. Your perspective is one perspective. You can't say this about anybody', and I said, 'I'm very upset, right now, I need to, I need to tell you that what you're saying is wrong. I'm going to end the call' … and then I ended it." After Greta disconnected from the call Greta says, "my son came out … and he talked me through it because that's what we do ... he … grounded me." Greta also says, "Kelsey was trying to call me because we took a class break and she was trying to do a check [in] to see if I was okay. Greta also shares that her classmates also reached out to support her, and says, "I [also] felt like supported [by] … a couple of my peers. They got back to me by email and they said, when you left, I left and she said … 'I didn't feel that was right.' Her peer also said 'if it ever happened again, I'm gonna stand by someone or I'm going to stop it.' and I felt supported. And it's like hard because that person's attitude, you can tell it was like, racist against Indigenous people and I was like, shocked that it was happening in a college course. So, I was glad that my peers … supported me that way by reaching out. And then Kelsey got a hold of me the next day after I calmed down, and we talked through it, but it was … really, it was hard. Like it's hard when you hear those kinds of

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things … [it's] … what they believe is coming out and they put it out there. It's like words. That's heavy."

Greta also shared about supportive relationships she experienced while completing her Master of Education at the University of Saskatchewan and how those relationships helped to shape her views on education. Greta says, "when we first … got into like that master's program and we traveled, me and a couple of my peers, from Chief Julius school (Erica and Sonya), we drove to Baker's Narrows, that's where we were going to start. And our university professor, she said, first assignment, we'll find a place we're in like a lodge, not connected to internet. Go find a place that speaks to you. Go into bushes, go at the water, wherever. So, I like I went and found a place and she said to stay there. Be quiet. And I'm like, what is this assignment about? And when we talked about it in the circle, because we're taking Indigenous education. It was about decolonization. And I thought we were gonna go to that program that I brought paper and pen and I was gonna write notes and they're gonna deposit information like my experience from [a previous university Greta attended]. And she/we did a roundtable talk. And she said in our program, we're not gonna do like this standard [education practice] we're doing it like action based, you're gonna feel things, you're gonna see things, you're going to experience things and she was decolonizing our western methodology of learning." While participating in this type of education Greta says, "what was so amazing as they got us to bring in our Indigenous worldviews into the class experience. At the end when I was doing my final paper, I said, all these years we focus[ed] on the Western way of doing things that we personally thought that was higher than our ways … My dad had passed away when I was doing my papers. I wish I could have told my Dad that he already held, he was a professor like he was there, because he had all those teachings. Right? And now, Western researchers are precise, like they're asking us because

we we've known, we've lived this for 1,000s of years." Greta acknowledges that researchers "are seeking our input … they're actually validating what we know. So that was … a big thing. When … I'm with my students, those voices, those things, like they get to experience, that they bring it in … I don't let them leave their identity at the door … I recognize them for who they are; so that's really important."

While talking about supportive relationships Greta asked, "have you ever read The Four Rs? It's by Verna Kirkness and Ray Barnhardt. It's First Nations and higher education, the four R's, respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility." Greta says, "This resonates with me because it really reminded me of how my parents have taught me and my siblings. It's about respect. Like we have to have that in our relationships, right? When … we have respect … we could do things in a good way because if we don't do things in a good way, we're not gonna be able to do the work that we do. And it's about when we're in education or in any work, we have to make it relevant. So, we have to make sure that the students understand where we're coming from, like teach from what they know, and bringing their voice so that lived experience. Reciprocity, it's like, we give and take like as a teacher, we give information the student takes it. Example, the students who just did my one assignment that was due Wednesday, I said, one part of the assignment is you need to send a thank you to the person you interviewed and you need to give authentic feedback and you send it to them but BCC me, that's how I hold them accountable. And in class on Wednesday, I said 'I asked you to do this I said because it's a form of reciprocity in Indigenous culture … they gave you something and like you need to give them back.' Right? 'You give, they give you words, they give you your time, and you need to give them back because they need to hear that.' I said that 'you're building that relationship. That person could be a contact for me for you one day,' so I'm teaching them about that. And then it's

about responsibility, like how do we engage them so that they take responsibility for their learning? And I say like for me when my students are struggling when they call me and they're, especially at the beginning of the term or in the midterms, when it's exams or finals, when they're pushing through … [the students say] 'I have a lot of stuff that I don't know if I could do', so I, we, we talk, they talk, I listened and I said 'I want you to picture this'; I said 'you're going to picture yourself walking across the stage to get your certificate or get your diploma' and then they take responsibility. I said, 'you are making an investment not only in yourself, but your family and your nation and your community. So, you can do this, you've gone through a lot this term if you give up now it's like all the work that you've done, it's going to be for nothing. So keep pushing through; you got this.' So … I think that's why this article really resonated with me, *The Four R's of Education* … when I was with, doing my Master of Education with Alex, Dr. Alex Wilson and her parents, Stan and Peggy [and] Dr. Karla Williamson and they really taught us about that. We got to visit different communities ... we went to Opaskwayak Cree Nation in Manitoba; we went to the Hawaiian communities and we learned how they're making a difference in education and … that's why … I think this four Rs really resonated with me … [because] … until I, we, went through the group project I didn't, I started to look at my practice … I didn't even know I was doing that, like doing it, the way my parents taught me, the way I was mentored by the Wilsons and by Dr. Karla, Dr. Karla Williamson."

In Greta's current doctoral program she talks about building trusting and supportive relationships and says, "we are texting and we do Zoom calls, [and] we email one another." "I camped with … one cohort [member] in Whitehorse … and stayed with a former coworker." Greta talks about building bonds with her colleagues through an art night together where Greta

says, "she was doing her weaving and I was doing my beading and it was good because we got to know one another and… trust one another."

Other supportive relationships that Greta identifies include those with her son and her Mom. Greta says, "my son, like I go away and he takes care of the house and the dog and I come home from studies. My Mom always says, I've got supper ready, I've got cooked fish or I got moose roast … she's feeding, feeding me, my spirit. My spirit, because it's a lot of work to pursue postsecondary. It's almost like the relationships I have, are keeping me together. It's like my community like I have a community here in the college and I have a community out in Inuvik, then I have my cohort community because we bonded over this semester, and they send me messages."

Course Content and Resources. Greta was asked about course content and resources and shared her thoughts about her Special Projects class with Dr. Mike McPherson, in the CAED program. Greta says, "we had Moodle, and he had a really clear syllabus." [Mike] "would do brief little lectures and then we would do things in class and each of us would always… say this is where I am in my project and give like a little update on it." Greta also says, "The end [of the course] was a final presentation of what we had done, how we applied that theory to into practice, and our reflections … We talked about assumptions and [about] find[ing] something that would interest us so that we could do … applied [research] in class … theory to practice." Greta's project was influenced by a book she found at the college and she says, "I found… a book, called *"Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools, and Techniques,* by Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill … I said, 'Mike, I think I'm going to change my … project to discussion because I want to look at my teaching practice and how can I engage it [with students] because we're using remote delivery' and so he said that he was okay with it." Greta appreciated Mike's

class pedagogy and instructional approach saying, "What was good… when we were in class, he would give us the lectures and he would talk about it… take ideas from it and apply it and then we had to report back on at the end of the class." Greta says, "He really helped me with that because I said, this really aligns with how I learned as an Indigenous person because we tell, teach by stories, right? In a circle, we're around people. Someone's going to talk and they're like telling you a story about that's going to help you learn. So, I always like when I'm in class now with my HR Payroll, I'll pose, 'have you done this? Have you ever experienced [this]'… and then [students say] 'oh, yeah, I know what you're talking about'. And then they teach one another and some of them [have an] … aha moment. So that book has been very helpful … him allowing us that flexibility … we [were able to] choose what we're interested in." Greta adds, "[If] I had to do [a required] … book, [it would have been] very disengaging." "[I would have been] 'I just got to do this just because the instructor wants it; I didn't have no ownership of it.' But Mike allowed us to have that ownership and we did something that interested us."

Assignments and Assessments. When asked about assignments and assessments, Greta reflects, "I really liked the evaluations where they got to do reflection because it really makes you think about the course throughout the term and making sense of what we learned and linking it to the course objectives. [I also liked] … the practical projects where we do things that we take ownership for like that discussion as a way of teaching, that I liked that. I liked [my course] … with Kelsey because I … pull[ed] everything from my notes and I put it on paper and then this was like my notes but I turned this … picture into a paper. Yeah. So we're reflecting pieces and then the presentations where I got to share my … learnings or my takeaways from that project. I like the practical based projects."

"One of the first ones [CAED courses Greta enrolled in] was Teaching and Learning at a Distance, remotely and it was kind of boring because the instructor just [lectured]." Greta states, "I always got like, syllabi from my instructors when I'm starting CAED; [but] never got one for that class. Never knew how I got … that grade and I ended up with 100." "I was like thinking about it. How did I get 100 but he [the instructor said] … just do the work." Greta adds that the instructor would "talk at us and at that point, I was like just pushing through just to get this certificate to keep my job because it's a bonafide requirement. But yeah, I never got a syllabus from him. So, when my … transcript [came in Greta exclaims] … Whoa, I got 100 … How do I get 100 in my class? [Greta looks at her transcript], yeah, I got 100. That was the highest grade I got; 100."

"So … I never got a syllabus [and I] didn't know how I got that 100 … I'm a type A person, I need to know … how am I getting graded? What do I have to do to get that grade? Give me some, like, guidelines, but it [the course] was like so laid back. And I just attended the classes and did whatever [and] … got my grade …. Greta says, "Now I know how important that syllabus is, because it gives you the outline like this is the course objectives. These are the deadlines like this is when we're going to start classes is when we're going to add classes [it includes] … what we're going to cover each class." Greta reflects back on to her experience with her instructor Kelsey and says, "Kelsey had it all laid out, everything like the schedule was there; the assignments, this is how you'll be evaluated. It was very clear. And my takeaway was like when I'm doing my syllabus, I have to make sure that I do the same thing for my students because I don't want to feel [at] a loss … this is their ... I call like a contract of learning."

With regards to leaning in her doctoral program, Greta says, "you know what's interesting … the professor who's going to teach us, she emailed us a survey … she emailed and said, 'Hi,

I'm getting ready to plan for next semester and I would like to know what things worked for you. This term what thing, what kind of assignments you enjoy, how can I keep you engaged." Greta says, "I did the survey and I'm like, wow, that's the first time an instructor or professor has ever asked for my input, because we're gonna look at governance and diversity … I'm like, that's amazing to actually contact the cohort and say, I'm planning the course, I need to know your feedback, and that's our opportunity … that's amazing … We *don't do* that here. Like I don't do that here … This is my first time ever experiencing it."

Challenges. When asked about what kinds of things made it difficult to be successful, Greta says, "I think when instructors come from a place of power [it] makes it difficult, or like when … [the course or learning process is] not engaging." Greta says, "For me when I was going to school, what made it difficult for me was money." Greta adds, "I had four kids to take care of and I think what made it helpful was having scholarships … [and] opportunities to apply for scholarships. That made my difficulties less hard … I was able to focus on my studies and rather than worrying [about having enough money for] tuition or books because going down south to school is expensive right? The books are expensive, tuition is higher than our college…"

In Greta's current doctoral study she is experiencing other challenges. Greta says, "what's difficult about that is having to go [fly] *to* Whitehorse on a Friday night for class … and then [class is also on] … Saturday and come home Sunday and then [I have to] be ready for work on Monday … that's a difficult thing. … I actually told my professor Michelle yesterday, that I appreciated her allowing me to join class remotely by Zoom. That really helped because I still was part of the class and I was still hearing the discussions and hearing what was being said. … I'm funded for my tuition, but the cost for travel is not covered and I'm taking annual leave [to attend classes]. That's a difficulty right there because I'm worried about if I run out of annual

leave… I['ll] have to take unpaid leave and I can't pay for my travel. So that's like one thing right now it's been difficult for me is that leave requirements and requirements to be in class in Whitehorse. It makes me … feel like stressed out. I try not to be stressed out. I'm just gonna take it like one class at a time. Yeah, one class … one travel at a time."

Greta speaks about other challenges she faced during her doctoral classes, she says, "we're talking about colonialism and white privilege and how Indigenous students feel in the class. So, there's like tension and you know what's so beautiful is like my peers made [it possible to talk through] those uncomfortable conversations … They [Greta's peers] 'said we're not here to make you feel uncomfortable. We want to like work through this because we all are here to try … to do our work to make our students succeed.'"

When Greta talks about how she is coping with her work, life, and school balance she says it's, "hard to navigate … I was so tired at the start of the term. We give out a lot of energy when we work with people and I had … over 30 students … across three campuses." Greta says, "I would get home at the end of the day I would just plop on my chair. So, I'm learning to try not to do that… I need to start getting back into walking. That's why I think I started doing the beading because it helps me … process [everything and it is] … downtime for me."

One Word to Describe Why You are Successful. When asked for one word to describe herself, Greta says, "I am *resilient*. Yeah, I I've been through a lot, Tammy, in my life. I buried my husband at 28 and I raised my kids on my own and it's my kids in my mind … I'm gonna work because I'm not gonna depend on someone else to take care of them. … I think I get my resilience from my parents because they always taught us that we got it keep doing the work until it's done and do things or else you're gonna have to redo it. So, I think that's where I get my resilience from and seeing my people like the Gwich' in, Inuvialuit, how they persevere even

under difficult circumstances. Yah so, I think that's what makes me like, is my resiliency. I think it's like pockets of people there. Things they give me, that's invested in me, that I carry with me, on my journey that sometimes I am having a tough time and then I just think of like my late Auntie Marjorie or my Dad. I'm like what would Dad do? Or my sister Ister … they have … put pockets of them[selves] in me, so that helps me be resilient."

Most Important Thoughts from the Interview. When asked what the three most important things were from our interview, Greta says, "I'm really glad that the college has been flexible in the last part of like transitioning CAED to remote delivery. Because I often had to wait to see when they're going to offer a class and then being able to deliver it remotely. I don't have to leave Inuvik to go do my Elements [of Instruction course] because often we'd have to go down to Smith or to Yellowknife. But now I like doing it remotely … it doesn't have that travel barrier and I'm still part of the class. So, I appreciate that the last part of my CAED program that the college is using technology to get things done."

Greta says, "I think what I want is having a community, like a wraparound, like the support." Greta also thinks it is important, "recognizing someone for who they are like as a person, and then remember that what you do in our community … like your research, it's reciprocity… You're taking stories from Northern students, and you're gonna give it back and how do you give it back? Give it back in a good way, so that it helps someone else who might be pursuing their own journeys, their own academic journeys, someone might reference like Tammy's work and so you have to be very honest in it."

Final Thoughts On the System and Access to Education for Indigenous Students. Greta says, "I used to work at ECE [Education, Culture and Employment, Government of the Northwest Territories] and I oversaw like, income assistance. On the other side was training and

development and people who are in need, they could hardly get over here to the training because of their education. And it was almost like the policy made them be in that place. And so they there was no way, no support for them to get to the site to pursue training. Unless they're very, very persistent … there's barriers." Greta decided, "I said I'm not going to work in places where it's oppressive, so I chose to leave and I went to the school board and I stayed there for a while but after my Dad and then my sister died, I said, 'I've been investing so much time like working late till 10:30. I want to exit here and go to the college to work with adult learners because I really believe in investing, like supporting students so that they can seek employment and support themselves and their families and can give to their community.' That's why I'm here." Greta says, "It's different … when you're working with adults … I chose to work with adults because I, I've been through a lot in my career and I wanted to come back to the college and share the things that I learned along the way and to help students with their learning." Greta is also aware that "there's not a lot of Indigenous faculty in the college."

"I'm on … the SEMM [Strategic Enrollment Management and Marketing] committee, and we're talking about how do we recruit? How do you retain our students?" Greta reflects and says, "they're coming to us and we're going to indoctrinate them. We're going to like teach them how to be a student, like our student, but for us as students, and because I'm a student right now, I was a student like with CAED … For me going, it's like, I'm going to go learn something. University, I'm coming, they're coming to us. And we're gonna like fill them with this knowledge and they're coming with their dollars. It's like, they're in a seat, and that's tuition. That's gonna be it's like, how to keep the institution going. But for us [students], it's like we're investing in ourselves. And that was my like, when I was doing the readings. It's, we're not just looking at a dollar sign, we're looking at a student. We have to look at them holistically, like,

what are they bringing, their lived experiences? … How do they learn? What supports do they

have; what barriers are there? … How can I be a facilitator rather than … me being the instructor

and saying you must do this. How can I help them achieve their goals because they're there for a

reason. Right? So it's really interesting when you're looking at from those two perspectives, like

they're coming to us, and I'm going to university that's been a big aha moment for me this last

term as a student again."

 Final Thoughts - Greta's Continuing Journey. Greta is currently enrolled in her own

cohort-based Doctorate in Education. Greta says, "there's a program at Yukon U I could do it

from Inuvik, but … you have to go to Whitehorse. So, I'm in that program now." When asked

about this program Greta says, "at the beginning it was very overwhelming because there's a lot

of readings and … very demanding because they want us to go to Whitehorse every two weeks

for classes because it's at Yukon U … and I go [fly to the Yukon on] Friday [and] come home

Sunday." Greta says, "I learned that I need to chunk my readings" and "my professor Michelle

Pigeon said… 'just take it one course at a time'… and she said, 'get through each course and

don't try to get overwhelmed' … I'm always trained to see the bigger picture like how things fit

together and what things are missing. So [I] just think of the end like you're gonna get through

this course and then the next course." Greta considered withdrawing and explains, "I was …

contemplating withdrawing from the program because it was pretty rigorous. But then I thought

about … something … that I was reading." Greta read that, "Not many Indigenous people get to

pursue postsecondary programs like this." Greta reflects on what she read saying, "the writer was

saying, she told her family members … you're doing work, that's gonna make a difference for the

people … then I thought of my Dad because he grounded me in my culture. Like, who I am as an

Indigenous person, him and my Mom." "When I was in the school system because of my

ethnicity I always got… 'Oh, you're gonna go the general [route]' but my Mom … she stood up

for me in high school." Greta's mom saw her course load and Greta says, "my schedule was …

all dash 13 stream and she said, 'you're not going to do general you're going to go to college

when you're done high school'. She had to argue with the principal and he said, 'Well, we'll let

her in but she's got to prove herself. She'll do two maths, math 13 and math 10-1.' And when we

were walking out of the high school, she said and '*you better pass.*' Because she just wanted to

demonstrate that you can't just put someone in a lower level because of who they are, their race."

Greta says, "She had high expectations and I'm her first child that finished high school. I'm her

first child that did university. So, it's a big thing …" Greta is on track to complete her Doctorate

in Education in five years.

#2 Lana's Distance Education Story

Lana is a lifelong learner who was born and raised in the NWT and has embraced

distance learning throughout her postsecondary education. Lana admits, "I was a student who …

really struggled in school growing up in elementary, middle, and high school. I was there ... often

for social reasons. I had a teacher as a mother and … she was a special educator … I have the

smarts, I just … found that I didn't enjoy a lot of school. I struggled with math and sciences and I

really didn't believe in myself for a long time." Lana says, "It actually it took me quite a few

years after high school to decide to do a postsecondary education." After graduating from high

school Lana went to southern Canada and says, "I studied professional makeup artistry, which

was really fun … but I realized I didn't want to work in that industry for my entire career. It was

more of a hobby but didn't want to turn that hobby into a career." Lana decided to change her

career direction and says, "I moved back [to Yellowknife] when I was I think 20 years old and I

started substitute teaching in Catholic schools as a job. And I fell in love with teaching and you

know, I could tell I had my mother's [passion for teaching in me] … I knew that I would have to go to school."

"So before doing that I decided I wanted to do something fun and I volunteered to teach English in Thailand for nine months. I was working first with adults and then I worked at a high school and was doing adult tutoring … I was like okay, if I want to continue doing something like this, I have to go away to school. So, while living in Thailand, I applied to postsecondary institutions. I was accepted and … chose Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario." Lana says, "The reason… I picked to go there was actually based on their educational philosophy … Since they've started [Trent] has been one of the top undergraduate universities in Canada because they follow a college more delivery method for every lecture. You have a small group seminar and that was so necessary to my first year of courses. There were a couple of classes, a course, like Intro. Psychology, which was my major and I almost didn't continue with it because I hated the first intro course because it was a thousand people in the lecture hall. And that's just not how I learn and that's why I think I didn't enjoy a lot of aspects of education when I was going through elementary school … I didn't enjoy pure lecture style, [it] does not work for me as a learner. I need a hands-on, tactile component to an extent." Lana says, "I found just [sitting] in the lecture hall being spoken to for three hours with no small group discussion afterwards [didn't work]. All you're expected to do is read the textbook, do some online quizzes, do a multiple-choice exam; rote memorization, that's not how my brain works and that's not how most of us function and in modern society. Like we don't need to memorize things, … rote memorization does not work for a lot of people and I just find that a lot of universities teaching [in] very archaic, western, male-focused, male-research driven [ways]. I could go on for hours about that but I didn't enjoy the way universities taught to an extent but I loved Trent University. I really enjoyed my time there

… [and] by second year was getting … B's in my first year to all of a sudden being like a 90 student. Cuz I was taking classes … I enjoyed [and] I learned that I was good at writing and a lot of it had to do with having really engaging teachers. But also getting to have that other teacher assistant or the prof as a small group seminar leader [all helped]. You'd have… [a] two-hour lecture and then you'd have a one-hour seminar for your three hours of classes a week. Having that smaller group discussion time was so valuable."

"I really enjoyed that aspect [small group seminars]." Lana ended up taking distance courses and she says, "I actually sped through it [the program] and I finished in three and a half years. I did summer school online … Trent didn't have that many distance courses I could do [so I]… started doing some courses through Athabasca University … I think I did the maximum amount of transfer credits you could do … so I think I did like a third of my courses were transferred from Athabasca University." Online courses "worked for me and my timelines and what I needed to do. So, although it wasn't my preferred learning method, I did learn as much as I could. … Anyways, long story short, [I] finished my undergrad [and] decided after three and a half years that I was going to do a masters [but] I didn't want to do my Bachelor Ed [Education] because I did not want to be a general classroom teacher. So, I applied to two masters programs, both in-person and virtual ones and that summer I moved back to Yellowknife." Lana says, "Within a week, everything fell in place [and] … one of the programs I was offered to take, was virtually distance a masters through University of Northern British Columbia."

"So, I chose to stay living here [in Yellowknife]. I have a good job. I had a support system, and I did a distance program. So, I did my masters from 2016 to 2018. I did it [in] two and a half semesters … the shortest you could do it is two years. I just took an extra semester to finish my thesis." Lana says, "I don't like to regret things but sometimes I wonder like, what

would have happened if I had done my masters in person." Lana has no regrets and believes that "everything happened for a reason, like I ended up writing a children's book, I did my masters, which has now changed my life and now I write children's books and I started a publishing business." Lana adds, "So now I [also] work [in] the government, have a great job where I get to use my masters regularly, which is interesting working in health, having an education background, but it [education] lends itself to any career really and I get to do the Certificate in Adult Ed because I eventually would like to go over to work at the college … I think especially with my background in not feeling that I really fit in with a lot of traditional education styles, [I know] how I could help other students find better ways to learn that works better for them."

Engagement. When Lana is asked about engagement in her current Certificate in Adult Education program Lana says, "I've gotten to be in small breakout rooms, I've gotten to do part group assignments, group presentations … Then as we saw each other recently, I got to do the introductory seminar … which was amazing to get to actually meet people in person. That was one that full week [and] was the one thing that I was missing in my master's [distance program] … I never got to meet people in person." Lana also says, "I appreciate that program is designed to meet the needs of people who are doing it [the CAED program] on top of other jobs."

Lana identified many reasons for being successful and says, "It [CAED program] allowed me to practice skills; it allowed me to connect with people that were going through similar things." Also, Lana says, "With the CAED program … it's been a variety of different teaching styles and different opportunities to do small breakout group work like… small group break out discussions and group assignments and doing the Instructional Skills Workshop, [these are all] … completely invaluable aspects of the program." [These teaching styles and opportunities are] a huge thing [and] they make it a huge success."

Personally, Lana attributes her success to her organizational skills and ability to create work-life balance for herself. Lana says, "I had to prioritize days of the week to do homework." "I have a calendar on my wall and I have to schedule things and I would still, I still have to plot out when assignments are due and prioritize them." Lana also identified that forcing her studies did not improve her success. Lana says, "In trying to force myself to do homework, my brain stop functioning in that way … I'd just get frustrated." Lana learned to balance her personal, professional, and academic responsibilities and says, "sometimes you just need to do your assignment to finish it and there are there times where you are super into it and passionate and will do it and power through and that you have to remember … it's okay to have off days and to not do your schooling, but you still have to get done."

When asked about Lana's personal beliefs about herself that help her to be successful in the CAED program Lana says, "[I] know that I can do it now. Like I said about ten years ago, I did not have the same confidence in myself with school as I do now." Lana also says, "believing in myself, setting boundaries, setting goals, … [and] celebrating the small milestones not just the end goal" all contribute to her personal beliefs about herself. "I don't even think about the concept of completing this program or not. I'm thinking about each course that I take on, and assignments within each course, and the things that I'm gonna get out of each course … I break it down because holding out for celebrating, graduation [isn't enough] …. Yeah, that was another huge, like mindset shift when I learned that concept and the importance of it."

Supportive Relationships. Lana reflects on her instructors and says, "I just had a situation with one of my last classes, not the essential skills but the one I did just before, it was Adult Education I think, I … ended up [attending]… only four classes." "I had work travel that resulted in me missing the first lecture, which I'd emailed the teachers about and they said [it

was] not a big deal. [The instructors said] 'we can record it and then send it to you.' I ended up having a severe health issue and a mental health crisis on the second class. I was trying to wrap … my brain [around] trying to complete this course, on top of work and my mental health crisis and a physical health issue all around the same time … I emailed the two professors and said, … 'I don't think it's fair for me to continue.'" The instructors were aware of Lana's academic background and "they were able to record the lectures and they were able to send them to me. … I had taken one or two other classes with … one of the instructors … he knew also my work ethic as a student and… both [instructors] talked it through and they're like, 'there's no reason you should drop this course if you think you can complete it. It's totally fine that you've missed the two, we know that you'll go back and watch the lectures and that you will still be able to successfully complete the course.'" Lana says, "Even [them] just believing in me, made me realize like it was also a good mental health. You know, I was able to shift my brain towards something else and do the course over the next two weeks."

Lana adds, "But if that was my very first course in the program, maybe they [the instructors] … would have just said like, yeah, maybe just take it next time instead, but it was also the teachers had built a rapport with me by that point, or at least one of them had. I never had the other teacher but they knew me. They knew that I could do the course, they also knew that… I knew most of this [course] information." Lana says, "If I had to redo that course it's probably not offered until next year and could have delayed me finishing."

Lana also says, "I would say … my director at work is very supportive of me being in this program and the government is paying for me to take this program. I'm using my PDI funding, because it happens to support [my] work … Work is [also] paying for it but also my work time and my the days that I have class in the evening my boss let's me leave work three

hours earlier that day cuz I have three hours off that night. So it's still as part of my work hours for that week." Lana adds, "I go back to my home position in in April, and I believe… my home manager will still support me finishing this … But even if not, I still enjoy it enough that I and I have Student Financial Assistance I'd be able to still finish it … So I have support from my instructors and support from my employer."

Course Content and Resources. When asked about the CAED course content and resources Lana says, "The [use of] multi modalities of teaching [in the CAED program] has been huge …. The instructors often send the lecture slides in advance while … you're attending your virtual classes [and]… you might get notes afterwards. There are supplementary handouts, there are small breakout rooms." Lana also shares, "I've talked about the Instructional Skills Workshop week of actually getting to do something in person … for me it work[s] because it's keeping me attentive."

"The thing that's helped meet my need[s] is that we are given … complete freedom and then create a reign over what topic it is that you want to choose." Lana says, "For example, creating a lesson plan [about] subjects that I'm more passionate about, for fun, like one of my instructional skills ten-minute lessons was on we created a children's story within ten minutes. So, it's allowed me to do that yeah, I think that as well as I love personal reflection. So, in quite a few of the courses there have been weekly journals … it's just reflecting on what it is that we learned and how it relates to your life in any way." Lana was also "kind of excited about [the] program [content], [the high school diploma entry] requirements, and [the opportunity] … to learn from people across the north."

Assessment and Evaluation. When Lana was asked about course assessment and evaluation she says, "I think almost everything has been pass and fail pretty much. There was I

think my most recent course there was number grades." Lana says, "I don't like number grades really … I think everything should be pretty well pass/fail for a program like this." Lana adds, "This is a certificate program and that was something in my masters I tried to remind myself was like grades don't matter. *Grades don't matter* … and that's the piece of advice I now try to give … to lots of friends working through their masters." Lana says, "I try to remind them, your grades don't actually matter because you care about what you're studying and as long as you focus your assignments on things … things you enjoy, things you're passionate about, and things that will benefit you [and you will do well]."

Lana says, "I don't think there's ever like a true 100%. People can always … leave room for improvement. Things can always be done differently, but it could still be the best that you put out or the best you were able to put out if it was an 80% day." Lana believes that "an Instructional Skills Workshop [could still be a] … pass/fail," and that students can receive "an incredible amount of feedback, constructive criticism over the course of a couple of days." This is what Lana experienced in the ISW sessions "and it was amazing."

"It's a catch 22, I struggle with that. I don't care about grades; but I do … so, I think it's been more positive for me not getting … number grades throughout this program. It's allowed me to … enjoy [what I am doing and learning]." Lana adds, "I'm going to need this program if I want to teach at the college eventually, but I'm doing it right now purely because I want to do it … It's not going to get me a raise at work. Down the line it'll eventually … help me when I applied to college [for a job] … So, I will have already had this program done… I don't need to be taking this program right now, I'm choosing to."

One Word to Describe Why You are Successful. When asked to chose one word to describe herself she says her word is, "Reflection. I'm a huge fan of reflecting afterwards." Lana

says, "Like I was saying there could still be feedback … Yeah, reflecting on afterwards … what the outcomes are … It also leads to greater appreciation [and] it's not just always [about] negative [feedback], it's [also] what happened well."

Most Important Thoughts from the Interview. "I think one of the things is that my aunt had told me she [completed] her masters, when she was in her 40s and I think I was in high school, she said 'school will always be there, it'll be there when you're ready for it' and that's how I feel school has really been for me since I left high school and [I] didn't have to be in school. School has been there when I felt ready for it. When I … went away to makeup school I enjoyed it … but it took me a while to feel ready to go to university and then to do a masters." Lana adds, "Right now… I don't feel ready to do a PhD but I feel ready to be doing certificates, so that's a huge part. Having support … is very important. So, for me it was the concept of choosing to do my masters by distance and living here and losing the in-person support of peers and teachers but having the day-to-day support of friends and family and an employer." Lana says that support is important, "like having a supportive director now that allowed me to continue doing this work and supportive teachers that allowed me to stay in a course when I had missed half of it. So, support it's a huge thing and that grades do slash don't matter."

Final Thoughts. "I do feel that the CAED program is for me… I feel this program is still supporting me and I still feel engaged."

Early Learning and Childcare Program

The Early Learning and Childcare (ELCC) program is the oldest distance education program offered at Aurora College. This program offers both certificate and diploma options and is offered through virtual connections, primarily through Microsoft Teams. Students enrolled in the ELCC are called interns, not students, as they are treated as practicing professionals within

the field. Seven stories were collected from certificate and diploma interns within the program

and are summarized below.

#3 Amy's Distance Education Story

Amy started the Early Childhood diploma (ECD) program in 2004, in the high Arctic

when her oldest daughter was one year old. When Amy decided to do distance courses 18 years

ago, the program was run very "old school." Back then, the courses were based on textbooks,

sent by the college, and three-hour weekly telephone calls with the instructor. The three-hour

teleconference classes were used to cover weekly materials. Students were expected to read

weekly material and were assigned essays to write instead of homework. Final exams had to be

invigilated at the local school. Amy says, "When I first started [the program] was very textbook.

It was all over the phone and I was in (a high Arctic community) at the time and I was way more

isolated than I am now. Sometimes I didn't have a phone. So, I'm happy that things have

changed." Amy says the program has progressed: "I remember once they had to do a test of some

sort. So, they had to work it out with the school in (a high Arctic community) and the teachers to

help monitor me through this … test. It was just a lot of … hoops and obstacles and I like that

there's no test [in the current program]. I can't remember the course that was, I just remember

having to deal with logistically figuring out how I can take this exam. I like that there's no

exams." [Also, in 2004] it was a different program so courses weren't offered as frequently as

they are in the current program. "If you missed one [course this] year [it was] like okay, so I'm

not going to [be able to] take the course for another… two years." Each course in the program

"wasn't lined up perfectly." Amy says, "I'm very happy with how [the]… program is laid out

[today]. It's changed." Amy likes that in the current program (2022), "the three courses like I

need to finish to get my certificate all perfectly line up that I could take one course at a time … I

like that it's more, there's more connection [and that] I see my teacher once a week … [I] like the activities and [competency assessment profile] CAP." Although I need to learn more about the tech stuff." Amy says that she is "struggling a little bit because of [her] current position"; she "doesn't have one on one on one with children in [her] current role." Amy is working with friends and family to observe children for her reflections. It's not ideal, but she is making it work. "My challenge would be like making sure that I'm having *current* experiences not just past experiences."

Engagement. Amy's success is due to what is happening in the family schedule. For example, Amy says, [I] "like having a Tuesday class which is a free night." Amy is happy classes are held in the evening when the girls are asleep and her husband helps put the children to bed. Homework gets done "usually when they [her daughters] are sleeping, or at work, or on lunch hour, anytime when they're not present."

Amy is successful because "I like being challenged." "I'm gonna *make sure* I do it." "I love routine. I love structure and right now knowing that this course is on, fits within my schedule and it fits with my structure that's how I know I am going to complete it." Amy is persistent and *knows* "I'll get all the courses done … I know I'm going to do this and that's my personal belief." Amy has weekly communication with some of her instructors and attributes this connection to part of her success. Amy also has stable and consistent broadband connections. She says, "My internet connection is fine. I had some trouble with a camera, but I was able to borrow a camera from my friend." Amy is also flexible with her program timelines indicating that "I'm okay with doing the distance and I'm okay with knowing that it might take me another two or three years to finish … I think that's another learning … my daughters will see they're like, look, it took mommy like 14 years to get this diploma." Amy also says, "I'm very pro-

education, constantly telling my daughters that they have to go to college." Amy also says "I have to educate my clients on healthy lifestyles, and healthy choices, and considered what goals they have come to a conclusion that they are and I am happy with."

Supportive Relationships. Amy says that she has a lot of support for her studies. "My husband is supportive; my job is supportive. I think like everything just lined up perfectly." The manager of the local daycare is willing to work with Amy to meet her practicum requirements. Amy also has a flexible workplace and says, "I am fortunate enough that my supervisor is okay with me doing some of my homework during work hours … if I have an extra 30 minutes [I can work] on my CAP, then they're okay with that. They're okay with that because they feel as though I am still maintaining my job and furthering my education to make my job more successful." Amy is also supported by the program and discusses her education plans with the Program Head about meeting program requirements.

Course Content and Resources. When Amy is asked if she is learning even though she is not being tested in traditional ways, Amy says, "I do because I'm being challenged. There's little activities you have to do each week, there's videos that they want you to watch and then talk about what you thought and like how it felt. I really value that because I am a nervous tester. I can take a workshop and understand everything but when it comes to the test and like second guessing myself and everyone interprets something a little bit differently. So, I enjoy that it's [the course content is] about experiences."

What works for Amy studying at a distance is flexibility, about when and where to do homework and write CAPs. "I need to work and need to figure out how to do it [education] where I cannot … leave my job." "[I] need to work, not working this would cause financial hardship for the family."

Course Assessment and Evaluation. The competency assessment tool is a spreadsheet where students write their course reflections related to each competency in the certificate or diploma programs. Students are assessed on their critical reflections which link students' experiences with the required competencies within their profession. Amy submits CAP reflections through Teams. "That's how I've been connecting to it; through teams, through CAP." The CAP spreadsheet has "uploaded perfectly fine."

Challenges. When asked how she is getting through her program, Amy answered, "[Janna] helped walk me through it." Using Teams to connect weekly is helpful. Amy has familiarity with Teams due to work. However, Amy has never worked with Moodle, Padlet or CAP before; these were all new to her. These applications and programs all require technical support for students. "[I] didn't know that we had to deal with Moodle and now like I have to do submit things to Padlet." [Janna] "does like a little session she did it before she did it this week again, on how to like, where to go, what to press, but it's almost as if, like I think when you're signing up for a course or maybe she'd be like, are you familiar with these platforms? … And you can say No, No. Like okay, so if you're not, here are some things that can help. Because I was like, she lost me, she just asked me she said about Padlet. Oh my goodness, I've never done that before, I don't know Padlet; it's new for me." Amy identified many program requirements and indicated that Janna provides a technical session(s) to help navigate through the technology requirements for the course by indicating "where to go, what to press." CAP, an assessment tool, is uploaded through Teams and provides Amy with a place to document her reflections and for Janna to grade these assessments. Amy believes that the program should ask students if they are familiar with all of the technology and platforms. If students are unaware of these technology expectations then support and assistance should be provided. When offering advice to students

considering the program Amy says, "I would just ask them [another student] how comfortable they are. [Are they] text savvy? [They] will [need to] figure it out."

Most Important Thoughts from the Interview. When asked what Amy wanted me to remember about our conversation she said, "That it doesn't matter how long it takes to finish a course… my motivation is just to make sure that I am going to do this and it might take longer than it should but that's okay." Amy adds, "It doesn't matter how long it takes… If you really want it, you can do it."

Final Thoughts. A lack of program options in the Early Learning and Childcare diploma program in Inuvik and the availability of the Social Work program in Yellowknife made Amy change her plans and she decided to attend and complete her diploma in Social Work at the Yellowknife campus. Amy wants to complete her social work degree but currently there are "limited options unless you want to go to Winnipeg or Whitehorse." Amy says "I prefer to be in Yellowknife. Yellowknife is the hub." Amy prefers Yellowknife because, "I was able to have family come to town and it was like a really big benefit … it was comforting because I always had someone coming to visit me. If I lived in Winnipeg or the Yukon we wouldn't have that." Since completing the Social Work diploma, Amy decided to enroll in the distance Early Learning and Childcare program (2021) back in Inuvik because in addition to her 14 year-old daughter, she now also has "a six and a two year-old. So having them and trying to go to school to finish my bachelor's is a lot harder to do." Amy has indicated that future plans for further education will need to be at a distance (in Inuvik). Amy only has four courses and her practicum left to obtain her diploma in Early Learning and Childcare. [Also, when] "I decide to go for my bachelor's in Social Work it will have to be distance because I have three children and a house and cars. [It's] not ideal for me to go to school."

When asked what has pulled Amy forward through all of these years and what keeps her going, Amy's response was "my daughters." Amy is a role model to her children and demonstrates the importance of education through her personal efforts in earning certificates and diplomas. Amy taught her oldest daughter about the importance of education, so "she understands why I am doing it." Amy went to college when her first daughter was small and says, "I went to college so she wouldn't remember the days when we had grilled cheese for supper." Amy believes that "getting an education will never hurt; you will become more rounded. It's good for my children to see that that I am finishing something that I completed so many years ago." Amy says, "[I] want to be able to say that I have one day a diploma in Early Childhood Development and I have a diploma in Social Work." "I want to be able to say that I have a certificate on my wall and I want my kids to see them and know that education is important." Amy is on track to finish her certificate courses by the end of May 2023 (with the exception of her practicum).

#4 Kate's Distance Education Story

Kate enrolled in the Early Learning and Childcare program this fall and is currently completing her third and fourth courses in the certificate program. Kate says, "I'm living in Yellowknife" and "I was already working at the Montessori" before beginning in the Early Learning and Childcare program and "chose the distance program so I can continue working." Kate says the reason she enrolled in the program was because "I've always loved small children, even when I was a small child, I would always gravitate towards the … babies. So, I get along well with them and I thought why not make it a career?" Kate adds, "I wanna learn how to better take care of children and teach them." Kate has also had previous experience with distance learning, and she states, "I've done online schooling for animal behavior."

Engagement. When asked about engagement Kate says, "I haven't been in a classroom setting for very long" having begun the program this past fall. Kate says, "we have classes every … week." "[We] gather on Teams and [the instructor] will do a lesson plan." Having instructional support in the online classes Kate says is, "really nice… it clears things up; it helps me quite a bit." "It helps to focus what I'm learning, or I can just ask the teacher a question [in the virtual class]. We can always e-mail her a question, but sometimes it's better to just ask face-to-face on Teams". Kate also reflects on engagement with other students and says, "when we're using Teams… it's nice because I get to chat with the other students and sometimes … my teachers will break us off into little groups, and we'll discuss a question." Kate also says, "It's nice having some experience … [and] chats with the other students just to engage with them."

Supportive Relationships. Kate says, "I have two of my coworkers [who are] also in the same courses I am [in] …. So, during our work we'll discuss it [school] amongst each other. We'll tell each other how it's going [and] … what problems we're sharing and so it's nice to have a have that support." Kate also says, "my teachers are … very supportive." Janna … [is] very good at getting back [to me] and she's very understanding of people's difficulties, so that's … very good. Same with my other teacher … both very understanding and … try to help … us through problems."

Course Content and Resources. When Kate was asked about the course format she says, "it's a little hectic. It's a little … crazy sometimes like just with all the … different places we have to send in our assignments, either by e-mail or by the Moodle, Padlets, or by the CAP Excel. So sometimes you're not sure which one you're supposed to use or if there's two of them [or if and when] you're supposed to use [each] at the same time." Kate adds, "I preferred it when

everything was on Moodle, just one thing and that's all we had … I can handle the … three or more programs I need to use … but it's … more difficult and confusing sometimes."

Kate further elaborates through an example, she says, "the last two courses were on Moodle... it was very straightforward. It was very easy to follow. We only really needed to use that one [program]. [In these current] two courses we need to use different softwares, we use Moodle, we use Excel, we use the Teams, so there's different stuff to get around. I had some difficulties with Excel. I would type in a CAP entry, and then I'd go back and like, well, that entry is gone suddenly. So that was annoying … I also had these four modules we had to do and I wasn't able to access them on my computer. My computer was simply having difficulty just loading it, so … I couldn't do that." Kate explains, "I had to go [in] on the weekend to the school and do it at the computer library. So again, someone who's living farther up north with not as many resources can't walk over to the computer library, would have a difficult time if they have the same problem …. Most of the CAPs I put in [the excel spreadsheet] they stayed. They stayed in, but a few of them just suddenly disappeared … I had to put them in again … I decided to write [the CAP entries first] on Word and then save it on Word, copy, and paste it onto Excel."

Kate is in now in her third and fourth classes and is using Moodle (for resources), Excel (for CAP assessments), and Teams for her weekly classes. When asked about how that was going for her Kate says, "I think it's okay; I did prefer … just using the Moodle … it was more straightforward, easier, just having everything right there."

Assignments and Assessments. When asked about assignments, Kate says, "our teacher will set up a PowerPoint and that's how they teach us in Teams, so they'll upload that PowerPoint so we can go through it ourselves to help us with our work, and they'll also give us our assignments for the week. So that's what we use Moodle for really."

Assessment requirements are sometime confusing. Instructors also provide students with assignments using Padlet. Kate provides an example and says, "There's a Padlet that we put our assignments in for one class, and then another class we emailed them to our teacher but… I had some difficulty. I emailed my assignments to my teacher, but it was only later that I [realized] … that I had to write an activity points in a CAP [also] … I probably got a point taken off for not writing activity points in the CAP… when I was supposed to, by the deadline, but I had finished the assignment by the deadline so I just didn't realize until later I had to write that into the CAPs."

Kate prefers traditional assessments and says, "I'd like to do some more … assignments … or even tests, knowledge tests, because that's something … I can work on. I don't need the experience for that, I can just work on that, but for the CAPs I'm running out of experience to put down on … the CAPs are all right, but we're relying too much on the CAPs." Kate says, "I know I'm not the only one with this problem with lack of experience; we've discussed it amongst ourselves."

Challenges. Kate speaks about challenges with learning and how this impacts her studies and says, "ever since I was younger, I've been very slow with a learning. I had difficulties … reading through something at a fast pace [and] I'll usually … take … longer than everyone else … in writing tests and … getting projects done, I'll take a longer time." Kate adds, "I tried to speed up but it's difficult for me." Kate's preferences for learning include "listening and then reading through" the course materials and assignments.

When asked about the program's focus on experience and reflection for assessments, Kate says, "That has been very difficult for me … I don't have too much experience … I've volunteered at my church's nursery … [when] I was a teenager then. I wasn't in charge, I just

looked after the kids." Kate also adds, "I've [also] babysat, I was like basically a nanny for a young infant for a year, but there are some questions on the CAPs … that I just don't have any experience with. So it's like, what do I write? How do I get through this? Because I don't remember having to do any of this, so that's the most difficult part." Kate questions, "How am I gonna get through that? … I did try to answer the question without some bringing any… experience up because I had no experience." Kate communicates how the experience she is referencing is important and provides "my understanding of it" but "I don't get a very high mark on that … I'll get feedback saying, 'you should put in your one experience of this' … well, I don't have one experience of this so … that part is difficult."

Kate has also had challenges with access to computers and technology. Kate says, "I did have some troubles like we were supposed to print out something and I don't have a printer, but I was able to go to the school. Because we're in the same place [Yellowknife] and I printed it off at the school. But for someone who lives up in a northern community and they wouldn't [have access to printing services], they would have a much more difficult time being able to access a printer if they don't have one."

One Word to Describe Why You are Successful. When asked to use one word to describe herself, Kate's one word was "determined" and she indicated that she is "determined to just get through it".

Most Important Thoughts from the Interview. The most important points that Kate wanted me to remember from our conversation were, "Difficulties about the CAP because that's come up a lot; I'm not the only one … a lot of us seem to be having problems with that." Kate's second point is, "How it was … easier just using one program like Moodle and how am I was able to get through some of my problems like by … going to the library to use the school

computers but someone farther up north, [a person in a] more secluded community wouldn't have been able to do that. But again, this is online; it's an online course … that's gonna pop up."

Final Thoughts. When Kate was asked about why the certificate was important to her Kate says, "It'll show that, that I was able to pass the course … that I have … new [and] more knowledge and [the certificate] will help me be able to get into a job if I move, or just help raise me up into a better position … in a few years or so. I'm good with my position right now, but I may wanna have … [a] higher up [position] like an Assistant Teacher."

#5 Beth's Distance Education Story

As a mature student with grown children of her own, Beth has "been a classroom assistant for about 15 years [with] 12 years here in Yellowknife" and is in her "sixth year in junior kindergarten." Beth "was hesitant about going back to school at my age" but enrolled because she says, she had "professional day funds that will pay for [the program] and there was no tests." Beth also said, "I've been doing it for such a long time … I knew I was still going to learn things, but I have experience under my belt. So, I figured you know, I could, I could do this, but I still need to work. So, I'm working and doing it online. Yeah, so that's why I chose to do it online." Beth began the program this fall and wants to complete it within two years.

Engagement. When asked about engagement, Beth says, "having a lot more people [is] more engaging … they'll separate us in little groups to have conversations. I get to know some of the other students and I get to have more of their viewpoints and I mean [it] becomes really good discussion ... and that's a big learning thing too. And so then when you see them posting something, you already can see them, you can see their face. You've had conversations with [other students and instructors], so the learning experience is more enriched." Beth describes an exceptional example of when she was engaged, and she says, "they'll [instructors] bring

something up and they'll explain it to you … they would explain it to you how you never heard of it before … You're like, oh, I never thought of it that way." Beth says, "I've been able to actually do my job way better than I have done it … I am getting something from it. But it's more from the online sessions than reading documents … it can't just be all online. … for me, it doesn't work." Beth says, "I need that in-person [synchronous] experience too." Beth reflects on an asynchronous course and says, "So you have like a whole, the one course where … we didn't even see each other, the other people and stuff like that. We don't even have a rapport with one another. They don't put anything online like their Padlets and stuff and they don't comment on your palette. So, it's almost like you're left in the dark and you're like well why did I do that then right? Did the teacher even see it? Like did anyone see it? Like why am I doing it? You know, [in asynchronous sessions] I'd rather just write the CAP and forego with a participation mark because I'm just participating with myself."

Beth's reasons for her success are summarized by her commitment to her education: "I believe that [when] I decide I'm going [to do] something, I'm just going to do it; it took me six years to actually go and do the course. I knew that I could do it … [the] kids [in Beth's classroom] don't even know *I'm not* the teacher." Beth confides, "I was struggling to go back to school ... I don't know if I want to do it. And then when I make my mind up to do it, I do it, there's no … I quit … *I'm gonna do it.* I put my mind to it and doing it, so I focused. That's probably my biggest thing I know about myself … if I commit to it, I want to follow through."

Supportive Relationships. Beth identified several supportive relationships including her husband, her classroom teacher, and other students and the instructors in the program. Beth's husband is a big supporter and helps around the house so Beth is able to complete her homework and attend classes. Beth's classroom teacher at work is also very supportive. Beth says, "Sylvie

is a really, really good teacher … I've been working with her for six years … we bounce ideas off one another … and I'll say 'this is what my project is. Do you mind if I tried doing this with the kids?' She'll say 'sounds like a great idea.'"

The Facebook page that Beth set up for students to connect with each other outside of class "is [also] very, very helpful" for Beth and other students. Beth says that the instructional "support is also really good." Beth says, "So Janna [instructor] said the other people have done that [connected on Facebook] and that is really good for your participation marks. I heard participation marks … it was mentioned throughout the two hours and then at the end she's like, so what do you guys think? And nobody was stepping up and I'm like, well, I'll start it. I'll start the [FaceBook] group [for] participation marks, I'm in." Beth adds, "I just started the group, and it actually is turning out to be it's slow … I can see it being really amazing. [I'm] going to be getting a lot from those people too." Beth comments about the students on Facebook and says, "we're getting to know each other and we're seeing each other online, and more and more people are posting on it and so I think that eventually that will be helpful especially now that they changed everything so it's like half in Moodle and half in Teams." The Facebook page has continued to grow overtime and now supports students in multiple classes.

Beth really appreciates the online support provided by instructors. A supportive comment Beth received includes, "oh I saw you doing this … have you ever thought of trying to do this? Then I would take that in a lot more … they email me back right away and they're very flexible." Instructors know that there is a steep learning curve for most students with regards to the variety of technology and applications that are used. Beth says, "we're going from Moodle to [Microsoft] Teams" so instructors build in classroom support and extra time to figure everything out, "you have a little bit extra time and stuff. I try not to take [up instructors time] … if I fell

behind, I'm dead, like I need to be on time on stuff. But at least they are flexible … so it's it kind

of puts you at ease and they're always reminding you of what you need to do. I'm glad I took it

[the program] online, especially with the interaction."

Course Content and Resources. Beth also has a wide breadth of life experiences which

she wanted to convey in her weekly reflective posts but found it a challenged to summarize the

complexities of her learning into the limited 200-word posts. I'm "trying to explain to somebody

online… but I'm only giving you 200 words to show you that I'm doing that. But I am doing it

and I just don't know how to convey that. If they were to spend a week in my classroom with me

doing it, they would get probably the two years' worth of work done in that one week of

watching me do what I already do." Beth says, "The limitations about having word restrictions is

that you don't know if the instructors" understand what you know."

For example, Beth talked about how learning is emergent with children: "most of the

time in this job, in this profession, it is on the fly. Like I could be sitting there and all of a sudden

the kids start talking about apples. And well I don't have anything planned for apples, you know,

but they're also asking me all these questions about apples and then I'm having [a] conversation

about apples. And then we talk about apple pie. And oh, do you know what's really good in that?

Oh, cinnamon. Well, how does cinnamon grow? I don't know. Then it becomes cinnamon and

like you know what I mean? Like it's on the fly all the time." Beth says, "I wish that they [the

instructors] could see that." Another example relates to Beth's lived experiences. "I used to be a

foster parent for a few years so I have *that* education. I went to university to become a classroom

assistant; I have *that* education." "I'm trying to pinpoint, like one experience … but then that one

experience is not just one experience …. There's like a whole lot in there but you only have 200

words. So you're like, 'I hope you get it in the 200 words.'" Beth summarizes her thoughts and

says, "So, it's not like I'm just coming in brand new … so if I'm struggling in that point of view, I think that if I was in-person, they would probably see it a lot quicker and a lot faster." Beth adds, "I want good marks." Beth also found "the questions about adding the CAPS tend to be very repetitive."

Beth described two course experiences she had, one synchronous and one asynchronous. Beth states that the synchronous course layout is "very well put together" and "the Intro to ELCC [online course] was great." Synchronous classes are held once a week for eight weeks. "I have a two-hour session tomorrow and we get a lot of information in there. It's not all about just having to do a lot of research … we discuss things." Beth indicated that instructors really want to see how the student's learning is connected in the reflective CAP posts. Beth enjoys the weekly online sessions, the "whole experience like especially in the ones that had the interaction. I find it quite nice and very easy."

Unfortunately, the course that Beth was most looking forward to was offered in an asynchronous format and she was disappointed by the lack of engagement in the course. "I was really looking forward to *this* course in particular … I felt that this course is what I was gonna learn the most because I didn't have any information on it. I was really, really wanting to learn that I wanted to learn how to put it in the classroom, because I'm not part of the culture and I wanted to know what my role was going to be in order to, to meld it into my into the classroom into the kids and mostly just for my own sake living in [this community]. I was really looking forward to it. But I felt like I was on my own again." Beth says, "My big frustration too about the one course is, there wasn't a whole lot of information put out there … there was a little bit … go read this and read that. And then what are your thoughts on it … I didn't need to go to college for that, you know, I'd rather have a little bit of a lecture … I felt lost and that I really wanted to

know more and be more enlightened. And I think my expectation was a little bit high. And in that, in that perspective, I was I was upset about it." Beth expresses, "I wanted to know what my role is, not being Indigenous … I can make a bridge [between cultures] and wanted to know what *my* role was … I think it's very important, especially where I'm living … I feel it more here and I want to know more." Beth says, "I'm glad that I had those [electronic] links, because I personally would probably go into those links on my own time. But I needed to be more specific to the classroom, so I could get the course done and do it where I felt like I was being helped and learning what I needed to learn for the classroom."

Also, sometimes the pedagogy didn't match the learning approach. For example, during the final class in her asynchronous course Beth says, it's "the last session [and] I'm like yes, it's the last week, probably super simple, right? No, she put us in group works! *Group works?* … What other students are going to be part of this group? As I expected nobody responded to my emails, my Padlets, my messages, nothing and so I just did it myself." Beth states, "You can't put group work in where you've don't have like interaction with the participants. Yeah, so I don't find [group work] works, but that's my opinion." Beth says, "I've done online before and I've never done online where I've never had interaction with a teacher before… and it's not okay." Beth adds, "I think that that the online session needs to have the [synchronous] session like even if it was once a week, half an hour. Just like, do you have any questions? Oh, here's some articles to look at or something like that, even if it was just a check in. I think it's a *must* for an online course."

"I thought maybe that's what the online courses were going to be like. And then I was freaking out like, oh, is this what it's going to be like and no, I don't know if I'm gonna be able to handle two years of that … I was even thinking, well, maybe I'll take a year off school and do the

second year in person … but the two courses I'm taking now just reverts me back to … this is your course … next time I'm thrown in that position again, I think I would email and express my needs. I don't think I did that … because if I express my needs, then I might get what I need then. Right?" Beth says, "So [its] my fault for not expressing what I needed. I learned my lesson. I [need to] specif[y] … my needs. No one can read my mind and I will express it."

Assignments and Assessments. Beth was frustrated by the lack of connection and explanation about how her CAP reflections would be marked. In preparing her CAP reflection Beth said: "I wrote 200 words for each CAP. I spent a lot of time writing that and in this course; there was no online session [asynchronous]. Like, so it was all reading, it was all about me researching and I spent a lot of time so I got in 1,000 words and I put it in and oh no, no, no, she wanted 200 words for the five CAPs. And I'm sitting there going okay, so I had to scratch it and start all over again. But I'm like how does someone who doesn't meet me online [understand or communicate with me]? Maybe if they meet me online [then] they can see my personality. They can see how much I'm into it. They can see what I'm, what I'm about, but for not even knowing me at all and for me to have to explain to you in just 200 words, how I'm meeting these competencies I mean, it's really like I don't know. I mean, I got good marks. I ended that course in 88%."

Beth found the feedback on her reflective posts was limited and not meaningful to her learning. "I didn't find it very useful feedback…it was five CAPs, 200 words…how do you extend that? … it was more than 200 to answer the question." Beth adds, "I just gave up putting too much effort in that particular course." The lack of engagement and feedback in the asynchronous course was not useful. "I didn't put as much effort as I am in the other courses where I'm getting more feedback, more engagement with the other students."

Beth is looking forward to her next classes that will be held in Teams. "[I] kind of like in Teams … the one thing that I really want [to be able to see] is the grades." Beth says, "and then it has your feedback … that would be so brilliant because right now you have to wait, click here and click there and try to find it …. [There is] a place for Teams to like, have conversations and that hasn't happened and then there's a tab for assignments and I'm hoping it's like this assignment, this is due, these are your assignments and [a way to] keep … track. Where [in] Moodle you kind of had to like oh yeah, this Padlet, how did that go? Did anybody reply on my Padlet? Oh, where's the other Padlet? I had to go back in through the entire course of that week and then scroll through all the work. Oh, here's the Padlet, click on the Padlet, scroll through to find and then okay, I'm finished that then go back to the course scroll through the course to find the second Padlet … I wish they said okay, week one Padlet one, Padlet two, Padlet three, right there and you can just click, click, click, right? [It's important for students to] … still ha[ve access to] your course [but also be able find and access Padlets easily] … so that you can go back to it easily so you can, you can respond or, you know, see what other people have posted … and what they've posted about that assignment and then you can respond in each one … right now you have to search for it … even if they just put a link to all the Padlets in one spot. Week one done, you know, it would have been, it would be really nice."

Challenges. One of the challenges that Beth has faced is that teacher assistants are marking her CAP entries. Beth says, "Other people are marking my work. Like this one other teacher is marking [my] work that's never [met me before] because I do think like I said the struggle of it is that Janna has a little bit more in, she kind of knows me now." Beth believes that … "you do have to be precise. You do have to write it [your reflections] out so that other people know that you understand it. But I think that there's another key component there that at least

Janna … she sees me talking and participating in class and she … [might think] 'oh, she [Beth] does understand that concept' … and because maybe I'm not so good with my words or writing and being precise. I might have missed something. So yeah, so that's kind of bad." Beth believes it's important to understand the instructor's approach to marking as well as understanding the course materials.

Beth said the challenge in being successful is "sometimes like it's just time … I'm all school, school, school, grades, grades, grades." Beth says, "I'm not finding time to do the things that really ground me … Right now, I'm, I'm struggling a little bit, finding time to do school, to do work, and then finding my me time of doing my art and those kinds of things. So, I'm missing the art part because… my brain's full and I'm exhausted. Yep. It's two years … so now I am going to work and then I'm kind of bringing it home because it's all about work in your schoolwork. So, I'm feeling like 'oh my days are filled with work'. Like literally. Yeah. So, you know, I'm sure that will even out to once I do have my own classroom and manage my time …. It will be a little bit different. I still will put extra time in it, which is fine. But I'll have more of a bit more of a balance, I think. Yeah …. So that's on me. I just I need to balance myself out."

One Word to Describe Why You are Successful. When Beth was asked for one word that describes herself Beth says, "Determined. Determined to be successful."

Most Important Thoughts from the Interview. The three most important things that Beth wanted me to remember from our conversation were that: one, "engagement with a teacher online, whether it be 30 minutes, or two hours a week is *essential* to my success in this course." Beth says, "I really want to improve myself … to get something from it. I need online linkage." Beth says, "Two, I think that as a *student* of online learning … it is on *us* as students … if [I] need something [I] need to *ask for it*." Beth adds, "Let them know what you need, because they

need to know." Three, "I really like this courses that I'm taking … except for a few little details

of [it] like the Padlets and stuff like that … the instructors are lovely [and] I'm getting a lot out of

it and becoming a better CA [classroom assistant]."

#6 Cathy's Distance Education Story

Cathy and her family recently moved from Eastern Canada, relocating to Yellowknife.

Cathy is currently enrolled in her third course in the Early Learning and Childcare program. Her

reason for enrolling in ELCC "was to open a day home and so I just wanted to have like a few

things under my belt … I'm a mom of four boys … once we got here and I saw there's like a lot

of other opportunities." Although Cathy's original plans of opening up a day home have

changed, she is still interested in pursuing her ELCC certificate. "Yes [I'm still taking courses]

… I want the information … [it] help[s] me be a better parent [and] will help me understand

what's going on in schools here … I can utilize my previous experience, like I've been home with

the kids for seven years. [I] worked before I was a mom, supporting kids and adults with special

needs and that's basically what I'm doing in the school is working with exceptionalities … it's

definitely challenging but I like a challenge so I'm not bored … I also like … learning I am a

lifelong learner … education … keeps me motivated … being in the school was a good

environment. I can apply what I'm learning."

Cathy expressed her reasons for choosing distance education over a traditional face-to-

face classroom experience. Cathy says distance education is "very convenient. I would choose

this over having to go into the classroom once a week, because it just cuts the time down on

getting there getting, getting home you know, and all the other stuff that would go along with

meeting and so this just feels easier." Cathy says, "I liked that option, because then I can do other

things and still do schooling at the same time. And I really actually like this model, because I

know some other people in town who are doing distance and they don't have [to] meet on Teams, like they don't have a group, a classroom that they think like … they just do group work together. So, I like I can see my instructor, I get to see other people, and I actually really like there are others in Yellowknife, because [it] creates like a community network that there are other people doing the same thing and it's kind of like that support system. One thing that I actually really liked when I wasn't in Ontario, I already knew people [before arriving in Yellowknife] who knew I was coming. [This is] just like a networking thing."

Engagement. When Cathy is asked about student engagement she says, "definitely in the classroom, at work and at school, just being able to apply and use what I learned in the course material in the classroom … it helped me with my observation, with assessing, with interacting with the kids." Cathy attributes part of her level of engagement and her success to internal motivation. Cathy says, "I think part of it is my personality, I'm gonna stick to a schedule as much as possible … I find if I don't schedule things, I don't get a break, so I schedule things." Cathy also adds, "I'm going to do those things [what's expected of me] because … I want the knowledge not just to being something I know but something that becomes a part of me and you know, it takes effort and so I'm definitely not someone who's just like, oh, I'm just gonna, like, let that go. No, I'm gonna make sure that they get it done. Yeah, I guess because… I value what I'm learning and so I want to put in the effort to get as much out of it as I can and I realized too, like this, what I'm learning is a steppingstone to my future. So, I don't know where this is gonna take me, but I know it's going to take me somewhere."

"I know that knowledge is something that goes with us, you know, again, [I am] very much a very spiritual person. We came from somewhere, we're here for a purpose. We have a certain amount of time to learn and to grow and that is part of why we're here and the knowledge

we gain goes with us. Family and a marriage and stuff like that, it happened very later in life for

me. I was married at 34 and so now I'm almost 42 and I do want to keep learning and so that is

my motivation as to like what can I learn to do that is vital for me now and in the future. I just

like learning, I think that's a big part of my success is I enjoy learning."

       Supportive Relationships. Cathy speaks about the importance of supportive

instructors and says, "I've met one of my instructors. Janna has been my instructor for the last

course and that piece has also been really key because she also helped me with getting my job, I

talked to her about what I was interested in pursuing and she was like, yep, I know this person,

this person, this person. These are the names, this is what you can do, and that's what I did and I

was like, hired the next day, like it was the best …. So I got hired, I was an EA [Educational

Assistant] in the school, which I think pays better and I have the same holidays as my kids and

then our home is still our home. So, I was like, this seems like a better fit for now … She's

[Janna is] amazing. She really is an educator. She does like to give it, she gets it to give it, and

she knows she gives it like it comes back and that like it grows. And that's the whole point of

educating, is that it builds people, builds community."

    Cathy also speaks about the importance of program supports and says, "Sherry she helped

me a lot, a lot, a lot, with just you know, when I initially contacted her there was nothing open or

available and she just said you know [when] something opens up [I'll] let you know. That was

how I got in just through her keeping an eye out for me at a distance. There's a friend here that

we know who is been, much involved in early childhood education. She has a dayhome and she

was my go-to person with all my questions. I also feel supported actually just through the

government in terms of like what they're offering people right now with scholarships, you know,

incentives for learning and so it really feels like an all around support, and my husband too you

know, he's providing for the family because I was at home so he felt the burden even like providing for the family and stuff and I was like, I'm home with the kids. I am not giving that up." Cathy also credits other family members and says, "My mother-in-law is taking care of the baby and the school is like literally across the street. So, I walk five minutes to school and at lunch I come home and nurse the baby and eat and then I go back to school. And the kids and I are home at about the same time so [its] nice." Cathy also says that having relationships with other students is "great because also one of my classmates is at the same school as me, we get to share, bounce off ideas from the material and then also like what we see in our working life."

Assessment and Evaluation. This year the collaborative assessment profile (CAP) has been integrated into the distance education program. Using the CAP Cathy says, "we do way more writing than I was anticipating. We're like writing all the time. Writing our experiences, are reflection … what would be the next [step] if we were to take that learning experience further which is good like that type of learning is important. But that is the grading system and so there's no testing, there's no nothing it's all like that writing piece and so I write. It's still challenging because it takes a long time but I like writing. But for someone that English is their second language and maybe they're not as proficient… that's really, really hard. So, I don't know about that. And then the content; it's really, it's good. I feel like it's up to date and easy to digest. It's coming from people who seem to have their own experience, you know, re-teaching, integrating their personal experience with the content. No, I wouldn't [like to be graded differently]. I would prefer this, I like the system. But again, I think it's because I enjoy writing and I'm also a reflective learner so I like that kind of thing." "I can see how like a few tests here and there would be good too. But I think the whole point of it is that maybe the reading and reflecting piece helps integrate … a little bit more than just checking a box or something like that."

Challenges. Cathy shares her thoughts about the challenges of fitting schooling into family life and says, "I never really get a good chunk of time to do schoolwork. It's here, there. I know that I have to take those little moments so the things will get done. So, sticking to a routine like usually early [to] bed and early … [to] rise like, I'm a morning person. So 5am is my precious time where everyone's sleeping and I can focus on a few things. So that's how I do it because at night I'm not I'm no good at night, I'm tired, I just want to go to bed. 11 o'clock… I'm done. So, I need to get up early and do stuff." Cathy also shares about the importance of self-care and says, "It was not just sleep it's also like eating well and exercising and knowing; also having a mindset that you know I can only do what I can do, I do what I can, but it's okay that I can't do it all and so it's the mindset of that's just how it is and that's okay." Cathy says, "I think I realized at one point like I was too focused on school, not now, like years ago. I did a nursing program in 2012 to 14, and I [didn't] … have kids or anything at that point and I was still overwhelmed with things and I just realized like, I'm not going to get it all done. I'm going to do what I can do and that's the best I can [do] and so [do] not [get] stressed about it."

One Word to Describe Why You are Successful. When Cathy was asked for one word to describe herself she stated "determination. I'm determined."

Most Important Thoughts from the Interview. The three things Cathy wants me to remember about our conversation are: 1. [I] "would say like networking is key even at a distance. Like networking with the people in the program at a distance is key and that alone like builds community. 2. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Questions are vital for not only like the individual learning but for everyone's learning. 3. Local people taking a distance program is okay. It's a good thing."

#7 Ellie's Distance Education Story

Ellie moved to the NWT in 2020. Ellie says, "I came here [to Yellowknife] and I ended up as a JK EA [Junior Kindergarten Educational Assistant] and then the school shut down for COVID. The school team just kind of put a shout out that if anybody would like to pursue their education, there's a little bit of funding… and I thought to myself, 'oh, wow, I've never even thought about [pursuing postsecondary education].' I thought that would be amazing. I love what I'm doing [and] I would love to have a little education to go with my experience." That is why Ellie started in the Early Learning and Childcare program. Ellie says, "I'm on my last course for my certificate" and "it'll take me [about] two and a half years to finish it [my diploma] this way. It's given me the opportunity to work full time and do [my] education at the same time."

Engagement. When asked about engagement Ellie says, "I think it [studying] works beautifully with working in the field." "I feel like I come up with five examples like it's what I'm doing all day. So, it's very relevant to what I'm doing. I think it's helped me understand things… and I've already raised four children. I've spent tons of time on camps and after school programs … so, it's like very hands on to what I'm doing. So, I find it very engaging. I find it, it's very relevant."

Ellie really enjoys the program: "I look forward to my evening sessions. I find them informative. I enjoy the interaction with my classmates …. I personally like that they put us in breakout rooms. I feel like just listening to the teacher you're not interacting as much because you're supposed to have your microphone off essentially. It's too confusing if everyone's phones are on, so when they put us in breakout rooms, I think we all enjoy the interaction at that point."

When Ellie was asked about her personal beliefs and the strengths that she brings to her distance education experience, Ellie says, "Okay, so I would say that part of my motivation is

that I love the field and I'm not sure what our future holds. I'm not sure that we'll be in Yellowknife forever. And when I move on, I thought it would be kind of cool to be able to actually work in the field with an education, so I feel like that motivates me quite a bit. So, like personally, I think that would be my main motivation … that's sort of what keeps me going." Ellie also says, "I see a ton of value in children … I'm *not* authoritative … [and] I'm very nurturing, very patient, very loving and kind, like all those kinds of things." Ellie says, "My natural abilities that I think work well with working with small children especially and I think I'm intuitive and … pretty good at being able to perceive like what the teacher is going to need next or like how my child who's having, who's very dysregulated, fits into to the class as a whole or like reading the cues and the child I'm working with … I think those are my strengths [and contribute to success]."

Supportive Relationships. Ellie feels that she has a huge professional network and she says, "I really feel that way … I feel really blessed like I feel like I've learned a ton and we just had a PD day and I got to do the whole service program, which is learning about autism, so specific strategies with children with autism. So that was like a full eight-hour day of training. Like that was part of just because I'm an employee. So, I do feel like I've had a ton of training, I feel like I have a ton of people around me." Ellie also says, "I do feel tons of support of my coworkers and the school." Ellie also says, "I feel like … my kids are very proud of me for doing this" and "my husband is on board with me doing it."

Course Content and Resources. Ellie's inspiration for her program's assignments and activities comes from a very rich and creative environment in her school. Ellie says, [I] "walk around the school or observe what other EAs are doing and was able to use their expertise too." Ellie feels that the assignments are "so very relevant to what I'm doing and I feel like the way the

course is set up, it's, I would say it's more reflective. I do feel like a lot of my assignments have been quite easy …. For example, we needed to make a toy that was concrete for different ages. Those kinds of creative assignments are made … in our school." Ellie has since moved from the JK to a 2-3 split classroom and has found that assessments and "some of these assignments maybe would pertain to that [JK] level."

Ellie also commits to regular study time and assignment preparation. When discussing her personal schedule Ellie says, "I try to dedicate Saturday morning to my schoolwork … I don't really dive into the material until the weekend … there's a disadvantage to that because a lot [the activities that were supposed to be done in the assignment]. I can't necessarily have done what I needed to do with the kids and then my assignments are due by Monday after work. So I'd really have to get my assignments done on the weekend because I don't really have time during the week. Just working full time and managing with my own family responsibilities … if I had two weeks do my assignments, I feel like I could do a better job."

When discussing online peer-to-peer learning Ellie says, "often assignments will be put in Padlet form. That's where actually you're supposed to … read everybody else's [work] and … comment. That's part of your assignment, and other people's but I quite enjoy it. I actually often will look to see if somebody's posted something before I start because it just kind of gives you like, oh yeah, I did understand that right, or … confirmation that you understood the assignment properly. So, I definitely feel like I have benefited from other people's sharing things for sure." Ellie also has the benefit of connecting with others in her program who are studying at a distance in her community and uses these relationships to collaborate with others in their shared professional practice. Ellie's example included connecting and collaborating with another intern and she says, "we are now working together with a boy at recess."

Assessment and Evaluation - CAP Assessment Grading System. When Ellie was asked about the grading system she says: "I *love* it in many ways, I absolutely love that there is no exams and tests. I was very intimidated at 46 years old, go[ing] back to school, and I thought 'there's no way that I can do this,' but actually someone in my church is one of the instructors and he convinced me I could … I don't know how well I would do on a test anymore. So I … really love … [that] there's no tests, and I think the CAPs are great, like I said, it's … reflective, like it's like you learn this and then you go see it in your day. I love that concept." Ellie adds, "One day I'm going to be a JK teacher; I need to learn how to do these things. So, I'm thankful for the opportunities to learn it and to do it … I feel like it is a great way to learn something and then be intentional about finding examples of it. To see it work to see doing it, [then] like to see it in action … for example, this observing, I can see the teacher doing this, now that's not my role, so that's not what I'm writing the CAP on … and then I think to myself 'now how can I do that?' and then I work that out."

Challenges. When asked about the challenges she faces when studying at a distance, Ellie says, "I would say my main challenge is time." Ellie indicates that technology is also a challenge for her, "I am not a tech person … it takes me a long time and tech is a challenge for me." Ellie says, "Aurora College [also] has had a few key challenges with [technology] between our program and [some students] …. Last year [class] was through Zoom, this year it's through Teams and this year, it's through Moodle, last year it was not. So, last year they had problems with all that so over the summer they fixed those [technology issues] this year, that's why it's [the program's] back through Moodle and Teams." Ellie also shares, "I spent three or four hours figuring out how to how to put my assignment up the first day [and] how you upload your CAPs again that took me like an hour … uploading it, or printing it, like those kinds of things … would

be my challenge." When Ellie asked how she resolved her technology issues she says, "I reached

out to a classmate and we did our own little private Zoom meeting, she walked me through it."

Other supports for Ellie include, "emailing instructors [they] are really good to get back to you

and Sherry, she oversees she's like the secretary maybe for the program, I'm not sure completely,

but she's amazing. Like, she considers any question and she gets back to you. She spent like an

hour on the phone with me one day trying to help me figure out my login and stuff. In the end I

think it the problem really went back to me and she was very patient for an hour."

Doing courses from a distance can also be limiting because Ellie's experiential learning

opportunities are restricted to the learning spaces she is in. Ellie expressed that if she chose to

enroll in the face-to-face program offering, her early learning experiences would be more

diverse. "If I was doing this, potentially on site [face-to-face] my placements would be [at] other

places as well." However, "at this stage in my life, I wouldn't be interested in full time [face-to-

face] school. I'm working to supporting our family right now … so this is feasible." Ellie says,

"So, there's pros and cons to everything, but it's pretty amazing that I can do my placement and

still be working full time ... I think that's pretty amazing." Although most of Ellie's children are

grown she still has her youngest child at home. "My first priority is being a mom and wife, so to

do those two jobs well, I don't think I could have taken this on [in a traditional face-to-face

classroom setting]."

Ellie expressed that some of the course requirements conflict with her roles and work

responsibilities and she provided some examples of this tension. Ellie struggled with the final

part of the learning story assignment which was to send the learning story home to the parents.

"This week, we're supposed to do a learning story with a child. But as an EA [Educational

Assistant] … we're not supposed to be communicating with parents. Like that's not my role,

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that's the teacher's role. So, I don't really have the right to ask a parent if I can observe their child or if I can send them a learning story about the child, so I feel a little bit like … do I just make it up? I'm not sure what to do with that dilemma."

Ellie discussed challenges when course activities fall outside of employment roles and responsibilities. "If I'm going to be asked to be educated as a Childhood Educator then I would … appreciate the value of going in and rearranging a classroom for example. We did that but it's not my classroom. So, I went in on the weekend and we arranged … a breakout room. I rearranged that, took pictures of it, and then I put it [the classroom] back the way it was because it's not really my space to do, I'm not the teacher." Ellie has used these experiences and referenced them in her CAPs. She has explained how she would do these activities if she was the teacher, however her program instructors have told her "that, that's wrong, like I need to make it my own. So, I feel a little bit of this contradiction of that, whatever that is." Due to time constraints, there is not enough time to talk with instructors and get feedback on these and other issues. Ellie says, "earlier in the week I thought I should just send an email [to talk about resolving the issue]. I haven't gotten around to that. So now it's Saturday and I need to do my assignment." Ellie wants to resolve the incongruences between work restrictions related to her position and the course requirements. Ellie says that "our instructors have suggested another option … if you know a child in your school and … their parents, we have several kids whose parents work in our school. So, then I thought to myself and that's what I suggested to the girls [other interns in the program] was like I'm like you could take pictures of [student's name] and ask his mom [parent's name] and she's like a teacher, ask her if you can do it about him." Unfortunately, due to time constraints, Ellie says, "I don't always have the time or ability to process it further."

One Word to Describe Why You are Successful. When Ellie was asked to use one word to describe herself Ellie says, "I am motivated." "I would like to think that we're describing [me to] be more like loving and nurturing but I don't know if that completely answers the question as to why I'm successful. But it's [motivated describes me] particularly in the realm of like going back to school, like doing this. I think that maybe would describe me in my job and I don't know if it [being loving and nurturing would] fully describes me as a student. But I think I'm pretty motivated, like hard a worker…. [This brings up something for Ellie] … years ago kind of brought up the whole thing of like if we're going to do something, if I can do something, if I'm gonna, if we're going to, do something as a family, let's do it well. That's kind of the thing I live by. Like if I'm going to put myself into this, I'm going to, I'm not going to half put myself into that, I'm going to be in the classes I'm going to do my homework. It's something of a commitment of me. I'm going to make it happen. So that's kind of what I mean by motivated."

Most Important Thoughts from the Interview. When Ellie was asked about the three most important thoughts she wanted to be remembered for in this interview she says, "I think this is an amazing program. That I'm really thankful that I get to do [this program] … it's a really great opportunity .... So yeah, particularly about Aurora College, I think being able to work full time and have a course that I feel like as much as I said, the challenge is time. That would be true, like if I was going back to school, of course, like you're throwing a whole other thing onto your plate. So, I think that college is doing a really good job of making it manageable even though it's a sacrifice, to work full time and get your education which I think is a really neat opportunity and I love it." Lastly, Ellie says, "I'm really passionate about my job and working with children and then I love it and I'm really enjoying it. I think I'm becoming better at my job through this education and I'm thankful for that."

Final Thoughts. - Appreciation of Indigenous Ways. Ellie says, "I've really enjoyed the opportunity to be in class with people from all over the territory. I had somebody in Tuk, quite a few in Inuvik, Fort Simpson and there was a bunch of us in Yellowknife." Ellie adds, "I'm not Indigenous [but] it was really neat [to] just hear their stories and their perspective and I learned a ton through my classmates through that, like I really enjoyed the opportunity to meet people from all over. And it's again just such a unique experience because it's online and to hear their stories and work things through with them. And so yeah, I don't think that I touched on that, but I really appreciated it as well."

Ellie also notes that there were similarities between others from the North with her own experiences from southeastern Canada and says that "as far as being similar, tons of other women, actually many my age even. So, just natural similarities because of that, like we'll just have done similar things." Ellie says, "the people that you're online with are in the field as well. So, lots of similarities with working with children are like, you know, what we do day to day and whether that is obviously discussed."

Ellie continued by saying, "a lot of Indigenous people were in that class and they're living in communities [that have been] greatly affected by the things we're talking about. So just a lot of hands-on stories." Ellie says, "It was just a lot about residential schools and just a lot of different things that these different Indigenous people have gone through ... a lot of them are just saying, you know, like 'my mom, my grandmother, this is how this affected me' like, just very personal and relative. And I feel like it gave me a better understanding and perspective than if I was just being taught it through other ways." When discussing an example from learning through play Ellie says, "Different things that they were doing in their communities were different than I had had, certainly I had different experience before moving to Yellowknife. Maybe similar to

here, but just like a little bit of a different slant. Like going out on [the] land … I forget what they were hunting but the classes all went out to hunt something and I thought 'oh neat.'" Ellie also appreciated the importance of oral traditions, different ways of living, learning through play, and "living on the land" which helped her to understand "Indigenous intent particularly."

#8 Cherie's Distance Education Story

Cherie began our conversation by introducing herself through her family relationships. "My mother is from… Inuvik, Northwest Territories and my Dad's from Fort Rez and they're both educators. My mom taught for over 35 years; she has retired, but she's still subbing and my Dad teaches second languages in [in a South Slave community]. They both work there, and I literally grew up in a classroom." Cherie says, "I have three children. My oldest son just turned 22, and I have a second son who's 18 … and my daughter's 14. When I had my first son my goal was to go back to school."

Cherie said that getting her education "was a slow process." Enrolling and completing "upgrading, which seemed [to take] like forever" was her first step. "I really wanted to succeed in obtain[ing] a career, that was my overall goal." Cherie had to jump through many hoops to obtain her education. "I started off [in] basic education and I didn't know I had a passion for teaching until I started subbing in at the school here … I wanted to be a teacher."

"I've worked my way up within my employment at Dene school. I started off as a school librarian. That's how I got my foot in the door and then I started subbing because they didn't have any subs in the community. So, I was their number one substitute teacher for about three years and then one day my principal asked me to go back to school. She wanted me to actually take TEP [Teacher Education program]. But I had other passions, I think through that work

experience. So, I started working as a principal and then a teacher's assistant, and then a relief support worker and now I'm a Junior Kindergarten teacher."

Cherie has worked and studied concurrently over the years. "So, I just [started] working my way up and going to school … I was able to accomplish that through putting my skills into action." Cherie admitted that she is a shy person, however within her program she learned about well-being and developed her communication skills which helped her to share her passions and interests. Cherie says, "it all connects … before I really was a shy person. I didn't have much to say, but with the studies that I've taken it feels good to talk about your passion and really know what you're talking about …. It's such a rewarding feeling."

Engagement. When asked about engagement in her program Cherie responded by saying, "I felt engaged in school during my online distance education courses." Initially, when Cherie began the Early Learning and Childcare program, "courses were done through teleconference." Cherie appreciated having the real time connections with other students and her instructor. Although Cherie's earliest teleconference experiences connected Cherie and her classmates to a southern instructor located in Toronto, Cherie acknowledges that "we built a really good bond like she [the instructor] was able to recognize our voices … over time … we're staying connected through teleconferences." These real time connections fostered personal growth and Cherie says, "I believe that this made the biggest difference as over time I became comfortable with sharing my thoughts and opinions." Being connected and engaged with others in the class helped Cherie and she expressed, "It was just a real eye-opening experience. I think for me, because after I started achieving my goals and being so dedicated, I knew it was gonna be hard work. But I just made short term goals and I just focused on those and that's what really helped me, instead of looking at the long-term goal because that was always frustrating." Cherie

summarized her thoughts by saying, "Although distance education has been long a long process, I'm proud of myself for not giving up. It felt very rewarding to be connected with other early childhood educators within the Northwest Territories and that we had that in common." Cherie says, "I made a lot of friends and … I just grew so much as an educator and I feel like I'm an asset to my community."

      Engagement - Reasons for Cherie's Success. Cherie identified several reasons for her success, including paying attention to her internal motivation and professional relationships. Cherie identified personal skills she needed to focus on: "I had to practice time management and remain dedicated to short-term goals. I had to … do self recognition and reflect on my compliments and then set new goals and put my skills into action like I mentioned and I had to build positive relationships with my family and the families I worked with [including] my interns, my instructors, my colleagues." Cherie was also motivated to succeed in early childhood because of her children's needs. Specifically, Cherie shared that one of her children has "high-functioning autism and ADHD. So, through his experience in school and the lack of support that he had, it really inspired me to work with children, especially [children] that had difficulty with disorders … I wanted to be there for our future children. I wanted to be that supporter that wasn't there for my son in school … and I think by going back to school too … I really helped my older boy finish school too."

      Cherie explained the professional influences on her success through a conversation she had with the principal in her school. Cherie said, "I mentioned to my principal that I was doing an interview with you and he mentioned like how driven I am and what an amazing person I['ve] become … he came back [to work after a leave] and he's noticed such a difference in where I am compared to where I was when he left." Cherie also acknowledges the importance of the

relationships she has with the children in her program. "A lot of children tell me that they love me. I've been given little notes like 'I love you' and today a little boy gave me a paper and had a big heart and I don't think he was thinking of me when he drew it, but when he saw me, he gave it to me. So, I've, I've watched the kids grow and they've, you know, they've known me for at least eight years now." Cherie also says, "I think they really appreciate the fact that I'm Aboriginal and that they could make that connection with me because I share the language and I share the culture." Cherie identified the importance of being a role model to Aboriginal students in her school and how important it is to be able to share her culture and ways of knowing with the children.

When asked about her personal beliefs that helped her to reach her goals, Cherie responded by saying, "I am able to be successful, I had to tell myself that off right off the bat. I had to change my lifestyle … in regard[s] to the people I was hanging around with, so I had to cut off ties with [some] people. So, I am able to be successful, I can set goals and achieve one at a time. I am worthy of happiness and success. I'm able to achieve anything if I want it bad enough; it will be done. That's what I had to tell myself. I had to really believe in my ability to achieve my goals. Because growing up in [a small south slave community] at the age of 14, we were transferred to Hay River and we had to live in a residential school and the educators there weren't happy about us being transferred there because it was more of a workload for them. So, they told us stuff like you're here because your parents didn't want you … you're not smart and really criticized Aboriginal students, so it really affected my self esteem. I believed that I wasn't smart for many, many years … I had to believe that I was smart and now that I'm achieving like honors. It's so rewarding, you know, like, it's sad to say that it took so long, but I'm just happy it's happening. That's what I focus on."

Relationships. Cherie describes many supportive relationships in her life and throughout her educational journey including her relationships with her family, colleagues within the school system, and instructors in the Early Learning Childcare program. With regards to Cherie's family relationships she says, "I've been supported [by] my family and value their patience. My common law and my children have been growing with me throughout the years. I don't regret going back to school and the amount of time it is taking as I'm a positive role model to my children. They look up to me and appreciate how hard I work for our well-being as a family." Cherie also says, "I use the Dene laws and I use my parents and my grandparents. I took my kids pictures and I used our lifestyle to build my philosophy and it was really … inspiring for me to reflect back and look at how young they were when I started my learning journey and how patient they've been with me and how proud they are."

On supportive relationships within the school system, Cherie explains how supervisors and colleagues supported her educational journey: "educators that wrote reference letters for me when I first got into the program" supported her application into the program. Other educators "watched me grow …. I started off as their support worker and now I'm doing their job, like I replaced them so they could move up because we're all working. We're all working at our own career goals. So, the lady that I was working with last year is working towards a master's [degree now] …. I did my field placement within my certificate program [with her] and she'll probably be my supervisor again for my diploma."

With regards to instructional supports within the program Cherie says, "I can honestly say that 90% of my instructors value my work and expressed gratitude toward my effort. I'm pleased with the Early Learning Childcare instructors as they are just as passionate as I am to be working in the field of education. It truly makes a world of difference when educators support

and acknowledge each other. So, I said majority of instructors helped me to be successful

through their proactive encouragement, as they always focused on my character strengths and

praised me for my ability to share my work experience. They inspired me to teach with a passion

as they do. This I stay true to and value their guidance and through my educational experiences."

Currently, the program is offered virtually through weekly Microsoft Teams sessions,

which has opened up other types of connection for Cherie and other interns enrolled in the

program. Cherie shares that students are able to "do small group activit[ies]" which allow

students to stay connected and support one another. Students, who may already have past

connections and relationships look forward to reconnecting face-to-face. Cherie says, "during

graduation, I'll see my friends, I'll see my classmates in Smith. I'll have about three of them with

me and then a lot of them come from Inuvik, where I come from, so they know my Mom, they

know my grandparents and they get to know me and it's really nice."

Course Content and Resources. When Cherie was asked about her thoughts on course

content and resources she says, "I think it's educational and purposeful." "They give us links and

stuff like that. They have good examples, but we usually do all the work ourselves. So, we sit in

there and they lecture to us and then after we do our two-hour meeting, they give us assignments

based on our session and then we just go to town. Yeah, and we reflect on whatever we learned

in that session." Cherie adds, "Everything relates to our work experience." Cherie appreciates

when instructors prepare curricula "that reflect on Aboriginal curriculum and philosophy and

inclusion and all that, like I could really connect with that. So, I think the resources are limited,

but at the same time I really value all the effort that instructors put into it. I think … [that] they

go over and beyond, and they work with what they have just like we do." Another important

point Cherie makes is, "Yeah, and one thing I like is that they, they look at us as interns … they

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really have a high respect for us. They don't look down at us the way my high school experience was. So that's a good thing, yeah." Cherie also realizes that not all interns in the program have the same opportunities or life experiences; she says, "I think the ones [interns] that don't have access to certain work experience are the ones that struggle the most."

Cherie also shared her thoughts on the progression of the program from a teleconference program format to a virtual online approach. She says that the way the courses are offered now is "really good … we get to see each other and it's once a week … and I think it's, it's a better program now because the instructors no longer in Toronto, these instructors work together at the same campus … I think it makes a really big difference." Cherie also shared her thoughts on having northern instructors teach from the NWT, "I think that [it] makes [a] difference because they just know the program like the back of their hand, because they're doing it all day and then they meet in the evening and they're doing it again and they work as a team to grade papers."

Assessment and Evaluation. When Cherie was asked about her thoughts on the grading process and the use of the competency assessment profile [CAP] she respond, "I put a lot of effort into it [CAP posts] and I go over and beyond, but lately I've been telling myself, you know because I know what I'm like, my profession, I don't stress out about editing like I used to. Because I would do it [get stressed out] and then I wanna reword it and it just would be a waste of time … I was never good at short and sweet, but now I'm getting better at it."

Challenges. When Cherie was asked about challenges she experienced, she indicated that time was a major challenge; "time made it difficult because I did my studies within the Early Learning and Childcare through distance as I wasn't willing to relocate to Yellowknife." … [Sometimes courses weren't available] "it just made me feel anxious because I had to, like, wait till they offered my courses to me. So sometimes I'd have to face a semester where I already took

the courses and I'd have to wait for the following semester." Technology is also a limiting factor in remote postsecondary education in the NWT, however administration in Cherie's program is working to improve systemic inequities by providing jump drives to students with limited broadband capacity. Cherie says, "I work with the college where they give me a, a … what is it called? It's not a jump drive, but you plug it into your laptop and you get Internet. Yeah. So, they [administration] they gave me that access. So, it's really good that way."

One Word to Describe Why You are Successful. Cherie had two words to describe herself. When she was first asked during the interview, she identified the word *"dedication"*. However, after she shared some of her story she indicated, that in preparing for our conversation the "word was actually *content"*.

Most Important Thoughts from the Interview. Cherie says the most important thoughts from our interview are, "That I never gave up; I consider myself a leader. Like, because I'm leading, I inspire other people to achieve their goals today. I guess that I'm just proud, I'm proud of who I am, I'm proud of where I'm from, and what I've become, you know, overtime. I'm just proud, yeah. Mm-hmm."

"I'm so willing to help people today because throughout my journey, I didn't really have the support from the community. Although I'm a quiet person, I still don't feel that I have support from the community, the people that watched me grow up and watched me thrive and grow and they don't come up to me and say 'congratulations' or anything like that. And I've learned that, you know, it's not important what other people think of you, but it would be still nice for them to acknowledge your success and be happy for you. So that's a really big thing for me when I meet people and I wanna help them. Like when they said that you were looking to interview people, I

felt that you're trying to do your job and I wanna help you do your job and that what I have to offer you is valuable to what you're trying to accomplish too."

Final Thoughts – Gratitude. Cherie says, "And it makes me feel really privileged and honored to, to, to be working within my community. Yeah. And it made me feel really good to know that … my principal considers me as an asset within our team." Cherie also says, "I feel that I'm very fortunate to be working in the Aboriginal community, especially one that I grew up in because I could really relate to some of the assignments."

Cherie says, "I had to be dedicated, to my dreams, to the things that I set out to do a long time ago. And when I did that, I was… discourage[d] because I knew it was going to take long, but I knew what I wanted in the long run and at the end of the day, I'm, I'm so proud of myself for achieving my goals and I'm so fortunate to meet people like you and I just feel so happy and content." Cherie is looking forward to her graduation where she will be able to reconnect with other interns to celebrate their success. Cherie also wanted to share this: "I've been a leader within my community as an educator, as a student, within Aurora College, as I encourage others to pursue their educational goals and strive for success."

#9 Jais' Distance Education Story

Jais is new to Yellowknife, only arriving in April of last year. During this last year she completed her maternity leave and began studying at a distance in the Early Learning and Childcare program. Jais explained that she is a full-time student and mother to a young child. Jais also works full-time during the day and then comes home after work to take care of her family. Two nights a week she attends classes in her program at a distance. When asked about how she was balancing her school/family/work life balance Jais says, "I don't know how but I'm doing it."

When asked why she chose distance education instead of the face-to-face program, Jais says, "I don't have time to do that full time [face-to-face] study. I have to work and I have a kid also."

Jais noted that "observing the child like that is the most important" and says that paying attention to the "micro details" provides important information about a child and how they interact with their environment. For example, Jais says, "we should observe like which hand they are using [and] how they are using it," because these things are important in assessing students and providing feedback about children in Jais' Montessori classroom. Jais said, "I'm learning a lot" and provided a recent example of when a child developed pink eye. Jais was not familiar with pink eye and used the experience to research and further understand this infection.

Engagement. When Jais was asked about what personal beliefs have helped her reach her goals, Jais indicated that she is very focused on her family and on the children in her program. Jais indicated how much she loves being with children in her job and said that "they all love me back and I feel so great."

Supportive Relationships. When Jais was asked about what helps her be successful in her program, she indicated the importance of instructors. She said, "the instructors are very supporting." One of the instructors told Jais that, "whenever we have some questions we don't understand [or if] we need a little help just leave a message and [the instructor will] just reply back and the same with [another instructor], I just email him whenever I need [to]." Jais also indicated that she receives support from the program administration. "Since I enroll[ed] in this course I was actually in touch with Sherry, she was helping me. Like, what to do, what are the next steps? So, she's pretty good."

Jais also emphasized the importance of her mother with regards to being successful in her program. "My mom is here and she's helping me … it wasn't possible to keep sometimes for

myself, for my study." Once Jais' mom arrived in Yellowknife, Jais decided to enroll in the

Early Learning and Childcare distance program. She feels with her current job at Montessori she

can put what she learns at school into practice at work. Jais puts learning into practice through

her reflections in her competency assessment profile (CAP) journal.

Course Content and Resources. Jais has been provided with a lot of useful information

and appreciates the documents and resources she has received throughout her course work. For

example she received articles on report writing. The resources "are really very useful, but we

need some time to read everything. So, there are so many useful things I found [and] … they are

really, really helpful. They're gonna help me in my profession." Jais has begun organizing her

resources and says, "I am actually putting them in a folder in my computer, biweekly, so

whenever I do have some time, I will print them all and I'm gonna make a file for myself and my

boss." She has chosen to create a file system so that she can go back to read through the

information when she has more time to review the documents. Jais says, "I'm running out of

time … I'm putting those links [in the folder] so that in future, whenever I need to go through

them so that I can use them."

Assignments and Assessments. Jais was asked about her thoughts on the competency-

based assessment (CAP) approach for course assessment and evaluation. Jais says, "It was a

completely new concept for me." Jais adds, "The first week like it was very bad. I was just, I

don't know how I just put the entries. I don't know what [to do]." Jais spoke with one of her

instructors who explained the CAP and how grades were earned and is now comfortable with the

assessment approach. Jais says that she appreciates the journalling because it allows her to self-

reflect but would also not mind if she was required to write tests instead; she sees the benefit of

each approach. "The CAPs I would say like, it has pros and cons. So, it is very time consuming

because you need to think, you need to write, and it shouldn't be that lengthy. When you're writing, you need to be concise, so it is really time consuming but at the same time it is really useful. Because you reflect on so many things … there [are] little assignments that are teaching you … how you can do better in some of those situations that maybe you face, so that's kind of teaching you. I would say they are really useful, although they are time consuming, but they are really useful." Jais adds, "We are learning from our experiences and we are giving them thought, otherwise we are not going to think that because … nobody … has some time."

Challenges. When Jais was asked about challenges she faces, she says, "it's very hard for me to give some time to my family these days." Jais balances work, with family commitments and her need to complete her CAP entries. She attends classes two evenings a week and also wants to build her resources for her children at Montessori. "I have never been so … busy in my life like I am these days." Sometimes Jais studies until 11pm or midnight, always after she puts her son to bed. Jais said, "I'm just running behind time and the time is running behind me we are just facing each other."

One Word to Describe Why You are Successful. Jais was asked to chose one word to describe herself. She chose two; her two words were "*honest" and "brave"*.

Most Important Thoughts from the Interview. Three things Jais wants me to remember about our time together: "I am going to be professional, with this course [program], and focused .... I'm learning so many things; I'm very grateful."

Final Thoughts. Jais holds a Bachelor of Information Technology from her country of origin but the Early Learning and Childcare diploma will be her first Canadian-earned credential. Because of her previous degree, Jais has no issues with any of the technology needs or applications in the program. Jais just needs to spend some time with the technology and then is

able to navigate the environment successfully. When asked about the differences between her

Canadian studies and those in her country of origin, Jais indicated: "we were used to have a lot

of burdens during our studies, it's not like here. Here, [in Canada] it's … pretty … easy, like, no

pressure …. There was a lot of pressure over our heads [in her country of origin] because we

were learning three languages at the same time. Now you imagine, so we started learning our

national language, our mother tongue language, and English at the same time and once you start

doing the math … there was a lot .... [I studied] six days in a week."

Personal Support Worker Program

The Personal Support Worker certificate program is offered through Microsoft Teams

and teleconferencing. This program runs as a cohort-based model from the Yellowknife campus

to smaller remote communities across the Northwest Territories. Two stories were collected from

students within this program and are summarized below.

#10 David's Distance Education Story

David's distance education story began when he immigrated to Canada from his country

of origin. David says, "before I came in Canada, I was in Dubai for two years and I didn't finish

my college degree in [his country of origin]. That's why when I got my opportunity to study here

in [the] Northwest Territory, I [took] the chance to finish my study." David says, "I want[ed] to

get at least certification here in Canada." David's desire to become a Personal Support Worker

began while he was working in housekeeping in his local long term care facility. David says,

"when I was in housekeeping, when I'm cleaning the rooms and seeing [the elders] sad" David

tried "to connect with them like … a family member." David wanted to provide comfort and care

for elders and recognized that being in care is "hard for them … I'm seeing the elders, that they

have their struggle[s] staying on long term [care units]." David took the time to talk and dance

with the elders in his care, trying to improve their lives and to make them happy. During this time David says he thought, "why … don't I take the PSW [Personal Support Worker program] first instead and work with the elders?" Looking from the outside in, David says, "they are in long term [care] and everything that [I see about the elder's needs] makes me motivated to take this course and finish this course." These thoughts for the elders made David "motivated to succeed" in his program.

  Supportive Relationships. David attributes his success to the people who supported him in the Personal Support Worker certificate program including the Program Head, the instructors, and his wife. David says that completing the program would have been difficult "without the[se] people, [they were] patient to help us." When speaking about the Program Head David says, "I try to always mention Mavis because yah she is one of the reasons I finished the course … she not just an instructor, she's like a friend … she's a motivator … [to] motivate me well to finish the course." Although David says that "doing my study, it's kind of hard because I'm working at the same time, part-time, and doing school," he also acknowledges the importance of his wife in his educational journey saying, a "good thing … was my wife, she helped me to finish the study." David reflects and says, "I almost quit and then my wife and my instructor motivate[d] me … and then I finished the course … [and] I feel really happy."

  David continues to give credit to the Program Head, instructors, and his wife through their supportive relationships and says, "Mavis [is a really big help. She] motivate[s] you [and asks us students] 'what's your goals?' [She] remind[s] you [about] everything. [She reminds students by saying things like] 'do [you know] what you're going to have when you finish the course?' She is always reminding us that when you finish these course[s] you're gonna get more." David also says that the Program Head and instructors are "a big help … reminding us,

and motivating us, one more month, two more months, just the practicum." David is aware that all of the work done by the program team "is a really big job" and that he appreciates and values these supports. David emphasizes the importance of his wife again in his educational journey saying, "especially my wife, like she's the number one… supporter that I have."

Course Content and Resources. David talks about the books and resources the program teams send to him and says, "the books that they send us … will guide you to learn the course." David also talks about the weekly lecture recordings and their importance. He says, "they recorded everything for us so even [if] we can't join the class we can still watch the class, what they did for that day. You will not miss anything because of their effort." David says that the "videos and the supports are a really big help. Without them I don't think that I [could] finish the course." David also stressed the importance of the pedagogical approaches instructors use to ensure students learn and says, "and yeah, the way they teach us you will learn."

Course Content and Resources - Benefits of Technology and Distance Education.
David says, "we can't stop the technology anymore" and provides an example: "Like back before when I was in [his country of origin], even if it is raining and there is a thunderstorm or whatever you need to show up in the class. Now it's windy, I don't want to go out, you can stay home and you can do all that [schooling using technology]." David also says, "Sometimes … course[s] are made easier for us because of the technology …. [We can connect] through Microsoft Teams, … [the instructors] used Moodle as well … [to] connect with us." There is "more [course] support there … because of that technology" [my program uses]. David recognizes that technology-enabled learning can happen anywhere and that it has become very significant in his program. David contemplates that if his program hadn't been offered at a distance he would have had to travel to Yellowknife to become a PSW. David shares that if he

moved to Yellowknife for courses, "I'm going to miss my family" and considers his studies "would take more time for school," create a financial burden on his family, and concludes that "I don't think I'll do that … course."

Challenges. When speaking about the challenges of learning at a distance, David reflects on his personal challenges and also those of the institution. Personally, David says, "Yah, I would prefer to be in class [face-to-face]." David also found it hard to get into the program because of technical issues, David says, "for me, it's really hard to enroll, check this account … forget my password and everything." In addition, David shares his challenges balancing work, school, and family, David says, "the challenges as I said I'm working as a full time, as housekeeping, besides that I'm doing [a] part-time job and doing school. At the same time, I have two kids that they are doing what they call 'home school' [and they need to be taught]." David also became ill and talks about the experience as a "really big struggle" and about how he had to manage his work, school, and family-life balance while "doing all that kind of stuff, while doing school." David explains, "First I'm just doing the part-time course and then I stopped for a while and then they open[ed] another full time [cohort] and I took the year and a half like that." David says, "I almost [gave] up, I almost quit, but because of my instructor and my wife [they kept pushing me to] just finish it. 'It's just three months, its just four months, finish this, David.'"

David also acknowledges institutional challenges and says, "sometimes, at the beginning it's hard because [of the effort required by college] … just starting the long-distance course sometimes." David remembers the institutional IT challenges and says that by "the middle of the course they improve[d] the technology, the IT did well." David was also not aware of other students studying in his community and program. "There are other students studying here but at the time we didn't know each other."

One Word to Describe Why You are Successful. David chose two words, "happy family," to describe his success, and explains his choice. David says, "As a father, [I am] what they call …[a] motivator for my kids… I need to give them wherever they want. [This doesn't] mean that you're gonna spoil them or whatever. But if you haven't finished this [program then maybe] … you can't get a full time job, you will be stressed. [If you're] less stressed [you are more available] and [have] more time with your kids. Yeah, yes and at the same time you… [are more] focus[ed] on your family because you're not thinking about losing your job. You're not thinking about tomorrow [and needing to find a job to provide for your family] … I'm just a high school graduate [but] now I can say… I'm a PSW and everything makes my family happy."

Most Important Thoughts from the Interview. When David was asked what he wanted to be remembered for from his interview, his first point was that taking the PSW program has "given him confidence." Second, David says, "I say… [that] I'm happier now with my life now because I can say now, I'm a confident person." David is grateful that "they launched this long distance" program. David also recognizes that creating a distance program was difficult for the Program Head and instructors; he says, "although its hard for them, they still tried their best to launch this kind of long distance [program] and it's really … help[ed] us [students], *thank you*."

Final Thoughts. David says, "I just wanted to add like I just took this course because I see people in long-term [and recognize] how they need a person, [how they] need … personal care." The needs David speaks of include every "aspect of their life, like emotional, physical, mentally, illness, that they have right now in long-term [care]." David says that those of "us that have [an] education … [need to] help to at least less their pain on their life." David says, "I care for them because I feel their pain … I don't know … their background and everything but for me I prefer to make them happy." David explains, "I know some of them they do not want to be in

long term, they want to stay in their family." David emphasises, *"We* are the replacement as their

family. We need to give the care that they need. [It's] not all about money." David concludes

saying, "Like you going to be older one day as well … we're going on this kind of stage [of life]

one day … and then we [will] need that care as well. We need to start humanity now … paying it

forward … that's what I believe. My mom *will* be there for sure, I need good care for her as

well."

"When I finished the program, it opened a lot [of opportunities] for me." Currently David

isn't working as a PSW; he says, "now, I'm working as rehab. They hired me as rehab because I

had certification as a PSW. Then they send me on training instead of hiring someone outside

from [his northern community] … and then when they need people to help in as Healthcare Aide

or RCA, we call it RCA here, in [his northern community]. They pull me to help them especially

in pandemic times, like when the elder gets … COVID." Taking the PSW program opened up

opportunities above and beyond what David thought was possible.

#11 Dora's Distance Education Story

This final interview was conducted with Dora, a student studying at a distance in the

Personal Support Worker program, with Monica, Dora's mentor and long-time friend. Dora is an

Inuvialuit woman raised in the high arctic; she says, "I am an Inuvialuit from … the Northwest

Territories raised by my grandparents [in the] small town of [a high arctic community]."

This is where Dora chose "a healing path" and "wanted to help our … Aboriginal people.

Knowing that this course was available that I could enroll to help people where I come from …

[I] grabbed at the chance just giving back to our Aboriginal people, giving back to the elders, and

giving back to our grandparents because I was always raised with them, learning to respect our

elders because … growing up, that's what we were taught." Dora says, "at an early age I learned

to take care of our elders." Dora acknowledges her grandparents, her husband and three children. Dora says, "my husband taught me and my three daughters … to better our lives. My husband was a big encouragement."

Monica identifies herself as a "Metis woman from [a south slave community]," and acknowledges her parents saying that her parents had 16 children, "and there's still 11 of us still alive ... eight [children] live here in [a south slave community]." Monica also shares that, "both of my parents lived in the care home that I worked in … that's why I went into the [profession] … my parents always taught us that we look after the people that went before us and just pay it forward."

As a lifelong learner, Dora began her postsecondary journey in other programs before enrolling in the Personal Support Worker (PSW) program. Dora says, "I needed something positive. I went back to school and then the ladies in college helped me, they wanted me to go into this other program that's called the Furrier's program, it was a three-year diploma course. I learned to make parkas and mitts and hats and gloves, I learned to make everything with fur. So, I took up furriers and I worked with Furriers." After completing the Furrier program and working in that field for a while, Dora says, "then I came to Fort Smith to a cooking course, and I finished that course [the Aid Cook program was also] hands-on. And then I got involved with the elder's home … I just was drawn to help even though I was working in the kitchen, [as an] Aid Cook. I always felt drawn to help them [elders] and I didn't know that at first that I wasn't supposed to help them. But I was wanting to help. I can assist them to walk to the bathroom, assist them to get up on their chair, assist them to … just assisting them. One of my friends Monica encouraged me to do a PSW." Dora was concerned and was worried about getting involved in the program,

but Monica encouraged Dora and says, 'you would be good at it' so Dora says, "I stepped into the role."

Dora was always drawn to the profession and says, "I was always wanting to help, volunteer here, volunteering there, not really feeling a fulfillment in [other] … role[s] in my life. Stepping into the role of a PSW … it was kind of intimidating but my friend here Monica really encouraged me and says, 'you can do it, you can do it.'" Monica says to Dora, this is 'where you belonged and Dora says: "Yah, where I belonged." Reflecting back Dora says, "I've been at it for … 13 years … before I went into … the schooling.

Engagement. Dora decided to enroll in the program and says that the PSW program "came up as a … pilot project and [the college] delivered right away … even though it … wasn't through our work … and I thought okay, this is what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna apply for this program. And so I did, and I was doing some 7.5 hour shifts at the time. And we were doing three rotations, there was a day shift, an evening shift and a night shift and then I would exchange with helping the girls with a dayshift so I could be available in the evening for the program. Going to the college at Fort Smith and we were taking evening classes around seven o'clock. And we started like that for a little while because it was available to us … and we called ourselves 'Groovie Grannies.'" Dora also shares that, "there was other places where we were online taking part … there was a group of six of us in Smith and then there was a group in Hay River of six, we had different little communities all during the same time." When Dora was asked about her teacher, she says, "She was in Yellowknife." Dora's program began before COVID however when COVID restrictions came into effect they impacted Dora's and her classmates' learning. Dora says, "So we were doing this for a little while and then COVID hit. So, we had to be six feet distance in our class and then all of a sudden, we couldn't go to classes

no more. So, we're started to do the program online [through Zoom and] three different programs online." Dora says, "It was a struggle because they kept on going into different programs, into the virtual. Teams was the last one we used."

Dora talks a little about her experiences during COVID and says, "It was all good. I really enjoyed doing that. Because then we can work out of our own homes … we weren't able to be in the class." Because of poor broadband connections and unstable internet, Dora says, "when you first started it was taking up too much [broadband capacity] … we're getting cut off and … we couldn't have our faces on[line] … but we could listen and then whenever we had a question we would flash our hand up and then the teacher would say 'Dora you have a question?' and then we would be able to partake in the conversation."

Dora talks about what it was like to learn virtually, she says, "So I could take part on my phone or on the computer and I found it better to be taking part on my phone. Like I could see the video and everything through Teams on my phone, but I found it better to be on my phone because I wasn't get cutting out, like the internet would get cut out if I was on the computer. Yeah. Because sometimes, you know, when there's too many users … you get cut off. So, my phone would just automatically click into its own … Wi Fi. Yeah, so that was good, and the thing too was that we can partake *anywhere*, let's say I was attending my medical appointment and I was assigned to take part in this course. I would be able to take part in the course even though I wasn't in the community." Travel for medical appointments sometimes requires people to leave their remote communities, to attend appointments in urban centers. Dora comments about this when talking about the benefits of studying at a distance. Dora says, "And another thing about the program, I was able to … attend appointments, like medical appointments, during a time where I was available." Dora also adds, "Yeah, that was best. Like

even there was at one point where you know, you, you lose family members and you know you talk to your instructors and they give you the support, so you're going through the situation and the classes are recorded so I was able to go back to a class that has been recorded and listen to it … you can hear your fellow students having conversations. So that was good because it felt like I was right part of it but wasn't able to input right there. So, three days later, I was able to get back into the course that I missed and then catch up."

Supportive Relationships. When Dora was asked about the relationships that helped her to be successful in her program, Dora says, "Relationships with the instructor were really good and my fellow students … I work with a lady named May, we worked together for many years and our relationship was always good." Dora says that May was one of the Groovy Grannies. Dora also spoke about the Groovie Grannies and the importance of their connections in the program. Although Dora was able to connect with her cohort in person before the pandemic, she was only able to connect with the other South Slave community cohort online. Dora also credits her mentor Monica and says, "I just wanted to say too that when I started in this position of Care Aide, I was encouraged by Monica, she was my mentor, she is the one that had trained me and I just wanted to put that out there too because without her encouragement I probably would never have stepped into the position." When Dora was asked if it was hard for her to connect to her instructors at a distance Dora says, "No, it was easy because you could connect with them through the internet or you could give them a phone call."

Course Content and Resources. When Dora was asked about course resources and textbooks, Dora says, "Well the class materials, we weren't really getting any of that because it was a pilot project right? So, we were doing all of it online and whatever we needed print out we were able to print it out at the college or at our job, work. And then only in the last part of the

course we got our books." When Dora was asked about where she got her knowledge from the course and what was most helpful for her learning, Dora says, "It was being part of the course, it wasn't the books." Dora's learning came from her experiences, from "where I'm working. I already knew most of this because it was hands-on right? And so going through the course it was it was just like, 'oh, yeah, oh yeah, yah I did that.'"

Assignments and Assessments. When Dora was asked about assignments and assessments, she says, "Yes, yes, there was tests." Dora explains that when COVID hit "we did our tests … we went virtual and we brought the camera into our site, or our home, and we practiced on teddy bears. I had a big stuffy as one of my patients." Instructors were able to assess Dora virtually, by using a stuffy as a patient; Dora says, "I checked his temperature [and] I checked his vitals." Dora also talks about her written assignments and says, "we had papers, too, and assignments and tests we do on the computer." Dora was able to submit assignments through email and Moodle.

Challenges. When Dora decided to enroll in the program, she says, "We didn't have a manager at the time, we had a supervisor/manager, and I was trying to get into this course. I just didn't have the support. They [administration] were saying I didn't need it [certification] because I was grandfathered-in and I had nothing to worry about but I really wanted it [to earn the certificate]. [I had] no support and I had to do it on my own." Dora says, "when it [the program] first started [we had] … 7.5 hours shifts, this was a pilot course. And then all of a sudden in the last edit of the course they said, 'okay now we have to charge you course fees.' So, we got in the manager, she's got control …. the course which was free and then all of a sudden you had to pay for it; it needed like the employers involved. And now it's a thing they [Care Aides] have to get. You have to get their certificate that's like being pushed."

Dora describes the impact of shift work when she began the program. Dora says, "The eight-hour shifts allowed [me] to be able to [book] time off … [for] this course but after … we turned over to the 12-hour [shifts] … it was harder. I was having to try to do shift exchange for 12 hours and no body wanted to do shift exchange." Dora talks about what it was like studying at work during a shift and says, "I'm off the hook for an hour so my coworkers didn't like that … I was able to sit on the computer while they were all working so that caused conflict." Dora adds, "it was even hard to take the course at our worksite [to] get on the computer [and] to be in session for the one hour or an hour and a half. [I] … wasn't able to do [it] … they emailed me and said that I had to figure out another way to do this course." Jackie says, "my supervisor/ manager just didn't support [studying at work] so I had to take leave of my own … to attend the course … but that was just the ending of the course. So, thank God it was not the whole course." Dora is concerned about other students who are considering enrolling in the program in the future and says, "I don't know how they're going to do it with the 12 hours now." Monica adds, "So they're not helping people succeed in doing that. It's just another stumbling block because people would just quit, right, and say 'I can't do it.'"

Monica speaks about program accessibility in relation to students' literacy limitations and says, "you know, a lot of workers do not have a lot of education, mostly, I would say most of them have neither." Because of work experience and low literacy, many RCAs and PSWs are grandfathered-in without needing to get certified. Monica says, "But it limits the amount of Indigenous people that can come into the workplace, as the [employment] criteria are now more than doubled." Monica also adds that for those like Dora that want to earn their certificate, "because you have to have a course if your education was not good, you have to go back to school. There's, there's so many stumbling blocks put in place. So, they [potential students] just

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say 'well, I can't [do that], I don't have that, so there's no point,' and yet they have the heart and soul for the people. They don't have the finances or the resources to do it." Monica adds, "But it's the education that's stopping a lot of people. Like, they may be able to learn verbally, but there are certain amount of writing involved and you have to be able to do that part of the job. You need to be able to write it down. You know, it's just it's, it's a cycle because it stops people from succeeding. You know, I see lots of people that don't have certificates that work circles around people that have certificates, but don't have the heart and soul for residents, you know you're always going to have a bit of that. So, I've seen all kinds of different ways of mentoring people within the workplace. It's doable. But I don't know how governments would feel about putting the resources there." Monica suggests that the college could "actually have a course where they help somebody you know, find where they're learning at and help them how they, for example, some of them can't write anything down …. Some people just want to get, get a little bit of education … the shortest route to succeed." Monica also identifies another critical challenge saying, "Childcare is a huge thing. If you can't take care of your kids and your family, you can't even think about going on to school, if you do you rely social assistance to survive. It's not fair ... I've seen it many times."

One Word to Describe Why You are Successful. When Dora was asked for one word to describe herself, she says, "I would say '*resilient*.'" Dora explains, "Well I would say, my faith in God [and] help from [my] family and friends to continue, to encourage me. [Dora has a deep appreciation] that the push for where I come from, and [an awareness of] how much more I could do to help people … I am … in a facility that I can help elders; it brings me an honor that I can do that for them at the end of life. [When] you put yourself in that position you can have a friendly face, a helping hand, and a kind heart. You know it's what I would want in my end days

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… respecting how my grandparents looked after me … and just helping them in the end of [their] life." Monica also responds and says, "so what can I tell you about this girl in front of me here [is], I can tell you she is one of the most resilient people I know and what strikes me about Dora every time I spend time with her. She teaches me something, she thinks outside the box and her goal is *always* the best for the residents but that's for the elders … she is [also] learning that looking after herself as well as looking after people, which was hard for people that have been caregivers since they were children, [can be] very hard. You know, and she's taking every course to better yourself."

  Final Thoughts. - Policy Change Impacts on Elders' Care. Dora identifies that many of the changes occurred after the policy changes for a 12-hour work shift were implemented, and says, "its almost like with this big change in the 12 hours its almost getting to be institutionalized again. We're no longer working in their home and they're in our workplace." Prior to the changes, Monica says, "We were a team like that … it felt like a home you know, like family. Like you're playing a card game all together, you're eating together, then you're cooking together, you're playing games together …. Now it's everything is on time base and you don't go by the elders" [preferences and needs]. When comparing practices between the North and southern Canada, Monica also says, "when I started working at the home here, in comparison to the homes down south, there was a huge level of respect for elders." Part of that difference lies in the attitudes of staff: "We don't live in our work, in our workplace. We work in *their* home. Right, and that's the difference." Dora echoes, "we're working in their home, it's not the other way around." Dora says, "we used to have elders come in, they used to help bake." Monica adds, "We were just there assisting them [baking] cookies and everything." Monica says, "We'd hold dances on a Friday night, it was fun" and she adds that it feels like, "we're going backwards."

Monica also shares, "one of the residents thought she was back in the convent, which is residential school. You know because she said, 'don't smell anything cooking' … we have the blue bedspreads and white walls, and they paint all the walls white, and they won't give us anything but blue bedspreads. We used to have all colors of bedspreads when I first started there and all the walls were colored. So, like, we've gone backwards." Monica says, "I'm not sure how I turn that train around … I'm going to be a resident there one day." Monica reflects on positive aspects of the current working environment and says, "we have a really good resident recreational therapist … [she's] excellent … she['s] only one person. She's just a young gal but she's really good and she's got a super kind heart."

Monica says, "the hands-on people always know best ... they know the needs of the people ... we had a really great team of people [that worked] … double shifts … and ma[d]e sure the family connections were always encouraged and their families were encouraged." Monica says that their roles are more challenging now because, "here are so many policies and so many rules … [that] some of the families [aren't able to] step … foot in there [elder's center] because of the policies."

Dora shares her thoughts on the impacts of her facility changing from staff working an eight-hour to 12-hour shifts and says, "I realize that as we … did a lot more for them [during] our eight hours shifts. Now that we changed over to the 12-hour shift it's just not the same. We know less of our elders … we spend less time with our elders, and they're not getting the top care … With the eight-hour shifts … I was there everyday so I knew what was going on every day. Like they had a bruise on their leg, I would know when that happened. So, with the 12-hour shift I'm off for days and I come back and, you know, the resident's got a bruise and I don't even know where that c[a]me from so I have to follow up … we see a lot of this." Dora adds, "we lose track

of elders and what's going on with them." Dora also says that "The PSW is hands-on care so there is a lot of burnout. Yeah, and it's not just that it's like mental fatigue. You're not only dealing with your work, you're dealing with your work, at home life as well, [and] your personal life."

Monica reflects on her educational experience in the PSW program and says, "I took this course many, many decades ago. And part of that, the biggest impact that course had on me, was communication … it helped me see how I communicated and how others communicate. There's many ways to communicate." Monica adds that communication has changed and says, "communication is a huge thing within our workplace, but it's always a very top-down kind of communication." Monica shares that, "LPNs [Licensed Practical Nurses] and RCAs [Registered Care Aides] … work together on the regular bases [but] now we're divided, totally not grouped together. Now, LPNs only need to know this, and RCA only need to know that, it's not a team effort. Before we used to catch things: we used to catch diseases, we used to catch infections, we used to catch all kinds of things for the residents, cuz we all knew the information." Dora adds, "We even had housekeeping and kitchen involved in our meetings because we're all serving one party right? We're all serving the elders and how best can we serve them." Monica adds, "it's totally divided and … not a good thing. It's like [there are] little camps now and it used to be a team, you know." Monica summarizes, "We are just inundated with hundreds of policy changes since I started there. There's a policy for everything."

Final Thoughts – Dora's Continuing Journey. Dora has successfully completed the PSW certificate and continues to work in an Elders' Care facility in a South Slave community. Dora says, "Of course I'm glad I did it, [completing the certificate is] a little medal of mine." Dora also says that she would be able to share her "knowledge [with elders] in acute care [and]

to their loved ones in their homes. I would be able to mentor them." Dora has also identified the importance of other programs she has participated in and says, "I was gonna say that you know the supportive pathways too is, I think is, part of my learning as a PSW, you know, just learning to communicate with the residents or elders … you know in the moment with them, what they're going through." Dora also has future aspirations and says, "I also want to acknowledge that if I would go to my community that doesn't have an elder's home … I could still help the elders."

Summary

This chapter summarized the perceptions of 11 students and their experiences in three distance education programs at Aurora College: the Certificate in Adult Education, the Early Learning Childcare program, and the Personal Support Worker program. Chapter 5 will provide an interpretive account of these stories, describing common threads that join these students between their distance education journeys and respective programs.

Chapter 5. Interpretive Analysis

Overview

Chapter 4 provided 11student narratives, using socio-narratology, to better understand those students' success through their perceptions of program engagement, relationships, course formats, assessments, and challenges within their respective programs. Chapter 5 describes and analyzes threads across the students' narratives, identifying common themes between their stories. I will discuss the common threads within each program and summarize the collective narratives. The common threads between the students' narratives do not suggest casual relationship between students or their perceptions, but rather illustrates where the stories connect and how their perceptions and experiences are relatable to each other across remote distance education and learning. The common threads that bind the students' stories together provide insight into engagement, relationships, course format, and pedagogical practices. Through their stories it is possible to anchor common perceptions to scholarship about these students' engagement, supports, and relationships. This chapter provides a thematic summary of the students' interviews within, and across, the three programs.

Certificate in Adult Education Program Theme Summary

Overview

The following common threads were identified by two student participants from the Certificate in Adult Education (CAED) program. This is a professional program that supports faculty in developing instructional skills. Both students were born and raised in the North, one student is Indigenous, the other is non-Indigenous. Both students consider themselves to be lifelong learners, both have master's degrees, and both have studied in face-to-face and distance

education environments. One student has adult children; the other student does not have children. Both students are employed in the field of education.

Engagement

The Certificate in Adult Education students identified and emphasized the importance of connecting with others, using chat functions and break-out rooms, and participating in practical applications during class time, as necessary for effective engagement leading to students' success. Both students identified exemplary instructors in their program and explained how these instructors "made us feel like there was no screen." Both students provided examples of how exemplary instructors integrated program outcomes across courses. Both students also emphasized how instructional supports improved program experiences and how impactful instructors' flexibility and relational supports contributed to their development. Each individual stressed that opportunities for collaborating, exploring, and pursuing self-interest regarding topics within their program contributed to their meaningful engagement and purposeful learning. Both students appreciated the instructors' use of contextually meaningful topics relating to northern examples, pertinent to their learning, and expressed how each of these exchanges contributed to engagement and connection. Finally, one student spoke about the disengagement that occurs through struggles that exist due to barriers for Indigenous students.

Relationships

Relationships were considered essential and significant for both CAED students who identified exemplary instructors and the importance of relationships with instructors and with other students. Both students agreed that wrap-around supports, such as the coordination efforts between administrative, instructional, and program personnel, were also essential in their educational development and success. Relationships can be broken into five categories: personal

(family, friends and mentors), professional (work related), other students and colleagues, faculty and/or instructional staff, and administrative (administrative supports and program heads). Both students stressed the importance of all categories of relationships including personal (i.e., dad, mom, aunt, son, friends), professional (colleagues, manager), other students, faculty and/or instructional staff (instructors, professors), and administrative (program staff) relationships.

Course Format, Content, and Resources

Many aspects of course format, content, and resources were significant for the CAED students. Both stressed the importance of clear guidelines for learning and the use of multi-modal forms of teaching and learning. Both students valued teaching approaches that included the instructor's mini-lectures, class discussions, and applications to real-life experiences. They also appreciated autonomy and support to pursue their own passions and valued when instructors encouraged personal learning opportunities related to personal, professional, and academic interests. Both discussed how improvements have been made over the years to course format, content, and resources since the CAED program moved to virtual, online delivery. One student expressed their gratitude for virtual course offerings because they have reduced barriers due to travel requirements to attend specific parts of the CAED program, specifically the ability to enroll and complete courses such as the Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW). Both students said exemplary learning occurred when assignments, assessments, and course evaluations were clear. Receiving a course syllabus and schedule was also necessary, and although receiving a class survey for course planning prior to the commencement of a course was not expected, it was deeply appreciated. The students also identified that bad learning experiences included not receiving a course syllabus or an outline and not understanding course outcomes. Finally, neither

student appreciated being talked at but preferred being involved in collaborative discussions and being engaged in the learning process.

Assessment and Evaluation

The central focus of assessment and evaluation in the CAED program is to facilitate the professional development of instructional faculty and staff. Both students appreciated the opportunity to engage in purposeful and meaningful learning. Both valued the opportunity to self-select topics of interest in their assignments, to give and receive feedback to/from class members, and to receive formative feedback from their instructors. Both students identified and valued constructive criticism and feedback and commented that it was essential to their learning. These students also appreciated the use of critical reflection in assessment and evaluation and the impact this had on deep learning.

Challenges

Both CAED students acknowledged that striving for work-life balance is necessary when pursuing post secondary education, but it was not always possible. They suggested that time constraints and professional responsibilities sometimes need to take precedence over studies. Another challenge that one student identified related to when instructors come from a place of power. They stated that this could immobilize some students, especially when issues of racism, white privilege, or colonialism are evident. Issues related to money, the ability to access classes online, and other life responsibilities also impact learning at a distance.

Laurillard's Framework Components – Certificate in Adult Education Program

Laurillard's conversational framework (2012) identifies six main learning types: acquisition, collaboration, discussion, inquiry/investigation, practice, and production. Each learning type is supported by the use of digital tools that foster and support student learning. The

students' interviews were analyzed to determine which teaching methods and digital learning

tools were used to support students' interactions, activities, and the feedback they received. The

following learning tools were identified by CAED participants and include the use of five of the

six learning tools identified by Laurillard. By integrating multiple digital tools, students are

provided with a robust learning environment to engage, learn, and develop deeply. This diversity

illustrates a deeply developed pedagogy and learner-centered philosophy. Table 3 below

provides the list of digital tools identified by the two CAED students interviewed.

Table 3

Laurillard's Conversational Framework: Certificate in Adult Education Program

Laurillard's Learning Type	Learning Tools Identified
Acquiring	Mini online lectures
	Instructor shared PPT
	Supplementary handouts
	Shared lecture notes post-class
Inquiring/Investigating	None identified
Producing	Practical projects - creating diagram
	Group assignments
Discussing	Break-out room discussions.
	Talk in main online course
	Use of chat functions
Practicing	Synchronous online activities
	Practice ISW skills
Collaborating	Group assignments
	Group presentations

Early Learning and Childcare Program Theme Summary

Overview

The following common threads were identified by students interviewed in the Early

Learning and Childcare (ELCC) program. Seven students were interviewed; two were born and

raised in the North, one is a longtime northerner (> 15years), and four are new to the North (< 2

years). Two students are Indigenous, four are non-Indigenous, and one is a recent immigrant to

Canada. Of the seven students, three consider themselves to be lifelong learners. Six of the seven

learners had previous postsecondary education experiences. Of the six that have postsecondary

education, three have studied in face-to-face environments, whereas the remaining three have

studied at a distance. All six of the learners that have studied in postsecondary education have

credentials, three earned diplomas and three earned degrees. Six of the seven students have

children varying in age from newborn to adult, and one student has no children. All seven

learners are currently employed in the early learning and childcare profession or related fields

(i.e., early learning, daycare, or Montessori environments).

Engagement

Student engagement occurs through online instructional and peer connections and is

considered essential to students' success in this program. Although each student attributes their

success to a variety of reasons, most interns emphasized the importance of relationships and

being motivated by other students, instructors, and their colleagues. Weekly synchronous

sessions were also identified as invaluable and allowed students to apply what they learned in

their work experience during the previous week. Weekly online lectures, including activities and

discussions, allow students to build real-time connections, to network, and to develop support

systems. These support systems include the ability to ask instructors and other students questions

in a timely manner and the opportunity to develop skills related to technological applications and

writing skills for their critical reflections. Students also appreciated practical applications and

support for the Collaborative Assessment Profile (CAP) writing during class time activities.

Connections to instructors (4), to other students (4), and to reliable broadband and stable internet

(2) were important and contributed to their success. Other students said that practical application

was an excellent way to connect work to practice (3). Many interns are motivated because they love their discipline and "see a ton of value in children" (4) and attribute their success to their natural abilities to work with children (6). Six out of the seven interns interviewed indicated that their time management abilities were a contributing factor, helping them to be engaged and successful in their schooling. Other personal attributes include personal drive and motivation, enjoying challenges, and having positive personal beliefs about themselves. Others had to work through past negative experiences, such as low self esteem caused by previous experience in residential schools in order to succeed in their studies.

Relationships

Relationships are important and significant for all ELCC students and can be broken into five categories: personal (family, friends, and philosophies), professional (work related), other students and colleagues, faculty and/or instructional, and administrative (administrative supports and program heads). Almost all interns expressed the importance of all relationship categories including personal (6), professional (2), other students and interns (6), faculty and/or instructional staff (5), and administrative (5) relationships.

Course Format, Content, and Resources

Many aspects of the course format, content, and resources were significant for most of the interns in the ELCC program. Four of the interns interviewed expressed the importance of weekly synchronous online Teams classes to support their learning. Three identified connections to instructors, students, and other people as essential to their success. Three students also identified technological connections as significant, identifying the need for accessible, stable, and consistent broadband and internet capacity as essential to their success. Two students also appreciated the time and connection to others from across the NWT, while two others

appreciated the ability to connect to their northern context in the online classes. Two of the seven students appreciated how experiential learning combined with work experience balances newly acquired knowledge and skills with experiences students are developing. Three of the students appreciated the use of critical reflection integrated into their course format and learning but felt that there was not enough time in the courses to complete the course components well.

The inconsistency in course layout was confusing to some students. Although many of the students appreciated how courses were formatted, two students suggested that courses could be more systematically formatted so they would not lose sight of necessary course components. An example provided by two students was the location and submission of Padlet activities and assignments in Moodle. In addition, two of seven students criticized the pedagogical approaches in their asynchronous courses, suggesting that group work should not be used for marked activities and assignments if students had no other point of contact or connection in the course. Pedagogical practices to teaching and learning must be consistent with distance delivery modalities, to provide the best earning experience for students. Finally, two students wanted to be clear that not all students had the same, or equitable, work experiences.

Assessment and Evaluation

The central focus of assessment and evaluation in the ELCC program was the CAP. CAP is a learning and assessment tool, using reflective practice to connect interns' experiences with their course assessments. Students indicated that these assessments required a lot of thinking, writing, and rewriting. Although six of the seven interns interviewed preferred synchronous online learning to traditional methods, three interns consistently expressed that CAP assessments were sometimes inconsistent and confusing across courses. In addition, although four of seven students preferred reflections to traditional testing methods, two students felt that improvements

could be made to improve the gradebook set up and feedback functions in Moodle. There was a split between interns that felt they had professional supports and access to present experiences and others who felt that their experiences were not current or relevant. These experiences are the basis of the intern's reflections and an essential criterion for program success.

Challenges

Students expressed a need for more technology-orientated support (3) based on frustrations with upload and download difficulties, access to broadband, internet, hardware (e.g., computers, printers), and software (e.g., Teams, Zoom, CAP applications). Challenges were also shared about course formatting; students are not always sure where to submit their activities and assignments. Common submission locations were through Padlet, Moodle drop boxes, or email. Challenges also existed with interns in their workspaces where work requirements did not align with program requirements, such as roles and responsibilities within school systems that restricted an intern's ability to conduct activities required for their coursework. Four interns expressed challenges with time constraints, three with work-life balance, and two with self-care, as well as learning challenges. Three interns also expressed that distance education is a long process, and can be isolating, but was their only choice for obtaining a postsecondary education. Finally, interns struggled with frustrations around word count limitations, feeling lost in the learning process, and the amount of time CAP entries took to prepare.

Laurillard's Framework Components – Early Learning and Childcare Program

The following learning tools were identified by the ELCC students interviewed and include the use of all six learning types identified by Laurillard: acquisition, collaboration, discussion, inquiry/investigation, practice, and production. Students in the ELCC program were the only participants in this study who identified digital tools employed in all six of the learning

category types. Integrating multiple digital tools also provided the ELCC students with a robust

environment in which to engage, learn, and develop deeply. This diversity illustrates a deeply

developed pedagogy and learner-centered philosophy in this distance program. Table 4 below

provides the list of digital tools identified by the seven ELCC interns interviewed.

Table 4

Laurillard's Conversational Framework: Early Learning and Childcare Program

Laurillard's Learning Type	Learning Tools identified
Acquiring	Live, synchronous online lectures
	Instructor shares, knowledge, information, and experience
	Instructional support online "clears things up; it helps me quite a bit"
	Documents and resources are invaluable
	Links to websites
Inquiring/Investigating	Padlet
Producing	Padlet Practical Projects
	CAP Excel
	Reflections in Moodle forums and on CAP excel spreadsheet
	Difficulty uploading assignments (skills, broadband, no computer)
Discussing	Break-out room discussions
	Connecting with students & instructors weekly
	Forum posts - can already see others because they met online
	Can see & feel instructors & other interns online
	Synchronous discussion about how you think & feel
	Asynchronous - Facebook Connections
Practicing	Very hands-on practicing
	Weekly activities
Collaborating	Break-out room activities

Personal Support Worker Program Theme Summary

Overview

Two students were interviewed in the Personal Support Worker (PSW) program. One

student was born and raised in the north and is Indigenous and the second student is a recent

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immigrant to Canada. One of the students considers themselves to be a life-long learner. Both students had previous post-secondary experience in face-to-face environments, however only one had earned diploma credentials. Both students interviewed have children; one has adult children, and the other has school-aged children. Both students are employed in the healthcare field as Personal Support Workers.

Engagement

Engagement for both students occurred through direct contact and encouragement from the Program Head and instructors. One student also received encouragement and support from their mentor to pursue and complete the PSW program. Both students said that instructor and instructional support were essential; without the support of these significant people neither student would have completed the program.

Three cohorts existed in the three separate communities of Fort Smith, Norman Wells, and Hay River. One student was connected to, and supported by, students in their cohort; the other student was not. They only became aware of other students in their community after program completion. The student who was connected to their community cohort indicated that being connected to other students, even though they did not meet them, kept them engaged and supported in learning. They appreciated the community of practice that developed between students and formed a smaller study group called the "Groovy Grannies" to support one another in the learning process. They also identified that connecting in Microsoft Teams helped to engage them in class and allowed them to partake in real-time conversations.

Technological issues were identified as an important factor that could either promote or disengage students in the learning process. Administrative support staff helped in program application, troubleshooting, and technology support to resolve issues for students. Both students

identified the importance of instructional support in solving technological issues, accessing

course resources, and motivating students. Although both students emphasized that technology

created the opportunity to study at a distance, without which they would not have been able to

study at all, both students identified significant challenges with the use of technology. Examples

of technological challenges included administrative roadblocks in applying and registering for

the program, difficulties getting access to the software applications used, and internet and

broadband limitations. Each student worked with their instructors and Program Head to resolve

their issues and complete the program. Both students said that they would not have been able to

resolve their issues on their own and acknowledged the essential need for the instructional and

administrative supports provided by the Program Head and instructors in their program. One

student also said that they became disengaged when they were unable to keep up with the

changes between the various programs (e.g., Zoom, Teams). Both students also emphasized the

importance of recorded lectures and the opportunity to go back and listen to the recorded lectures

so that they never had to miss a class. Both agreed that technology allowed them to learn on their

own time.

Disengagement

Both students agreed that technology increased their frustration and disengagement. One

student was more impacted by administrative challenges whereas the other student was impacted

by changes with various applications. The need to switch from Zoom, to Teams, to Moodle was

frustrating and confusing, causing the student to disengage from learning. Both students agreed

that instructional and administrative supports reduced this frustration. Finally, struggles

continued to exist due to barriers for Indigenous students regarding language, literacy, policies

issues, and other systemic barriers, making programs inaccessible for many Indigenous students.

Relationships

Relationships were considered essential and significant for both Personal Support Worker students. Both students expressed the importance of four of the five relationship categories including personal (i.e., grandparents, spouse, children, mentor), other students and interns (i.e., students, Groovy Grannies), faculty and/or instructional staff (instructors) and administrative (Program Head) relationships.

Course Format, Content, and Resources

Many aspects of the course format, content, and resources were significant for the PSW students. Weekly online lectures and instructional supports were essential for both students. One student indicated that they would not be able to complete the program without the synchronous lectures or support. Both students agreed that the video recordings were a big help when they were unable to attend classes. One student indicated that they were able to partake in classes anywhere, at anytime. Distance education was the only option for both students who both lived in small, remote communities. One student indicated that the pedagogical approaches used by the instructors supported students' learning, saying "the way they teach us you will learn." Online resources were provided in pdfs, that students could print at the local campus or learning center. Both students indicated that books were not used until the end of the program and that the knowledge in the course came from sharing work experiences and instructors' knowledge about elder care. Using technology made learning possible in the smaller communities but required a lot of time and attention by students, instructors, and administration. Adaptations were shared by one student who found it easier to connect to the courses through their mobile device instead of joining through computer connections. This was due to broadband and connectivity issues.

Assessment and Evaluation

The central focus of assessment and evaluation in the PSW program was based on the student's understanding of their hands-on work experience and knowledge in their field. Assessments were based on written assignments, papers, and tests that were completed on the computer and submitted by email or through Moodle. Virtual demonstration tests were important to demonstrate knowledge and students' abilities; these were assessed by instructors during demonstrations. Each student's hands-on workplace knowledge supported and reinforced their learning in the virtual classroom.

Challenges

PSW students expressed challenges related to technology, program accessibility, and impacts on professional relationships. There were many technology-related challenges identified by the PSW students. Initially students' broadband and internet connections were not stable or robust enough to provide both audio and video access to virtual synchronous lectures. Student were able to hear the lecture and see presentations with delays but did not have the capacity to use their own video functions. Streaming lectures required students to turn off their videos to ensure connections did not freeze or drop students from the class. One student found using their personal mobile phone provided more stable and secure connections. Using a mobile phone allowed the student to see faces and hear voices without delays. Another student had technical issues relating to the student records system that required the assistance of the Program Head to resolve the issues. These institutional challenges were resolved by the middle of the program. Other work-related challenges arose due to the elders' care home changing staff hours from an 8-hour to a 12-hour shift. This change in work hours made it difficult for students to trade shifts and attend online classes. A lack of managerial support left one student to complete their

program on their own time resulting in impacts to professional relationships and leaving them to find ways to accommodate shift change challenges. These inconsistencies between program and work requirements may impact future students and their ability to access and complete the program. The mentor who was interviewed identified additional impacts and challenges for many Indigenous students. Indigenous students experience additional challenges related to work experience and low literacy levels, making programs inaccessible. Both students also identified work-life balance as a challenge, stated that face-to-face programming was their preference, but were grateful that the distance option was a possibility for them.

Laurillard's Framework Components – Personal Support Worker Program

The following learning tools were identified by the PSW students interviewed and include the use of four of the six categories identified by Laurillard (2012). Students interviewed in the PSW program focused on acquiring, producing, and discussing digital tools. They did not identify digital tools from either the inquiring or collaborating learning types identified by the framework. The use of the digital tools identified supported the hands-on work, relational practices, the philosophy of the PSW program, and the emphasis on the doing of the work in this field. Table 5 below provides the list of digital tools identified by the two students interviewed in the PSW program.

Table 5

Laurillard's Conversational Framework: Personal Support Worker Program

Laurillard's Learning Type	Learning Tools Identified
Acquiring	Live, synchronous online lectures
	Instructors
	Real-time support in class
	Electronic handouts to print off
	Class recordings to be watched asynchronously
Inquiring/Investigating	None identified
Producing	Written assignments
	Papers
	Online tests
Discussing	Real-time online student discussions
	Synchronous online discussions with instructors
	Phone calls with instructors
	Chat functions
Practicing	Virtual demonstrations
Collaborating	None identified

Pulling Threads Together Across Programs

The following section summarizes the common threads across the programs and identifies which elements of students' distance education experiences fostered success. The students provided detailed information within their stories about engagement, supportive relationships, course format, assignments and assessments, and challenges they encountered during their studies, in their respective programs. These summaries provide an integrated look at the three programs and the elements which students identified as contributing to their success. In addition, all students interviewed identified the digital tools their program used that helped them to be successful on their educational journey. These results are also summarized across programs using Laurillard's Conversational Framework.

Overview

Eleven students were interviewed in three distance programs at Aurora College. All of the students that were interviewed identified that they were employed in their respective professions. Five out of 11 students were born and raised in the North; four of the 11 students were Indigenous. Six of the participants self-identified as lifelong learners and 10 of the 11 participants had previous postsecondary experience. Only six of the 11 students had experienced distance learning prior to enrolling in their program. Table 6 below provides a summary of these findings.

Table 6

Overview of Programs

	CAED	ELCC	PSW
Number of Participants	2	7	2
Born and raised in North	1	2	1
Longtime northerner (>15yrs)		1	
New to the North (<2yrs)		4	1
Ethnicity			
Indigenous	1	2	1
Non-Indigenous	1	4	1
Immigrant/newcomer to Canada		1	1
Lifelong Learner			
Yes	2	3	1
No		1	1
Unknown		3	
Previous PSE experience			
Yes	2	6	2
No		1	
Previous DE Experience			
Yes	2	4	0
No		3	2

Engagement

Eight of the 11 students stressed the importance of connection within their programs. Significant connections included the importance of instructional, student-to-student, and technological support. The use of practical applications was also identified by six of the 11 students as a tool to promote engagement. Technology-supported, synchronous connections that supported engagement varied by program and included: the use of chat functions, break-out rooms, and virtual conversations in synchronous classrooms. Asynchronous connections occurred in a Facebook group and from recordings of live lectures. Disengagement occurred when technology applications were inconsistent or changed frequently within a given program. In addition, Indigenous students identified barriers they experienced including racism, technology issues, and program accessibility. Finally, disengagement occurred when pedagogical practices did not align with students' expectations or practices. Table 7 below provides a summary of these findings.

Table 7

Engagement Across Programs

	CAED	ELCC	PSW
Engagement			
Importance of connection	2	4	2
Instructional connection	2	3	2
Student-to-student connection	1	5	2
Ability to ask instructor a question		3	1
Stable/Accessible broadband connection	1	1	
Access to internet and hardware		3	
Importance of technological supports		4	1
Use of practical applications	1	3	2
Synchronous connections			
Chat functions	2		
Break-out rooms	2	3	
Virtual conversations	2	3	1
Asynchronous connections			

Class recordings	2		2
Facebook		1	
Disengagement			
Changing applications and technology		3	2
Barriers for Indigenous students	1	1	1
Alignment pedagogy-student expectations	1		

Relationships

As identified previously in this chapter, relationships were divided into five categories: personal/family, (including sons, daughters, moms, dads, grandparents, mentors, and Dene law), professional (work related, supervisors, managers, colleagues), faculty and/or instructional staff, administrative (administrative program personnel and program heads) and students (students, interns, or colleagues). Each program emphasized a variety of relationships which were significant. Only the Early Learning and Childcare participants identified relationships in all five relationship categories. The importance of relationships plays a significant role in students' perceptions of their success. Table 8 below provides a summary of these relationships.

Table 8

Relationships Across Programs

Relationship	CAED	ELCC	PSW
Personal	Dad, mom, aunt, son, friends	Grandparents, mom, dad, spouse, child(ren), Dene laws, friends	Spouse, grandparents, children, mentor
Professional	Colleagues, manager	Co-workers/colleagues, supportive supervisor, manager at local daycare	
Faculty and/or instructional staff	Instructors, professors	Instructors	Instructors
Administrative		Administrative program support and Program Head	Program Head

Students, interns, or colleagues	Other students	Other students and interns, Facebook group	Other students – "Groovey Grannies"

Course Format, Content, and Resources

Seven of the 11 students appreciated the connection, flexibility, and instructional support of their distance programs. Six students across the three programs identified the importance of weekly synchronous classes and their virtual class time together. The use of critical reflection was important to five of the nine students in the CAED and ELCC programs. Students from all programs appreciated connections to other northern students whereas students in the CAED and ELCC programs also valued the application of, and connection to northern contexts in their classes. Students from all three programs appreciated that learning resources came from shared knowledge and discussions about important topics within their courses. Course layout, pedagogy, and equitable access were identified by ELCC students as challenges to course format and pedagogy. Table 9 below provides a summary of these findings.

Table 9

Course Format, Content, and Resources Across Programs

	CAED	ELCC	PSW
Course Format, Content & Resources			
Course Format			
Weekly, synchronous classes		4	2
Connection, flexibility, and support	2	3	2
Student connections	1	1	1
Appreciated lecture-talk-apply cycle	2		
Appreciated use of critical reflection	2	3	
Multi-modal forms of teaching and learning	2		
Pedagogical approaches supported learning			1
Video recordings were a big help	1		2
Ability to partake in classes anywhere	1	1	1
Mobile devices were more reliable			1
Clear guidelines	2		

Distance education was the only option		1	2
Not enough time in courses		3	
Content			
Appreciated connection to northern students	2	2	1
Appreciated connection to northern context	2	2	
Appreciated autonomy and support	2		
Ability to pursue personal interest and passion	2		
Resources			
Online resources provided in PDFs			1
Experiential + work = new knowledge		2	1
Books not used until the end of the program			1
Knowledge came from sharing and experience	2	2	2
Challenges			
Course layout confusing		2	
Pedagogy didn't align with distance format		2	
Not all interns had the same/equitable work		2	

Assessment and Evaluation

Nine of the 11 students appreciated how program evaluation facilitated their professional development. Seven students from the CAED and ELCC programs felt that the assessment techniques used were purposeful and meaningful. Two students, one in the ELCC program and one in the PSW program appreciated the opportunity to be evaluated using virtual demonstrations. Six of the 11 students in the CAED and ELCC programs appreciated the use of critical reflection in their course assessments. Table 10 below provides a summary of these findings.

Table 10

Assessment and Evaluation Across Programs

	CAED	ELCC	PSW
Assessment & Evaluation			
Evaluation facilitated professional development	2	5	2
Assessment was purposeful and meaningful	2	5	
Virtual demonstrations were effective		1	1

	CAED	ELCC	PSW
Assessments were sometimes inconsistent and confusing		3	
Written assignments and tests	2		1
Appreciated use of critical reflection in assessment	2	4	
Preferred reflections to traditional testing methods		4	
Appreciated peer-to-peer evaluation	2		
Valued constructive criticism and feedback	2		

Challenges

Seven students across all three programs identified challenges with work-life balance while studying at a distance. Six students identified time constraints as a major challenge. Three students, one within each program, also identified the barriers that exist for Indigenous students that study at a distance. These students identified barriers related to the length of time it takes students to access and complete program requirements. Challenges also exist due to broadband capacity in smaller communities and students' inability to access stable and affordable internet. Two students identified challenges related to racism and prejudice. One student identified that challenges occur when instructors come from places of power and privilege. Table 11 below provides a summary of these findings.

Table 11

Challenges Across Programs

	CAED	ELCC	PSW
Challenges			
Work-life balance	2	3	2
Times constraints	1	4	1
Need for technology support		3	1
Need stable broadband and internet connections		2	1
Distance learning only choice for PSE		3	2
Distance education is a long process		3	
Challenges and accessibility for Indigenous students	1	1	1

Instructors come from a place of power	1

Digital Tools Using Laurillard's Conversational Framework

Laurillard's conversational framework (2012) acknowledges the significance of instructor-to-student and student-to-student interactions and students' ability to regulate their learning through their practices, activities, and interactions. Approaches to distance education can be improved by applying the use of effective digital tools to learning and design science to teaching practices. Table 12 below provides a summary of the digital tools identified by the students as being effective and supporting their success.

Table 12

Digital Tools Using Laurillard's Framework

Digital Tools	CAED	ELCC	PSW
Acquiring:			
Online lectures	2	3	1
Instructor's knowledge	2	4	1
Instructor's resources (PPT slides and lecture notes)	2	3	
Supplementary documents and handouts	2	1	1
Links to website		1	
Real-time supports in class	1	3	1
Class recording	1		1
Inquiring/Investigating:			
Padlet		4	
Producing:			
Practical projects	2	2	
Written Assignments	2		1
Group Assignments	1		
Reflections	2	4	
Online tests			1
Difficulty uploading assignments		1	1
Discussing:			
Breakout rooms	2	4	
Chat functions	2		1

Forum posts		2	
Class-time discussions with students	1	3	1
Phone calls with instructors		2	2
In-class discussions with instructors	1		1
Asynchronous - Facebook Connections		1	
Practicing:			
Synchronous online activities	1	4	
Practice instructional skills	1		
Virtual online demonstrations		3	1
Collaborating:			
Group Assignments	1		
Group presentations	1		
Break-out room activities	2	3	

Students identified that the digital tools in the categories of acquiring, producing, and discussing are the most frequently used to support their program success. Students from all three programs consistently stressed the importance of real-time lectures, access to instructors' knowledge, supports, and resources, and the necessity of in-class, real-time discussions with other students. Although each program has its unique methods of producing in their programs, the production functions were essential for promoting deep learning across the three programs. For example, the CAED allowed students to self-select their outputs for the course, whereas the PSW students were required to demonstrate their skills. ELCC students integrated their experiences with their knowledge acquisition, integration, and development. It is also interesting to note that inquiring/investigating and collaborating are not identified by students in this study. Further inquiry is necessary to understand why collaboration and investigation were not emphasized by students in this study.

Summary

The following threads connect these students and interns through their stories and across their programs in remote postsecondary education:

- all student participants were employed in their field of choice.

- eight of the 11 students emphasized the importance of connection, stating that instructional connection and support and connections with other students in their programs were essential to their success.

- five of the 11 students emphasized the difficulties with technology and the importance of ensuring stable and equitable internet access for all students.

- five of the 11 students came from remote communities that have issues with internet and broadband capacity, a perennial issue that requires a permanent solution to ensure equitable access for all students.

- all three programs emphasized the importance of acquisition, production, and discussion, as the most frequently used pedagogical practices that provided meaningful supports.

Students within the CAED and ELCC programs stressed the importance of practical projects in promoting success and deepening students' knowledge and understanding. Every student stressed the importance of familial relationships as essential to their success (including grandparents, parents, spouses, children, mentor, and dene laws), as well as instructional relationships and relationships with other students in their program. Both the Certificate in Adult Education and the Early Learning and Childcare students appreciated the reflective nature of their programs, whereas students within the Personal Support Worker program were focused on experiential, hands-on learning. These differences in teaching and learning requirements aligned with assessment and evaluation techniques in each of the programs. Virtual demonstrations in the PSW program allowed students to demonstrate their skills and knowledge, whereas critical reflection was used for experiential/metacognition needs within the CAED and ELCC programs.

The most consistent threads that tied these programs together were students' voiced needs for work-life balance and time constraint challenges due to working and studying full-time at a distance. Three of the Indigenous students interviewed expressed their concerns about the inaccessibility of postsecondary education for Indigenous peoples.

Chapter 6. Discussions, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Overview

The previous chapter summarized the threads that tie the participants' stories together between the programs. The intention was to illustrate the common connections across students and between programs. This chapter discusses insights that have emerged from this study, draws conclusions from the findings, and provides recommendations for future research.

Discussion

Student success is a popular area in educational research and includes information on student engagement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), persistence (Tinto, 2013), engaged learning and high impact practices (Kuh, 2013), and retention (Braxton, 2013). The evolving scholarship of student success for non-traditional students emphasizes the need for relational supports (Cherubini, 2014; Guenther & Disbray, 2015), the integration of socio-cultural meaning (Halfacree, 1993; Kovach, 2014; Vygotsky, 1962) and the importance of digital supports (Laurillard, 2012; Stommel, et al., 2020). This research considered the overlaps among student success, non-traditional students, and remote distance education and invited students to share their perceptions on engagement, relational needs, and the importance of program format, assessments, and approaches. It is important to note that socio-cultural context matters and shapes the needs and expectations of learners and their learning. It is also important to ensure that the threads that bind students together are strengthened and used to inform, promote, and meet the needs of learners and to acknowledge that narratives may also differ between students which may impact learning needs based on social and cultural differences. This research aimed to share stories of remote northern students accessing programs through distance education and invites those from outside this experience to reflect on threads that bind these stories together.

Conclusions

The research questions of this study are restated here from Chapter 2. How do various

elements in distance education approaches contribute to, or detract from, students' success? The

two sub-research questions were: what elements of the distance education experience do remote

learners perceive as necessary to experience educational success through learning at a distance

and what institutional conditions or supports do remote learners perceive as necessary when

experiencing educational success through learning at a distance? The broad categories that were

examined in this study as contributing to students' success included: relationships (personal,

professional, faculty/instructional, administrative, and other students); course format, content,

and resources; assessment and evaluation; and challenges. The elements of the distance

education experience that learners in all programs perceived as necessary to experience success

included: connection to instructors and/or supportive mentors, receiving timely and constructive

feedback, experiencing purposeful pedagogy, opportunities for experiential learning, and the

need for administrative supports. Students also identified digital tools that supported their

success, that were categorized based on Laurillard's Conversational Framework (2012). Digital

tools also detracted from students' success, specifically when appropriate orientations were not

provided, when digital pedagogies were not explained or supported, or when broadband capacity

was not adequate to meet the program needs of students. Specifically, elements that detracted

from students' success included inaccessible Moodle course sites, lack of stable internet and

electronic access, inconsistency in course structure across programs, inappropriate assessments,

and absence of peer-to-peer interactions. Finally, the institutional conditions and supports that

learners perceived as necessary to experience educational success included administration

supports (for enrollment, orientation, applications, assessments, and evaluations); standardized

procedures, technology supports, and the need for acknowledgement of cultural differences and supportive policies. How did the elements in distance education approaches contribute to or detract from students' success? Synchronous connections and discussions created meaningful engagement for students and helped them feel connected and respected. Receiving timely and constructive feedback allowed students to proceed with their learning or to ask clarifying questions to get themselves back on track. Experiencing purposeful pedagogies that where contextually relevant and culturally supportive helped students feel a sense of belonging and a motivated students to stay connected and to complete their studies. Conversely, when student felt talk at and ignored during classes, they felt disengaged and unmotivated. Experiential learning reinforced concepts to the lived reality of students. These experiences drew on the competencies within each program and promoted self-development, broadened sense of awareness, and encouraged self-discovery. These experiences improved students' self-confidence, allowed them to connect with other students in their program and colleagues within their professions, and advanced students' proficiency. A lack of digital supports and information detracted from students' success because many times students did not have the digital tools, digital literacy, or digital capacity to know or understand how to access or use these tools. This lack of competency or access limited students' ability to respond to necessary learning activities or required assessments. Improvements to digital access, literacy and orientations are necessary to improve distance experiences at Aurora College. Administrative supports have the capacity to support or marginalize distance students. How administrative supports impacted each student was mixed and contingent on whether students experiences were supportive or not. A lack of administrative supports left some students feeling isolated, alone, and disengaged. Those students who experienced positive supports were encouraged by 'people in their corner' or people 'they could

count on'. Standardized procedures and supports are necessary across programs to ensure students receive the necessary help.

Key Findings

Based on these research questions, the key findings from this research included the importance of connection to the remote postsecondary students and included: instructional, student-to-student, and technological connections. Students in all programs also appreciated the connection to other northern students and their views, and their ability to share personal knowledge and experiences with one another. The use of practical applications in their programs was emphasized, as well as the importance of virtual conversations in synchronous connections. Students in all programs identified the significance of personal, instructional, and student relationships, as contributing to their success. The students in all programs appreciated how evaluation techniques facilitated professional development. Finally, students from all programs identified that work-life balance, time constraints, and challenges including accessibility issues for Indigenous students, as issues that detracted from students' success.

Students identified digital tools and approaches in each of Laurillard's six learning categories which supported their success, however students across the three programs consistently emphasized the acquiring and discussing tools. The acquiring tools that were most frequently identified included: synchronous online lectures, learning support through instructors' knowledge; access to online supplementary documents and handouts; and real-time instructional supports in class.

Contributions

The main contributions of this research include insights into students' perceptions of their success in remote postsecondary distance education and elevates the voices of an

underrepresented population in scholarship. This research also promotes a deeper understanding about elements in distance education that promote students' success in remote populations such as the importance of connections, socio-cultural context, and accessibility. These contributions support the importance of students' behaviours in traditional scholarship with regards to interactions with faculty, peer involvement, and teaching and learning approaches. However, these findings are limited to a small sample size and an institutional setting.

Contributions to Theory. There is a direct relationship between the need for meaningful communication and connection between student and instructor. Non-traditional students have less connections to educational mores and practices and require more guidance than students who have previous postsecondary experiences or who are represented in the institutional culture. This is magnified in distance education compared to face-to-face learning environments. Consideration needs to be given to the relationship between learner autonomy, digital affordances, instructional responsiveness, and effective pedagogical approaches. The less experience a non-traditional student has in a distance learning environment the lower learner autonomy exists; the more dependent the learner, the more important the instructional and digital literacy supports are. Although clear, concise, pedagogical instructional patterns are good practice for all distance education experiences, these necessary patterns are more important with non-traditional students and those experiencing distance education for a first time. In addition, if students' socio-cultural experiences do not match the normative academic culture the is a greater need and heavier reliance on instructional relationships and supports.

Contributions to Laurillard's Framework. Laurillard states (2012) "It is the teacher's responsibility to create the conditions in which understanding is possible and the students' responsibility to take advantage of that" (p.1). but not all students are created equal; they are not

classless, cultureless, or equally privileged. Communication technologies form the basis of many distance education technologies however they cannot replace the necessity of teacher-to-student contact, the necessity of removing student doubt or misunderstanding, or the replacement of social scaffolding required by minority students who's needs may not align with mainstream teaching approaches. Also given that remote distance education students are more characteristically represented by non-traditional student groups, This research supports Laurillard's (2012) conversational framework with regards to the importance of communication cycles however challenges the needs for both contextually situated knowledge and various levels of communication contingent on students' proximity to the knowledge sought. Laurillard fails to stress the importance of students' dependency, independency, or interdependency in the communication forms taken to improve learning. In short, the more distant the knowledge frame is from the students' situated knowledge, the more communication supports may be required, including the significance of relational supports from instructors and peers.

What does this mean with regards to student success in remote postsecondary education? The study focused on learners' understanding and practice within the conversational framework as outlined by Laurillard (2012) and the importance of student agency and relationality on distance learning. This research illustrates that there are levels of students' agency and relational need. These levels of need are contingent on several factors including, but not limited to: the types of learning used in each program; the previous postsecondary exposure to distance learning and postsecondary learning; access to, and understanding of, digital tools; and the importance of relationality. Further studies are necessary to explores each of these elements more fully.

Contributions to Policy, Practice, and Institutional Supports. Several institutional and policy contributions arose from this study. From an institutional perspective, this research

provides answers to perennial questions about how to improve student success in remote postsecondary distance education, which is summarized above in this chapter. An important policy implication that arose is the need to develop policies based on the knowledge interface between western studies and Indigenous knowledge systems. This could occur through higher representation of Indigenous academics within Aurora College or through the development of an Indigenous knowledge holders committee. This approach would provide a venue to strategically inform policies with decolonized pedagogies and practices. Policy development is also necessary to formalize the importance and support of distance education approaches, pedagogies, and practices. This study has also emphasized the importance of relational supports and purposeful distance pedagogies, reinforcing the need to provide instructional development to improve learning conditions for students and best practices for instructors. This study has the potential to impact remote northern Canadian academic environments in visible ways including representation of Indigenous philosophies and practices on policy development and acknowledging and elevating the diversity of needs amongst students. These results can also impact improvements to adult teaching and learning pedagogies, program delivery strategies, technological supports, and instructional skills development.

This dissertation was born from my deep desire to explore success in postsecondary education in remote spaces. When I began, I believed that there were differences between learning in rural and remote spaces compared to learning in a more urban context. I discovered that much of how remote learners learn is consistent with student success in general, and that student success in remote postsecondary education relies heavily on relational connections with others. I also discovered that, as a Northerner myself, differences exist because of socio-cultural context and the process used in meaning making through learning. Our ways of knowing and

being differ and that deeply influences, not only learning opportunities, but by student's abilities

to get to, and through, the door to education. There are many issues that govern who receive an

education, what that looks like, and whether students are able to anchor ourselves within a

specific educational reality. There are other issues outside of how students learn, that are not

related to the student but rather to the context, philosophy, and dominant views that determine

approaches to education. Remote distance education must include contextually relevant learning

that allows students to see themselves and their knowledges systems in the classroom. Remote

distance classrooms need to promote social scaffolding, meaning we must create intentional

opportunities to inform a progressive understanding between diverse cultures, to gain deeper

insights into other's ways of living, learning, and doing. Social scaffolding layers cultural

attributes such as values, beliefs, and behaviors and prioritizes social mores and ways of being so

others outside of a culture may gain insights. Social scaffolding invites empathy and

understanding and has the potential to improve conditions of learning so we may better

understand our connectedness to one another.

Education is an integration of ideas and should enforce the values and needs in our lives.

When it does not, the value of education is diminished and will not represent students' needs or

growth. It is my hope that those who read this work will better understand and appreciate the

value, beauty, and goodness of supporting remote ways of seeing the world through our teaching

and learning practices.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research has sparked a deeper curiosity and desire to learn more about how to

improve accessibility to meaningful learning in remote regions. First, I would like to understand

how distance education impacts teaching practices with instructional faculty and staff. I would

like to understand from the instructor's perspective what is meaningful and effective for their teaching practices and compare how their experiences are consistent with, and differ from, the students' experiences within the same programs. Connected to this, I would also like to understand the strengths and limitations of distance learning, from the institution's perspective. I wonder how the faculty and institutions can promote a more deeply engaging experience for students across the NWT?

Second, there is a need to invite and explore perceptions across Indigenous and immigrant narratives and to understand how these narratives are impacted by, and differ from, the needs identified in traditional approaches to distance education. Emerging scholarship emphasizes the need to advance the needs of Indigenous students and their ways of knowing into postsecondary education; this research revealed that many non-Indigenous allies also seek to understand how they can support and contribute to the needs of Indigenous learners. There is a need and a desire to increase awareness and improve understanding about Indigenous needs in scholarship. Connected to this, I would like to dive more deeply into differences of perceptions between rural-remote and urban-remote students and examine if these differences impact how we teach. I want to ask students, instructors, and administrators about their thoughts on how to improve systemic weaknesses and invite them to share how they would improve environmental conditions and postsecondary education, generally.

Third, I am also curious about the importance of social scaffolding, our ability to expand our collective understanding between diverse populations, which I believe is a necessary component in creating deeply meaningful understanding and connection in students' collective success. Creating space is necessary in learning, specifically across distances and cultures. Making time and creating space is as important as teacher interaction and relationality; all four

components are necessary to create generative opportunities for deep learning to occur. I wonder how we can create more diverse learning spaces that are inclusive and responsive to students and their needs and expand intentional understanding about the similarities and differences between cultures. I want to better understand how we invite and expand social scaffolding to improve the evolution of postsecondary education, so we can open doors, invite diversity, and embrace institutional change.

Finally, I would like to explore the relationship between students' dependency, independency, or interdependency and examine how this should guide instructional practices. Specifically, I wonder about the relationship between learner dependency and digital maturity in various remote regions. How does limited digital maturity impact pedagogical practices and can this be compensated through other practices such as building relational bonds? This is a complex subject because technology and broadband capacity are not consistently available across all communities within the North. Linking students' developmental levels to digital maturity with effective distance education pedagogues and social scaffolding may also provide insight into how to create rich spaces for learning that supports non-traditional students.

Summary

Getting to the door is not the same as getting through the door…

Remote postsecondary distance education has improved over the years from teleconferencing approaches to virtual, online, and blended classroom spaces. These initial course offerings were infrequent and did not support sound pedagogical practices or student-centered learning. The programs have been improved by hiring permanent full-time northern instructors who provide contextually relevant content and use a variety of tools to reach and teach students. Course formats and assessment approaches are now more closely aligned with

contextually relevant learning and better support student engagement with relevant examples, purposeful pedagogies, and meaningful knowledge. Good programming is now more aligned with supportive, student-centered approaches and there are "less hoops and obstacles" in students' ways. Pedagogies match delivery methods through the effort of responsive program administrators, caring instructors, and self-advocating students. As one participant commented, "if [I] need something, I need to ask for it." Many remote northern students, like many distance students, need to work full-time while earning their degrees and they are willing to make those sacrifices for many reasons, to be a better parent or role model, to contribute to community, to be a leader for their children, and to advocate for students who have less representation.

The students that gave their time to inform this research are doing their part to inform the needs of northern remote learners by sharing their stories and advocating for systemic improvements. Most are not concerned about the length of time it will take them to get through the program because they have a thirst for knowledge and are improving their lives through learning. They realize that they are voting with their participation and vocalizing their needs to improve both course structure and the quality of education. These students also advocate for improved technologies that are taken for granted in other parts of Canada and the world. Inaccessible, unaffordable, and unstable broadband and internet capacity still separates learners in smaller remote communities when compared with our larger centers.

We are seeing changes in our learning pedagogies. Our interdependency within the North both allows us, and demands of us, to be responsive and respectful to all people who live and work on this land. Many students make many attempts before they can make it through the door – personal, environmental, and cultural considerations all impact access to postsecondary education. The resilient, persistent, and determined make it through the door but now we need to

open the door wide and make space so that everyone has access to participate and inform remote

education spaces.

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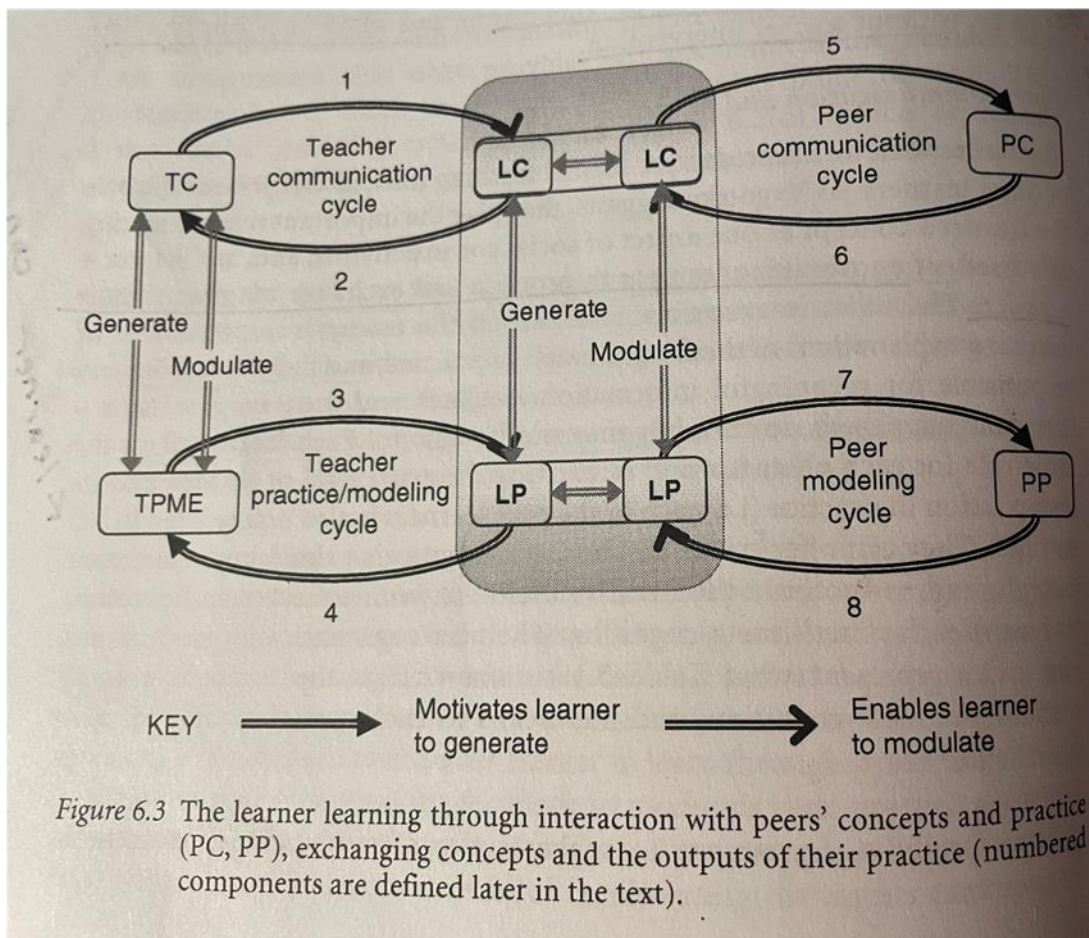
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Appendix A
Laurillard's (2012) Conversational Framework

Figure 6.3 The learner learning through interaction with peers' concepts and practice (PC, PP), exchanging concepts and the outputs of their practice (numbered components are defined later in the text).

The Conversational Framework from "Teaching as a Design Science Building Pedagogical Patterns for Learning and Technology", by Diana Laurillard (2012).

Permission pending.

Appendix B
Map of Aurora College Locations

Map of Aurora College campus and community learning center locations. Source: Aurora College website, http://www.auroracollege.nt.ca/_live/pages/wpPages/AboutMap.aspx

Appendix C
Email Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

Dear Aurora College Students,

My name is Tammy Soanes-White. I am a doctoral student at Athabasca University, in the Center for Distance Education. I am also an Adult Learning Specialist, in Yellowknife at Aurora College. My home is in the Northwest Territories where I have lived with my family for the past 30 years. I am currently preparing for the data collection phase of my dissertation entitled *Cutting the Trail: Students' Perceptions of Their Distance Learning Experiences in Distance Education in Remote Postsecondary Education.* I am interested in understanding how student engagement promotes deep learning and how we at the college can improve your distance learning experiences and environments. I am conducting research on student's experiences in postsecondary education through interviews with students. The purpose of the interviews is to collect information from graduates on their perceptions of their success in the certificate and diploma programs. The reason I am studying this topic is to better understand students' perceptions of their success and which student self-identified practices, activities, relationships and beliefs best assist in promoting students' achievement.

If you are interested in participating in an interview, please respond to this email and I will contact you to set up a date and time for us to meet.

I hope you will take a few minutes to share your thoughts on student success and what it means to you.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Tammy Soanes-White

Appendix D
Information Letter and Participant Consent Form

Researcher:	**Supervisor:**
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1-867-446-2090	1-587-873-3041

Background: You have been invited to participate in this study because you are part of the Aurora College community. This study aims to collect and summarize information on how you define your success and which factors have helped you or made it more difficult for you to be successful while studying at a distance. This information will help me to understand the things that help you achieve your educational goals and what things could be improved upon in the future. Aurora College students studying at a distance are invited to participate in this study.

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to better understand perceptions and conditions of student success in remote postsecondary education in the Northwest Territories. The data collected in this research project is being collected for my graduate thesis at Athabasca University. Results of this research will be shared with students, instructors, adult educators, administration and government agencies to provide a deeper understanding of the student experience in remote postsecondary education.

Study Procedures: This study will consist of semi-structured interviews with students that are willing to participate in the study. Interviews will be held in person where possible and through Teams, Zoom, or by phone interview if face to face interviews are not possible. The interviews contain questions about how you view your success and what activities could be improved on to help you achieve your success. If you agree to participate in an interview, the interview questions will be forwarded to you prior to our meeting. The interview will take between 30 minutes and one hour to complete.

Potential Benefits: The aim of this study is to generate a deeper understanding of student needs in postsecondary education so that this knowledge may improve conditions and rates of students' success.

Risks: There are no foreseeable risks, inconveniences or costs to the participants in this study.

Confidentiality: Your identity will remain anonymous throughout the interview process. You will be assigned a pseudonym prior to our interview. The audio files will not contain your identity, only your pseudonym. I will be the only person that will have access to your name and pseudonym. Physical transcripts and interview summaries will be kept in a locked filing cabinet, in a secured office. Any electronic copies of transcripts and interview summaries will be maintained in a private password protected computer. The dissertation results will be disseminated through many forms. There will be community presentations, video presentations

across the campuses and webinars to community learning centers. The results will also be summarized in my doctoral dissertation and used for conference presentations and research articles. Direct quotes from participants will be identified by pseudonym in future presentations or publications. Although raw data will not be scrutinized by Aurora College or the government of the Northwest Territories, summary reports and data may be provided. The Research Ethics Committee at Athabasca University has the right to review study data, so potential access by this committee is acknowledged.

If you are interested in receiving a copy of the dissertation, or reports prepared from this research project, please contact Tammy Soanes-White via email at soaneswh@ualberta.ca . The data collected from this study will be kept for a minimum of 5 years following completion of this research project. Only the principle investigators of this study (Tammy Soanes-White) will have access to the data after the project is complete. Any further study with the data from this study will have to be approved by the Research Ethics Board.

Voluntary Participation: You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Therefore, your participation is completely voluntary. You can opt out without penalty or can ask to have any data collected withdrawn from the database until data analysis begins. In the event of your withdrawal our research team will remove any data obtained from you.

Further Information: If you have any issues pertaining to this interview process please do not hesitate to contact the researcher, Tammy Soanes-White (soaneswh@ualberta.ca) or by phone at (867) 446-2090.

If you feel that you have not been treated in an ethical or professional manner please feel free to contact Dr. Pamela Walsh, Research Supervisor for this project. Dr. Walsh can be reached at pamelaw@athabascau.ca or by phone at 1-587-873-3041.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by the Research Ethics Board of Athabasca University. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of the research, contact Research Ethics Office at 780-213-2033.

Consent Statement
I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above by either clicking the box below or signing a copy of this form. I may request a copy of this consent form or keep a copy of this form after I sign it.

Electronic Box to click will be provided here

_____   _____
Participant's Name (printed) and Signature   Date

_____   _____
Name (printed) and Signature of Person   Date Obtaining Consent

Appendix E
Interview Questions

I would like to hear your story and ask you the following questions during our time together. Our meeting should take between 30 minutes to one hour. Please contact me if you would like to talk about these questions before our meeting.

1. Can you please tell me about you? What important information do you want to share about your life and your experiences?

2. Can you please describe a situation for me when you felt engaged in school? What happened? What did you experience? How did it feel?

3. Can you describe things that you have done that have helped you be successful in school? What did you experience? How did it feel?

4. Can you describe a situation when you felt supported in your current program? How did that help you be successful?

5. Were their any relationships which helped with your success? Can you describe them? How did they make you feel?

6. What personal beliefs about yourself do you think helped you reach your goals?

7. What things made it difficult for you to be successful?

8. Can you describe your course content and resources? Were these helpful in your success?

9. Can you describe how you were graded in the program?

10. Describe yourself in one word; why are you successful?

11. What are the three most important things you said to me, that you want me to remember about you and your success?

Thank you, Mahsi cho

for sharing your thoughts and experiences

Tammy

Athabasca University
RESEARCH CENTRE

Appendix F
CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The REB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

Ethics File No.: **24865**

Principal Investigator:
Ms. Tammy Soanes-White, Graduate Student
Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences\Doctor of Education (EdD) in Distance Education

Supervisor/Project Team:
Dr. Pamela Walsh (Supervisor)

Project Title:
Cutting the Trail: Students' Perceptions of their Distance Learning Experiences in Remote Postsecondary Education

Effective Date: July 20, 2022   **Expiry Date**: July 19, 2023

Restrictions:

Any modification/amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval prior to proceeding.

Any adverse event or incidental findings must be reported to the AUREB as soon as possible, for review.

Ethical approval is valid *for a period of one year*. An annual request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

An Ethics Final Report must be submitted when the research is complete *(i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable))* or the research is terminated.

Approved by: **Date: July 20, 2022**

Katie MacDonald, Chair
Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, Departmental Ethics Review Committee

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