

# Lessons from Our Sweetgrass Baskets: A Wholistic Vision of Academic Success for Indigenous Women in Higher Education

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## Résumé de l'article

Cette enquête qualitative documente les leçons glanées dans mon parcours vers la praxis de la pédagogie maternelle autochtone, un engagement d'enseignement et d'apprentissage centré sur les femmes autochtones, afin d'offrir des idées pour soutenir les femmes autochtones dans l'enseignement supérieur. Plus précisément, cet article propose une vision pour l'accès à l'éducation et la réussite des femmes autochtones dans l'enseignement supérieur en partageant une histoire de recherche collective offerte par des participantes autochtones qui ont suivi un ou plusieurs des trois cours liés aux littératures des femmes autochtones et à la théorie maternelle autochtone. Chaque cours a été offert dans une optique féministe décoloniale, comprenait un contenu autochtone et amenait les étudiants à s'engager dans une évaluation culturellement pertinente. Ce travail relie les pédagogies maternelles aux épistémologies autochtones qui englobent « l'étudiant dans son ensemble » dans des contextes éducatifs afin d'établir un environnement d'enseignement et d'apprentissage qui peut parler au cœur et à l'esprit des étudiants. Dans l'esprit de la réconciliation, je positionne cet environnement comme un espace sûr où les étudiants peuvent être pleinement authentiques et où leurs réalités et expériences vécues sont positionnées comme des forces et des atouts clés pour établir un espace éthique pour le dialogue interculturel et antiraciste. Collectivement, les récits des participantes offrent quatre leçons clés qui font partie intégrante de l'éducation à la réconciliation de manière plus générale, et je présente ces leçons comme des recommandations finales qui s'alignent sur le travail intemporel de Kirkness et Barnhardt sur les principes de respect, de pertinence, de réciprocité et de responsabilité.

# LESSONS FROM OUR SWEETGRASS BASKETS: A WHOLISTIC VISION OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS FOR INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## Abstract

This qualitative inquiry documents the lessons gleaned from my journey toward the praxis of Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies, an Indigenous women-centred teaching and learning engagement, to offer insights for supporting Indigenous women in higher education. Specifically, this article offers an express vision for Indigenous women's educational access and success in higher education by sharing a collective research story offered by Indigenous women participants who completed one or more of three courses related to Indigenous women's literatures and Indigenous maternal theory. Each course was delivered through a decolonial feminist lens, comprised of Indigenous curricular content and engaged students in culturally relevant assessment. This work connects Maternal Pedagogies with Indigenous epistemologies that embrace the "whole student" within educational contexts to establish a teaching and learning environment that can speak to the hearts and minds of students. In the spirit of reconciliation, I position this environment as a safe space where students can be their whole authentic selves and where their realities and lived experiences are positioned as strengths and key assets to establishing an ethical space for cross-cultural and anti-racist dialogue. Collectively, the participant narratives offer four key lessons that are integral to reconciliation education more broadly, and I map these lessons as final recommendations that align with Kirkness and Barnhardt's timeless work on the "Four Rs" of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility.

**Keywords:** Indigenous maternal pedagogies, Indigenous women in higher education, reconciliation education

## Résumé

Cette enquête qualitative documente les leçons glanées dans mon parcours vers la praxis de la pédagogie maternelle autochtone, un engagement d'enseignement et d'apprentissage centré sur les femmes autochtones, afin d'offrir des idées pour soutenir les femmes autochtones dans l'enseignement supérieur. Plus précisément, cet article propose une vision pour l'accès à l'éducation et la réussite des femmes autochtones dans l'enseignement supérieur en partageant une histoire de recherche collective offerte par des participantes autochtones qui ont suivi un ou plusieurs des trois cours liés aux littératures des femmes autochtones et à la théorie maternelle autochtone. Chaque cours a été offert dans une optique féministe décoloniale, comprenait un contenu autochtone et amenait les étudiants à s'engager dans une évaluation culturellement pertinente. Ce travail relie les pédagogies maternelles aux épistémologies autochtones qui englobent « l'étudiant dans son ensemble » dans des contextes éducatifs afin d'établir un environnement d'enseignement et d'apprentissage qui peut parler au cœur et à l'esprit des étudiants. Dans l'esprit de la réconciliation, je positionne cet environnement comme un espace sûr où les étudiants peuvent être pleinement authentiques et où leurs réalités et expériences vécues sont positionnées comme des forces et des atouts clés pour établir un espace éthique pour le dialogue interculturel et antiraciste. Collectivement, les récits des participantes offrent quatre leçons clés qui font partie intégrante de l'éducation à la réconciliation de manière plus générale, et je présente ces leçons comme des recommandations finales qui s'alignent sur le travail intemporel de Kirkness et Barnhardt sur les principes de respect, de pertinence, de réciprocité et de responsabilité.

**Mots-clés :** pédagogies maternelles autochtones, femmes autochtones dans l'enseignement supérieur, éducation sur la réconciliation

## Introduction

Indigenous access to post-secondary education in Canada has been an area of concern for many years. As a result, there have been a number of initiatives put in place to increase the numbers of Indigenous students in higher education programs (Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Kristoff & Cottrell, 2021; Pidgeon, 2016a; Pidgeon et al., 2014; Stonechild, 2006). Access programs have offered entry into certain programs, but many of these programs focus on quantitative statistics and extend a deficit framework without considering the inherent barriers within the education system itself. Although statistical findings on educational achievement highlight the benefits of education for Indigenous peoples, the adverse economic and associated social conditions that disproportionately affect Indigenous peoples, particularly caregivers and those with young children, call for a more wholistic support model that embraces the educational realities of the whole student. Traditional access programs from a deficit lens do not account for the myriad realities associated with the educational experience for Indigenous students. Moreover, Bonnycastle and Prentice (2011) advise that concern with retention is typically framed within a deficiency mindset that ignores the macro-structural barriers that lead to unacceptably high attrition rates. They drew attention to the historical, socio-cultural, geographical, and demographical barriers that challenge the deficiency mindset and underscore the lack of attention given to the childcare needs and familial priorities of Indigenous students. Although research on Indigenous post-secondary success has moved from dominant notions of access and retention to more community-based approaches, there is a need for strength-based models that foster wholistic visions of success and offer culturally relevant programming (Brant, 2011, 2017; Waterman et al., 2018). Indeed, Indigenous success in higher education is not merely about access, but also about relevance.

With this article, I intend to document the lessons gleaned from my journey toward the praxis of Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies to offer insights for supporting Indigenous students in higher education. I present this article in first-person narration to highlight the traces of my footsteps along my decolonizing path and describe the ways I have felt grounded by keeping my teaching and research connected to my own cultural identity, beginning by positioning myself in this study. My journey toward a praxis of Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies is rooted in my identity as a Yakonkwehón:we (Mohawk woman) and Ista (mother) of

two children. I thread cultural identity into my work to enact a learning exchange with Indigenous women students that involves familiarizing students with a web of relationships within Indigenous women's scholarship. My journey toward this work began with my own story in education and the myriad barriers I experienced as an Indigenous sole support parent navigating undergraduate studies. My experiences inspired me to dig deeper to reveal and document the barriers Indigenous women faced in higher education as part of my master's research. The vision of academic success expressed by my master's participants planted the initial seeds for the development of the Gidayaamin Indigenous Women's Transition Program (*Gidayaamin*)—a one-year transition program that offered a unique Indigenous women-centred curriculum. I document the development of *Gidayaamin* more fully elsewhere (Brant & Anderson, 2012) but share it as the inspiration for my praxis of Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies.

Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies synthesize the work of Maternal Pedagogies (O'Reilly, 2021) with Indigenous ideologies of motherhood (Brant & Anderson, 2021) to present a theory that embraces the "whole student" and establishes a teaching and learning environment that speaks to the hearts and minds of students. In doing so, Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies foster advocacy, agency, and activism by connecting curricular content to the larger societal realities that matter to students. This work extends the literature on Indigenous cultural and racial identities (Anderson, 2016; Horse, 2012; St. Denis, 2007) and engages the "4 Rs" (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991) to present a strength-based vision for wholistic programming that is culturally specific and rooted in the principles of ethical relationality. The purpose of this article is to document the value of Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies in relation to student success.

I considered the value of Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies as a transformative learning engagement for Indigenous women by drawing on the several courses that deliver Indigenous women-centred curriculum. One of these courses was an introduction to Indigenous women's literature, offered as part of *Gidayaamin*. The other two courses were offered as advanced Indigenous studies courses on Indigenous women's literature and Indigenous mothering. Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies were advanced in the courses through theoretical frameworks such as Kim Anderson's (2016) theory of identity formation. The four components of Anderson's theory—resist, reclaim, construct, and act—connect contemporary realities with historical realities (traditional and colonial) and lay the theoretical grounding

to engage students in a process of decolonization and reclamation. All courses were delivered through a decolonial feminist lens, were comprised of Indigenous curricular content, and engaged students in culturally relevant assessment. Of notable mention are the sweetgrass lessons that emerged from the Indigenous curricular material and presented themselves throughout the methodology. I elaborate throughout the article, but here I offer a glimpse into the significance of the metaphor of the Sweetgrass Basket.

Indigenous well-being is rooted in the connection between cultural traditions. I, therefore, draw upon an emerging body of scholarship that connects access to cultural traditions with self-empowerment, strong cultural identity development, and increased educational success (Hundleby et al., 2007; Wilson, 2004). Such studies inform the lens through which I view the connection between Indigenous women's identity development and educational success. Thus, this work contextualizes the university experiences of Indigenous women through a strength-based view that honours student knowledges and lived experiences and positions culture, tradition, and language as core elements of success. Drawing from Indigenous community knowledges and developing intercultural relationships are integral to this strength-based approach.

Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies must be understood within the historical, colonial, and socio-political context of Indigenous women's realities in Canada. Ongoing state interference into Indigenous women's affairs such as the ongoing legacy of residential schools, ongoing state interference through the Children's Aid Society, and ongoing racialized, sexualized, and gender-based violences mark the educational realities of Indigenous women. Although my research positions education as a vehicle for shifting many of the contemporary injustices that target Indigenous women, it must be understood that education itself has in fact led to many of these disheartening realities. Given the history of the residential school system in Canada, generational effects of colonization, and the ongoing assimilatory nature of mainstream education, a general distrust of educational institutions is still felt among Indigenous students (Kristoff & Cottrell, 2021). Colonial violence is structurally threaded throughout education and Indigenous students experience this through ongoing encounters of racism and micro-aggressions (Brant, 2017; Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017). Despite this messy history, many Indigenous peoples view education as a contemporary mode of survival, critical to supporting well-being and building strong communities (Battiste, 2013; Lavell-Harvard, 2011; Stonechild,

2006). Stonechild's (2006) work draws attention to ongoing problems associated with the assertion of Western values that de-legitimize Indigenous knowledges. He advised that programs embedded within Indigenous worldviews and philosophies tend to move beyond access to retention and success. Other scholars recognize the limitations of recruitment and retention initiatives that fail to recognize the need for culturally relevant programming (Brant, 2011; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Kovach, 2021). For example, Kovach (2021) pointed out that "welcoming Indigenous students but not allowing for learning, scholarship, and research that is congruent with Indigenous paradigms is simply a nuanced variation of a past strategy—same old, same old" (p. 163). Focusing beyond retention involves creating ethical spaces that can facilitate Indigenous student success while maintaining and promoting cultural identity development.

Indigenous women have unique and specific educational realities associated with social, cultural, political, linguistic, and epistemological barriers that hinder their access and success in higher education (Lavell-Harvard, 2011; Monture-Angus, 2003). Indigenous families tend to be younger, larger, and more often headed by single mothers than non-Indigenous families (Brant & Anderson, 2021). The lack of financial, cultural, and childcare supports forces many young Indigenous women to become marginalized from the social and economic opportunities of a post-secondary education, and this compromises the well-being of not only these women, but also their families and communities. As a young single mother of two children struggling to find balance within the university while negotiating my way through a number of social supports that were unfeasible, overlapping, and at times degrading, I knew all too well about these statistics, and I could relate to the personal accounts that were shared throughout the literature. Several studies document profiles of Indigenous students in higher education to showcase the need for culturally aligned student services (Pidgeon, 2016b; Waterman et al., 2018). In these profiles, I see myself and my participants and I appreciate the acknowledgement of our diverse and collective realities. The following research story offers a rich contribution to these profiles by highlighting the stories of Indigenous women in higher education as they engage with Indigenous women-centred curriculum.

## Methodology

This study was enacted through an Indigenous methodology that brought together elements of Indigenous storywork

(Archibald, 2008) and Sharing Circle methodology (Brant, 2017). Fitznor's (2012) work revealed the importance of narrative as a research framework for understanding the lived realities of Indigenous participants. Her work demonstrates how storytelling as research methodology is rooted in cultural identity work. She wrote, "we learn how individuals construct their identities and the conception of what community is from their stories" (p. 273). Moreover, her work offers insights on appropriate ways to gather stories of Indigenous participants in ways that are transformative, and potentially transform the university landscape (Kovach, 2021). As Fitznor (2012) explained, this involves fostering a research landscape that invites participants to engage in dialogues that include the difficult stories, ensuring a true reflection of the array of Indigenous realities:

I have come to understand that the process of translating meanings and relevance embedded in our autobiographical stories/narratives into themes, issues and models can provoke a range of emotions from anxiety to dynamic living. Indigenous scholars who favour a writing style that often includes our contentious and traumatic histories with colonization and assimilation, in addition to culturally-specific stories, epistemologies and metaphors, are gaining credibility, and these writings add to the various forms of scholarly publications. (Fitznor, 2012, p. 273)

Fitznor's work is presented to showcase the narratives of Indigenous realities in the spirit of promoting awareness and creating change in higher education. Smith (2021) also writes about the power of storytelling within Indigenous research frameworks:

Storytelling, oral histories, the perspectives of Elders and of women have become an integral part of all Indigenous research. Each individual story is powerful. But the point about stories is not that they simply tell a story, or tell a story simply. These new stories contribute to a collective story in which every Indigenous person has a place. (p. 144)

Smith's (2021) description of the power of stories, and the connection stories have to a collective research story, offers important insights for ways to foster ethical relationality when enacting research with Indigenous participants; this is particularly important for work that focuses on Indigenous women in higher education. Thus, I was intentional about the reciprocal nature of the sharing circles, and worked in

relationship, as a co-participant with the participants, to present a collective story that presents pedagogical insights into culturally relevant programming for Indigenous women. Indeed, we all gain from telling and listening to educational stories, and it was important for me to imagine myself and the participants as tellers and listeners within the sharing circles. Creswell (2005) offers the following description to highlight the importance of gathering educational stories through qualitative research:

People live storied lives. They tell stories to share their lives with others and to provide their personal accounts about classrooms, schools, educational issues, and the settings in which they work. When people tell stories to researchers, they feel listened to, and their information brings researchers closer to the actual practice of education. Thus, stories reported in qualitative narrative research enrich the lives of both the researcher and the participant. (p. 473)

This description is particularly useful as it applies to the way the sharing circles were conducted to engage the educational narratives of Indigenous women. Some of these women, who are often silenced in mainstream education (Monture-Angus, 1995), have few opportunities to share stories and personal accounts of their experiences in classrooms and schools, or of larger educational issues. My design, therefore, was useful in revealing layers of experience that remain largely unexposed or untold. The storied lives of Indigenous women gathered through the sharing circles provide deep insights by exposing layers of knowledge that might not otherwise be gathered in a mainstream research setting. In the sharing circles, the telling of stories also aligned with the reciprocal nature of Indigenous methodology as the women shared their stories not only with me as the researcher, but also with one another, or to "the eachother" (Brant & Anderson, 2012). This two-way engagement allowed for a synergy that got to the core of the power of story.

## Participants and Recruitment

My work highlights the importance of honouring the role of Elders when carrying out research with Indigenous participants. This involves important protocols and direction from the Elder to support the cultural and ceremonial design of my research. Upon receiving ethics clearance for this study, I had important conversations with the Elder, hereafter referred to as Grandmother Shirley, in relation to her role in the



study. When I approached Grandmother Shirley to participate in this research, I felt that it was appropriate to seek her guidance about how she would like her role to be defined in the study, and the consent process involved her input to ensure cultural protocol was followed. Grandmother Shirley expressed desire to be considered a participant in this study, as well as a mentor for the other participants, through the ceremony and words of wisdom offered throughout the sharing circles. Grandmother Shirley was also involved in the analysis and dissemination and affirmed the overarching framework of the Sweetgrass Basket.

### **Participant Selection**

Participants were purposefully selected through theory sampling (Creswell, 2005). In order to convey a powerful presentation of this pedagogical framework, I knew it was important to gather input from students who could describe their experiences with Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies and offer sound directions that would inform the development of this emerging praxis. I sent a letter of invitation to all previous students who identified as Indigenous women and had completed one or more of the following courses: INDG 2P17, INDG 3P47, or INDG 3P81.

To give readers a sense of the women and provide context for overall research story, I introduce the participants by briefly sharing a bit about them here and will elaborate in the findings. This study involved 10 participants in addition to Grandmother Shirley.

### **Participant Profiles**

The participants were all Indigenous women, including six belonging to the Anishinaabe nation, two of the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk Nation), and two members of the Métis nation. Of the participants, eight gave permission to be named in this study and two requested to be identified by pseudonym. I have taken care to respect the women's wishes about which details to share. Here, I offer a general sense of the overall participant profile by offering some defining features before moving into a summary of the findings. The participants ranged in age, with some in their mid-20s, and others in their 30s or 40s. Some of the participants described themselves as single mothers, others were married or in common-law relationships. Not all of the participants defined themselves as mothers, but the majority of the participants were the primary guardian of two or more children, and one had several grandchildren. All participants had completed at least one of the courses where I enacted Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies, and some were graduates of *Gidayaamin*.

### **Data Collection**

Along with Grandmother Shirley, I held three sharing circles to gather initial data and a final feedback circle to ensure the emerging research story aligned with the participants' overall vision. For the initial three sharing circles, I assigned participants to one of three groups so that we could facilitate smaller circles to ensure a comfortable research environment that allowed for richer discussion. Each sharing circle opened with ceremony, was approximately three hours in length, and engaged the participants in open-ended discussion about their educational narratives. The participants were asked questions that prompted discussion about the value of Indigenous women-centred curriculum in relation to academic success. As co-facilitator and co-participant, Grandmother Shirley also shared guidance, overall thoughts, and words of wisdom throughout each discussion. The sharing circles ended with a traditional closing ceremony and a shared meal as per cultural protocol related to teachings about hospitality, relationality, and togetherness.

To ensure an accurate reflection of their contributions and provide an opportunity for further insights, the women were also involved in the analysis through a final sharing circle that served as a feedback circle, as part of the member check process. In preparation for this circle, I met with Grandmother Shirley and shared with her the initial findings that emerged from the data. During the feedback circle, the women were presented with the initial themes and asked to contribute further by identifying themes that I may have missed. In this way, the participants were invited to co-construct the research story along with Grandmother Shirley and me. Thus, in honour of Indigenous research principles, the participants were engaged in the data analysis to ensure my findings were authentic to their realities. Moreover, by seeking input and guidance from Grandmother Shirley, I ensured my findings were culturally aligned, accurate, and credible. The feedback circle was an important phase that added to the trustworthiness and integrity of my data for both the participants and wider Indigenous and academic communities. While the initial three sharing circles were held indoors at the Indigenous research centre on campus, the feedback circle took place outside, in an area called The Pines. Located at the local Indigenous community centre, The Pines is an outdoor gathering place surrounded by pine trees. For the purposes of the feedback circle, it served as a neutral territory that provided a balance to the sharing circles that took place indoors and helped bridge the intrinsic divide among academic and community landscapes. As

several of the women indicated, it was very grounding to be out in nature, and the circle itself provided a form of self-care for the women as they were able to engage in research in a setting that was familiar and connected to land.

## Findings

To contextualize the need for relevance in undergraduate programming for Indigenous students, I open the findings section by elaborating on the participant profiles featured earlier to document key statements from the women who shared about their desire to attend higher education. Overall, their insights highlight the desire for a university program that weaves in cultural elements along with knowledge they can bring back to their families and communities and use toward their career goals in a variety of professions such as teaching, language revitalization, counselling, social services, and Indigenous midwifery and doula care.

## Summary of Participant Narratives

Angelica described herself as being in a process of still finding out who she is as a Mohawk woman and expressed a desire to use her knowledge to give back to Indigenous communities. Angelica highlighted the importance of being able to pass cultural teachings on to her children. Charity decided to return to school because she was looking for an opportunity to explore who she was and what it meant to be Indigenous. She saw the Indigenous content courses as an opportunity for her own cultural development. Jessica aspires to be a teacher and was accepted into the Sociology program as a mature student. As part of her journey to reclaiming her Indigenous identity, she took several Indigenous studies courses as electives before she officially enrolled in *Gidayaamin*. Laura enrolled in the Indigenous women's literature courses as electives and described this as an opportunity to discover more about her Métis identity. As a young adult, Leigh had previously started an undergraduate degree, which she did not complete. Leigh decided to enroll in *Gidayaamin* as a mature student after several years away from university and continued her education by enrolling in a Mohawk Immersion Program. Natalie enrolled in an undergraduate program and began university the year after she completed high school, but eventually dropped out of the program. She decided to return to university as a mature student and enrolled in as many Indigenous studies electives as her degree permitted. As she described, this offered her an opportunity to find out more about her Indige-

nous identity as well as her future educational goals. Sabrina described her journey to university as an opportunity to rebuild herself. Prior to university, she worked to support her three children as a single mother. She described being frustrated with the lack of opportunity she faced, but found support in the local Indigenous community. Sabrina completed *Gidayaamin* and the Bachelor of Education in Aboriginal Adult Education Program. Shannon described her struggle with the Western education system and noted her desire to enroll in an Indigenous studies program. Shannon works with youth at a local Indigenous community centre and pushes youth to achieve education while honouring their Indigenous identities. Shannon expressed the importance for youth to find balance within two worldviews; a balance she found difficult in Western education. Sharon came to the courses with the goal of securing a position related to Indigenous community work. To support her educational goals, she spent time volunteering at the Indigenous community. For Sharon, the courses offered her an opportunity to become connected to her Indigenous identity and understand experiences of her family members that were not discussed at home. Sherry applied to *Gidayaamin* after learning about another community member's experience in the program. She began the program while pregnant with her second child because she wanted to learn more about her culture and enroll in a program that would better her future.

Indigenous women's journeys to university are inherently different from the journeys of non-Indigenous students, who are less likely to have experienced generations of colonial violence at the hands of educators and administrators. As the brief profiles above document, Indigenous women tend to come to university for a myriad of reasons that are generational and rooted in a desire to give back to community. Indeed, they enter with a particular vision of success that is rooted in cultural identity and wholistic well-being. To offer a wholistic story of the collective vision shared by the participants, I share key findings by documenting their comments related to perseverance, a wholistic vision of success, and the value of Indigenous women-centred curriculum.

## Perseverance

"When an Indigenous woman walks through the doors in the university she should have a PhD in survival" (Ilene, cited in Brant, 2011, p. 173). The above words hint at the myriad realities Indigenous women have experienced before entering the doors of a post-secondary institution. As Ilene articulated, "One thing that we excel at in our communities, no

matter what Nation [we] are from...we are survivors" (Brant, 2011, p. 173). Several of the participants talked about being discouraged from a pathway to university prior to enrolling in *Gidayaamin*. As Angelica explained:

I had teachers in high school say I would never go to university and I was more of a college-level [student]. "You will never be able to handle university"—and that discouraged me a lot and then when I got back to school and I took your program, I realized "I can do this."

Echoing this sentiment, Sabrina explained that she had never had anyone who believed in her academic abilities. However, all the women demonstrated perseverance as they moved beyond initial barriers and enrolled in *Gidayaamin* as a pathway to undergraduate studies. As Laura noted, seeds of encouragement can come from within and "you're able to do it and despite everybody telling you that you can't, you find it in yourself."

Some participants described the lack of access to quality childcare support as an educational barrier prior to *Gidayaamin*. However, parenting as a barrier to pursuing education was seldom discussed in the sharing circles. Rather, the sharing circles highlighted the notion of centring children in educational experiences, and participants commented on the importance of this support. *Gidayaamin* fostered a sense of community that welcomed babies and younger children. For example, Sherry noted that she began the *Gidayaamin* program when her son was an infant. As she noted, having a newborn was certainly a consideration, but she knew that *Gidayaamin* was designed to honour the unique needs and family responsibilities of students. The ability to welcome and embrace children is integral to Indigenous environments and programs. Such environments must embrace the "systems of kinship and caring and valuing children and honouring people who are doing that work and mothering" (Brant, 2011, p. 186). The *Gidayaamin* program has welcomed several babies and many young children who became part of the class environment. Embracing familial roles is a core understanding within Indigenous contexts.

## Belief in Education

Although all participants expressed a general belief in education, it is important to note that their belief in education was expressed in relation to Indigenous curriculum, as well as the desire to contribute to community well-being and so-

cial change. For example, as Sherry commented, "My vision going through school has always been to get some form of education to help my people and bring me back to my people." Moreover, Natalie expressed, "I'm hoping to go to grad school next year for policy writing so I'm hoping that that's something that will affect the community once I reach the workforce." It was evident that the women also instilled this belief in their children. Sabrina became emotional when she expressed that her initial educational aspiration was being able to tell her children that she went to university. Likewise, as the following quotation indicates, it was important to Sherry for her children to see her success in education:

What inspires me, is to be a role model for my children because I am the first in my family to graduate from high school, the first in my family to get a college degree, and the first in my family to have a university degree.... and those four little eyes looking at me.... I want higher education to be a normalcy for my kids; instead of something that they think they can't obtain.

Shannon, whose children were nearing the completion of high school and starting to map out their own educational paths, echoed this sentiment. As the participants shared about their belief in education, it was apparent that their educational desires supported a vision of decolonial praxis that included Indigenous content and curriculum. Indigenous community well-being and intergenerational understandings were core to this vision.

## Visions of Success

Part of this study involved finding out what success meant to the participants. An open definition was shared with participants to note that academic success is generally defined by academic achievement and associated with high marks, and a definition of academic success for Indigenous women might include a balance of academic achievement with the attainment of one's educational goals and aspirations. For Indigenous students, educational goals are often inspired by the value of reciprocity and a desire to contribute to the betterment of their families and communities (Battiste, 1998; Brant, 2011; Monture-Angus, 1995). The participants offered important insights about their understandings of Indigenous women's academic success. For example, Shannon noted that it was important for her to find meaningful connections that were life-affirming and culturally relevant. Likewise, the following comment made by Charity attests to



the importance of personal development:

My vision of academic success changed a lot...approaching it from a different space, knowing that it was more about the personal growth and taking the time and proving things for myself.

As Charity explained, returning to school after having children was more about her journey with the learning process as opposed to the final grade. Charity's comment resonated with Sherry's statement "that it no longer became a matter of grades or what my grade point was going to be. It was more of what I was learning and what I invested in it." Jessica extends this sentiment in the following:

Academic success wasn't just about marks but about my learning journey as well. Not just academically, but...finding out who I was [as an Indigenous woman]. It provided me with a little piece of the puzzle that I was searching for. I didn't want to just know about who I was, but I also wanted to know about my peers. We all learned from each other.... Each person would share their background with one another and we all learned from each other.... So that was part of my academic success because we set those building blocks for each other to succeed.

Sharon also considered this sharing to be a component of success:

I think that it's hard to differentiate between high marks and academic success because when you're interested in doing something you're going to do well. When we had our presentations at the end of the course, a few women did very emotional pieces. I wasn't really in any place to do that but that was sort of a success because they were able to come in front of their academic peers and show their success as a woman through song or personal experience. Leaving that course, I realized the success and importance of sharing your own experience...it was a success of being able to be comfortable enough to share.

Being comfortable enough to share personal stories may stem from the subjective nature of the courses, which invokes emotional learning. Angelica felt that the successes of these courses, particularly with the personal connections, extended into future courses. She noted:

The courses set you up to be able to succeed in the oth-

er courses because the work is a little bit different. They teach you how to be able to speak with your heart but also speak in a professional way.

The following comment by Natalie also noted the importance of personal growth as it helps to shape one's visions beyond the classroom and into the community:

You really get to grow, which is a huge thing for me, whereas the other courses you're just getting through them to do the essays and get good grades—you want good grades for all of your courses but in all the Indigenous courses you leave a little bit changed.

Sabrina also connected academic success with a desire to give back to the community. She explained that her vision of academic success involved "apply[ing] the knowledge gained in those courses to community.... If there's one thing that I'm most proud of with academic success, it's being able to transfer that knowledge to real time every day." Other participants noted that they extended the classroom lessons to family and community. For example, Jessica noted, "Now I can start applying that stuff in my home and with my kids and in my life and with my community."

It was evident that the participants' visions of academic success were wholistic and moved beyond academic to personal growth, and beyond personal growth to family well-being and finding connections to community relevance. Their vision of academic success was indeed connected to the value of Indigenous women-centred curriculum.

## **Indigenous Women's Literature as a Counternarrative**

As Natalie pointed out, the courses offered a counternarrative to mainstream literature historically written about Indigenous women, and she commented on the empowerment that came with reading from a strength-based lens. Moreover, participants commented on the deep connections they made to the literature shared in class and noted that this fostered an intellectual environment where they felt safe with their feelings and encouraged to share. As Leigh commented, the courses were delivered in a way that fostered "a safe place for that ability to share." Echoing Leigh's sentiment, several of the participants explained that the creation of a safe space prompted their ability to share and be vulnerable in front of other peers. Leigh extended this by expressing: "I think your class was the first class where I

actually felt comfortable to speak vulnerably and honestly.” Others noted that the safe and welcoming environment was necessary for their academic success:

I wouldn’t have been able to make it through university if I didn’t do that first year because I guess that was kind of like my safe haven, I was able to kind of be myself and learn something new and take that information and cherish it within me. (Angelica)

The safe space was integral as the material also documented difficult realities that reflected the women’s own familial experiences:

*In Search of April Raintree* and *Sweetgrass Basket*, those are sad stories and I know they’re reality because I face that in my family, like that’s my family, you know so they weren’t really like shocking to me, they didn’t have that shocking effect, it was kind of like well it’s out there now like and other aspects like where I would never be able or I would never consider telling my story in that kind of context but because it was out there it kind of made me feel a little bit more safe with my feelings, my own feelings. (Sabrina)

As noted earlier, the participants in this study had completed at least one of the Indigenous women’s literature courses and were assigned Indigenous-specific content that included texts, autobiographical narratives, memoirs, selected journal articles, and poetry. They all read Marlene Carvell’s (2005) novella *Sweetgrass Basket*, a story that gently and eloquently offers a glimpse into the residential school experience through the fictional voices of two sisters. I highlight *Sweetgrass Basket* because it became a prominent theme throughout the Sharing Circles. For example, many of the participants kept returning to lessons gleaned from the book and several discussed the importance of their own sweetgrass baskets. Although the content documented disheartening realities, it centred a strength-based lens and connected cultural teaching that nourished the learning spirit (Battiste, 2013). As Sabrina shared, “I’m noticing that being a student is very nurturing to me. It’s allowing me to give myself something.” Sabrina and Shannon also shared a deep connection to *Sweetgrass Basket* and this was translated in concrete ways as they both acquired their own sweetgrass baskets following the courses. This was fitting, as the lessons related to sweetgrass baskets highlight the importance of holding story medicines.

## Discussion and Recommendations: Lessons from Our Sweetgrass Baskets

The following comment expressed by Charity during the feedback circle eloquently captures the essence of the collective research story and the metaphor of the sweetgrass baskets:

I think there’s a lot of metaphors that go along with the sweetgrass basket just even the way the sweetgrass grows right that individuality and then all coming together. That’s where your strength comes from and then the process of making that basket and then bringing that with you and accepting everything that you went through while you were growing and that’s part of that basket. So, I think there are a lot of metaphors that go into that so it leaves it open for everybody to take from it and carry it how they want to.

As Charity’s comment demonstrates, Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies can be adapted to attend to all students in varying ways. They draw from the life experiences and cultural strengths of Indigenous women and position these experiences as key assets to a wholistic learning engagement that can be empowering for all learners.

The final report of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, entitled *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*, advanced 94 Calls to Action, of which Calls 62–65 are aimed at reconciliation education. The focus of my work rests within the broader national narrative of reconciliation through education. Although the participant contributions offer only pieces of a much larger puzzle, they provide valuable insights about the importance of decolonizing and Indigenizing educational programming. Indeed, this is particularly timely with the current push toward Reconciliation Education. To elaborate, Indigenous women-centred curriculum offers a decolonizing space for “actively resisting colonial paradigms” and “reject[ing] colonial curricula that [offer] students a fragmented and distorted picture of Indigenous peoples, and offer students a critical perspective of the historical context that created that fragmentation” (Battiste, 2013, p. 186). As the participants document, their prior educational experiences were characterized by colonial curricula. The Indigenous women-centred curriculum, however, offered an Indigenizing space that centres Indigenous worldviews, knowledges, and connections to land, place, and territory (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2021).

## Key Lessons for Reconciliation Education

The findings of this study offer key insights for promising practices on how to better serve Indigenous women in higher education. Collectively, the participant narratives offer four key lessons that are integral to reconciliation education more broadly. First, their entry points into higher education demonstrate their perseverance and they document a belief in education as a vehicle for social change. Second, they offer a wholistic vision of academic success. Third, they offer insights into the value of centring first voices as counternarratives to support cultural identity development. The fourth key lesson brings all the lessons full circle by highlighting the value of culturally relevant curriculum that bridges academic and community realities and connects students to the issues that matter in their own communities. These key lessons are in keeping with the “Four Rs” documented by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991). It has been more than 30 years since Kirkness and Barnhardt offered their timeless discussion on “the implications of the ‘Four Rs’ of respect, relevance, reciprocity and responsibility” (p. 6) as they apply to Indigenous student experiences in higher education. Today, their work continues to be taken up by numerous Indigenous scholars in relation to fostering culturally relevant educational spaces to advance Indigenous student access and success (Brant, 2017). Here, I connect the key lessons offered by the participants as they relate to the “Four Rs” to present concrete recommendations for supporting Indigenous women’s academic success in higher education.

The first recommendation is that **Respect** must be shown to Indigenous women entering post-secondary education by attending to Indigenous women’s entry points. This recommendation involves the development of responsive programming and curricula that align with the expressed educational visions and desires of Indigenous women in higher education. It also involves fostering family-centred models that embrace and honour students’ familial responsibilities. For example, embracing familial roles involves offering quality and culturally relevant childcare; ensuring there are child-friendly spaces, including quiet areas for nursing, diapering, etc.; and making education accessible for all sole-support parents, those with family responsibilities, and especially younger families and first-generation students. As an example, in one of our *Gidayaamin* classrooms there was a playpen in the room for a new mom, along with a cupboard for diapers and other essentials.

The second recommendation, **Relevance**, is inseparable from the one above, and also involves aligning with

Indigenous women’s expressed vision of educational success. Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies offer a starting place for curriculum developers to imagine culturally relevant pedagogies that align with wholistic visions of academic success, and attend to the heart-mind-body-spirit connections that are necessary for embracing and supporting cultural identity. As indicated in the findings section, this involves curating course material that allows students to see themselves and their cultural identities and knowledges reflected throughout the course. Ensuring cultural relevance in the teaching and learning exchange also fosters a reciprocal classroom environment as noted in the next lesson.

The third key lesson is about centring “first voices” through a process of **Reciprocity**. Indigenizing curricula starts with centring Indigenous voices throughout course material, as an example by decolonizing course syllabi. I align this with the call for reciprocity because intentionally curating course syllabi with Indigenous students in mind promotes a reciprocal learning exchange. That is, not one that calls upon Indigenous students to be positioned as experts in the classroom, but rather a learning exchange that honours Indigenous knowledges, literatures, and, by extension, fosters an inclusive and rich learning exchange. Ensuring all voices are represented throughout the course material also supports the racial literacy of non-Indigenous and settler students.

The fourth “R” noted by Kirkness and Barnhardt involves institutional **Responsibilities** and relationships with Indigenous communities. It also entails the notion of involving Indigenous students and community partners in all levels of the institution, as a way to support Indigenization efforts and effect change within. I align this “R” with the final lesson from the participant narratives, which also highlights the importance of bridging relationships between higher education and Indigenous communities. Kirkness and Barnhardt extend the work of Henry Giroux (1988) on “border pedagogy,” noting that students move in and out of spaces that are shaped by a series of power relations, and Tierney (1993), to call on the institutional responsibilities for fostering hospitable environments for Indigenous students in higher education. I position my final recommendation as bridge crossing that involves bringing community in throughout all levels of the institution and providing opportunities for cross-cultural engagement. This involves hosting Indigenous community on campus, such as inviting Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers as guest speakers, providing access to Elders and Knowledge Keepers as student supports, and having an Elders in Residence program. It in-

volves Indigenous representation and full participation at all levels of the institution. Finally, aligning with the participant narratives, this recommendation includes providing curricular and pedagogical opportunities for student investment in community engagement and social justice initiatives.

As Pidgeon and colleagues (2014) advise, Indigenous experiences of education can be told from many perspectives; when Indigenous students “tell their own stories about their perseverance and success in education, they frequently emphasize the interconnections and relationships between themselves, and their families, communities, nations and geographical locations” (p. 2). My findings document the value of Indigenous women-centred curriculum in relation to a wholistic vision of academic success. It was evident that seeds were planted throughout the courses that inspired and prompted intellectual growth. Nurturing the intellectual component of self was described as important for individual balance. For Sabrina, this learning journey indeed brought a sense of balance that she described as nurturing. Moreover, as Charity noted, she found balance within the satisfaction that comes with personal development. Charity continued by describing the courses as an opportunity to recognize “the importance of invoking thought and being inspired and inspiring moments, and in these courses specifically, there was a lot of inspirational moments.” Laura affirmed that the courses offered an opportunity to deepen her identity as a Métis woman. As she noted, the course provided “stepping stones” to her self-discovery as a Métis student, mother, and community member. Similarly, Leigh’s response also affirmed a deeper connection to her cultural identity. Leigh articulated that after taking the course she was more familiar with herself than she had ever been.

My praxis of Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies allowed many of the participants to come to terms with the effects of colonization and intergenerational traumas, as well as develop an appreciation for the contemporary realities of Indigenous women, families, and communities. The course material prompted cultural identity development and was emotional and personal for many of the students. Cultural identity development and self-nurturing went hand in hand as cultural teachings presented lessons on the balance of the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual, along with other women’s ceremonies. Lessons were informed by the women’s experiences and embedded as part of the curriculum, which was empowering for other students. The learning exchange that took place in the classroom when students shared personal experiences and personal connections with the literature was noted by the women as a

healing component of the courses because it prompted a sharing circle environment. Within this environment, some participants found their voices, and others felt safe expressing their voices. For example, the women applied lessons they learned in the classroom at home and in the community. Several students became active in organizing campus events and led teach-ins to promote awareness about Indigenous human rights, and several worked classroom material into publications, including an edited collection on racialized, sexualized, and gender-based violence against Indigenous women. Some of the women completed their degrees and moved on to graduate studies while others took up professional positions in community organizations. Overall, students described personal transformation, the inspiration to pursue further education including graduate studies, and a strong desire to contribute to community well-being. These lessons fostered personal well-being, which extended to family and community well-being and rippled back to personal well-being (Wilson, 2004). Collectively, all of the participants have been engaging in community work in ways that translate lessons from the courses into their families and communities. Through the application of Indigenous theoretical models in their personal lives, homes, and communities, their stories affirm the living connections between theory and practice, as points of self-recovery and community well-being.

## Sweetgrass Is All Around Her

Since Sky Woman, millions and millions of Indigenous women have inherited her legacy. As Indigenous women, we have been resourceful, resilient and remarkable in our will to keep falling and moving forward. We fall to better ground because of the many women who have gone before us, breaking our fall, and inspiring us from the shining example of their own incandescent lives.

—Sandra Laronde (2005)

The Haudenosaunee Creation Story is the starting point for my academic work and the courses I teach because it is well understood that, for Indigenous peoples, our way of life begins with creation as is reflected in our languages, ceremonies, and cultural protocols. It is from this starting place that I honour my own cultural identity and model for students how they might weave their own cultural knowledges into their academic journeys. From a Haudenosaunee perspec-



tive, the Creation Story provides the original lessons that are all around us today—I find these lessons interwoven throughout the Indigenous literatures that inform my praxis. The sweetgrass lessons come from the original teachings embedded in the Haudenosaunee Creation Story. As one of the traditional medicines for many Indigenous peoples, there are other stories and teachings about sweetgrass from each of the nations my participants belong to. Throughout this collective journey toward the praxis of Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies, I came to understand the importance of the sweetgrass lessons that grew “all around,” affirming the collective research story that emerged from my journey alongside Grandmother Shirley and the participants. Thus, sweetgrass as praxis emerged from the collective research story as participants documented the value of past, present, and future connections within curricular material such as Indigenous women’s literatures, and throughout the overall programmatic features of *Gidayaamin*. Indeed, a wholistic vision of academic success for Indigenous women is one that honours cultural traditions and knowledges such as that of sweetgrass that embraces body, mind, and spirit connections.

Sweetgrass grows and remains a link to remembering tradition. For many Aboriginal peoples, sweetgrass is the hair of Mother Earth; it provides clarity of mind and it purifies us. The threefold braid of sweetgrass represents the integration of body, mind and spirit; it is also symbolic of community strength. One strand of sweetgrass is easy to break, but many braided together are strong. (Brant & Laronde, 1996, p. 1)

This research story extends the metaphor of the sweetgrass basket to the women’s experiences in my courses, which have informed my pedagogical and collective journey toward the praxis of Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies. Affirming this, Grandmother Shirley talked to us about the sweetgrass teachings during the feedback circle, and gifted us all a thin braid of sweetgrass to carry with us; in doing so, she offered us a link to remembering tradition and encouraged the participants to recall on the sweetgrass as they journeyed forward.

## Conclusions

I ended my master’s thesis with the wise and powerful, yet simple, words of the Grandmother Elder who guided my work. She said, “Don’t just let this sit on a shelf, use it and

do something with it.” A similar sentiment is expressed by Anzaldúa (1990), who wrote, “Change requires more than words on a page—it takes perseverance, creative ingenuity and acts of love” (p. 574). The Elder’s direction during my master’s research to not “let this sit on a shelf” has encouraged me in my “own will to keep...moving forward” (Laronde, 2005, p. vii). My work certainly did not just sit on a shelf. It evolved and served as the impetus for my doctoral research on the development of *Gidayaamin* and it planted the initial pedagogical seeds for me to co-create an Indigenous women-centred praxis. The growth of these pedagogical seeds was evident as student experiences transcended classroom spaces with reaches into family and community spaces. Throughout the sharing circles, Grandmother Shirley made references to the “fierce love” the participants expressed when they shared their experiences, and she related their stories to creative acts of “perseverance.” The act of taking a vision forward for the betterment of Indigenous families and communities is certainly an act of love, and all the participants continue to play a role in this vision being realized. As Grandmother Shirley articulated, throughout their work as students, mothers, and community members, the women were providing sustenance for their families and communities, and, in doing so, the women were filling their sweetgrass baskets and carrying them home.

The findings from this study revealed that Indigenous women’s success in higher education is multifaceted and multilayered. Indigenous women’s identities must also be understood as multidimensional within the context of varying colonial and de-colonial experiences. Thus, the participant stories that I shared throughout are not intended to be representative of the experiences of all Indigenous women in university or of all Indigenous-centred programs; rather, they showcase a powerful research story that connects Indigenous women’s academic success to culturally relevant programming. I share this research with the intention of offering a harmonious description of the work that must be done to carve out safe spaces for Indigenous-centred programming. In sum, this article offers an important contribution to the work on supporting Indigenous students in higher education by documenting the value of Indigenous women-centred curriculum in relation to academic success. To move beyond the deficit theorizing and traditional access models that often frame Indigenous student success, the purpose of this study was to document a strength-based vision that documents wholistic understanding of academic success for Indigenous women in post-secondary institutions. The lessons gleaned from the women’s narratives



seamlessly connect to the “Four Rs” documented by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991), and in this way offer broader lessons for strength-based approaches to reconciliation education.

This work is dedicated to the women who participated in this study and so willingly shared their heartfelt stories of strength, resilience, and perseverance. Their stories presented me with the gift of the Sweetgrass Basket that continues to guide my praxis of Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies. Nya: when for continuing to carry your own Sweetgrass Baskets and planting seeds of rebirth and renewal throughout our communities.

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