

**NAAHSINAANIKSI (THE SPIRIT OF OUR GRANDMOTHERS):
FIRST NATIONS WOMEN AS PRINCIPAL LEADERS**

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B. Ed., University of Lethbridge, 1991

A Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Education
of the University of Lethbridge
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF EDUCATION

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA

January 2004

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the First Nations women in Principal Leadership roles because, in sharing their stories, gave me insight into who influenced them throughout their lives.

I would like to acknowledge my family; my parents who instilled values in me that are present today, my sisters whose encouragement is never ending, to my grandparents, especially my grandmother, whose faith and spirit remain with me always.

I would like to acknowledge my supervisor who encouraged me to write my stories.

Finally, I want to acknowledge, and thank, my immediate family: John, Larissa, and Eric because their belief in me gave me the strength to write my stories.

Abstract

Blackfoot tribal tradition provides for the voice and action of leaders within the tribe to be honored according to the protocol for the various cultural and religious societies. As leaders become successful and words of their qualities filter throughout the tribe, it is a basic understanding that these leaders would become mentors for persons younger than themselves. Leadership qualities esteemed within a tribe were passed from one generation to the next.

This project investigates First Nations women in Principal Leadership roles; it specifically asks who were/are influential persons in their lives, what leadership qualities First Nations women in Principal Leadership roles exhibit, and how influential they are as Principal leaders within their school communities. Four First Nations Women in Principal Leadership roles who reside in various Blackfoot tribal communities were interviewed. All women are of Blackfoot ancestry; two being fluent Blackfoot language speakers, two being knowledgeable of the Blackfoot language. All women are extremely well-informed in Blackfoot culture and its teachings and imparted their understanding to me

The results of this project provide the reader with a history of First Nations women from early North American literature to current ideologies that First Nations women in Principal Leadership roles hold to be true.

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Chapter 1: The Beginning of Life

The blizzard of 1967 hit with a vengeance. My family lived in a 10' x 10' four-room house. The snow was about four feet deep and drifted up the sides of our house so that when you looked out the square kitchen window facing west, all you saw was snow. So deep was that snow that my Dad couldn't walk through the two coulees—a mile at most—between our house and my Grandparents' house. That house had no foundation so the cold wind blew snow and cold air under our house. The attic above was insulated with old clothes and papers that lay haphazardly between the frame. Those cold winds blew into our house from every direction. There was no escaping that cold.

Our family of eight children plus my parents didn't have much to begin with. Our home had a wood stove which acted as a furnace, cook stove, foot warmer, and bakery. But during that blizzard of 1967, some wood and kindling stacked in the porch, the stove was mainly a furnace for those few days in December. I remember being hungry. A hunger that was nothing new. A hunger that ate away at your soul because you wished of food that you knew would never be. I remember eating macaroni and mustard soup for days on end. Macaroni and mustard soup with bannock. The hunger was interrupted on that second day by the sound of planes. Planes that could be seen dropping packages house by house. Those airplanes flew over us that day; no flour, oatmeal, sugar, powdered milk, lard. I remember being hungry sitting down to the table of macaroni and mustard soup.

Every family has their triumph stories and this is one of those stories. The real life stories where overcoming obstacles of nature or man provides a family with a sense

of accomplishment. This story is well known in our family. It resounds of poverty and our ability to prevail in spite of what nature and man put in front of us. I was five years old when this event occurred and I can still feel the draft blowing through the single-paned windows on every side of our house. This story is mine and my family's; a vague memory of eating macaroni and mustard soup mixed with someone hearing a plane overhead. But the hunger was real; is real to this day.

Throughout this event, and through the many events that happened in that little white house, my mother was the stabilizing force and the foundational support. With what little we had in our home, she found the energy to put breakfast on the table—a bowl of porridge perhaps—or to scrounge around for enough flour to make bannock and enough potatoes to fry so that everyone had something to eat. My mother supported our physical needs; but as important, she also nourished our emotional and mental needs as well.

My grandmother, Marie Scragg, was a 27-year-old unwed mother in the year 1931 in a city called Edmonton and at a time and place where being 27 and unwed would have deemed you a spinster. Her race was classified as “English”, which could have meant anyone who immigrated from Britain or its colonies. Marie gave birth to a baby girl on January 15. The father was listed as Unknown when Marie gave her child the name Anne Marie before giving this child up for adoption approximately 70 years ago. Anne Marie was sent as a tiny baby to live with Roman Catholic Nuns for a period of time. Four years later, she still remained in that city called Edmonton.

Anne Marie's trek south began during that fourth year, as she rode into the hamlet of Brocket on a team of horse and wagon. She was brought to the Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Residential School to be raised as a child of God. Why bring her to a Native

reserve so far from her birthplace? Why so far from her maternal territory? Had Anne Marie's mother committed an act of indiscretion with a married man? Had Anne Marie's mother had an illicit affair with an Indian man? Or was he of Italian or Greek descent as she was often told? Whatever their reason, Anne Marie was dark skinned, so what better place to hide her than amongst other dark skins on the reserve?

Anne Marie resided at the Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Residential School during the school year where she became a favorite of the priests and nuns who were her charge. She was more than intelligent, she was worldly smart, smartness born of being lonely amongst many people, of being committed to a people not her own. During her summers, Anne Marie was befriended by a childless couple named Gus and Soonniaki. They too adopted her, spiritually, if not legally. It is Gus and Soonniaki that Anne Marie remembered learning from: taking long walks to collect water from the Oldman River, hearing about the names of Blackfoot plants, people, and places. As Anne Marie took her place within a Blackfoot family, her ties to this place called Peigan took hold.

Anne Marie's adopted family introduced her to the Indian world—long before the politically correct term Native was introduced. She learned the old language—the Blackfoot language whose phrases depicted a life before houses, and fridges, and toilets. She was raised with the boys—Isadore, Leo, Robert—and she worked alongside them like a man. In every way possible, Anne Marie adapted to this world that was her own spiritually—if not legally, and she soon began to forget that long trek south to Peigan.

Anne Marie met Edward, a young Peigan man from St. Cyprian's Anglican Residential School. They were a mismatch from the beginning; she standing a petite 5'1" with curly black hair and wicked humor to boot while he stood a 6'3", slim built, with

wiry hands from working the fields or cattle during his time off. They were sixteen when they met but they lived at a time and place where sixteen was considered responsible so they married in the Sacred Heart Chapel. Later, someone took pictures of Edward in his borrowed suit and Anne Marie in the communal bridal gown on the steps of the church and from that union came to be a generation of children—eight in all—who each could tell stories of their time and place in Peigan. From the union of Anne Marie and Edward a relationship between their children, myself one of them, and their paternal grandmother developed that continued for generations.

Granny grew yellow and red tulips in a rectangular flowerbed bordered by bricks turned on a diagonal. That yard and those flowers were off limits. *Mistaapoot*, Granny commanded in Blackfoot. No running around the yard. Go out there and play. And with a wide sweep of her hand those eight children would be off and running through the coulees, down by the creek, into abandoned sheds, to the little buffalo jump, through the fields to play hide and go seek, or cowboys and Indians (always wanting to be the cowboy, never the Indian). Granny would call us in for supper; to be seated at a round wooden table, Grampa always the first be served, while the grandchildren sat quietly around the table (to be seen, not heard), and unable to leave until Grampa had left the table. Granny had expectations that everyone had to fulfill regardless of age or ability. If you were told to help get water, that meant carrying two buckets to the well (about a twenty-minute walk straight there). But you never really walked straight there because your concentration on the task ahead was broken by the meandering path, the clouds filled with dreams of ballroom dances, ballroom dresses, and ballroom kisses. But

Granny had a keen eye and her commands to finish the jobs could well be heard as it was carried along with the southern Alberta prairie breeze.

Granny told us many stories of our family, our connections to Little Leaf, Rides at the Door, Iron Shirt, Brings Down the Sun. She told us to pray to these elders because through our blood lines flows their strong and powerful lineage. Granny lived our spirituality, and when sleeping at her house we awoke each morning to the sweet, musky smell of sweet grass burning in her bedroom. It was here that she connected with the Creator each day. It was here that she asked our ancestors to watch over her grandchildren each day. Granny told us stories which brought us back to a time of magical powers and unmistakable strength and honour. She told us the story of *How the First Sundance Bundle Came to Earth*. The Sundance, which is integral to our Blackfoot world, came alive that day. Linda Hogan wrote in *A Circle of Nations* a statement which exemplifies the relationship between grand/mothers and their daughters:

Like the old redwood forests, when a mother tree falls, a young one springs from its death. I am one of the trees grown out of my grandmother's falling. The line where my grandmother ends and I begin is no line at all. (cited in Sommer, 1998, p. 19)

It is through my mother, Anne Marie, that I am forever connected to the Blackfoot people, especially to my Granny who guided us towards a life of spiritual well-being. Anne Marie and Granny are no longer alive; their trees have fallen. But through their blood lines, I am the one carrying our culture to a new line of young ones.

As our culture and language are passed from one generation to the next through the stories of our mothers and grandmothers, it is these First Nations women who become

leaders within our Blackfoot communities. Blackfoot tribal tradition provides for the voice and action of leaders within the tribe to be honoured according to the protocol for the various cultural and religious societies. As leaders become successful and words of their qualities filter throughout the tribe, it is a basic understanding that these leaders would become mentors for persons younger than themselves. Thus, leadership qualities esteemed within a tribe were passed from one generation to the next.

This project investigates how First Nations women became Principal Leaders. First Nations women in Principal Leadership roles will, through their stories, identify who were/are influential persons in their lives, what leadership qualities they have developed as a result of these influential persons, and how influential they are as Principal Leaders within their school communities.

As a First Nations educator in Alberta, my interest in First Nations women as Principal Leaders derived from the apparent fact that, at the time of writing, 12 of 18 Principal Leaders in the Treaty 7 Tribal communities were First Nations women. It became apparent to me that First Nations women have/had influential people in their lives that guided them towards careers in education and, ultimately, to become Principal Leaders within their school communities. Using this information, my intention became to illustrate how or what kind of leadership qualities First Nations women as Principal Leaders bring forth that enhance their respective school communities.

Chapter 2: In Their Words: Literature on First Nations Leaders

My paternal grandmother, Granny as she was called, had a daily routine that never altered while at home. She began her day by making coffee. She would dismantle the percolator, wash each piece, add the coffee grinds and water, and then put it over the flames to perk. Routine as that was, so was the next step in her regimen. Granny would leave the coffee to perk and re-enter her bedroom. This was a private place where entry to anyone except Grandpa was by invitation only. This room was where she went to pray after the coffee was on. Granny would smudge with sweet grass and as the incense burned the fragrance would float throughout the house, lifting skyward, carrying with it her prayers for her children, her grandchildren, and their children too. Prayers for a kinder world, for safety, for sickness to be removed, for journeying well, for protection, were all contained in those words. Granny prayed to Ihstipatapi'op, our Creator, to our ancestors gone to the spirit world – Brings Down the Sun, Iron Shirt, Rides at the Door, and to immediate family departed from this world – for our well-being. It was these people you asked for assistance to guide your family through the day.

Through Granny's daily routine, she began to develop within me a regimen of meeting daily physical and spiritual needs. As the day progressed, the continual and incessant amount of domestic chores began, interspersed with occasional coffee breaks (because there was always a pot sitting on the stove), or tea breaks (freshly made with mint and sugar), and smoke breaks. During these brief intermissions between washing dishes, making beds, vacuuming and dusting, Granny would sit at her usual place in the

kitchen. Facing the window looking east, nearest to the breadbox, sink, cupboard, and stove, Granny would tell us stories about how it was to chop wood and haul water, how cousin Ida came to visit, or about that cold January night when Lorna was born.

When I began thinking about the life that my grandmother led and her influence in my life, I became interested in how First Nations women were depicted in literature as written by both First Nations and non-First Nations authors. I read Beverly Hungry Wolf's *The Ways of My Grandmothers*, which acknowledged the influence that many elderly Blackfoot women had on the life of a young woman on the Blood Reserve. Through the interaction that this young woman had with her biological grandmothers and traditionally adopted grandmothers, I recognized that I too wanted to hear stories of grandmothers and to acknowledge my grandmother as well. I read Hungry Wolf's stories of these elderly Blackfoot women, of their spiritual, emotional, and domestic roles in their tribal communities and, as I explored more books like that of Hungry Wolf's (*Daughters of the Buffalo Women, North American Indian Women*), I became intrigued by the stories of these First Nations women.

However, as I began to research other texts written about First Nations women, I found that historically, stories, legends, and artifacts evolved around the First Nations male as warrior/hero, which in turn led Western historians to believe that First Nations women led lives of drudgery and boredom (Armstrong, 1996; McMillan, 1995; Peers, 1996; Wissler, 1966).

Plains Indian women [were] rarely visible as individuals or a category of people in the early journals of traders, missionaries, explorers, and government

agents....Often, these journalistic accounts ignore the experiences of women, considering them too insignificant to merit special treatment.

(Albers & Medicine, 1983, p. 3)

Other historical accounts of women show them being subservient to the Native male, which often communicated to the reader of early North American literature a denigration of First Nations women. This misinterpretation of tribal custom was a central tenet of William P. Clark (as cited in Weist, p. 30):

In savagery and barbarism women are merely beasts of burden, prized and valued for their skill in fancy or capacity for heavy work, rather than for any beauty of face or figure....A life of filth, drudgery, and exposure, sustained by the coarsest of food, is not conducive to female perfection of form and feature.

This perspective was that of the writer, not of the participant. In every skill associated with manual labor that related to domestic activities in the tribal camps or the wood-built home, First Nations women showed their strength and endurance to complete these tasks for their families and tribal communities. So whether by misinterpretation or omission, the reality and worldview of First Nations women was not apparent in early North American literature. Early historians did, however, write about the beast of burden/savagery mythology conferred upon First Nations women.

A woman of unquestioned virtue was highly respected and played a central role in several important ceremonies. While much of the women's time was spent in the drudgery of scraping and tanning hides to make clothing and tipi covers, it was the women who own the hides and tipis. (McMillan, 1995)

In reality, First Nations women led and are leading lives filled with an abundance of skills, wisdom, family history, and a way of knowing life. According to Hungry Wolf (1982) in *The Ways of My Grandmothers*, mothers were a stabilizing force as they “provided...a strong example of traditional kindness and generosity combined with hard work and devotion to family” (p. 7). Hungry Wolf continues by saying that

[in] the culture of my people the work of the women was generally respected and honoured, for the men knew very well that they could not live without them. The people of the past thought it a great honour that the women should bear and rear the children, ensuring that there would be people in the future....In the social life of my grandmothers, a household was judged not only by the bravery and generosity of the man, but also by the kindness and work habits of the woman....This traditional life of housekeeping was passed from mother to daughter through daily experience, not in classrooms or from books. (p. 110)

The values, attitudes, and skills that First Nations women possessed were in large an advantage. The strength and endurance that they personified suited them well for living in the environmental, economic, and social conditions of that time and place (Churchyk & Miller, 1996). These values were consistent with those of non-First Nations women building their own communities as they settled in this area of North America. Thus, when reassessing these values, attitudes, and skills and in order to reassess them with a more positive and less biased mind-set, one can see that First Nations women were very well suited to the rigors of their traditional life.

Native women, men and children belonged to a communal, family-oriented people; the plains Indians were independent members of basically democratic

societies....Everyone participated in games, gambling, races...they sought out old friends, gossiped, laughed, and told stories...communal activities occurred as well including tribal hunts, public festivals, spiritual ceremonies, and diplomatic councils. (Carlson, 1998, p. 70)

Traditionally, the lives of First Nations women were lengthy times of hardship interspersed with joyous occasions and ceremonies; through these times First Nations women continued to possess the ability to participate in the decisions that their tribal communities made (Medicine, 1983). For Blackfoot people in particular, the decision making process was held with the input of both men and women. Whether deciding to make camp, go to war, or to disperse of material goods, leadership within the Blackfoot tribal community was highly regarded as being held with dignity, honour, and discipline (Wissler, 1966). Leadership was a shared domain where both men and women (sometimes as a married couple) would have joint leadership in different social or religious organizations. There were some social or religious organizations that were lead by First Nations women only (McMillan, 1995). Leadership was also extended to Elders and Herbalist/Doctors, both of whom could be female.

“Elders, the usual source of information on all aspects of tradition, are likely to have a fund of knowledge and experience that is very different from that of young people.” (Niece, p. 3). Elders [both First Nations males and females] were held in high esteem for their ability to provide knowledgeable advice regarding political, social, or moral dilemmas or discussions within their communities. (Boldt, 1993, p.199)

Religious or ceremonial membership was voluntary for both men and women. Blackfoot women were involved with the Motokiiks (Buffalo Women Society), Horn Society (with a male partner), Sundance Woman, Crazy Dogs (with a male partner), or Beaver Ceremony (with a male partner).

In tribal society women were equal participants with men.... Women held considerable influence. On occasion they sat on tribal councils and sometimes they determined which men rose to power.... With men frequently away to hunt or raid, women often dominated camp life and daily decision making. Some women became healers...warriors. (Carlson, 1998, p. 81)

This concept that First Nations men and women shared decision-making and leadership duties was expanded upon by Weist (1983):

During the many days in which the men of a band were absent on hunts or war parties, the women of the camp were responsible for the welfare of the families. Women were accustomed to making decisions, often during crises. They had to be capable of providing food and other necessities if the men did not return promptly. (p. 70)

The need for leadership within First Nations communities, both historic and present day, is a fact. Bowles, Hanley, Hodgins, and Rawlyk (1972) made a statement that is true today: "Leadership within Indian communities is important for its own sake. The objectives are group achievement, stability of family, and growth of community pride....It is vital that children and young people see change and development take place." Although no written documentation regarding the formal leadership of women occurs in early North American literature (most authors still giving the power and

authority of tribal decision making to First Nations males), an indication through their daily tasks and activities shows that First Nations women held leadership roles as healers, warriors, and domestic skills people—all part and parcel of their existence within their tribal communities.

More recently, the roles of First Nations women have continued along the lines of their ancestral matriarchs. First Nations women are using their leadership abilities to focus our politicians, social and religious organizations, and school communities towards the needs of our First Nations youth. First Nations women are acknowledging the need for leadership within our communities. This was addressed by Elder Paula Weasel Head who stated: “Yes, I think there is still hope for them [youth] to change, in the future...if they will listen to good leaders, and learn to have respect for all things, not just those that are theirs, and if they will pray” (Hungry Wolf, 1982, p. 79). The fact that Mrs. Weasel Head is addressed as an “Elder” shows the moral significance and value given to her belief and attitude. Also, in sharing her story, the history and skills from one generation to the next perpetuate traditional First Nations knowledge.

I’m going to tell you a little bit about the holy initiations that I have gone through in my lifetime of over seventy years, to show you what a woman can take part in with our tribal culture....When I was just a little girl my father purchased a painted-tipi design for me. The design was put on a new tipi for the transfer ceremony. It wasn’t a big tipi, it was just a little tipi big enough for kids to play in. My mother made it for me so that I could use it with my friends. They hired an old man to conduct the ceremony so that I would be properly initiated for it.

(cited in Hungry Wolf, 1982, p. 79)

In a short and simple story, Elder Paula Weasel Head told of a time when young girls and their mothers continued to generate tribal values in the creation and transfer ceremony of a child's tipi; a plaything with much significance attached to the ritual and protocol of Blackfoot transferred rights being respected. In *The True Spirit and Original Intent of Treaty 7* (Hildebrandt, 1997), Wilton Goodstriker speaks of First Nations people and their responsibility to their children:

Storytelling is a great gift among our people. A requirement among our people is for the young children to spend much time with grandparents. It is the responsibility of the grandparents to teach legends and stories and the ways of our people. In this way closeness develops between the very young and the old.

(p. 11)

Not only does a close personal relationship develop but also, as Carlson (1998) states, it is an education in itself to hear these stories. "Children also received instruction in tribal histories, myths, legends, and values...important clan[s], band[s], or tribal tradition. The next evening a young person might be expected to repeat the oral lesson."

(p. 82)

Understandably, First Nations women as leaders within Treaty 7 tribal communities were expected to impart knowledge of skills and wisdom of our traditional ways to the very young. "She [the First Nations woman] teaches her child a reverence of and profound respect for all creation...A Native woman teaches that responsibility lies in nurturing and renewing the relationship with all creation" (Bastien, p. 127). Through the transmission of these values, attitudes, beliefs, and skills, the language and culture of our tribal community is secured.

The benefits of researching First Nations women as Principal Leaders are in acknowledging that in traditional Blackfoot culture, women were and are held in high esteem if they have shown leadership qualities such as integrity, honesty, teamwork, sharing, caring, knowledge of tribal traditions, and wisdom of cultural ceremonies. In displaying these leadership qualities, First Nations women were and are deemed an integral part of the tribal community.

A common thread linking First Nations cultures across the land is respect for the elders of the community, with their great store of wisdom and endurance. Elderly women are honoured as transmitters of tribal culture and a link between past and future generations: Mothers of the People. (Sommer, 1998, p. 11)

Armstrong makes the same point as Sommer when she states:

We [First Nations women] find our strength and our power in our ability to be what our grandmothers were to us: keepers of the next generation in every sense of that word—physically, intellectually, and spiritually. We strive to retain our power and interpret it into all aspects of survival on this earth.

(Armstrong, 1996, p. xi)

Leadership in First Nations communities, whether traditional or modern, has been addressed in a number of ways but the importance of it is highlighted by Boldt (1993): “Effective leadership represents the only and final chance for Indian people to escape their destitution, despair, and frustration, and it represents their only hope for survival and well being as *Indians*”(p. 177). Effective leadership represented by both First Nations women and men.

Early North American literature abounds with articles and books regarding the roles of First Nations women in traditional roles with few addressing First Nations Women in leadership roles. As we move into the present day, literature regarding First Nations women in leadership roles continues to be deficient; literature regarding First Nations women in Principal Leadership roles is almost non-existent.

Women and people of color were almost completely absent from the study of leadership until the late 1970s. The lack of research on women and people of color was not viewed as problematic because race and gender were not considered differences of consequence. Researchers seemed to assume that their findings on educational leadership could be applied without regard for gender or race. (Bass, 1981, p. 218)

Bass continues by stating that:

Of the research that is available, there is considerably more on women than on people of color....It is interesting that even though situational theories were created in a society in which racism and sexism are salient, they are silent on issues of race and gender. This is especially perplexing since community factors, cultural values, and other commonly studied situational variables frequently involve issues of race and gender. Situational analysis can help increase our understanding of the behaviors of people of color and women in leadership positions as well as the behaviors of others towards them. (Bass, 1981, pp. 220-221)

If we examine the situational context of First Nations women as Principal Leaders, we will find that these women have experienced life differently than women of

other races. Influences on First Nations women are framed from their respective language and culture, moral development, schooling, and domestic training. Thus, to legitimize the leadership roles that First Nations women have developed and acquired in today's society, we must delve into their situational contexts to understand how they became leaders, what qualities they have, and how the culmination of these attributes help their First Nations communities.

Chapter 3: A World of Spirit: Interviews with Principal Leaders

Making connections with my students is something I strive to do. As a teacher and significant adult in the lives of my students, it is important to me that I understand where they come from. To know their family and their life circumstances assists me in valuing my students for the individual child that each one is. As each year progresses and I observe the students within my class, I see that more and more students are being raised by someone other than a parent. This someone is often a grandparent; but more often than not a grandmother. I feel that my students have made connections with their grandmothers largely due to the fact that extenuating circumstances have not been kind to them. So in pondering the question about who the most important/influential person in my life was, I recently told the following story to my students. I told my story to my students in part because it made the point that one single person could be the most important/influential in their lives and in part because I wanted to connect with them because my own extenuating circumstances were not much different from their own.

My mother died when I was a teenager; fifteen to be exact. This, after having witnessed the disintegration of my parents' marriage not three years earlier. My dad had moved to Calgary by then and although I could still count on him for support, it was really a mother that longed for. After my mother's death, I turned to my grandmother for support. In anything I needed, from borrowing five dollars, to needing a hot meal, to hearing stories about camping in canvas tents during harvest; my grandmother personified stability. I felt special when I went to my grandmother's brown stucco home. Upon entering her home, a verbal greeting was accompanied with the more physical

acknowledgement of the kiss. I would always kiss my grandmother on the lips as a way of saying many things: I like you. I thank you. I love you. I'm glad you are home today. I need to be here with you. My grandmother always had kind words for me. 'You're a good girl,' she'd say in Blackfoot. Incidentally, I never repaid my grandmother those numerous five dollar bills that I owed her. Money wasn't that important. But as I grew older, married, and had children, I repaid her with my sense of integrity because my grandmother had always told me to think about what was right and good for myself, for others, and to follow my heart. As a grandchild, it became more than just a sense of duty to drive my grandparents to Pincher Creek to shop for groceries at Co-op or to help her wash clothes at the town laundromat. It was the right thing to do for my elderly grandparents. Going to their house on Sundays with my sister Karen wasn't just a day to visit and relax and hear the old stories. It was a day to repay my grandparents for their kindness and generosity. We vacuumed, did dishes, dusted, washed floors, cleaned bathrooms. My grandmother just couldn't do for herself anymore so we became her arms and legs and sight. My grandmother would always tell us in her patched English language 'Tank you very much'. No more was needed than that. My grandmother saying thank you when, in fact, it was I thanking her.

My attitude and belief system was generated from my grandmother, along with my mother and my sisters. These female role models that have spanned my lifetime have given me the one value that I truly take to heart: integrity. In everything I do and say, I try to do what is right and good for myself, my children and husband, my family and friends, and for my students because they are in many ways my children. By doing the right thing, I believe I demonstrate in myself that which can be emulated by those people

around me. These women who have influenced me so deeply have left a bit of their spirit with me; guiding me towards a path of good judgment.

I recently interviewed four First Nations Women in Principal Leadership roles who reside in various Blackfoot tribal communities. All women are of Blackfoot ancestry; two being fluent Blackfoot language speakers, two being knowledgeable of the Blackfoot language. All women are extremely well-informed in Blackfoot culture and its teachings and imparted their understanding to me. So as I listened to their stories, I learned many things about their lives. Some of the words, especially the verbal responses, followed the form of the interview questions, but much of the language spoken, emotions experienced, and hearts opened truly belonged to the person. In these stories, came an understanding of how these First Nations women came to be Principal Leaders within our tribal communities.

Transference of First Nations Culture and Language

The transference of First Nations culture and language was not inherent at birth; these First Nations women were born at a time and place where being *Indian* was often a negative, rather than positive, experience. From the beginning, it created a duality within First Nations women, living a life filled with Indian practices and Western religious doctrine. First Nations women told common stories of grand/parents who were raised with the new religion of Christianity (plus its many offshoot groups) and the traditional cultural knowledge and practices of their tribal communities.

I grew up in the era where our spiritual practices were really not there any longer because my parents went to boarding school and the spiritual practices weren't there because they were not allowed by the Indian Agent. So I grew up in the era

where there was the Full Gospel Church and the Mormon Church. All these people were making their way into the community and the Catholic Church was already established and we lived not far from there. However, my mother was not a person who was a strict Catholic. My mother was baptized Catholic but she was never a strict Catholic, or a strict Anglican. That was not her world view. Her world view was that if you go somewhere and people are praying, then it's good. Then you know you have a right to be there; so sometimes we would be at the Mormon church on Sunday, then other times we would be at the Catholic Church or Full Gospel Church....So in my upbringing I never had biases towards churches or people, because I was taught that if it's prayer—it's good. However, I do remember my Dad. My Dad had a lung problem and he died from emphysema in '73. One thing I remember about my Dad was he used to try and doctor himself and he would take a tub (like you wash your clothes in) and he would go out and he would come back with rocks. At that time I didn't realize that those were sweat rocks. He'd come in and he'd take a tub of water, really hot water, and he'd put those rocks in, and he'd cover himself with a blanket and he would lean over that [tub] and that was his sweat. He'd doctor himself. I also remember when we lived next door to the graveyard and so, whenever someone passed away, we were to go to bed early and not make any noise. I know that I used to be told that spirits wander at night and you couldn't be outside or even look out the window. We had to have the curtains pulled. Or to cry at night wasn't a good thing for us....One day we ran up there to Ghost Hill—you know that hill by the graveyard—and it was in the evening. We came home and we had all these dishes we found up there and

they were from that little house where people were buried. It was in the evening. We ran home and we hid those dishes behind the house. We didn't tell my mom that we had them. That night we really got bothered [by the spirits of the people who owned those dishes]. My dad came in the bedroom and woke us up. He asked if we had taken anything from that house and we say 'Yah.' He was really mad at us. [He said] 'I have a good notion to make you bring those things back right now.' And we were scared! But the next day he woke us up early, just as the sun was coming up, and he made us bring them [the dishes] back. When we came back, he said 'Don't you ever take anything like that again. That's a cemetery there.' (Principal A)

In this story, both Christian and traditional First Nations beliefs were acknowledged by the speaker. Even though she attended church on Sundays with her mother, this First Nations woman was indirectly taught about the healing/cleansing nature of a sweat bath, of the common belief that spirits exist in our temporal world, and the belief that personal effects belong to the person even upon their death.

Another First Nations woman acknowledged her grandmother's ability to address the importance of traditional First Nations spirituality in life, even though she was a staunch participant in Christian practices, and how this bears upon her role as a teacher of culture and of education.

My grandmother's mother was one of the last women to hold a Sundance [prior to it being outlawed]. So basically, for myself I am carrying on those traditions.

That's where a lot of my influence comes from; because my grandmother really, really valued our traditions even though she went to boarding school and whatnot,

she still really valued our lifestyle—our true lifestyle. And I think that today it's been a blessing in disguise for me [because] I'm a teacher in two ways—about culture and a school teacher. I see both of them being equivalent. Neither one is better than the other. It boils down to being a teacher who could influence both [ways]. I'm fortunate that I come from a strong lineage of women. I have to be thankful because one of my aunties (who raised 16 children on her own) is still up and around, lively, and she carries on the values—the same values as my grandmother. So, I am really lucky to have those kind of influences and I depend on them [grandmothers and aunties] for advice and giving the proper direction....More so, these last few years you really get challenged and there's so much influence around that your spirituality really get challenged; [should you] be doing it the Christian way or the traditional way....I've been tested but throughout all that time, I've always been pulled towards our traditional beliefs. I really, really strongly believe in our traditional way because there are things that I have encountered that have no explanation whatsoever, but I know through our spirituality that these things happen. (Principal B)

One First Nations woman recalled her experiences with her grandmother. Her recollections portrayed an understanding of the importance of prayer, the nature of cultural practices such as the collection of worldly goods as offerings, and of being unaware that she was the recipient of traditional knowledge at a very young age.

I was one of the Kipiitapookaiksi [beloved grandchild]. We were always with my grandmother or great aunt. She taught in Blackfoot and she was so gentle. Every day, we'd wake up with that—discipline and prayer. She was with the Motokiiks

[Blackfoot Buffalo Women Society]. Back then, we never had to say, 'I'm part of this society or I hold this [position] or I do this.' They just lived that life and you just recognized it. They were very humble, spiritual, kind. And her whole life centred around that—the Sundance. [One] year she developed offerings for it—for her husband's health—different things. As soon as it was over, she'd start buying material or whatever she thought was needed for the ceremony....She'd start putting money aside for the Sundance (every month, every little money she got), or she'd make a new dress, or a quilt and say 'This is for the offering.' So it was a whole year's preparation. She'd always used prayer. So if somebody was sick, she'd say to us 'If you want them to be healed, I'll make my offering at the Sundance at the centre pole for this person.' And she'd keep praying. She'd be very dedicated to this person [who needed healing]. So I watched [my grandmother]. In the beginning, she was looking after us [tending to our needs] and when I got older she showed me where her roots and the medicine that she used [were]; where to pick them, how to care for them. It was just that I went with her and I helped her. I knew where she picked her berries, her saskatoons, and it was just that [kind of] life. (Principal C)

From their formative childhood years, First Nations women began developing an understanding of the rules and responsibilities basic to our First Nations culture such as daily prayer, respecting the possessions of deceased people, the collection of goods, and domestic duties such as berry picking. These First Nations women were exposed to a number of belief/religious systems, but they were inevitably drawn towards traditional First Nations spirituality as influenced by their grand/mothers and grand/fathers. These

grand/parents, themselves being influenced by Christian residential schools located in many tribal communities, held in regard those beliefs and attitudes attributed to Christianity. But prior to Christian beliefs being imbedded in their psyche, the majority of these grand/mothers and grand/fathers had been raised with the daily experience of practicing and appreciating First Nations spirituality and took honour when instilling it in their grand/children.

Rules such as respecting the deceased's belongings were established in a very direct way; others were taught through observances of daily activities. Such were the kinship rules apparent in male/female relationships. Kinship rules were not shown in written form, but in the oral/body language of our grand/parents. For instance, women of any age were not to be in the presence of a male (relative or not) for any length of time. This showed deference for him and kept the First Nations women in an honourable position.

In sitting with these ladies, just listening to them you learn what it takes to be a good woman. If we were at my grandmother's house and a male visitor came in, my grandmother would answer the door and talk to the man, but all the other women would look away. They wouldn't show themselves or try to get his attention or what not, they would all just look away. That was a sign of respect; not only for that man but for themselves. It was to show that I am a respectful woman; this is a person I respect too. Not speaking doesn't mean that you are being snobby; it was a means of respect for you and [showed] that there were parameters. Maybe some of these women were married, maybe some of them were very dedicated to their children and families, maybe some of them were

Ninaamskaa [religious society members] so there were rules. So they [old ladies] showed us these ways in a very subtle way. Every time we sat with them, there was no book written saying these are the things you need to do. We watched their actions and through their actions we knew what was expected of you as a girl.

(Principal B)

In every story told by First Nations women, they talked of spending time with their grand/mothers and grand/fathers who taught them a way of life. Yet, the duality of living in both a Christian and traditional world became uncomfortable, and internal conflicts regarding the beliefs and practices of traditional First Nations spirituality and Christian doctrines and rituals caused an imbalance in First Nations women's spirituality. This resulted in the women having to make a choice between the two. Lifelong decisions were made. From remembering how religion changed her perspective of herself as a young girl to making an informed choice in maturity, this First Nations woman felt great emotion about her spirituality:

I was sent to live in South Dakota. Like I was saying, at that time, there were a lot of people that were coming in, establishing themselves in the community as religious organizations. These people came to my house one evening and said they were from the States. They were showing my mother some pamphlets about this boarding school. I guess my mother was really concerned about my brother and I and she wanted us to see a different way; to experience a different way....I was too young [to start at that boarding school]....So what [the school personnel] said was that some people who lived in South Dakota...were missionaries and that these people would allow me to stay in their home for a year till I became old

enough to attend school in Montana. In that year I totally lost my language. I was amongst the Sioux people. And these non-Native people that I lived with...I lost my language and was also introduced to their religion which was very confusing to me. Their religion was very strict. It viewed God as a punishing God....I turned 11 in December and at that time your brain is still learning; your influences are greatest at that age level and they gave me, now that I look back on it, a really twisted view of God.

[Now] I have to say that you have to create a balance. I believe in the medicine wheel. The physical, emotional, mental and spiritual – you have to balance those four. Some people become unbalanced [because] you can get fanatical about spirituality and that creates an imbalance. I always believe that it is true, you have to balance all four parts in order to be a whole person. I really believe that and I think once we balance it, it makes it easier for us to walk on those two roads. (Principal A)

Another First Nations woman told of her decision to follow traditional religious beliefs and spiritual practices:

My main teachers were my parents but because you're so immersed, you're not aware that you're being taught. I would say that my most profound teachings came from my niece. After she joined the [traditional religious] societies, she began teaching me many, many things about our societies, about our culture, about what it meant to be Blackfoot, and to be a Blackfoot woman. Maybe she didn't teach me the language, but she definitely taught me most of what I know of our culture....It's my faith, my faith in prayers. And it's the commitment to pray

and once you make that, once you turn over, it's almost like you're aware of it, then you kind of ride the fence with the decision 'Am I going to get fully immersed in the culture? Am I going to make that commitment?' 'Cause you know you're having your calling. Like I knew that was my calling. So it was like riding the fence, to finally immersing myself in it and I think that it would have to be the faith and the prayers [as my main values]. And just living it and walking it. That would be the biggest influence from [my niece] is teaching me what it was that I was experiencing and what I needed to do about it. It all kind of goes together....I was at a [traditional ceremonial] pipe dance about two years ago. All the rest was preparation, all build-up, all like teaching me not to be afraid of it 'cause I was very brainwashed before. I was a Catholic through and through because that's what I was raised in but about two years ago at a [ceremony], where the men pipe owners [society members] get up and dance with the pipes, each of them took turns and at one time, everything just kind of was in slow motion and I had to close my eyes and it was like I was consumed with love and I really felt connected. I thought to myself 'This is what I was born to do. I just love this so much I don't want to let this go.' And that was it for me; that was the moment that I knew that I was meant to be in the culture that way. (Principal D)

Many people shared the distinction of being a person of influence for First Nations women in the transference of First Nations language and/or culture. Mothers and grandmothers, fathers and grandfathers, extended family members such as nieces, each of these began to create within First Nations women the sense of faith and spirituality. The challenges created by living with and being conflicted by the dual nature of First Nations

spirituality and Christian religion were met by First Nations women, and a mature appreciation and understanding of First Nations spirituality and practices was developed.

Schooling

Schooling (or formal education in an institution) was encouraged within each of the First Nations women's families. A number of the women charged the promotion of schooling from advice and role modeling of their grand/fathers. In their interviews, these First Nations women stated that their fathers often stated that education was the only way to get ahead in life and to be/do something better. 'Better' meaning the ability to provide more for their families, have good jobs with proper wages, being able to read and do math as this was the *new way*, to have bigger homes with indoor plumbing, proper running vehicles, and to have courteous interactions with government. Take into account that these grand/fathers were born at a time when reading/writing/speaking English was important and interacting with white people integral to daily life in our tribal communities. First Nations grand/fathers were being hired to work in office jobs and in learning these new duties saw that a new world was developing. This new world emphasized the importance of working and being schooled in a white world.

As for First Nations women, they often saw their grand/fathers living a life of hardship and saw their ever increasing need to create a life of prosperity for their families. So when their grand/fathers spoke words of advice to further their schooling, these First Nations women heeded that advice and a seed was planted for these women to become successful.

I know that my dad used to talk to all of us girls and in a lot of cases he used to tell me to make something out of myself; to do something with my life. I was young and because I went away after that I never really had that connection with my dad again after I was sent away. Then he died shortly after that. He died two years later, but in that time when I was young, I always had a talk with him and he always encouraged me, as young as I was, he encouraged me to make something of myself, to go to school, and become educated. My dad was easy going, but could be a real disciplinarian when he wanted to be, but those things stuck in my mind. However, I do believe that my experiences with that school also played a role in my choosing to be where I am today 'cause I believe that they made me feel so small about myself that I really needed to do something to prove to myself that I was worthwhile. The self esteem was totally not there. I decided to go back to school after I had four children....I think I was really looking for something to make me feel like I had a right to be here because, from my experience at the school and with those people, I was left with these feelings that I didn't have the right to be here. All these factors, but that was the major factor—my dad influenced me because he really wanted me...us...to make something of ourselves. (Principal A)

The next First Nations woman told of the role her father played in her schooling:

My dad worked for education here and he was a director for Alberta Indian Education. He was responsible for over 20 education committees right across Alberta. They really looked up to him, so he was like a role model for me to go into education. When I started working in the field of education, I was 17, and he

gave me the choice. He said 'You go back to school. You get a job. If not, you get out of our house.' He set the rules. I didn't want to go back to school in Calgary [because] it meant we had to board there. I've been all through the education system and I know what works – the residential schools and then the integrated schools. (Principal C)

For another First Nations woman it wasn't a person so much as an event that most influenced her to further her schooling. This First Nations woman had worked many years in the corporate world of big city Alberta. She recalled one day when she saw pictures of disabled/handicapped children as part of an assistance campaign. In seeing these children, this First Nations woman was so touched that she felt the calling to also help children with special needs. The pictures and emotions as prompts, she eventually returned to school (post secondary studies) and completed her Bachelor of Education.

By then I was already a mother of my son and he had just changed my life and brought so much happiness into my life. So all of a sudden I had so much compassion to any child and so when I saw those pictures of these sick children in hospital beds with all kinds of diseases and terminal illnesses, it just hit me that I had to go back to school and I had to somehow help. (Principal D)

Two First Nations women were heavily influenced by their grand/mothers in the encouragement and promotion of schooling. These grand/mothers told their grand/daughters to further their education for various reasons: to get away from negative influences, to not follow in the footsteps of their family members who chose not to attend school, and to not be dragged into lives influenced by alcohol and drugs (so prominent in tribal communities).

My grandmother was another really strong influence. One thing I always remember my grandmother telling me is that you have to get your education, you have to be successful, other wise, you are really going to struggle in your life. I remember being a teenager and doing crazy stuff and having my grandmother pull me aside and say 'Listen, if you go down that path you are going to be sorry. Enough of your aunts and your uncles are drinking alcohol and doing drugs. We don't need another one.' She used to tell me you have to finish school; because it's your answer. (Principal B)

She always told to me make sure I get an education. I remember telling her I didn't want to go to the residential school. I didn't want to leave her. We all lived in the same house and I told her 'I don't want to leave you. I don't want to sleep alone or I get scared. She told me 'Well, I'll pray for you and, when you go to bed, make sure you pray and I'll always be there for you'. (Principal C)

These First Nations women saw the benefits of schooling whether in residential/church schools, integrated/public schools, or on-reserve/First Nations schools. They discussed what schooling of this nature meant to them, how it was accomplished, the years of working jobs not in the field of education; but more important they discussed how their grand/mothers and grand/fathers influenced their decisions to be schooled.

Moral Development and Bestowing Values

First Nations women in Principal Leadership roles were influenced by significant persons who guided their moral development. These significant persons often became a guiding

force during their early adult years. Often it became the responsibility of many extended family members to develop within these First Nations women qualities viewed to be honourable. For one First Nations woman, it was her grand/mother that developed within her a sense of duty to use roots/herbal medicines to doctor family members in a holistic, traditional sense. This same First Nations woman learned the discipline of locating the area where these traditional roots and herbs were found, picking them, caring for each plant, and knowing the purpose and use of each plant part. As a young First Nations girl, it was imperative that a gentle, caring, disciplined routine be established to generate the use of traditional tribal healing methods.

Another First Nations woman in a Principal Leadership role, acknowledged a colleague as being responsible for her moral development. She associated her moral development to various leadership qualities that were developed in her early years as a school teacher. This First Nations woman had her colleague ask her questions such as ‘What does it take to be a leader?’ and this new teacher had to find within herself the answer to this question. She found that she had a strong sense of dedication to her family, friends, and work. She found that she had integrity; always wanting to do what was right for her self and others. She found that she had spirit; the ability to have faith, prayer, and commitment to First Nations spirituality.

About 1995-96, I met the next person who would influence my life. She saw in me the potential that I didn’t see in myself and they really saw value. For me, I was just happy being a mother. I refused [to participate] on committees; I just stayed away from everything. I just stuck with my kids and their hockey and that was it. So then D. kind of challenged me to come out of my box and help her

write this booklet for Alberta Learning. So we started venturing into that and then we came into this whole role of our master's program [whose] focus was leadership and school administration. I started hearing about what it takes to be a leader. You know these people who were teaching us were from these famous corporation that are on the cutting edge of management success and earning their dollar. These were some of the people who were mentoring us and they started asking us 'What does it takes to be a leader?' One of the things that would always stick with me was these qualities...dedication, integrity, some form of spirituality. I didn't know that these things were developing in me. I was taught that here's the measurement of a manager--of a leader and these are the qualities that help them to succeed....Through my training I started looking back and seeing these qualities that I had....Now that I'm in administration I look at myself, I know that people are hardworking and I place value on them. (Principal D)

The moral development of First Nations women was acquired throughout their lifetime. From early teachings from their grand/parents, to acquiring knowledge in maturity, the moral qualities developed in First Nations women were forever internalized.

First Nations women garnered innumerable values from the most influential people in their lives. Values were bestowed in a number of ways: through daily experience and practice, through ceremonial/religious practice, or as found inherent in First Nations language and stories. The value most often mentioned by First Nations women was *respect*. This value was taught to them by their grand/parents and the expectation was that it would be carried with them throughout their lives. Respect was for all things made by the Creator; all things animate (people, animals, plants) or inanimate (air, fire, rocks)

are considered to have an earned and/or reciprocal respect. For First Nations women, respect was an integral part of their daily existence exemplified through thoughts, words, and actions.

I think one of the values that was instilled in me all while I was growing up was respect. I think that value has really helped me and carried me—especially in my role as a principal—its respect. Not to demand respect from my staff, but to treat them with respect in all areas and to treat the students with respect so that you gain respect back in a mutual way. I know that respect was a very big thing in our home. I think for a lot of Native people that's a very big thing. Respect by not yelling at one another. Respect by not talking back to people that are older than you....That kind of leads into my role as Principal. I think one of the strongest values that I hold and I try to display towards my staff and the students is respect.

(Principal A)

Another key value for First Nations women was *perseverance*. These women had numerous struggles during their childhood and adult hood. These women grew up during a time of hardship; no running water or indoor plumbing, food rations, fuel for fires consisting of coal, wood chips, gasoline, hand-me-down clothes, poorly operating (or no) vehicles. Throughout this time, these women developed beliefs and attitudes which helped them to battle the hardships, to want more for themselves and their families, to try hard at school to learn more about the world. First Nations women persisted to dream, want, and need which guided them towards their roles as First Nations women in Principal Leadership roles. Often, due to these circumstances, First Nations women

depended upon their extended family to *support and care* for them, a value that is perpetuated today.

The one thing that I really like in terms of growing up is that I always knew that wherever I went, especially being on the reserve, I would never go without a mother or father figure. There was always one of my aunts, my older cousins, one of my uncles—someone that was there—and if I was doing wrong, I'd be told. Or if I needed something, I could go to family members to get the things that I needed. Or if I found myself in a situation, I would always have help...and I think that is one of the biggest values I have. Now that I'm older and I have children, I see my younger cousins, and I'm always looking out for them. Even though I may not know them that well, if I see them doing wrong, or if I see them in need, we help them out. I've really tried to keep that going in my family and I see it in my children. My children always want to help. I really admire that because I was taught that from my family. (Principal B)

Two of the First Nations women in Principal Leadership roles talked about the value of *sharing*. Although both families would be considered poor by today's standards, their grand/parents often shared what minimal food was in the home and long-term lodging was generously offered to their extended families.

I remember growing up when we didn't have a lot. We were very poor and a lot of times, we had very little to eat. However, if we ended having people come to my house and my mother was cooking, my dad invited them in and we ate—they ate as part of our supper table. Even if we had a little and someone came who was having a hard time, my dad always helped them out. Those kind of things I

remember my mother and father doing. I always heard him [my father] say that when people come to your house to visit, never let them go away without anything, even if you give them a cup of tea. If you're able, always try to give them something to eat, but if you can't give them something to eat, give them a cup of tea. Don't ever let someone leave your house without giving them anything. My sisters and I will sit around and talking about these things: how we were raised and how we follow those practices too. Sharing was a really big thing for us. Just watching them—watching my parents share what they had with other people—and we didn't have a lot, but they shared it. I also had relatives from the Blood Reserve who'd come and stay for two or three weeks. Then we'd go there and visit for two or three weeks at my Auntie's homes. That sense of community or family was really prominent for us. (Principal A)

We'd go visit in Morley. There was just so much love and kindness. Even though we didn't understand the Stoney language, we knew that we had family. They'd have gifts for us! We always had a meal; that was something [you did] when you had visitors. You always give them a meal or tea. In Morley, you'd always go home with a bunch of gifts. When they'd come here, we'd do the same.

(Principal C)

Sharing was a common occurrence in the homes of these First Nations women; often this value was passed on to their own children. First Nations women stated that as they matured they understood that numerous values co-existed (and were of equal importance to respect and sharing) including: humbleness, resiliency, honesty, kindness,

gentleness, honesty, and heartfelt actions. These instilled values developed within these women an overall sense of well-being and/or balance.

Also, in discussing with First Nations women what was important by the standards set by their grand/mothers, many of these women said that a work ethic of diligence, cleanliness, and discipline was expected of them by their grand/mothers.

My mother—the thing that stuck out the most was the kind of hard work that she did. She has been working for 42 years. Showing me that a woman can get up in the morning, look after her children, get them off to school, and at the same time she gets ready and goes off to work. So when I grew up it was just a natural thing for me. I thought all mothers did these things; get up in the morning and send their kids off to school; they go to work, after work she gets home, does supper, and does laundry, everything that a mother does. Yet, we still had a sense of balance and happiness in our home and we never lacked anything and I contribute that to the way my mother was able to divvy up the responsibilities in our house. I think to this day, she's 64 years old, she's still working and wants to continue working. That, to me, stands out as one of the biggest influences in my life.

(Principal B)

Finally, the value of spirituality was developed within this First Nations woman that promoted long term ideologies such as commitment and integrity:

I learned about the power of vows. I learned about the power and the feeling of ceremonies and fulfilling vows. It's when you hit this point of desperation and you know that no human being is going to get you out of it. It's going to be prayers that are going to shift [your] strength. For myself, it is being taught what a

vow is and it's being taught that under any conditions, that you can make a vow and go to a ceremony, and that you don't back down [or renege on your commitment]. To me, that has really developed into a sense of commitment, of integrity, of learning to keep your word. (Principal D)

Exemplifying Leadership Qualities

Each of the First Nations women in Principal Leadership roles were asked to identify specific situations where their leadership qualities helped or assisted people within their school community. Often, these women go above and beyond for their First Nations students as shown by the following examples: Teachers who provided positive experiences for their students by going the extra mile (literally, by walking them to her house and feeding them lunch) thus giving students a new learning opportunity and by offering guidance to a student. As a younger teacher, this same First Nations woman had in her kindergarten class a physically handicapped child who had suffered a paralyzing stroke a year prior. At that time, no therapist worked in her school community. Thus the responsibility for rehabilitating this child, physically, mentally, and emotionally was left to her. This First Nations woman restructured her class setting which included many one to one and class physical activities. Eventually, to the thrill of this First Nations teacher, this child graduated from high school and now is an active member of the community.

I used to tell the Principal 'We're going to watch Sesame Street at my house.'

They [the students] didn't have enough to eat so I'd take them to my trailer and they'd watch [Sesame Street] while I'd make sandwiches and soup for them. Just doing little things like that really helped them. Another time, I knew one student

who had a stroke and couldn't see on one side. My Teacher Assistant and I knew the mother and she had no transportation and there were no therapists here. She was saying 'My son has to go for therapy.' I had to take her to Calgary. So what we did—we helped in school. We told him where the desks were and had them one way so he knew the path to his desk. He liked to ride the tricycle but the kids would just push him along. Then I [said] 'He needs to ride by himself, to use the movement in his legs because he [doesn't try]. He's just being babied.' I also made arrangement with the bus driver since it was the only way for this child to come to school. His brother will help him on the bus.... We helped him and he graduated. (Principal C)

Another First Nations woman as Principal Leader broadened her scope of discipline by helping young adults in her school participate in a healing circle. This endeavor involves organizing members of the community (such as tribal police/RCMP, social welfare, drug & alcohol counselors, family school liaison, religious/spiritual members, parents, children, school personnel) all of whom convene in order to try healing the child from behaviors/attitudes which are detrimental to their progress. In bringing a healing circle of this nature into the school, these young adults became aware of how their behaviors /attitudes affected people around them. This case assisted this Principal Leader in developing a functional healing circle within her community as a whole.

I would see this boy and it was just like looking at a blank sheet of paper. There was just no connection, no response, nothing. So we told his family 'We want this circle. He's not in trouble, he's not suspended, but you know, he's at a crossroad

and if he goes one way it's going to be disaster and we want to help'. So we did it. Afterwards, he couldn't talk. I kept telling these people in the circle 'Okay, it's too much for the student; we can't expect a miracle right now, but he's going to think about what he's heard and then down the road he's going to express what he thought.' We had the circle and then I didn't see him for a couple of days, then all of a sudden I saw him and I looked at him. He and I met eye to eye and I just knew that he was really touched. He had an expression like he was happy to see me. He looked at me and he was happy. So I went over to him and asked him if he was getting up early and getting here [to school] on time. He said 'I'm really trying.'....I could see the impact that it [the healing circle] had on him. I could see the impact that the circle must have done to his family because suddenly they heard things from why we're here, academically, and they stopped taking things personal. (Principal D)

Another First Nations woman as Principal Leader showed compassion in her story of helping a young boy in her school who had been labeled a 'trouble-maker'. This young boy had a reputation of being disruptive in class; fighting, bullying, and exhibited overall non-compliance to all staff and students. New to her role as Principal Leader within her school, she took a proactive approach to helping this child by being the first school personnel to interact with this child on a daily basis. Eventually, this child came to trust and confide in her; more importantly, to feel the confidence to try new behaviors and develop skills within the school.

He was a grade five student. He's a special education student...and he was on meds. We had an Individual Program Plan for him. He was a foster child; we

worked with his foster mother. To begin with at the beginning of the school year, he was getting on the bus, coming here, and there were a lot of problems with him on the bus. He was egging the kids on or the kids were egging him on. But he was the one that everybody was labeling—out to get him—that kind of kid. I had a meeting with the bus driver, foster parent, and teacher. We set up a situation where the bus driver would come here and do the morning drop-off, then run back to this child's house, pick him up, and return here to drop him off. Three o'clock in the afternoon the bus would arrive, take him home, and return to do his afternoon pick up....I felt he so was labeled and so ostracized by students and even teachers so I started working with everybody and we developed a really good program for him.... he was just one of the kids. He still had his days, you know, still had his days when he was off, but I'd bring him in here and we'd sit and talk. I'd ask him 'What's going on with you today? You did really well here. It's the first time you wavered. Just tell me where you're at. What's going on at home?'....I think he began to feel accepted by the teachers, by myself, by students. (Principal A)

Many of the First Nations women stated that the words of encouragement guided students within their school to make good choices (personally and academically) which resulted in long term goal setting and completion of school.

When I came on as Principal two years ago, I always looked at the senior high school as a pet peeve. I wanted to guide our students in a specific direction, not that I want everybody to be in college or university, but to give guidance and to let them know the options that are out there. This year best exemplifies my

thinking. We had a number of students that were successful and got into post-secondary programs, a couple of our students got into the RCMP training, some went directly to college for their trades programs, one of my students is in a teacher assistant training program, and I'm hoping that he'll go into special education when he's done. The program that he's in too, I helped the college design that program as well. This helped our students get into that program. This made me feel successful because I had made my mark, not only in the school, but in the educational community. To be able to create programs and actually send students in that direction, to take them where there is actual value there, a program which can get them into university and to come back and be teachers. If I can speak about a specific student that I think really helped me and I provided her with a lot of guidance was C. She's in her first practicum at the University of Lethbridge and she graduated from here. I did a lot of work with her, and really helped her, and influenced her to stay here in school. Yes, you can do it. You can prove, not only to yourself, but to the community, to other native people that schools on the reserve can provide you with the same quality education that's out there. (Principal B)

This discussion lead to how these First Nations women helped or influenced teachers within their schools. Many First Nations women in Principal Leadership roles said that instructional leadership was their strength. They often had to provide constructive criticism to teachers upon evaluation; these teachers became hard working, focused, and dedicated teachers who were entrusted with planning and development of school programs.

I know that I have had to mentor a lot of staff. I know that my experience working in the corporate world was really hard for me because I went through major culture shock. I almost couldn't hack it; but I did. I persevered and I learned what it took....I started realizing these qualities I had. The main thing [the corporate world] taught me was professional conduct and professionalism; how to come to your job and leave your personal life outside and come in and perform and be productive....I can't pinpoint one person, but I think that the dedication I show, the hard work I show, and the real compassion I have for the kids—it impacts the staff. (Principal D)

When asked how they, First Nations women in Principal Leadership roles, had helped or assisted parents of students within their school community, most said through continual discussions and home-visits a positive connection between parent and school community was made. The interaction between home/parents and school community promoted a more positive outlook of students; parents saw that staff truly wanted to help their child and a real connection was made.

[I had] one student who was really into sniffing gas. I worked with the family; the parent and alcohol [problems] surfaced. Child Welfare, RCMP and I worked with [the family]. We came together and we tried to hear the parent out in their struggle with their child and in working with the child, they [both child and parent] went for treatment and they did really well. Right now the child is attending junior high. (Principal A)

Another First Nations woman told a story of assisting a young mother to have improved housing.

When I was teaching, I had a parent come in [to explain] why her kids were always getting sick. I was telling her that she shouldn't allow them to play outside without their jackets and warm clothing. She told me it wasn't that; it was her trailer. She said that it was so old that the heating vents are falling out. When asked how long had she lived there, the mother said that she had been there since the early 70s. I told her I know the Director of Housing, I'll talk to him. [The mother] told of writing letters over and over but with no effect. So I typed up a letter on her behalf, sent it home with her daughter, told her daughter where Mom should sign, and I brought it to Housing for her. I met with [the Department of] Housing and told them everything about the children missing school from being sick and their trailer being cold, cold and freezing in that house. I left it and the next week [the mother] came; she was smiling and said 'I got a house.' You know, when there's little kids like that you need to help. I see them in their nice house and was glad I could help. (Principal C).

Overall, the connectedness that First Nations women in Principal Leadership roles have with all members of their school communities, from students to teachers to parents, is a defining aspect of how these women feel about themselves as leaders. The adoration and respect devoted to their grand/mothers and grand/fathers, the perseverance they've shown to become educated, and the dedication they have for their roles as Principal Leaders is definitive of who they are as First Nations women:

I feel very blessed and I feel very, very honoured that these parents have faith in us and that they are allowing us to touch their children and work with their

children. To me that's sacred. To me, the role that we are in, these educational positions are sacred. (Principal D)

Chapter 4: Open Hearts and Closed Minds

My grandmother would have celebrated her 100th birthday on December 14. I thought about her throughout that day and memories of her and my grandfather flooded me with melancholy. Just like the First Nations Principal who arranged her desks one way never to change them so that a student could make his way towards her desk, I thought of my white haired grandfather, unable to see, making his way towards the kitchen table. He would sit there, tapping his Oxford shoes on the linoleum floor, whistling or humming the songs of his youth, songs of dance, songs of the pow-wow. I would watch his face as he sat there, unable to see me staring at him and what I saw was a proud man; proud of his possessions, his accomplishments, his children and grandchildren. My grandfather was the first in our tribe to own a motor vehicle. My grandfather, along with a number of his cohorts, established the first Indian Days in Canada; long before Indian Days or pow-wows were annual events in our tribal communities. My grandfather was a serious man who often would rather discuss tribal, provincial, or world politics than family history or event-filled stories of his youth. My grandmother, on the other hand, loved to reminisce of the old times. She would openly talk about her family; how her mother died when she was young and she was raised by her grandfather; how her older brothers, Tom and John, would look out for her; how she would travel to the Blood reserve to visit her relatives Rides at the Door or Weasel Fat. The day my grandmother would have been 100 years old, I could imagine her wrinkled, brown face and thin, grey braided hair smiling at me as she always did when I visited her. The feeling I had that day was one of melancholy but within that was also warmth because I knew her spirit was with me that day.

I have shared the stories of my grandmothers, but in doing so sometimes I have forgotten the impact that my own father and grandfather have had on my life. They too were instrumental in who I have become: a daughter, a sister, a friend, a mother, and a teacher. My father battled the effects of alcoholism for many years. He once wrote an article for the Calgary Herald (the city where he came to reside) where he told the story of a decision that would change his life. As he came to the intersection of Highway 3 in Brocket, on his way to the liquor store in Pincher Creek, he stopped and looked both ways. He knew that this was it. This was going to be the day where a choice had to be made. Turn west to Pincher Creek and continue to live in a world of alcoholism and probable death. Or turn east, away from the drink and towards something different, unknown, scary. My dad turned east that day, eventually ending up in Calgary and at an alcohol treatment centre. My dad never drank alcohol again. Through training, he became an alcohol counselor, a person who I was immensely proud of for his accomplishment because I knew it was not an easy choice to make. I attribute my own determination to live a clean life with no alcohol or drugs to my father who inspired me to walk in his shoes. Thus I have to acknowledge the influence that *both* my mother and father, grandmother and grandfather, and family members have made in my life.

The stories that I write and those told to me by family members, friends, and acquaintances are exquisitely fascinating. The intricacy of thoughts and emotions integrating with word patterns result in complex portrayals of a person's life. Throughout the process of conducting interviews with First Nations women in Principal Leadership roles, it was my intention to hear their stories and through their words, honour the people of whom they spoke. These women talked of their mothers and grandmothers and nieces

and friends. They told stories of First Nations women who became the impetus for others to hold fast to our Blackfoot culture and language and to develop morals and values which guided them towards a path of helping others.

In listening to the stories of these First Nations women in Principal Leadership roles, it became apparent to me that the essence of these stories was spirituality. Whether being raised with it as a child or choosing to follow a spiritual life as they became older, all First Nations women told stories of having faith in something greater than themselves. As spirituality became a foundation in their lives, these women began to exhibit the determination and drive to overcome many personal obstacles. They shared their stories where juvenile observations of daily practices matured into participation of spiritual and/or religious events. Through the encouragement of both grand/mothers and grand/fathers, these First Nations women pursued their schooling as young girls and/or as mature women. As their children were born, these women persevered through many trials in order to achieve their goal of attending university and completing a bachelor's degree in education.

Always there was someone, an important someone, who pushed them along a path towards something better; this meant becoming a teacher, educator, and eventually a Principal Leader within their communities. And in every story they told were the words that I wanted them to say, that their mothers and grandmothers were influential people that spanned their lifetime.

However, as I re-listened to the interview tapes, re-read my notes, and looked at the transcripts of the stories of First Nations women in Principal Leadership roles, I realized I had done so with an open heart and a closed mind. Closed-mindedness was due

to the fact that I wanted to hear that only First Nations women could influence the beliefs, attitudes, and education of other First Nations women. But what I heard was that these women were influenced by many people in their lives, including their fathers and grandfathers, extended family members, and friends. I realized that just as important in influencing the Blackfoot culture and language, and development of moral teachings and values, was a strong patriarchal presence of these women's fathers and grandfathers. These grand/fathers were born of a time when the horse and buggy changed to automobiles, when they moved from chopping wood for fuel to having heated homes with electricity, from being farmers and ranchers to working in government offices. The hardships that these men endured were not any that they would bestow on their grand/daughters. Instead, they wished, and guided, and forcefully persuaded their grand/daughters to make something better of their lives, to want something more than they had, and to aspire to goals that were not within their reach. Thus, these grand/fathers are owed credit for developing within their First Nations grand/daughters the strong identities they have.

Prior to asking First Nations women in Principal Leadership roles questions that I deemed important, I was intrigued by discussions I have had with my sisters about our own childhoods. We would often sit for hours upon hours, in each other's homes, to talk about how significant events in our lives affected us: the death of our mother, my father's courageous battle with alcoholism only to succumb to cancer; the death of our brother, Jeff, whose loss devastates us to this day; our grandparents aging and living their remaining days in adjoining rooms at the hospital. The seriousness of these events gave us time to evaluate our lives; the importance of family and friends, and the need to

connect with one another. We are not a melancholy family group; we indulge ourselves in the balance created by the joy and laughter of crazy times and family accomplishments. It is our sister Donna who was our family storyteller; she would share with us the most serious events in her life but always a twinkle of humor would sneak through, portraying a life filled with fun.

So I too, as a daughter and granddaughter, have come to appreciate the stories told to me by my family. Not only that, but the spirituality that I have come to observe on a daily basis had its foundation in these people around me. It is through the lives of my parents and grandparents, my siblings, my extended family members, that I have come to this place in my life; a time when the stories of my family need to be told, to be written, to be shared. I share these thoughts with and truly believe in the statement of Mary Crow Dog:

Our stories bring forth the values we have always held—to respect our Mother Earth and all life; to remember the birth by which the Great Spirit brought forth life with earth, winds, fire and water; to take care of this Western Hemisphere as natural beings living in a natural order with things. Our stories remind us to care for all we have and be grateful for all that has been given to us. We learn to harvest and to replace what we gather by offering our sacred tobacco as thanksgiving to our creator and our earth mother. From our elders we receive teachings for all generations, living and unborn, to carry on certain rituals—the living testimony of a natural people who have lived in harmony from the beginning of time. We carry on what our creator brought to us as man and woman knowing life, as women bearing life, as beings in tune with nature respecting our

peoples. We give prayers for the light, for the water we know to be sacred, for raindrops, for all animals. In our stories, Mother Earth cries for Grandmother Moon. Our rituals bring a message of faith: the sacred medicine bundle is handed to our people so we can offer a prayer with sacred tobacco. We give the morning star prayer, offering cedar to bring the spiritual values of love of family and respect for our brothers and sisters....We have been granted the gift of knowledge....(Bullchild, 1998, p. xiv)

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Appendix

First Nations Women as Principal Leaders

Interview Questions

Part One:

Describe a person in your life who you feel is (or was) the most influential in the transference of First Nations language and/or culture to you. Could you tell me a story about this person and his/her lesson?

Who was the most influential person in your schooling? Can you give me an example of how they influenced your schooling?

Was this person(s) also the same person who shaped your moral development? How did he/she transfer this knowledge to you: daily examples, story, ceremony? Can you share a story with me that exemplifies this?

Can you list the values that this person bestowed upon you?

Do you feel that these values have benefited you in your role as Principal Leader? Can you provide an example of this or describe a situation where these values were demonstrated?

Was domestic training something that was considered important in your family? Which person influenced you most in your domestic training?

Part Two:

How did you become a Principal Leader? Describe what you do as a Principal Leader.

Can you describe a situation which best exemplifies your leadership qualities within a school?

Can you describe a situation where your leadership qualities helped

- A student within your school?
- A teacher with your school?
- A parent of a child within your school?

Part Three:

How do you feel that your leadership qualities enhance your school community?