OVERCOMING BARRIERS AND FINDING STRENGTHS:
THE LIVES OF SINGLE MOTHER STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITY

by

Jennifer Ajandi

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Graduate Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

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Abstract

The impetus for this study came from my own history of being a single mother while completing my undergraduate degree and the struggles that entailed. The research uncovers both the barriers and facilitators experienced by single mothers in undergraduate programs in a Canadian context and utilizes a framework of access and equity in education. The co-participants belonged to diverse social and political identities in terms of age, race and ethnicity, sexuality, (dis)ability, and countries of birth. All the women attended universities in Southern Ontario. Twenty-five women agreed to be interviewed in either a group or individual interview. Co-participants were encouraged to contribute to the design and analysis of the study wherever possible.

Previous research based in the United States conceptualized single mother students as social assistance recipients and explored their difficulties within this context. This study suggests using a wider lens to include other experiences identified by co-participants and the literature review. The study locates barriers both within the university as well as in the larger society such as interpersonal violence, stress, financial insecurity, racism and other forms of discrimination. However, it also identifies supports and strengths single mothers encountered such as family, friends, children as motivation, professors, on-campus supports, and critical pedagogy, all of
which were largely missing from previous research. Many women challenged the often pathologizing dominant discourse and instead described single motherhood as empowering, independent, and liberating as compared to being a part of a traditional nuclear family. Co-participants also identified feeling isolated, discussions around which engendered a social group outside of the research project.

By creating awareness of the needs of diverse single mother students, this project aims to disrupt the still-prevailing notion of the “traditional student” and accompanying policies and practices in institutions of education and the wider community. While much has been documented in Canada about the need for access, equity, and inclusive schooling, single mothers in particular have not been a main focus and included among other intersections of identity. The findings from this study address this gap and contribute to the literature.
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Thank you to my mom, my grandma, and my aunt, for always making me feel loved and supported unconditionally. I am truly lucky to have you. I believe that without the help of my mother I would not have been able to finish this dissertation.

Thank you to the 25 women who participated in this journey with me. I would not have been able to complete this project without you and I wish you all the best in your own journeys. You inspired me every day and continue to do so. Thinking of your strength and your stories helped me persevere in my own education.

Thank you to my friends and my Rye girls – my circle of support. Many of you were there for me during my undergraduate degree. And thank you to “my Joce,” who was unwavering in emotional and academic support. It was so uplifting to be able to share the challenges and accomplishments with you as we both participated in our separate but similar academic journeys.

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Dedication

I cannot imagine my world without my daughter.

If she were not here, I would not be writing this thesis.

Thank you, Mya, for all the wonderful joy you are and for sharing me with the university for so long.

This dissertation and all writings that follow are dedicated to you. I love you.
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Chapter 1:
My Entry Point and Introduction

In this study, I explore the experiences of current and former single mother students in undergraduate programs across Ontario, Canada. This is an academic exercise yet it is also a story of many single mothers’ lives. In order to explain the importance of this research, I first need to outline my own life experience and how I came to be where I am now. I never perceived attending university as a possible reality for me, both because I did not think I could afford to and because I believed the cliché that the ivory tower was an elitist space where students only learned about abstract concepts that were not reflected in lived experiences. What would university do for me? Would I be able to find a job afterwards? How would I afford to pay for it, even with student loan assistance?

I grew up in a happy low-income single mother household that also included my aunt. I was surrounded by love and had the distinct feeling at a very young age that I was the centre of my family’s worlds. We were also very close with my grandmother. My mother, aunt, and grandmother were my first role models – strong, smart, and beautiful women. I grew up happy, safe, and loved. It is through becoming a mother that I truly have a sense of appreciation for the strong family foundation I was raised with. Later, I had the privilege of knowing many scholars, activists, and now, single mother students who provide me with inspiration and strength every day. As I grew older I realized that technically I could access postsecondary education; however, the idea of applying for student loans and still needing to participate in paid work in order to pay for education and living expenses seemed an insurmountable barrier. Eventually, I moved to Toronto and started studying Shiatsu in college, which was only an 18-
month program. I had taken out the Ontario Student Assistance Plan (OSAP) but I quickly began working more and more to compensate for the expenses OSAP did not cover. I started to work more and go to school less and I eventually dropped out before the end of the first term. Again, I heard the voice in my mind, “school is not for me.”

After working for 6 years as a waitress at a local bar, I started to think about what my life would be like in the future. I made great money waitressing; however I knew in the future waitressing provided no real security, no benefits, no sick days, and no pension (not to mention the constant sexual harassment which seemed to be a normal part of the job). I literally felt like I was being paid to be someone’s girlfriend for an hour or however long they were customers. I found out quickly that in order to apply for any jobs that were not in the restaurant or service industry I needed a postsecondary degree. Around this time, my grandmother enrolled in university. One of her lifelong passions was to write a book and she felt having a university degree would assist her. Watching my grandma and a couple of other friends register in university motivated me to register in a program. I resigned myself to the idea that I would need to go into debt by taking out student loans but hoped in the long run it would be worth it. I realized most low-income and even some middle-class students were probably in the same situation, which provided me with some comfort.

Now came the question of what to study. I remembered an old saying that said if you want to know what kind of job you would love to do as an adult, think of what you loved to do as a child. As cliché as it sounds, I loved helping people. Why not pursue social work as my undergraduate degree? I fell in love with school. I was originally drawn to the school I chose
because it had aggressive advertising campaigns throughout the city focusing on its status as a main hub for adult learners.

As a mature student, I thought I would stick to myself and just get through the program. However, a group of us in the program became friends. We were a mix of mature students and students of traditional age. Beginning in the third year of the 4-year program, I became pregnant. I began talking to my friend who also was a single mother student when she attended university. She provided me with a lot of helpful and practical information such as the additional financial amounts I would receive through OSAP by having a dependent. Having a baby while being a student slowly became a reality for me. It was not without many painful experiences; I had a difficult pregnancy, was extremely fatigued, would fall asleep in class, and experienced constant nausea and vomiting that prevented me from attending most morning classes. Meanwhile I had the added stigma of being single and the inability to keep my pregnancy a private issue because of the changes to my body. It became a public issue, which resulted in strangers, co-workers, and students often asking inappropriate (and heterosexist) questions about the father’s involvement, or lack thereof. In addition, I felt rage over the entitlement people had about touching my stomach – as if it were no longer a private part of my body. I managed to get through the school year with support from my close friends and two professors (also parents of small children) who were accommodating.

My daughter was due May 19, 2005, just in time for the summer break after school was to be finished. At the time, I was waitressing part-time in order to also be a student full-time, which meant I would only receive $200 a month from employment insurance’s maternity leave. This is a major policy area that makes single mother students’ lives difficult. While some
universities may provide a leave for students who are going to be parents, how many people can actually take advantage of this leave if it means their funding will cease? Income through maternity leave is provided by the government only if the applicant has paid work.

As a result of an absence of policies supporting single mother students, I had little income for the summer I was “off” with my newborn. This was the first summer I fell into major credit card debt. I did not have enough money, or credit, to stay home with my daughter and I had to return to school in September to complete my fourth year of the social work program in order to collect OSAP. My daughter, Mya, arrived prematurely on April 3, 2005. She was admitted to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit for 2 weeks. During the second week, I was taking care of her 24 hours a day. This care included bathing her, changing her, feeding her, cuddling her, taking her temperature, monitoring the machines that were attached to her, pumping breast milk, and an occasional 20 minutes remaining to run for something to eat in the hospital cafeteria. My family did not live in the city so I was often alone in the hospital with my daughter and the health care staff.

I remember very clearly the exhaustion I felt and how much I cried the couple of nights I stayed overnight in the hospital. It was a shared room and nurses would cart new mothers with their babies in and out of the room in the bed beside me. This practice seemed very cruel to me. Did anyone know how much harder it was for me to be without Mya and be worried about her health when I had to sleep beside families who were celebrating their healthy children's birth? I went through a type of grieving. I grieved the loss of the newborn experience I had imagined, as many mothers do when they cannot be physically close to their babies after birth.
At the beginning, Mya was in an isolette so even when I went to visit, our physical contact was limited.

During the first week of Mya’s stay in the NICU, I returned home alone late every night and woke up early to get back to see her. This took a physical and emotional toll on my health. I was terrified to leave her. My friend’s nephew had died approximately a week after his birth and overwhelmed by anxiety and hormones, I became obsessed with that possibility. I had a constant worry that Mya might die alone in the hospital while I was at home or on my way to see her. Fortunately, my social work education had provided me with some skills and information that helped. I knew how to find resources and how important it was to be on good terms with the health care staff. I was able to advocate to be admitted to the parent care room that was across the hall from the NICU. I was able to sleep there in the last week that Mya was in the hospital, which also gave me the opportunity to breastfeed her during the night. When she was first born and I had not yet produced milk, she could not tolerate the formula she was being fed. The staff were concerned about her food intake and I was worried as well. The mini-crisis reinforced my need to produce enough breast milk and to be with her 24 hours a day to feed her.

Unfortunately, I had gone into labour 2 weeks before our final exams. Luckily, I had several friends and a professor who was advocating for me at school. Two of my female professors who were women with small children accommodated me with no hesitation. The other two professors I had were men and they created many obstacles for me in arranging the successful completion of my coursework by not acknowledging the seriousness of my situation. One of the courses for which I had to reschedule the exam was the most important course that
graduate schools look at when deciding who to admit. It was imperative that I do well in it so that I could successfully apply for my Master's in Social Work. I was able to take the exam a few months into the summer but that turned out to be extremely hard since my daughter was then only a few months old and the carework involved with her was non-stop. During those beginning months, I never slept for more than 2 hours at a stretch. I cannot even begin to describe the feeling of continuous sleep deprivation.

After I overcame the many administrative hurdles in school, I completed my program in September while I enrolled my 5-month-old daughter in daycare. The guilt that I experienced that first day continues to this very day as I struggle to balance paid work, unpaid work, my own time, and my daughter’s time. The stress has taken its toll on my own health as I have been rushed to hospital Emergency Departments several times over the past couple of years. I am always stretching to find a balance between the roles of mother, student, paid worker, and unpaid worker and challenge the discrimination I experience because of my single mother status. The close relationship with my mother has been a source of strength for me. My mother acts as a co-parent with my daughter in terms of childcare while also working for pay. Our whole family has become closer since Mya’s birth, in fact. After I moved to Toronto, we only saw each other once every few months and now we see each other quite often. Another positive aspect of being a single mother is the liberation of making decisions about my and my daughter’s lives without negotiating decision-making with a partner. As she gets older and is able to communicate more, and as I earn more income through part-time teaching, I find it gets easier in general, though new challenges are constantly arising. Currently, Mya is 5 years old and she has just finished her first year of junior kindergarten. I had not anticipated the time
required for activities, fundraising, events, administrative forms, planning and preparing meals and snacks, and organizing our schedules between school, daycare, and work. I also make sure I spend time volunteering in her classroom at least once or twice a month.

When I first began my doctoral studies I had thought I only wanted to write about my life through an oral history, narrative or autoethnography format. I wanted to use the energy I had, as well as the privilege associated with being able to access education in the first place, to increase awareness of policies and practices that should be changed. While I changed my mind a few times on how I was going to accomplish that, my focus from the beginning of my Master’s was exploring and reconceptualizing access to education within the context of single mothers’ experiences. It became clear to me that my story alone would not suffice; it needed to be placed in context with others. Also, my particular set of socio-cultural and political perspectives and experiences is different from those of other single mothers and it is important for many voices to be represented.

When I began the literature review stage of my doctoral work I found little research addressing single mother undergraduate students in Canada. Much of what I could find focused on the United States (US). Although most industrialized nations are influenced by a neo-liberal policy agenda, there are still significant socio-political and economic differences between Canada and the US. Further, much of the current research views single mothers as being dependent upon the state in terms of the social supports it provides and rarely examines other factors in the education system such as discrimination or student loans. Even when examining the large body of literature that focuses on the welfare state in Canada (Cumming, 2005, p. 9),
the experiences of single mothers in the education system are not one of the main foci. This study addresses this clear gap in the Canadian literature.

Connecting with other single mothers and participating in interviews with them has been truly transformative for me as a researcher, scholar, activist, and single mother. Co-participants often expressed their satisfaction at contributing in an area where they had often felt invisible or misrepresented. My own writing and my own voice is strong throughout this thesis, in part because I view this thesis as a written document representing my own journey. It will be a journey that my own daughter can take off the shelf and read when she is older. Also, I believe that researchers and scholars should be transparent in their social locations and positionings because these characteristics inevitably influence the design and analysis of their research. All of my life experiences have led me to choose this important area of research. I decided to use some of the experiences of the barriers, the frustrations, and the exhaustion, to create something positive. I want to politicize the barriers single mothers face in order to decrease some of the stigma associated with this family status. I want the university to know we are here and administrators to think about how to accommodate and support us better. I also want to celebrate our strengths and perseverance. I hope that I have done justice to the co-participants in integrating their stories and words.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will review the theories that informed my analysis in this thesis and the findings from previous research which looked at single mother students’ experiences. Next, I provide an overview of the study, a summary of the findings, and an outline of the following chapters. I have tried to infuse my own style of writing and use of my voice throughout the thesis as a way to challenge the more traditional production and presentation
of knowledge sometimes found in academic writing. People learn and communicate in different ways – for me, it is important to locate myself throughout my writing.

**Feminist and Anti-Colonial Theories**

The theoretical underpinning of this research is informed by two theoretical approaches that represent my own political framework on the world and provide a rich, critical analysis of the issues single mothers raised in this study. In part, these theoretical approaches helped determine what I wanted to study as well as how I wanted to study it. They strive to reduce the individualizing and pathologizing of social issues, and instead, connect social issues to larger systems of power in society that contribute to how resources are provided or denied to marginalized populations. Feminist and anti-colonial theories not only pay attention to how the individual and/or group are represented today but also to the history that plays a pivotal role in shaping the current context of people’s experiences. These theories will be further discussed in chapter 2.

Looking at the issues single mother students face requires a theoretical framework that acknowledges and highlights both shared experiences and differences. Single mothers are not a homogenous group. In some instances, there may be as much heterogeneity within social groups as there are between social groups and this is particularly true for single mothers in this study. I draw upon critical feminist and anti-colonial theorists who connect theory to lived experience, explore power relations in society, and who focus on the intersectionality of social identities (see Acker & Webber, 2006; Anderson, 2000; Anzaldúa, 1987; Bannerji, Carty, Dehli, Heald, & McKenna, 1991; Baskin, 2008; Collins, 2008; Dua, 1999; Epstein, 2003; Graveline,
Single mothers are affected by barriers in the education system in addition to the obstacles they face in the larger community because of racism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, sexism, ableism, and their family status. While the Ontario Human Rights Code prohibits discrimination based on family status (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2010), I have rarely observed “family status” as a category in the literature on barriers and equity.

Universities and communities are often seen as two distinct institutions and thus expect students to compartmentalize their roles accordingly. For example, if students require assistance with childcare or housing subsidies they must seek out these services off campus. For students who have unpaid and paid responsibilities, childcare, mental or physical health challenges, disabilities, or who experience violence, poverty, racism, or heterosexism, these two worlds cannot be easily separated; why should they be? If we are truly interested in providing the opportunity for all to succeed in postsecondary education should we not try to “level out the playing field” so that disadvantaged students also have a fair opportunity? Many women in this study viewed their life experiences as positive contributions to the classroom, rather than experiences that should be left at the door of the academic institution. Many women went to school in the first place to attain an economically secure future for themselves and their children; it is no wonder they also view their life experiences as a meaningful contribution to their role as students.

Feminist and anti-colonial theories provide a framework for a discussion and analysis of how barriers such as a lack of institutionalized childcare, Eurocentrism, violence, poverty, and
racism are part of larger systemic operations of power. Also, it is important to emphasize supports to women’s perseverance in order to reinforce a strengths-based discourse in direct contrast to the dominant deficit-model of the single mother.

When I first started my Master’s and then my PhD, I became more interested in the “graduate experience.” However, I was determined to stay committed to the issues of single mother students’ experiences in their undergraduate programs. Undergraduate degrees are becoming a necessity in order to participate in the paid workforce, even in entrance level positions, which makes access to postsecondary education at this level ever more important (Leathwood & Read, 2009; Lightman, Heard, Um, & Mitchell, 2009). Many single mothers report pursuing postsecondary education as a way to escape poverty for themselves and their children (Jones De-Weever, 2005).

Previous Research

As mentioned above, the lion’s share of the literature on single mother students is based in the United States (US). These studies were conceptualized within a welfare discourse and tied single mothers’ experiences to the state. Single mothers in the US were particularly impacted by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) legislated by the Clinton government in 1996. Due to this punitive social policy, social assistance recipients have many restrictions and limitations pertaining to what type of school they can attend and for how long. The focus of PRWORA is to stream social assistance recipients into low-wage and precarious work by restricting full participation in any long-term education that would afford a greater chance of economic security in the long run (Zhan & Pandey, 2004a, p. 108). Further, this policy enforced paternalistic measures, “insisting all welfare mothers disclose
the paternity of their children” (Bashevkin, 2002, p. 69) – a stipulation which is also required in order to access social assistance in Ontario, Canada. The specifics of the policies depend on eligibility criteria that vary from state to state. The predominance of literature based in the United States employing the welfare discourse is problematic for three reasons:

1. By only presenting research about single mothers who are on social assistance, it restigmatizes the population as consisting exclusively of social assistance recipients. What happens to women who are not eligible for social assistance but still experience extreme levels of poverty? What about the working-poor?

2. If the main focus is on social assistance policies, other barriers may be overlooked.

3. No further, equivalent amount or type of literature based in Canada which connects the experiences of single mothers to education exists. This is a clear and troubling gap if we want to increase access for single mother students in Canada’s postsecondary schools. Research conducted in Canada will contribute to the literature by providing a better-rounded picture of the barriers and facilitators for single mother students across North America.

More research is also needed that supports diverse participants. Women who are Aboriginal and women with disabilities were underrepresented in American research, which needs to be rectified in both American and Canadian studies. Further, single mothers were never questioned about their sexuality and thus the analysis in the literature assumes heterosexuality of the participants. In my own research, there was a diverse representation of sexuality, yet issues of heterosexism and homophobia were only raised in one of the interviews.
A common theme of single mothers experiencing racism emerged throughout the research, narrative pieces, and analytic essays. Often times the researchers and authors were careful to include some of these reports; however, the experiences of racism in schools committed by professors, students, and the institution were not outlined as major research questions. I made sure to ask participants if they experienced discrimination, for example, based on class, sex, age, race and ethnicity, sexuality or ability.

A consistent barrier found across the United States, Canada, and Great Britain was the lack of affordable, quality, and flexible childcare (Adair, 2001; Bezanson, 2006; Duquaine-Watson, 2006; Holyfield, 2002; Hornosty, 1998; Waldner, 2003). The need for publicly funded and subsidized childcare is presently ignored on a policy level; instead, friends and family members of single mothers perform this childcare work (Austin & McDermott, 2004; Christopher, 2005; Holyfield, 2002). While the existing literature does address this issue, it does not integrate an analysis that childcare is actually work even when performed by family members without pay, just as government policies mostly fail to acknowledge childcare and raising children on the part of parents as work. One exception in Canada is the Child Rearing Provision found in the Canadian Pension Plan (Service Canada, 2010). Also, family support is highlighted in the literature as a facilitator for single mother students, especially for providing childcare, yet no gender analysis is provided in terms of women being the exclusive providers of this unpaid work.

Except for Quebec (Albanese, 2009, p. 126), there is no guarantee of childcare in Canada for low-income, unemployed or underemployed, working- or middle-class families. The government does provide a form of privatized childcare service that is accessible to higher
income earning families, via promotion of the Live-In-Caregiver Program. This program employs women from countries such as the Philippines to work in the homes of families in Canada (Zaman, 2004). Women are paid low wages for their work and are often exploited by their employers and their/our governments (Neysmith, Reitsma-Street, Baker, & Porter, 2009, p. 105). Since the government supports the Live-In-Caregiver Program, apparently childcare is viewed as work if it is performed by strangers (although the low wages illustrate the value it is given). This discussion was absent from the literature on childcare issues, perhaps because the studies were mainly focused on single mother social assistance recipients who would not be able to access this program.

Most of the research data from single mother students used qualitative methodology to uncover the lived realities of the participants. Interviews were conducted in a wide range of locations, wherever was convenient and comfortable for participants. These places included schools, participants’ homes, workplace, restaurants, or in coffee shops. Several authors were also educators and previously low-income or poverty-class single mother students. These authors used their own narratives to support their findings, illustrate their entry points into their research and build relationships with the participants. These stories are important elements of the literature and frame the studies within a social justice framework. However, some of the findings are inconsistent. For example, in some studies single mothers’ self-esteem and confidence increased with education (Blum, 2001; Haleman, 2004; Jennings, 2004; Sharp, 2004; Stevens, 2003) while in another study, self-esteem and confidence decreased (Bruns, 2004). In some studies, the educational outcomes for children improved when their mothers were in school (Holyfield, 2002; Jones-DeWeever, 2005; Kahn, Butler, Deprez, & Polakow, 2004;
Stevens, 2003) and in others, children were not adjusting well (Deprez, Butler, & Smith, 2004; Mitchell, 2003; Scarbrough, 2001; Snow, 2005). Since many of these same issues emerged in my study, I realized it was less about inconsistencies in the findings than the varying experiences of the participants based on their levels of social, educational, and financial supports. However, for participants’ children in my study who were not doing well in school, it was often because of a hostile environment of racism and ableism in the school system.

Often times researchers stated they were investigating the barriers and facilitators for single mother students, yet there was less attention paid to the facilitators. More often, facilitators were interpreted as being the reverse of the reported barriers. For example, if lack of subsidized childcare spaces was reported as a barrier, the analysis followed that an increase in subsidized childcare spaces would be a facilitator. While this approach seems to be a reasonable analysis, as researchers we must be careful not to make assumptions. In my study I explicitly asked what facilitators helped women to persevere in school.

**Organization and Overview**

The following chapters hold many quotations and analyses of single mothers’ experiences. However, as I realized half way into writing my data chapters, I cannot represent or integrate every aspect that emerged during the interviews. Instead, I looked for recurring themes and contradictions. I also had co-participants approve the research summaries in terms of accuracy and contribute feedback.
I interviewed 25 single mother current and former undergraduate students in either group or individual interviews, depending on their preference. My research questions were as follows:

- What are the experiences of single mother students?
- Is the university supportive and inclusive of single mothers?

These questions were meant to be broad in order to include any issues co-participants identified as being important but the interview guides asked them to discuss specific areas (or sub-research questions):

- What barriers do they experience?
- What facilitators do they experience?
- Do single mothers perceive discrimination in the education system?
- How do single mothers understand their classroom experience?
- What are some of the benefits to being a single mother student?

I wanted to focus on recent undergraduate student experiences but I was also worried that by restricting eligibility requirements I might not have enough people to participate. I decided to include single mothers who were current undergraduate students at universities or who had graduated from a university in the past 5 years. So while some graduate students and recent graduates were interviewed, they were asked to focus their discussion on their undergraduate experiences. I did not provide a definition of single motherhood; instead, I had women self-
identify. All co-participants’ children lived primarily with them; however, one woman had recently reunited with her son after a period when her parents had custody.

At every stage, I aimed to make the process as participatory as possible within the confines of dissertation research. Over email or during the interviews, I discussed the interview guide and any areas I was missing with co-participants. Most replied that it accurately represented issues they felt were important and sometimes added an issue or two. However, as I will discuss in more detail in the data chapters, some prominent issues emerged during the interviews themselves that I had not directly asked about nor read about in the literature. Some of these themes included interpersonal violence and racism experienced by single mothers’ children.

I completed 21 individual interviews which lasted anywhere from 45 minutes to 2 hours each. I also conducted a group interview with a total of 4 co-participants lasting just over 2 hours. When discussing the findings from the study I identify the co-participants between the group and individual interviews; several critiques have been made about researchers who combine the two different types of data as if they came from one research method (Wilkinson, 1998). Originally, I divided the data based on group and individual data; however, I found the findings repetitive since many of the same themes emerged from both types of interviews. I then synthesized the findings but indicated when experiences belonged to co-participants from the group interviews. I found common principles from feminist, anti-colonial, and participatory methodologies, used together, to be more representative of my world views than using one specific methodology. Shared principles included reflexivity, self-determination, participation, and action. I was not able to integrate the action piece within the design of the study, since I
had no way of anticipating the needs and concerns of the particular women involved. It made sense to wait and let them decide what would benefit them. One need that co-participants mentioned in the interviews was a desire to meet other women in the study as a means of fighting a sense of isolation. I am now in the process of facilitating social meetings for the co-participants. I am also in the process of reaching out to university and community-related services by offering policy recommendations.

In addition to using the literature on single mother students, I have explored literature that looks at access to education and equity for diverse students, including those of diverse race and ethnicity, age, sexuality, immigration status, sex, ability, and class. I have also included literature about single mothers in general, which mainly focuses on their relationships with the state through social assistance; access to education was never a prominent theme in this body of research. I also integrated several selected literatures in response to issues identified by the co-participants such as childcare, racism, stigma, economic insecurity, and violence against women. Because I wanted to stress the importance of single mother undergraduate students, I did not focus on the graduate student or faculty experience.

I explored literature in higher education to provide an overview of the education system and how it has been impacted by globalization. One of the contributions of this study is to address the almost non-existent Canadian context of the experiences of single mother students; therefore I also wanted to put an emphasis on Canadian literature. Inclusive education is highlighted as an important critique of mainstream educational practices and policies. While authors mostly discuss the framework of inclusive education in an elementary or high school context, many of the concepts and ideologies, such as ideals of representation,
curricula that reflect the multiple realities of its students, and opportunities to integrate more
critical pedagogies in the classroom, can be applied in a postsecondary context. Many times,
authors write about the education system as a whole instead of different levels of education.
Inclusive education is conceptualized as a model of social justice theory and practice that is
connected to larger issues in society; maintaining that society, too, needs to be inclusive (Dei,
James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, and Zine 2000; Kelly, 2000; Sapon-Shevin, 2007).

This literature was also relevant to some of the co-participants’ experiences because of
the barriers they experienced in education when they were younger or because of the
difficulties their children experienced in school. Many times children experienced racism in
school and these experiences echoed mothers’ difficulties within the context of university.
Some scholars apply the theoretical and practical models of inclusive education and curricula to
a postsecondary context (Baskin, 2005a; Fuller, Bradley, & Healey, 2004; Higginbotham, 1993;
Hindes & Mather, 2007; Oliver & Barnes, 2010; Timmons, 2006).

I have organized the thesis in the following way. In this chapter I have provided an
introduction to my own background and entry point into the research, previous research
conducted in this area, my theoretical lens, and an overview of the findings. In the second
chapter, I explore the feminist and anti-colonial theoretical literature informing this study. I
then provide an overview of the education system to help situate women’s experiences within
a structural context. The third chapter outlines the characteristics of anti-colonial, feminist, and
participatory methodologies that I used and explains how these characteristics or principles led
to providing co-participants with a choice of interview method.
Next, I discuss the findings in four data chapters. I have integrated the findings, literature, and my own reflections within each chapter. The first data chapter explores issues of violence that emerged as a main concern by nearly all of the co-participants and how these experiences interrupted their student work and/or became the impetus for them leaving the relationship. However, often violence continued even though the relationship had ended. One woman still had to negotiate custody arrangements and visitations that had recently resulted in an escalation of her ex-partner’s abuse. Often times violence was committed by the children's father in the previous relationship but many women of colour, Aboriginal women, and White women with biracial children also conceptualized racism as violence.

Sometimes when women took social science courses that examined power relations in society, they were able to decide to leave a violent relationship and found support from their professors and teaching assistants. In these situations, education played a transformative role by politicizing and bringing awareness to issues, such as violence, that are often stigmatized and silenced. Since students spend so much of their time on-campus when they are attending university, it would be helpful to provide professors and teaching assistants with resources and appropriate referrals that they could pass on to their students. Many times issues of violence were not disclosed on campus and women were left to find resources alone. Women were more hesitant to disclose issues of violence in the classroom or during meetings with professors and counsellors than they were to disclose their identities as single mothers. Educational institutions often did not conceptualize violence as a campus problem and therefore women were left feeling that it was a private issue to keep hidden. One of the things I found most
striking is that at no point during the interviews did I ask if violence was a barrier. The women themselves brought it up over and over again.

The second data chapter focuses on some of the most prominent and common barriers reported in this study. I begin with a discussion of the non-traditional student and how the academic environment caters to a male culture and other dominant social norms (Green, 2002; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996), which contributes to the exclusion of single mothers. Childcare was also, not surprisingly, a common concern. The process involved in applying for the childcare subsidy was confusing since the eligibility criteria and length of wait lists varied across municipalities. In addition to this confusion, women had to go on one wait list for the physical daycare itself and a separate one for the subsidy. Many times the two wait lists did not coincide. Inconvenient locations for daycare were particularly stressful since the typical hours of operation did not match student schedules. However, when students were able to change their school schedules to accommodate daycare hours, participating in work-study jobs on campus was helpful. Coordination between on-campus daycare and work-study jobs cut down on travel time and provided scheduling flexibility. While on-campus daycares were helpful, some students noted that they were designed for faculty and staff who worked a typical 9-5 schedule. These findings contribute to the abundant literature on childcare in Canada by providing a unique student perspective in terms of access.

Many women also highlighted the Eurocentric framework of the university system and their feelings of exclusion within it. The Eurocentric academy was highlighted as privileging dominant groups of students while not paying attention to the marginalized. Racism was commonly reported in the education system, the workplace, and in society in general. Although
Racism was (and is) a systemic issue, it often took place in the classroom setting through discriminatory comments made by peers (without challenge by professors) or by professors themselves. Some women of colour resisted any effort to have accommodations made for them since they did not want to represent the dominant stereotype of a Black single mother. While this resistance is a clear survival strategy in terms of being conscious of one’s own representation, it also puts women at a disadvantage because they often have legitimate reasons for accommodations, for example, the illness of a child. White women in this study were less likely to report that they felt uncomfortable or unwilling to ask for accommodations when needed.

Racism was mentioned as a major barrier not just for the women but also for their children. Several women pulled their children out of schools because of a toxic, racist environment. These negotiations placed additional stress upon single mother students who needed to use their limited amounts of time and energy to advocate for their children, often addressing the same issues they were experiencing themselves.

Barriers due to immigration policies and settlement were also discussed and often closely tied with racism. Several women were frustrated that their credentials from their countries of birth were not recognized in Canada. Without “Canadian experience”, women were either forced into low-wage work and/or had to enrol in university for a second degree. Second generation women who were single mothers felt a lot of pressure to be successful in school and the rest of their lives because they knew how much their parents went through in order to provide a better chance for them.
Nearly all of the co-participants felt that the social environment, supports, and services on-campus did not represent their lived realities and catered to an “imaginary student” who belonged in a typical age bracket. Interestingly, no matter what the age of the women, they felt they experienced ageism. However, only one woman provided an explicit example of where this occurred. Work-study positions were beneficial because women were able to work and study on-campus, reducing traveling time and cost. These positions were also beneficial when students had access to on-campus daycare. One of the women was hired in a work-study position for the school year. She loved the experience since it was in her chosen field; unfortunately, she could not continue in this position even though her employers wanted her to. The government helped to fund these positions in the summer and considered a student to be someone under the age of 30, which disqualified her.

Ableism was identified as a barrier for women attending university and in society in general. This was true for women who participated in the study and their children. Stigma associated with having a disability and a lack of resources were highlighted as major concerns. Two of the co-participants were visibly uncomfortable speaking about disability and were especially concerned with their anonymity in this study for fear of potential employers finding out. Also, the amount of time and energy it took for mothers to find appropriate resources for their children and advocate for them within the mainstream education system added to the stress of their already tight schedules. A co-participant from one of the smaller cities reported that there were no free resources in her area to help with the care and support of her child with disabilities.
Chapter 6 is the final chapter about barriers reported by women in this study. First, I discuss the prominence of economic insecurity in the lives of most of the women and how this impacted their survival strategies. Financial barriers were a common experience for co-participants and contributed to their overall feelings of stress and exhaustion. Unlike single mothers in the US who received social assistance, most women in this study received OSAP as their main source of funding. OSAP was seen as both a barrier and a facilitator because the program provided some financial relief but also meant acquiring high levels of debt. Many expressed concern that they would not be able to find a job in the paid labour market to support them and their children while still leaving enough to cover their monthly loan payments. In addition to this debt, some women had to use credit cards to address their families’ unmet needs. This debt has long-term (and short-term in the case of monthly credit card payments) implications for these women after they graduate and are expected to start paying back their loans. Before I entered my third year of doctoral studies my monthly student loan payment was estimated at $600. Even though undergraduate students may not acquire as high a debt load, it will still have an impact on them. Accruing this kind of debt further disadvantages single mothers, especially since it can be argued that they have more monthly expenses than healthy, able-bodied students without children or other caregiving responsibilities.

Next, I discuss the stigma that women experienced both on-campus and in society in general. Some women decided to not disclose their family status to professors, administrators, or peers for fear of being discriminated against or being made to feel as though they did not belong in university. Stigma is one of those often-intangible experiences that seems to
surround you like the air itself. Although it was difficult to pinpoint, women felt this stigma in their classrooms, when applying for financial aid, and when they dropped off their children to daycare or school. Some women had trouble differentiating where one oppression started and another ended. Stigma and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, citizenship status and family status are closely intertwined. Single mothers have been used as scapegoats in the media and are used to justify the design of punitive social policies. Rarely are single mother families given legitimacy as strong and independent families in their own right.

Students also reported feeling excluded on-campus and in classrooms. Social activities directed at the student population often reflect a biased understanding of the student group on-campus. Formal and informal social events are often held in the evenings at a restaurant or a bar with no mention (or thought) of childcare. Although there seems to be an increase in family day events on-campus, these events tend to be geared towards the student with his/her parents, not the student as parents. Co-participants identified needing to have family- and child-friendly spaces on-campus where they could bring their children. Simple things like having a baby-change table available in women’s washrooms (or men’s washrooms) would help to increase the visibility of the student parent population in general.

Even when women were studying in departments that were thought to be progressive and critical, such as women and gender studies, social justice, or social work, some Aboriginal women and women of colour in particular felt like they did not fit in. Women were frustrated with a Eurocentric academy that they viewed as privileging knowledge and practice rooted in dominant norms: male, childless, White, able-bodied, and heterosexual. Women wanted to see more diverse forms of representation in the faculty body, pedagogical practices, and curricula
in their classrooms. Many co-participants also wanted to feel valued for the life experience they brought with them.

The final barrier discussed in this chapter is the difficulties faced by single mothers because of a lack of time to do that was required of them. Time poverty was one of the most insidious barriers reported in this study. Economic poverty tends to be one of the most prominent features in research when describing single mothers, yet time poverty also emerged throughout all of the interviews. Many women felt exhausted, were sleep deprived, felt guilty for not spending enough quality time with their children, and had to juggle multiple responsibilities while pursuing full-time education. Assignments were done early in the morning or late at night. One woman read literature on psychology to her infant son during his bedtime routine in order to finish her homework. However, the need for more hours in a day (or less work to be done) also contributed to these women being some of the most organized women I have ever met. They spoke about creating lists of things that needed to be done each day and adding each unfinished task to the next day’s list. They knew that if they had 2 hours available one afternoon, for example, those were the only 2 hours they were guaranteed to have because children could always become ill or wake-up during the night.

Chapter 7 explores the strengths and supports experienced by single mother students. I wanted not only to uncover the difficulties women faced and the sometimes almost insurmountable barriers, but also point out their resilience, strength, and satisfaction in single motherhood. Although co-participants told many stories of the stigma they faced in their everyday lives, many also found strength in being a single mother. They felt free to make important decisions for themselves and their children. Some spoke about creating more
egalitarian and socially just relationships and family structures than in their previous relationships. In many ways, their families challenged the traditional ideological nuclear family norm that has been espoused as moral and responsible. Some women were extremely well-connected with their families, friends, and communities and also relied on spirituality as a source of strength. Some of the students in university programs considered critical and progressive (such as sociology, women and gender studies, or social work) thrived and were able to politicize their experiences, which reduced feelings of self-blame and guilt. Connecting with education in this way offered the opportunity for students to engage in education that was transformative and meaningful to their everyday lived experiences. The progressive curricula supported students in locating oppression on a structural level due to racism, sexism, and ableism, which counteracted feelings of self-blame. A few women even insisted that having a baby and going to school saved their lives. Many women left their partners (when there had been a partner) because of violence. They wanted to provide a safe and positive environment for themselves and their children. This reality stands in direct contrast to the dominant discourse of single motherhood that demonizes and demoralizes them as being irresponsible, unfit and neglectful (Abramovitz, 1996; Berman, Silver, & Wilson, 2007; Bezans, 2006; Cull, 2006; Strega, 2006).

In chapter 8, I begin with reflecting on the contributions this study has made to the literature. I discuss a summary of the findings and their significance. In conclusion, I discuss policy recommendations, the limitations of this research, and possible areas of future research. I conclude the chapter in much the same way I first began this thesis – I thank those who have made this study possible and who have supported me throughout this journey.
Chapter 2:  
My Introduction to Feminist and Anti-Colonial Theory

My entry point into critical theories also involved several personal turning points in my life. I remember being introduced to feminist content once in high school. We were shown the documentary, *The Burning Times* (1990). This film was a part of the Women and Spirituality series by the National Film Board of Canada. I then rented *Goddess Remembered* (1989) and watched it with any girl friends that were willing to sit through it with me. It was the first time I had been exposed to curriculum that felt transformative. It was also the first time I learned of spirituality that placed women’s strength and wisdom at its core.

For several years after high school, I was not sold on university. To be honest, I was anti-university. To this day I still do not feel I belong in institutions of higher education at times. My outsider status is implicit in my tattoos, toned-down punk look, and “plain” way of speaking (though I admit my speech and writing has unintentionally shifted to sound more academic – the first time I said or wrote the word *discourse* I thought I would trip and fall down the stairs). For a long time, academia seemed elitist and absent of any real meaning to me. Students only learned abstract facts. How would this expensive knowledge provide me with tangible benefits? I needed to work to pay rent. I could not have fathomed the possibility of having the student loan balance that I do now. Education seemed a luxury I could not afford.

I did try it once. I moved to Toronto with my best friend after high school to study Shiatsu, a practice based on both Western and Eastern notions of health and healing, similar to acupuncture but without the needles. I enjoyed being in a classroom, learning together as a
group, and practicing shiatsu. I only studied the first semester and eventually withdrew as I worked more and more midnight waitress shifts at a busy downtown Toronto restaurant to cover my expenses. I worked a few more service jobs and then found a place waitressing at the oldest tavern in Toronto. I worked there for 5 years, until the very day my daughter was born. My water broke while I was at work, getting ready to eat my breakfast. During my pregnancy, patrons looked particularly distressed when they saw my large pregnant body at their table-side. I would get the regular comments about how I should not be working, to which I would have liked to respond, “Would you like to pay my rent?” but then thought better of it since they were actually the people paying my rent.

Working 10-12 hour shifts, five nights a week at this tavern made me decide to try school again. At that point I had been in a common law heterosexual relationship for 3 years and our two incomes provided enough financial comfort to take yearly vacations. My partner was quite supportive of my efforts to go back to school initially. Little did he know that going to school would lead me to leave our relationship.

Applying to school as a mature student was terrifying. I could not remember the last time I wrote an essay and had no idea what to expect. I thought I would not make any friends because of the age difference. I was lucky enough to go to a university that had a high percentage of mature students, especially in our department. The first day of class, our professor told us, “What you will learn in this program will transform your life. It will affect how you view the world and be sure it will affect your relationships. You will probably end many friendships as well.” I thought he was just being dramatic but I slowly began to realize that he was right. Although I had always thought of myself as a social justice activist, the histories and
theories I was learning about helped me to articulate my positions more effectively. One class in particular directed me on my feminist path. It was an elective course about women, power, and politics, taught in a different department by a feminist professor. I excelled in this course and looked forward to going to class every week. I learned about subjects such as racism and Whiteness, sexuality, sex trade work, violence against women and the lack of female political representation. I felt both enraged at the injustices and empowered, motivated and equipped to do something about it. This knowledge changed my life. Armed with a greater understanding, I began to recognize escalating abusive and controlling patterns in my relationship and I decided to end it.

My next “aha” moment came when I was pregnant and taking a course with an Aboriginal woman professor who taught Aboriginal worldviews on education, family and spirituality. Many elements were similar to the earth-based spirituality taught in my first exposure to transformative curriculum in high school. This professor’s teachings, along with another educator who taught social work practice within anti-colonial theory, helped shape my theoretical lens and the way I strive to live my life. I had strong emotional responses to these classes and identified closely with these teachings. Since then, I have been most fortunate to surround myself with critical feminist and anti-colonial educators who continued to contribute to a meaningful education.

This chapter outlines the theories that inform my analysis in this thesis. First, I discuss feminist theory and how it is useful in deconstructing power and represents issues associated with gender and other social and political identities. My educational background in anti-oppressive social work also foregrounds praxis at the root of my analysis and ways in which I
approached this research. Next, I explore anti-colonial theory as a useful analytic framework to understand historical and present day contexts of education and knowledge production. I also provide a brief overview of the education system with a focus on the increase of diverse bodies in the academy and the impact that globalization has had on the education system. Further, I discuss Eurocentrism and how the framework of inclusive education can be used as one way to address barriers in the education system. Literature is also integrated in the data chapters later in this thesis.

**Feminist Theory**

In this section I will outline how I engage with and understand feminist and anti-colonial theories and connect them to the literature about single mothers and the education system. Eichler (1997b) describes the literature on feminist methodology “as a thick braid with multiple strands – which is sometimes snarled, sometimes cleanly braided” (p. 9). I understand feminist theory in a similar way. Feminist theory is commonly known for using a gender analysis in deconstructing practices and policies operating at an institutional level, in examining unequal social relations in society, and in individual exchanges between people. One of feminist theory’s most common mantras is that “the personal is political” (Code, 1993, p. 42). While this phrase is used so often that it runs the risk of sounding clichéd, its importance is timeless. Problematizing individual experience must not be lost. By politicizing the experiences of the individual and connecting these experiences with others’, isolation is reduced. We also begin to see patterns and practices of power that run throughout dominant structures in society, which uncover entire systems (both visible and invisible) of inclusion and exclusion, such as in educational systems.
I agree with Acker (1994) when she writes, “Feminist theory, like feminism itself, is multifaceted and complex” (p. 43). While feminist theory is useful in analyzing the gendered experiences of men and women and “is about the social transformation of gender relations” (Butler, 2004, p. 204), it is also important to highlight that gender and sex identities are only some of the pieces of single mothers’ identities. I understand feminist theory as encompassing and highlighting how race, class, ability, family status, gender identity, sex, citizenship status, geographic location, spirituality, sexuality, and age interconnect and influence people’s lives. These identities also connect with other people, communities, institutions, and the environment. I do not seek to reduce all women’s experiences to one “common oppression,” which hooks (2000) argues is “a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women’s varied and complex social reality” (pp. 43-44). Green (2007b) also supports feminist theories which attend to women’s diversity when she explains, “Feminism is usually viewed as multiple: feminisms analyze the diversity of women’s cultural, political and in other ways specific experiences” (p. 21). Wane (2004) emphasizes that one of the ways Black women have responded to their exclusion in academia is through the development of Black feminist thought. “This theory has become a critical tool for exploring contextual questions pertaining to identity, patriarchy, race, gender, class, sexuality, and imperialism” (Wane, 2004, p. 151).

Mohanty (1986) draws attention to writings that have constructed “Third World women” as a homogenous Other. She emphasizes how multiple forms of power and oppression, along with the subject positioning of women, contribute to complex experiences of heterogeneous groups of women (p. 338). In critiquing Western feminism’s construction of the Other, Mohanty’s classic transnational feminist text has been interpreted by some as being
divisive and illustrating Western feminism and feminists as representing one monolithic entity.

Mohanty responds to these critiques in her follow-up article, “Under Western Eyes” Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles. She states:

My insistence on the specificity of difference is based on a vision of equality attentive to power differences within and among the various communities of women. I did not argue against all forms of generalization, nor was I privileging the local over the systemic, difference over commonalities, or the discursive over the material. (Mohanty, 2003, p. 502)

Similarly, in the development of my research and in the ways I constructed and analyzed our stories, I strove to balance a focus on common experiences among women while also acknowledging differences in experiences, sometimes even within the same commonalities. Also, I sought to balance awareness of the different levels of agency. Individual, family, community, institutional, and state levels affect the ways in which single mothers experience barriers and facilitators in education. Usually these different levels are interconnected, but sometimes during analysis it is useful to separate them.

Working with diverse women in my study and committing to valuing multiple ways of knowing and learning has made me aware of the dangers of constructing rigid categories of theories and practices that may not be reflective of the co-participants’ lives. I argue there is no “one kind of feminist,” nor is there “one kind of feminism.” Therefore, it is difficult to pinpoint one definition of feminist theory (Reid, 2004, p. 6), nor do I believe it is necessary. I agree with Butler’s (2004) statement, “There are many questions that form the various foci of feminist research, and I would not want to identify any one of them as the essential or defining focus” (p. 205). I understand feminist theory and research to be rooted in lived experience,
demonstrating how gender and other social identities intersect with each other without placing gender in a hierarchical lens of analysis. For a single mother who identifies as queer, disabled, and/or Black, the experiences of heterosexism, ableism, and/or racism cannot be divided out from sexism. All social identities intersect and create meaning for the co-participants involved. These social identities and meanings are viewed within a larger socio-economic context that explores how power is structured and exercised in society.

I locate my theoretical analysis of single mothers in education at the intersection of feminist theories and feminist practice, namely feminist praxis. Feminist praxis reflects the inseparability of theory, practice, and action and is dedicated to transformation (Green, 2007a; Reid, 2004). It emphasizes the reciprocal nature of lived experience and theory. My own dedication to the inseparability of theory and practice follows from my previous academic training in critical anti-oppressive social work practice, wherein we spent almost as much time in the field working with service users as we did in the classroom. Many of us can identify with the issues and theories we learn about, such as racism, violence, heterosexism, poverty and ableism, because we have experienced these conditions ourselves. Lather (1991) speaks to the importance of grounding theoretical knowledge with on-the-ground knowledge:

For praxis to be possible, not only must theory illuminate the lived experience of progressive social groups; it must also be illuminated by their struggles. Theory adequate to the task of changing the world must be open-ended, nondogmatic, speaking to and grounded in the circumstances of everyday life. It must, moreover, be premised on a deep respect for the intellectual and political capacities of the dispossessed. (p. 55)

For the purpose of my study, feminist praxis was key because I wanted to bring awareness to the lived experiences of single mother students. In the study, I deconstructed
“neutral policies” in education (i.e., attendance policies, course scheduling, absence due to illness), examined the provision of supports for single mothers on campus (i.e., childcare, family-friendly spaces, work-study positions, gathering places, and support groups), and examined barriers to education (financial hardships, discrimination and violence). I also used feminist praxis to explore single mothers’ experiences in the education system and their communities with racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, and ableism. However, the large component of the action piece was still missing. I found it difficult to build in an action component when I did not know what the needs of these particular co-participants would be. A suggestion emerged throughout the study for the group to meet socially outside of the study. With the exception of those who attended a single parent group, many women felt isolated from other single mother students on campus and wanted a space to feel comfortable with other women “who get it.” For those who were interested, we created an email group and met in parks where women were able to bring their children. The other piece of the action component will take place after the dissertation is complete and will involve writing recommendation papers to university administration and social/state supports in the community in order to bring awareness to the barriers that co-participants experienced. The goal will be to make some change at an institutional and community level. All of the co-participants are strapped for time but those who would like to participate in this phase (which will happen outside of my PhD) will be invited to do so.

Anti-Colonial Theory

An anti-colonial framework highlights how the history of education and the use of education as an explicitly colonial institution affect the relationships of students to education
today. Using anti-colonial theory, Dei et al. (2000) challenge the production of knowledge and pedagogy currently reproduced in most classroom settings across North America. Multiple ways of knowing and learning in educational institutions must be recognized in order for people to be treated as whole beings, not only “students.” This claim is particularly relevant for single mother students, who often have many responsibilities in addition to school work such as unpaid work in the home, childcare work, and paid work. In addition, multiple ways of knowing can be derived from a person’s history, social group identity, spirituality, or community ties. Dei et al. (2000) state:

Understanding curriculum as “the whole environment” and culture within which schooling takes place, means that representation in education is achieved through creating a sense of presence for all students in school. It entails that the voices and bodies of all students be central to this holistic understanding of curriculum. Further, it asserts that we see a diversity of knowledges and people within our schools both as knowledge producers and in positions of authority. In short, when we see curriculum as the bodies, cultures, spaces, objects, positions, beliefs, sights, sounds and smells within schools then, an inclusive curriculum, which is positioned through the cultures and experiences of all students, is one that has the broadest range of academic possibilities. (p. 175)

One of the principles found in anti-colonial theory is self-determination. Throughout history and still today, the Canadian government has been responsible for regulating every aspect in Aboriginal peoples’ lives (Lawrence, 2003). Social justice advocates and educators aim to create an inclusive and emancipatory environment in the classroom; however, this goal is not always realized. “Racism is embedded in the normal individual interactions and institutional practices of schools” (Rezai-Rashti, 1995, p. 89). In terms of evaluating power structures in society on both macro and micro levels, the intersections of colonialism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, and other oppressive structures must be understood. For example, exploring
issues of sexism is insufficient without connections to issues of racism, colonization and European “settlement” within larger Western patriarchal structures.

As Graveline (1998) points out, “The Eurocentric colonial worldview has highly influenced what is considered ‘theory’ in today’s educational settings” (p. 31). Knowledge cannot be separated from power. How different bodies of knowledge are created and delivered, and the power to influence that knowledge, is constructed from and rooted in White colonial powers. In Wane’s (2004) research, “Black Canadian Feminisms Among Women of African Descent” (p. 145), focus group participants discuss the ways in which academic institutions marginalize women of African ancestry:

Black women’s lives are thus informed by the various forms of colonialism that are pervade their everyday experiences. There were many examples in the focus groups of the ways in which the participants’ race, gender, and class background determined their life chances. Many asserted Black women’s knowledge is often devalued and their existence undermined whether at work, school or in their everyday interactions with others. (pp. 149-150)

Smith (1999) explores the production of knowledge within an anti-colonial framework by situating knowledge production as part of the exploitive practices by European settlers. “The production of knowledge, new knowledge and transformed ‘old’ knowledge, ideas about the nature of knowledge and the validity of specific forms of knowledge, became as much commodities of colonial exploitation as other natural resources” (Smith, 1999, p. 59). She discusses how knowledge has been structured in academia by privileging certain forms of knowledge (i.e., Western scientific methods) over others. “Most of the ‘traditional’ disciplines are grounded in cultural world views which are either antagonistic to other belief systems or have no methodology for dealing with other knowledge systems” (Smith, 1999, p. 65). These
dominant norms contribute to exclusion and racism in the education system for Aboriginal students (Graveline, 1998, p. 35) and for many other students who do not fit into notions of a dominant cultural worldview. In Baskin’s (2005a) doctoral research, she explored the experiences of Aboriginal students in social work education programs in several universities in Ontario. Baskin used the Circle as a research method for students to share their stories. After her initial data analysis, she invited students to respond with their feedback. Baskin (2005a) states:

Most of the ten students talked about negative experiences they had had in the academy over the past year, which, obviously, had not been included in the initial writing of this thesis. However, they also discussed how they were more prepared to challenge both other students and instructors when confronted with exclusionary treatment in the classroom and in writing their assignments. (p. 118)

Negative experiences in the education system are not limited to single mothers themselves. Sometimes it is equally painful to fight against the racism and colonialism that their children experience. Wane (2004) discusses the challenges for Black women who have to fight against colonialist practices but at the same time teach their children how to resist, work, and succeed within these structures:

The structures of colonialism have continued to reproduce themselves and many Black women or many marginalized communities have become prisoners of these structures. Many Black mothers sacrifice to provide some aspects of the dominant culture not necessary to conform to the dominant culture, but to provide tools of negotiation. It is through these Black mothers’ sacrifices that new forms of resistance and theories are developed or created. The struggles of these mothers, therefore, should be read not as a form of submission, but as a way to ensure their children have choices. (p. 148)
These findings are also supported in my study as most women of colour and Aboriginal women reported how much work it was to advocate for their children because of racism in their elementary and high schools. Racism was experienced in workplaces and with caseworkers providing social support, yet the discussion of racism in schools dominated our conversations. While single mothers had to negotiate the experience of racism in the education system with their children, they also sought to instill an appreciation of the value of education. Most of the co-participants deliberately acclimatized their children to the universities they attended and some would bring their children to campus throughout the year so they would feel comfortable in the environment.

I am conscious, even as I write this dissertation, that postsecondary education is not the end-all solution to the difficulties faced by single mothers. I am quite certain that most single mothers would say that issues of immediate sustenance take priority over education. Women who experience violence in relationships may point to safety as their main concern. Women who do not have enough money to feed their children and themselves may scream out that they need a livable wage in order to survive. Aboriginal single mothers who have lived through the legacy of Canada’s notorious residential schools under colonialist education and “assimilation” policies may question participation in a Eurocentric education system at all. Indeed, in her Ph.D. dissertation, Baskin (2005a) writes, “My story is, of course, a familiar one for many Aboriginal people. Education has more often than not been our enemy – a major arm of colonialism” (p. 7). However, she also emphasizes, “Being in the academy and becoming an educator, then, is one of my most powerful acts of resistance and anti-colonial activity” (Baskin, 2005a, p. 7).
My goal is not to underestimate these important and often systemic and state barriers. Also, the goal of this study is not to individualize the person in a neo-liberal market context which insists the individual can succeed if she just tries hard enough. Instead, I wish to bring awareness to and recognize barriers to education since remedying this exclusion may be one of many tools to fight against poverty. As noted by Lightman et al. (2009),

Access to and completion of post-secondary education is a well-known stepping stone to a successful and sustainable labour market career. In the global, knowledge-based economy of the twenty-first century, what was once a passport to a secure and financially successful future is increasingly a basic requirement of a successful job search. (p. 98)

In many studies, single mothers stressed the importance of education in providing a path out of poverty towards independence and self-sufficiency (Baskin, 2008; Blum, 2001; Christie, 2002; Deprez et al., 2004; Jennings, 2004; Kahn et al., 2004; Mason, 2002; Ratner, 2004; Sharp, 2004; Waldner, 2004). Furthermore, by exploring the experiences of single mother students, issues of racism, colonialism, violence, and poverty can emerge in whatever ways participants identify them. Also, while the university setting is a privileged place to be, I want to disrupt the stereotype that all students must therefore belong to a homogenous dominant and privileged group. Collins (2000) emphasizes the importance of Black feminist theorists whose analyses focus on ways in which interlocking oppressions operate, depending on identities of race, gender, and class. In this light, single mother students are not one homogenous group, they experience multiple and interconnected experiences of privilege and oppression and various barriers such as poverty, racism, colonialism, sexism, and heterosexism.
Using an anti-colonial framework as part of my analysis involves acknowledging the fight, the resistance, and the accomplishments that are taking place in institutions of education and in the community. As St. Denis (2007) states:

The movement among Aboriginal and First Nations people towards cultural and language revitalization is another example of a strategy to counter the detrimental effects of colonization and racialization. Feminists, people of colour and Aboriginal people[s] have similarly challenged their marginalization and constructed inferiorization by western institutions through a strategy of valorization of their cultural differences. (p. 36)

After meeting with, interviewing, and getting to know many single mother students, I am in awe of their capacity to meet the challenges that face them. I am humbled by their strength, dedication to providing a secure life for their children and themselves, and their ability to give thanks for the benefits and privileges they do have. LaRocque (2007) reminds me to see this strength and beauty when she states she feels compelled to offer a more positive portrait of the ways in which Aboriginal women live: as victims of colonization and patriarchy, yet as activists and agents in their lives; as oppressed, yet as fighters and survivors; and as among the most stereotyped, dehumanized and objectified of women, yet as the strong, gracious and determined women that they are. (p. 53)

While much has been written about inclusion and exclusion in systems of education, little attention has been paid to the ways in which the identity of single mother intersects with race, class, ability, sex, or sexuality. This is where my research contributes to the discussion. Systems of education have been historically built upon ideologies that support one particular kind of student. We know that students bring a variety of social identities, cultures, spiritualities, ways of knowing, family responsibilities, unpaid work and paid work with them to the classroom and that these roles and identities cannot be easily separated.
Acker (1994) comments on findings from studies on mature women students and their involvement in different educational programs and institutions. She points out:

What is particularly striking is the commonalities in their experiences whatever educational institution they may be attached to; women’s experiences of family are more critical for them as preoccupations than are men’s. The boundaries between family and education are drawn more tightly and women’s experience of them is less easy to avoid. (p. 4)

It is unrealistic to imagine that an education system that has narrowly defined and restricted the role and identity of “student” would be able to create an environment to meet the needs of its many diverse students. We must think differently about what roles our education systems should play in our societies. However, my study shows that different groups of single mother students are persevering in their undergraduate studies and even moving on to graduate studies. Our presence may be limited and not without difficulties but we are here. Every co-participant indicated that this research was important and they were passionate about their involvement in it. I view this work as a means of active resistance to barriers and a vehicle for awareness about facilitators. Equally, the research is an expression of our own power to disrupt the often stigmatized images that are presented of us.

Institutions of Education

A substantial amount of research in the US supports the importance of single mothers obtaining a 2-year or 4-year degree in terms of increasing earning potential and thus, moving out of poverty (Adair, 2001; Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002; Haleman, 2004; Jacobs & Winslow, 2003; Jones-DeWeever, 2005; Kahn et al., 2004; Tamiyu & Mitchell, 2001; Zhan & Pandey, 2004a). However, very little research qualitatively explores the experiences of single
mother students in undergraduate programs in Canadian universities. According to Adair (2001), an educator, activist, White woman, and previous low-income, single mother student in the United States:

The process of earning postsecondary undergraduate and graduate degrees can and does break otherwise inviolate cycles of intergenerational poverty...Education is important to all citizens; it is absolutely essential to those who must go on to face continued obstacles of racism, classism, and sexism, to those who have been distanced and disenfranchised from the U.S. mainstream culture, and to those who have suffered lifetimes of oppression and marginalization. (p. 219)

The majority of the literature on single mother students points to welfare reform in the US as the primary barrier for single mothers in postsecondary education. Single mother students who occupied various and diverse social locations were underrepresented in previous research, in particular, single mother students who had disabilities and/or were Aboriginal. Single mother students who identified as queer, lesbian, two-spirit, bisexual or transgender were not even mentioned in research findings. This underrepresentation or absence of diverse populations was one of the main impetuses for me to focus on this intersectionality in my own research.

Canada's high-quality education system is known throughout the world. However, the traditional student who is usually conceptualized as a young, single student without children or other family responsibilities is also sharing a classroom with students who would be considered non-traditional. Many women with children who have family responsibilities, paid work, and unpaid work do not fit the stereotype of a traditional student. There is a general perception that students pay their dues by living in “temporary poverty” in order to reap the rewards of
the economic mobility a postsecondary degree is expected to bring. “But for single academic/student mothers, there is nothing romantic about the heavy financial, emotional and personal costs of raising a family alone with little or no income” (Comeau, 2006, p. 15).

Educational institutions are not always well equipped to meet the needs of a diverse student population. “To remove structural barriers one must determine whether any institutional practices and policies, which may appear to be gender-neutral, actually impede the full participation of women” (Hornosty, 1998, p. 183). The invisible and visible processes that operate to create expectations and policies that exclude are premised upon the focus of a particular kind of student. “The model of a single scholar, who is able to devote all his time and energy to academic pursuits epitomizes this tradition” (Hornosty, 1998, p. 184). Research into student persistence “tends to privilege the experiences of traditional-aged, White college students without children” (Christopher, 2005, p. 170). Also, as discussed by Wagner, Acker and Mayuzumi (2008a),

Over the past few decades, the Canadian academy has become an increasingly contested site, as marginalized populations have challenged the myth of the ivory tower being a haven of meritocracy and equal opportunities. Despite resistance at each stage of challenge, there have also been gains in both practice and scholarship. Students, and to a lesser extent faculty, have become increasingly diverse. At the same time, and perhaps paradoxically, a range of biases has been identified. The academy has been charged with being androcentric and Eurocentric and with discriminating overtly or covertly against those who do not meet the white, male, middle-class, heterosexual and able-bodied norms which have been taken for granted throughout much of its history. (p. 11)

Compared to the traditional student, single mothers may have additional difficulties with balancing multiple and competing roles. While single mothers may technically be permitted to apply to postsecondary education, this does not mean their experiences are
positive and meaningful if they are accepted, nor would I suggest that only entrance numbers adequately addresses true access. Increasing enrollments for women undergraduate students is important; however, what happens once they get in deserves more attention. Many services offered on campus are geared towards the traditional student stereotype: single, White, male, without dependents, and young (Christopher, 2005, p. 170). This set of assumptions plays out in the organization and operation of extra-curricular events, orientation sessions and financial aid departments. In addition, various social policies may benefit or hinder single mothers’ participation and success in education.

Single mothers have been particularly targeted through punitive social policies in both the US and Canada which then impact on their ability to access or stay in school.

Casting stones at poor women has become a rewarding political sport. They have too many babies; they remain dependent upon welfare checks for too long; they don’t properly prepare their children for entering school; they perpetuate poverty from generation to generation. But polls show that many voters are drawn to political leaders who call for a reinvigoration of traditional American virtues: personal responsibility, independence, and hard work. And these modern-day social monsters – single mothers, welfare recipients, and immigrants – are portrayed as failing to uphold such ideals. (Holloway, Fuller, Rambaud, & Eggers-Piérola, 1997, p. 6)

Ratner (2004) also brings attention to exclusion in education for marginalized populations through government policies in the US, the most recent restrictive policy being the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) governing social assistance recipients:

Throughout the nation’s history, educational policy – or, more accurately, education’s denial – has been used as a means of maintaining inequalities and ensuring exclusion. From the days of the Old South, when it was illegal for slaves to learn to read, to the Victorian prohibition against women’s higher education,
to today’s underfunding of inner-city schools, the country’s record is filled with examples of institutional discrimination. Although the PRWORA does not explicitly forbid welfare recipients to go to school or receive training, it effectively bars many from pursuing these options. It undermines and restricts to the point of impossibility.

All of this should make people suspicious. Any time a group, particularly one defined largely by women and people of color, is blocked from receiving an adequate education, sirens, loud and wailing, should sound in our minds. These sirens should remind us that the history of education is a history of exclusion, and that it is no small accident that so many poor women have been forced from school by the PROWRA. As Latesha said: “It’s like they’re trying to keep us on a certain level. They’re controlling our lives... I think they don’t want us to move forward.” (p. 70)

Although this excerpt is referring to policies in the US, the growing neo-liberal political climate also affects us in Canada. Wellen (2004) points out that, “in virtually all industrially advanced countries, postsecondary systems have reached unprecedented levels of participation increases at a time when higher education budgets face increasing competition with other public needs, such as health care and social security” (p. 50). The federal government provides transfer payments to each province in the form of the Canada Social Transfer (CST) to be spent towards education and social assistance. As part of a neo-liberal agenda, education saw drastic cuts to its funding beginning in the mid 1990s. Provinces responded to these cutbacks by reducing their funding to postsecondary education and/or increasing or deregulating tuition fees (Shanahan & Jones, 2007, p. 33). Although my research does not directly explore government policies, the consequences of the social policy climate in Canada and in Ontario contribute to difficulties in accessing postsecondary education, particularly for marginalized groups. Focusing the attention on policy and structural factors that
shape educational institutions is important so that individual actors such as professors and administrators are not burdened with all of the blame.

Previously, university education was conceptualized as an elitist space and delivered to the upper socio-economic strata of society (Delamont, 2006; Gillett, 1998). Women started entering the doors of the academy in the late 1800s yet were (and still are) overrepresented in stereotypically gendered spaces such as “education and health and welfare” (Leathwood & Read, 2009, p. 34). When universities began transitioning from an elite to a mass system of higher education (Leathwood, 2006, p. 612; Trow, 1999; Wellen, 2004), the organizational structure of the university rarely changed to meet the increasing demands of higher enrolments. While there is an increase in diversity of the student body (Blackwell, 1998; Chan, 2005; David, 2009; Luke, 2001; Trow, 1999), this increase may be a result of the increase in enrollment overall as opposed to targeted equity and diversity initiatives. In one institution located in Ontario, Canada in the early 1990s, equity and diversity initiatives were met with resistance on many levels (Mojab, 2002). Even though women’s participation in undergraduate education has increased dramatically over the decades, even surpassing men’s participation, diverse groups of women are still underrepresented (Delamont, 2006).

Globalization and its impact on institutions of education and the actors within it are widely documented phenomena (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007; Bok, 2003; Davies, Gottsche, & Bansel, 2006; Deem, 2004; Giroux, 2002; Luke, 2001; Morley, 2004; Rajagopal, 2002; Trow, 1999; Vaira, 2004). The restructuring of the university is not new; it has been taking place in incremental stages over the past few decades. However, many argue that the corporatization of the university rapidly escalated in the 1990s (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Blackmore & Sachs,
2007; Chan, 2005; Dobbie & Robinson, 2008; Osman, 2008; Rajagopal, 2002). Previously, education had been viewed as a public good (Chan, 2005; Knight, 2008; Neumann, 2006; Rajagopal, 2002; Vaira, 2004). Education had been touted as an important building block of the social and economic fabric of society. Thus, government had been responsible for financially supporting this social right. However, as a consequence of globalization, and in particular, the General Agreement on Trade in Services (Knight, 2008, p. 13), higher education is now seen as a commodified good that can be exchanged in the international learning market or knowledge-economy (Bok, 2003; Morley, 2004; Rajagopal, 2002). “The state has moved from being a provider of public services to a regulator or auditor of them” (Morley, 2004, p. 2).

The commodification of education has changed the teaching and learning relationship in universities (Davies et al., 2006; Giroux, 2002; Morley, 2005; Rutherford, 2005). Students are seen as consumers of a product and professors are seen as delivering that product. This relationship reduces teaching to a technocratic process which is assumed to be apolitical and neutral. Little attention is paid to the dynamics in the classroom or the social good of education in itself. On the contrary, education is seen as a means to an end. Universities compete with each other for students in the global market.

Students are conceptualized as independent and autonomous learners which are socially constructed categories. “This model of the individual is not only a masculine one, but specifically western, white and middle class” (Leathwood, 2006, p. 613). The discourse of the independent learner supports the position that students do not need any supports or services on campus to assist them in their learning. Leathwood (2006) problematizes the independent
learner narrative and suggests that most students do not fit this stereotype within a mass higher education system.

[The] Independent learner was completely inappropriate for many of these students who did not have the cultural or material capital of white able-bodied middle class men students from the UK. This included women with children, working class students, those working long hours to survive financially, those from a different culture or country, students with an illness or disability, students new to a subject, and those who were shy or not very confident. Indeed, most students could be seen to fit into one or more of these categories. (p. 621)

The neo-liberal discourse of competition permeates the academy by changing the relationship professors have with their work. Professors have experienced a reduction in autonomy and authority over their work. A culture of merit and quality assurance has infiltrated universities where faculty are punished and rewarded based on meeting certain criteria and work is intensified (Acker & Dillabough, 2007; Blackmore & Sachs, 2007; Dobbie & Robinson; Luke, 2001; Morley, 2004; Trow, 1999).

The intensification of labor in the education sector arose from multiple sources: reduced per capita funding; the negotiation away of set hours of work in return for pay rises in decentralized enterprise bargaining agreements; increased productivity gains achieved largely through downsizing of the workforce; outsourcing teaching, thus shifting the load of development and planning to a shrinking core of tenured educators; and the necessity for casual staff to work in multiple jobs. This intensification of labor not only changed the nature of the work teachers, trainers, and academics, in the form of whole of class rather than small-group teaching, large lectures rather than small tutorials; it also impacted on quality. In all sectors, teaching workloads and student-staff ratios increased, doubling in higher education from 1992 through 2002. (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007, p. 60)

The ability to compete for prestigious research grants to contribute funds to the university is also encouraged. What “counts” as quality scholarship then becomes contentious because large research grants and publications in “high quality” journals are seen as being
worth more on a professor’s curriculum vitae. Constructing criteria in this limited way becomes dangerous because activities and scholarship that do not count are left behind. For example, social justice and activism in the academy become even more marginalized within this merit system (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007; Giroux, 2002; Lynch, 2010; Morley, 2003). Also, when social justice and activism are not recognized or counted within productivity norms, professors may be less likely to undertake these important, yet time consuming, endeavours (Lynch, 2010). Discourses of equity are replaced with efficiency in this “new managerialism” approach to education (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007, p. 243; Deem, 2004, p. 291). As noted by Morley (2004),

Continuous improvement has a surface agenda that is credible and desirable in the context of global changes and the risk society. However, continuous improvement also has a subtextual agenda that could be theorized in terms of the Foucauldian concept of governmentality. It is an example of capillary power in that it is everywhere and permeates organizational priorities, social relations and person and professional aspirations. (p. 11)

Importantly, when governments reduce their funding for education, universities are left to engage the private industry sector to secure private contracts and outside revenue. Also, in order to meet the demands of higher student participation rates, universities raise tuition fees and rely on an increased number of contract, non-permanent faculty to deliver their courses (Dobbie & Robinson, 2008; Rajagopal, 2002; Trow, 1999). As a new part-time instructor in university, I philosophically consider myself to be self-employed because few supports are provided to part-time instructors despite the stress and uncertainty in these precarious positions.

Several factors that may lead to making postsecondary education less accessible for single mothers and other marginalized groups include increased tuition rates, restrictive
eligibility requirements for student loans, and higher student loan repayment schedules (Christofides, Hoy, & Yan, 2009; Schwartz & Finnie, 2002; Shanahan & Jones, 2007). When I first looked into registering at my local university after I graduated from high school in the 1990s, tuition was wavering around $2000 per year. By the time I actually attended university as a mature student 6 years later, tuition cost approximately $6500 per year. The effects of these changes are exacerbated when taking into account decreased social assistance rates and cutbacks to childcare, housing, and transportation subsidies (Bezanson, 2006, pp. 111-114).

Delamont (2006) describes women as “newcomers to higher education” (p. 179). She tracks the history of women students in the US and in the United Kingdom (UK). She outlines the educational trajectory of women as they were first granted entry into educational institutions and traditionally male-dominated programs, and explores the development of women’s studies and other consciousness-raising courses and programs in postsecondary education. Delamont (2006) also points out that marginalized groups of women such as women of colour and low-income women were often the last to be granted entry. Breslauer (2002) adds to this argument when she writes,

There is no doubt that there have been improvements with respect to the representation of women in Canadian universities over the last twenty to thirty years...Among students, more than 50 percent are female and even in areas such as engineering where representation has always been very low, the number of female students and faculty has increased some. By and large, however, the proportion of the women in Canadian universities who are visible minorities, Aboriginal people, or people with disabilities remains very low. (p. 27)

The development of feminist inquiry, women’s studies programs and other social justice areas of curriculum contributed to a women’s studies movement within education. During the
second wave of feminism intense lobbying and activism had a positive impact on increasing numbers of women in education. An important policy piece that raised awareness of women’s issues was the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1970 (Wagner et al., 2008a). Many co-participants in my research emphasized the importance of women’s studies courses, programs and other courses that explored themes of equity, consciousness raising and empowerment. Robbins et al. (2008) position women’s studies programs as a challenge to the status quo in universities:

Women’s studies was born in the 1960s, on the one hand, out of frustration and anger women felt when their critiques of the academy were ignored or denied, and, on the other, out of their passion and excitement as they developed scholarship about women and gender relations and uncovered new ways of learning and knowing. (p. 29)

Unfortunately, we have recently witnessed women’s studies programs close across Canada due to many universities’ fiscal platform to reduce funding.

**Eurocentrism and Inclusive Education**

**Eurocentrism.**

Graveline’s (1998) concept of transforming Eurocentric consciousness in educational institutions as well as more directly in the classroom informs my analyses of educational policies and classroom practices. In particular, I am interested in how single mothers experience the educational institution and their classrooms. Graveline (1998, p. 8) refers to “Western patriarchal capitalist domination” and describes how she can personally challenge these structures in the classroom through using an alternative Aboriginal teaching model. Along with
many activist educators, Graveline (1998) asserts that educators must challenge the Eurocentric colonial worldview:

As educators, we must examine our part in maintaining this discourse. Competency-based educational models proliferate in schools. Competence means not only learning specific skills, but also acquiring the knowledge or theory base of the discipline, almost all of which is generated by middle-class, urban, White, male theorists. Skills and curriculum are based on notions of commonality within the human experience, and they tend to apply personal solutions to socio-structural problems. Little awareness of cultural diversity is present. Few culturally diverse members are represented as educators, and even fewer alternatives to Eurocentric models of education are available as curricula. (p. 9)

The education system has been used as a tool of colonialis

Aboriginal peoples in Canada (Hampton, 2000, p. 218), and elevate certain bodies of knowledge (mainly rooted in White, male, able-bodied, and heterosexual notions of “objectivity”) over others. Among others, Longino (1993, p. 268) argues that this dominant notion of objectivity is false and instead we should reconceptualize true objectivity as being a range of diverse perspectives included in the analysis. Residential schools in Canada are the clearest example of the atrocities experienced by many Aboriginal peoples in the “education” system. According to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, “Residential schools were more than a component in the apparatus of social construction and control. They were part of the process of nation building and the concomitant marginalization of Aboriginal communities” (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, Chapter 10).

The school system’s concerted campaign “to obliterate” those “habits and associations”, Aboriginal languages, traditions and beliefs, and its radical re-socialization, were compounded by mismanagement, underfunding, the provision of inferior educational services and the woeful mistreatment, neglect and abuse of many children – facts that were known to the department and the
churches throughout the history of the school system. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, Chapter 10)

The effects of residential schooling are being felt by those who were forced to attend in addition to their family members and communities through experiences of intergenerational trauma (Ing, 2006; Quinn, 2007).

**Inclusive education.**

According to research by Dei et al. (2000), a “general theoretical approach to the idea of ‘inclusive schooling’ is informed by the view that a school is inclusive if every student is able to identify and connect with the school’s social environment, culture and organizational life” (p. 13). Although inclusive education is most often written about for elementary and high school levels of education, I suggest the movement and principles of inclusive education can also be applied to higher education because they respond to the institutional and individual acts of discrimination and/or lack of representation of marginalized groups in the education system as a whole, or Eurocentrism. It seeks to bring awareness of multiple ways of knowing and learning in order to provide true access for students with various backgrounds, experiences, and needs. This kind of education challenges us as teachers and learners to reevaluate the purpose and goal of education and to reconceptualize pedagogy and institutional policies and practices in ways that promote equity and diversity. “Over the past decades, Canadian schools have experienced important demographic changes in their student population and have become increasingly diversified” (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008, p. 9). Sapon-Shevin (2007) also finds there is diversity in the classroom:
An inclusive definition of inclusion goes far beyond students with disabilities and looks at the myriad ways that students differ from one another: race, class, gender, ethnicity, family background, sexual orientation, language, abilities, size, religion, and on and on. Unless teachers have thirty cloned children, there is—and always has been—considerable diversity. Inclusion as a school policy didn’t create the differences in our classrooms, but inclusion does allow teachers to name the diversity, value it, and strategize about productive and sensitive responses. (pp. 10-11)

A focus on diversity in the education system can value the strengths of students who have varied lived experiences that contribute to the diversification of ideas and ultimately the diversification of knowledge production. “Diversity and notions of difference in educational institutions are also political because they are about power relations experienced in everyday institutional life” (Chan, 2005, p. 141). Kelly (2000) discusses the importance of inclusive schooling particularly for adolescent and young mothers. She defines inclusive schooling as “the ideal of including a wide variety of students, particularly those who have been traditionally excluded, either formally or informally” and further explains it as including “efforts to challenge institutionalized practices of racism, sexism, class discrimination, and heterosexism” (Kelly, 2000, p. 6). While there are barriers for students who are young single mothers, Kelly’s argument calling for complete integration of young student mothers into the school system can easily be transferred to traditional age and older age student mothers in university as well, particularly in her analysis of how they are viewed by society. “Teen mothers are often both wards of the state (sometimes literally) and threats to the state, insofar as they are perceived to be a drain on the welfare coffers” (Kelly, 2000, p. 195). Using a critical feminist lens to critique the current education system, Kelly further problematizes the separation between
public and private issues that leads to separating the individual from her social context. Kelly (2000) contends that:

Critical feminists would support a flexible attendance policy for teen parents, particularly with regard to absences related to caring for sick children. If schools and workplaces introduced more flexible hours, then men and women, students and staff, would be better able to perform school, work, and family duties. (pp. 219-220)

Feminist theory is useful when examining how the responsibility of childcare usually falls upon women, especially single mothers. If university policy does not include a child’s sickness as a legitimate reason for being absent from class, the impact of this policy will be disproportionately affected by the women caring for their children.

Much has been written about the work-life balance as if work and life are two neatly separated categories that are not interdependent. However, even within this framework, the intersections of student work and mother work have not been adequately explored. Acknowledging structural issues that make it difficult for single mothers to participate in schools is as important as acknowledging the individual agency of single mother students. For example, when a student gets sick they can usually submit a doctor’s note to excuse their absence, yet the sickness of a student’s child is not always accepted as an adequate excuse. These kinds of institutional practices are viewed as neutral but in fact marginalize single mother students and contribute to blaming the individual for failure within a personal responsibility discourse. This focus on individuality requires the student to fit into the current dominant structure of the education system (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008, p. 10) instead of changing the education system to fit the student. On the other hand, we must not forget that single mother students
are active participants in resistance through the decisions they make and the space they create for themselves and their families on campus. Acker (1994) reflects on balancing this analysis:

For educational theorists as well as for other feminists, certain dilemmas remain. One of these dilemmas is the relationship between structure and agency. Should women be seen as immobilized by reproductive social and economic structures, by tradition-bound institutions, by discrimination, by men? Or are they active agents, struggling to control and change their lives? (p. 159)

We must also begin to politicize the barriers single mother students face as being social responsibilities, as opposed to individual ones. As Kelly (2000) comments, “the ideal of an inclusive school is impossible to separate from the ideal of an inclusive society” (p. 220). To build an inclusive school, we must integrate a social justice mandate espousing ideals of equity, diversity, and reciprocity that contribute to an environment of mutual and collective learning. “Inclusion is, at its heart, a matter of social justice. Being in an inclusive environment makes social justice real” (Sapon-Shevin, 2007, p. 219).

**Conclusion**

Ideals of social justice and equity, which are representative of inclusive education, enable us to envision a society where resources are more evenly distributed and power is challenged and transformed so that processes of marginalization are disrupted. These same ideals can be applied to an educational context where many marginalized students still feel excluded. It is important for research to explore all avenues, policies, and practices in relation to how these are experienced by diverse groups of students. While this study focuses on one group of non-traditional students, single mothers are diverse even within this category. Feminist and anti-colonial theories provide a strong analysis of how power operates in society
based on social, political, and cultural norms and privileges. With an increase in globalization contributing to the rise of neo-liberal policies and ideologies in both social and educational structures, it is important to explore the local impacts these changes have on marginalized students.
Chapter 3:
Methods and Methodology (or the way I see the world)

Introduction

As opposed to using one methodology, this study focuses on four main principles found in three different but complementary methodologies. The four main principles are self-determination, reflexivity, participation, and to a lesser degree, action. These principles are found in decolonizing, feminist, and participatory action research. I used multiple methodologies and principles in order to recognize, value, and support multiple ways of knowing, learning, and storytelling. The process of ensuring a collectivizing research process has its strengths and limitations. Collective or participatory action research can be time consuming. I have been committed to this type of research at every stage of design and implementation; however, it has not been without its challenges. Indeed, I am left wondering if true participatory research can be achieved within the positivist confines of the university.

Dissertation research is limited by the requirements of the program and the methods and methodologies validated by the institution. I would argue that, based on the ethical review process, traditional forms of quantitative and qualitative research are normalized and anything “outside of the ordinary” needs to be proven and justified. Other authors also discuss the barriers within educational institutions to working on their graduate research in collaborative ways (Lavallee, 2009; Ristock & Pennell, 1996).

For example, for the action piece of my research, I envisioned an organic process unfolding whereby some co-participants could be further involved in several ways. That might include presenting conference papers together, advocating for institutional change in
universities, or developing inclusive pedagogical approaches in the classroom. I could not predict the direction of the "action" since it was intended to be community-driven. Also, it was unrealistic to presume that all single mother students would have the time or energy to participate further than the time they had already given during the interview. Time poverty frequently emerged in the interviews as an issue for single mother students. It took months for several participants to even schedule one individual interview between my busy schedule and theirs. The clearest example of how time constraints worked against a collaborative process was illustrated by co-participants' choices in speaking in individual or group interviews. While the majority of the women wanted to participate in the group interview and share their stories with others, finding a time that all of us could meet proved challenging. We finally scheduled the group interview during Reading Week. At first there were 12 women who agreed to attend; by the time of the group interview, only 4 women were able to make it. (We scheduled an individual interview for those who were forced to cancel.) Because of these difficulties, I only arranged the one group interview and increased the number of individual interviews to 21.

In my ethics applications, I was obligated to foresee all possible scenarios in order for the study to be reviewed and approved, which limits creativity, spontaneity, and power sharing between the researcher and the co-participants. This process also assumes that the researcher alone has structured and designed the study without the input of the participants. Although no action piece was structurally included in the design of the study, the women expressed a desire to connect with other single mother students from the study, which many had previously been unable to do because they did not know many others like themselves. This social group took
place outside of the research process and was largely comprised of social and consciousness raising activities.

Ultimately, the requirements set forth by administrators at my university view this study as a vehicle by which I obtain my PhD. I am the only person who can officially author this dissertation and thus exercise sole ownership of the completed document. I found this regulation frustrating because I would not have been able to complete the study without the women involved and I wanted their names included in the authorship. Also, this regulation points to questions of who has true ownership of the research which works against community-based participatory ideals. I approached this dissertation as a project that went beyond the self-serving and material. The struggles and accomplishments that the co-participants shared so generously with me and with each other will not be simply and literally shelved. Many of the single mother students who persevered through their undergraduate studies want the paths for those who follow to contain less turmoil, more transparency concerning on-campus and community resources, and an acknowledgement of how much work their multiple roles entail. They told their stories to make their bodies, minds, and spirits visible on campus and in our communities. I accompanied the co-participants in their journeys by sharing my own experiences, and by gaining insight through the act of listening, not only to analyze the stories but to build relationships between researchers and co-participants who share common goals, as one single mother student to another.

Feminist research is also about social justice:

Feminist research is committed to challenging power and oppression and producing research that is useful and contributes to social justice. It provides space for the exploration of broader questions of social justice because of the
ways in which feminists have sought to address multiple forms of structural inequality, such as race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, as well as gender. Research is political work and knowledge building is aimed at empowerment, action, and ultimately social transformation. (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p. 150)

Further, Lather (1991) posits that research as praxis is “explicitly committed to critiquing the status quo and building a more just society” (p. 51). Reid (2004) problematizes participatory action research that does not pay attention to the different social positions within communities such as gender. Instead, she uses feminist action research, which is “a conceptual and methodological framework that enables a critical understanding of women’s multiple perspectives and works towards inclusion, participation, action, and social change while confronting the underlying assumptions the researcher brings into the research process” (p. 7).

I am excited to be in graduate studies at an institution that encourages critical thought and multiple ways of knowing and doing. However, it is also important to note that other scholars, educators, and activists have made this possible. As Eichler (1997b) points out:

Feminist scholarship, however defined, originally emerged out of an oppositional stance to mainstream scholarship. Today, there is a sufficient amount of feminist scholarship available to serve as a springing board for new inquiries in its own right, so that the critical attention may be towards other feminist writings, rather than oriented towards mainstream research. This can be understood as a generational phenomenon – a generation of young feminist scholars now has a generation of older feminist scholars available that can be used as a foil. (p. 12)

**Insider / Outsider Research**

In designing a research study with participation as one of its main elements, I spent substantial time focusing on co-participants' involvement. In terms of the action piece of participatory action research, my goal is to raise consciousness at an institutional level. Many
co-participants expressed the need for this study to make a difference. They wanted their stories to help draw attention to the inequities and discrimination experienced during their studies and in society. My focus on making a difference is always up front and center and largely takes place through the dissemination of the findings. I will go back to the advocacy groups, agencies, and on-campus administrative departments that supported a gateway to inviting single mothers to participate in this study and provide them with summaries of the findings, offer any assistance I can, and do presentations based on the findings. I will also offer suggestions on how to increase the visibility of single mother student populations on campus and in the community.

Women were excited to have a space to speak about times when they felt silenced and invisible. What I did not anticipate, however, was the difference this study would make in my own life. It may sound clichéd but the lessons I learned from the single mothers in this study have directly impacted my own mothering strategies and validation as a hard working AND loving single mother, a message that many of us have not received from the broader society. As Lavallee (2009) notes, “When locating ourselves within the research, it is also important to recognize that personal growth is an important end product” (p. 26). I was honored to listen to the struggles, guilt, and heart ache that many single mothers felt about not having enough time for undivided attention to their children or not having enough money to provide all of the things they would like to. Yet, the forceful determination that single mothers had to complete their studies, be a good role model, and provide a “better” life for their children was a strong theme throughout co-participants’ narratives. Listening to all of these stories was truly a transformative experience for me. Also, listening to single mothers’ experiences of violence,
trauma, isolation, and street involvement provided a humbling perspective from which to look upon my own life. Knowing how hard being a single mother student is and hearing experiences that further illuminated this struggle forced me to continuously examine my own points of privilege and challenged the often dichotomized categories of “insider” / “outsider” research.

Throughout my dissertation, I located myself in the analyses and shared experiences of my own life as a single mother student. I was mindful that I was sometimes torn between not wanting to take up too much space with my own experiences and the need to politicize my experience as being the incentive for doing my PhD in the first place. I was also aware of how “The problems of voice and identity are packed with internal dilemmas not only for the listeners but also the tellers of the tale. Often women of colour are asked to tell their stories while others will do the theorizing and the writing up” (Razack, 1998, p. 52). As a researcher/co-participant, I shared with other co-participants in the vulnerability and strength that comes with telling our stories so that I was not only “writing up” Others’ stories. Disclosing my own experiences of trepidation, guilt, sleep deprivation, frustration, and moments of pride made co-participants feel comfortable and contributed to a sense of trust within the interview process.

Locating my subject positioning in the research was important in making the research process transparent. As Eichler (1997b) points out, “feminist researchers tend to identify their own values and to consider their own feminist presuppositions in a highly self-reflexive manner” (p. 18). Furthermore, self-disclosure with participants is also part of the process in building relationships and attempting to decrease the power differential between researcher and “subject.” Baskin (2005b) emphasizes the importance of locating yourself as a researcher:
Western approaches to research tend to focus on the participants with little or no attention paid to the researcher other than his or her academic qualifications...The researcher remains fairly anonymous, whereas the participants are expected to reveal a great deal of information about themselves in connection to the “problem.” Indigenous scholars consistently question this practice along with the motives of so-called “expert outsiders.” It is viewed as problematic not to state who one is and why one is conducting any particular research. (p. 6)

Locating myself in this dissertation and reflecting on my privilege ensures that my research does not contribute to processes of Othering (Opie, 1992; Ristock & Pennell, 1996). I intend to use and reflect a social justice lens and to position myself as an ally. I am to be in a constant state of reflexivity, learning about injustice and how not to perpetuate injustice or Othering in my own research, writing, and analyses. As I begin my journey as a researcher, I am both excited and apprehensive. I hope to continuously question my assumptions, my positions, challenge any biases, and learn how to use my privilege in a way that is supportive, whether that means to use my voice or to be silent and listen. One way I reflect on this research process is through journal writing.

Reflexivity in decolonizing, feminist, and participatory research challenges the assumption that the researcher is or should be value-free. With a focus on feminist research praxis, Hesse-Biber and Brooks (2007) state:

Truth is transformed from universal applicability to situated location, knowledge from objectivity and value neutrality to lived experience and personal perspective. Personal experience becomes a source of authenticity rather than a contaminant, and by honestly acknowledging her situated perspective, a researcher increases the validity and legitimacy of her research project. (p. 423)

The four principles of self-determination, reflexivity, participation, and action that I used in my study often overlap with each other and are interconnected. However, specific to using
an anti-colonial framework, Baskin, Guarisco, Koleszar-Green, Melanson, and Osawamick (2009) note:

An anti-colonial framework is also about decolonization which involves a process of dismantling the colonial relationship between Aboriginal peoples and dominant society and forming a new relationship. An anti-colonial framework emphasizes that it is not only Indigenous peoples who need to decolonize – the colonizers must as well. (p. 5)

As a White woman with mixed European and British ancestry, I had to engage in a constant state of reflexivity (Smith, 1999, p. 137), both in my position as a White researcher involved with a diverse group of participants, and also in my position as a single mother student invested in the process and outcomes of this research. “At its core, reflexivity is about reflecting on power – a researcher’s power to perceive, interpret, and communicate about Others” (Reid, 2004, p. 11). My “insider” status as a single mother student was beneficial because I was able to relate to the experiences of the participants and contribute to the richness of the data and analyses. However, several educators and researchers caution us to examine what being an “insider” means. Smith (1999) discusses how feminist research has contributed to legitimizing insider research as important qualitative inquiry, yet problematizes the fixed category of the “insider.” Instead, she insists that intricate nuances work to make us insiders and outsiders simultaneously in our communities. Smith (1999) explains, “The role of an ‘official insider voice’ is also problematic. The comment, ‘She or he lives in it therefore they know’ certainly validates experience but for a researcher to assume that their own experience is all that is required is arrogant” (p. 139). My own social identities, privileges and experiences of oppressions are complex in that what makes me an insider on some occasions also makes me an outsider on others – these positions constantly shift and change. Therefore, the process of reflexivity,
specifically writing in a journal, helped me to stay mindful of the research process and my influence and interactions within it. Loppie (2007) also finds this an effective process as she reflects on her own journal-keeping during her research: “I was astonished at the degree to which this ‘academic activity’ has affected me on a personal level: this is not a component of research often discussed in doctoral methodology courses” (p. 281).

In examining the roles of insider/outsider researchers, Acker (2001) brings attention to her role as a researcher on a project exploring the experiences of academics, especially women academics. She felt more at ease when interviewing participants who worked in the same field as she did. However, she points out a limitation to insider research during interviewing when she states, “Nevertheless, I cannot know how much I might have missed because education academics may have assumed I would know about something and therefore there was no need to tell me” (Acker, 2001, p. 154). I kept this problem in mind when conducting my own interviews.

However, my practices of reflexivity were most beneficial in examining my role as an outsider within this insider/outsider paradigm. My insider status was readily apparent in the commonality of experiences and oppressions I shared with co-participants. Like many of the co-participants, I experienced poverty, childcare barriers, guilt, frustration, isolation, and sexism. My outsider status and the privileges associated with it were more difficult to interrogate, particularly in regard to experiences of racism towards biracial identities, one of the main themes of the group interview. Three out of the four group interview participants described situations where either they themselves or their children were faced with not feeling “Black enough,” “White enough,” or “Brown enough.” Experiences of racism were an integral part of
the stories shared by many of the co-participants in the study. I do not have these experiences. On the contrary, I have benefitted from the structures in society that privilege Whiteness. Further, issues associated with biracial identities seem marginalized even within the scholarship of the anti-racist work I have used to educate myself in being an ally.

I conceptualize the insider/outsider status as being circular or fluid instead of binary and static. This continuum of fluidity is conceptualized in a similar way to the structures of power producing interconnected experiences of privilege and oppression. Mullaly (2002) emphasizes that “Oppression, then, is not a static concept but a dynamic and relational one” (p. 27). However, Mullaly (2002) also states “For all those concerned with developing an adequate conception of social justice and for those committed to social justice in practice, oppression must be a central concern” (p. 35). I argue that oppression must be one of many concerns. In order to use a social justice framework, attention must also be paid to single mothers’ acts of resiliency and resistance.

Researchers must challenge the overarching conceptual framework pertaining to the stigmatization of the single mother family structure. What makes these single mother students strong, persistent, courageous and fiercely ambitious role models for their children? Most single mothers in this study discussed how liberating it was to be the sole provider for their child(ren) and the confidence they gained through overcoming the challenges of maintaining their multiple roles. Many women emphasized how their feelings of success, despite the barriers, directly contributed to strengthening their perception of self-worth. Some single mothers appreciated the intrinsic value of education and felt better equipped to teach their own children and help them with their homework. Also, as will be discussed in more detail
later, many single mothers gained strength by leaving a violent relationship. This very act alone disrupts and challenges the stigma associated with single mothers. The stereotype of a single mother as draining the social welfare state, lacking ambition, or being reckless and irresponsible is contrary to the findings in this study wherein many women actually became single mothers as a way to protect themselves and their child(ren) from violence.

Principles of participation values “local participation, learning through action, collective decision making, and empowerment through group activity” (Loppie, 2007, p. 278). It has also been described as a “politico-pedagogic instrument” that can be used as a tool for change with marginalized populations (Freire, 1993, p. ix). Participation in all stages of the research process supports a collaborative environment wherein participants are viewed as partners in creating knowledge as opposed to be studied about or on. I view the creation and documentation of knowledge emerging from the experiences of single mothers as a collaborative process.

“Academics and workers in participatory action research are joined by a thematic concern, that is a commitment to inform and improve a particular practice” (McTaggart, 1997, p. 30). Reid (2004) describes feminist action research as focusing on ways in which social justice and change can be created through the process and outcomes of research. “Feminist action researchers typically use qualitative research methods to generate in-depth understandings of women’s experiences and put women’s diversity at the centre of the analysis” (Reid, 2004, p. 4). However, to discuss how I approached the principles of participation in my research I must first describe the methods I used.
Methods

In this study, I explored access to education for single mother students. In Canada, we are told we have formal equality in that anyone is able to apply to university (even though this perception does not take into account how students are affected by their social economic status, racism, ableism, and heterosexism). But are the educational spaces, curricula, financial aid policies, institutional policies, extracurricular activities and pedagogies in the classroom representative of the identities and needs of single mothers and their children? Is there true access for this marginalized student population? In parallel, my aim in the study was also to create a space for the participation of diverse identities and voices, which required that I be reflexive in my practices.

I designed the study with the self-determination and participation of the single mother students in mind. Co-participants chose to participate in an individual interview (see Appendix A for interview guide) or a group interview (see Appendix B for interview guide) with other single mothers. While I did not include formal questions on why participants chose which method they did, informally it seemed that time constraints in terms of scheduling were a major issue. The individual interview was most convenient to schedule, both on my part and on the co-participants’ parts. I would like to do further research to explore more formally why co-participants choose one method over the other. However, the purpose in this research was to provide co-participants with as many options as possible throughout the research process. Providing co-participants with options for decision-making supports the principle of self-determination.
Interviews allowed me to explore single mother students’ experiences in-depth in a way that is interactive and conversational (Ristock & Pennell, 1996). An oral method through interviewing explores women’s experiences by providing a space where their voices and reflections are acknowledged and they are recognized as being the experts in their lives (Anderson, Armitage, Jack, & Wittner, 1990). Organizing group interviews in a way that includes heterogeneity among the group can offer a transformative experience in terms of participants learning from others who are from different social groups. Group interviews can serve to connect single mother students with each other by sharing their stories and collectivizing the research process (Kitzinger, 1994). This method also attempts to equalize power between the researcher and the participants as participants may have more control over what is being discussed and the researcher’s role is generally one of facilitator as opposed to interviewer. A study by Loppie (2007) looking at the health experiences of “midlife Mi’kmaq women in Nova Scotia” (p. 276) found that participants preferred group discussions as a way to share their experiences. As she states, “I offered the opportunity to participate in a one-on-one interview. However, all of the women indicated that they felt comfortable participating in the group discussion” (Loppie, 2007, p. 280).

Making the option available for participants to choose between the one-on-one interview and the group interview also supported two of the main methodological principles in this study, which are self-determination and participation. Salmon (2007) also found that when offering participants in her study the choice of participating in a group interview or an individual interview, all of them chose the group interview. “They felt that this would give them additional support, encouragement, and an increased sense of safety and trust in an interview
with a researcher who was previously unknown to them” (Salmon, 2007, p. 985). Group interviews are also helpful in politicizing experiences through collective stories that are often privatized (Salmon, 2007). Wilkinson (1998) makes several points relating to the importance of using group interviews rather than one-on-one interviews because women’s experiences are contextualized within group interviews. She argues that in an individual interview, researchers rarely disclose any personal aspects of themselves and are able to direct or control the conversation. Conversely, in a group interview the power and influence of the researcher can be reduced (Wilkinson, 1998).

The process in group interviews is also about the relationships that the co-participants previously had with each other or about the connections they experience with each other and the facilitator while participating in the group interview (Kitzinger, 1994). In this group interview, the co-participants had not been previously been known to each other; however, of the four co-participants, two went to one university and the other two to another university. Having these institutions in common allowed them to relate and compare experiences. One of the Aboriginal co-participants referred to our group interview as a Circle, which is an Indigenous research method used in Indigenous communities for transformation, healing, spiritual growth, and for conducting research. I was honored that she felt comfortable making that reference. As Lavellee (2009) explains, “Sharing circles use a healing method in which all participants (including the facilitator) are viewed as equal and information, spirituality, and emotionality are shared” (p. 29). As a White woman researcher, I felt that it was not my place to facilitate a Circle in which spiritual practices and teachings, which have not been shared with me and are not a part of my own cultural group, needed to take place. However, this does not mean that
healing did not take place as several co-participants stated afterwards that they found meeting with other single mother students quite rewarding, uplifting and powerful. The use of the group interview was a way that I could still provide a space for co-participants to tell their stories, without appropriating the Circle as a research method.

One of the main drawbacks to using group interviews in this study was the effort involved in scheduling a time when all single mother students could meet. Two group interviews were scheduled over two different days in reading week with a total of 12 participants. Accounting for cancellations, rescheduling, and women who did not attend, only one group interview actually took place with a total of 4 co-participants. Of the 4 co-participants, one Aboriginal woman was particularly keen on participating in a group interview and insisted on it, even with the scheduling issues. Despite the difficulties, the group interview provided a space for co-participants to share their experiences and learn from each other, and several women shared their contact information at the end of the session. While group interviews are often referred to as focus groups in the literature, I prefer to use the term group interview to emphasize the collective nature of the interview process.

The Design

Recruitment.

I wanted to ensure that as many diverse perspectives were included in this study as possible. Aboriginal women, queer women and women with disabilities were particularly underrepresented in previous studies so my goal was to do specific outreach in these diverse communities. This resulted in co-participants representing a great diversity across many different areas including citizenship status, age, sexualities, race and ethnicity, and ability. My
previous social work experience provided me with many personal and professional connections to social service agencies, culturally specific services and people I would consider to be leaders in their communities. I spent a lot of time and energy on the recruitment phase, making sure I connected with as many people and places as possible. One of the ways I was able to do this was to submit an ethics review to three universities in the area and through one professional association. I also submitted an ethics review to the Aboriginal Research Advisory Committee at one of the universities. This committee was established to oversee any research that involves Aboriginal participants. I posted hard copies of the flyer (see Appendix C for Call for Participants) on all three university campuses, in culturally specific agencies and in general public spaces such as grocery stores, libraries and parks. I also forwarded electronic calls to participate to any personal and professional networks which represented diverse interests. In the call for participation itself, I disclosed that I was a single mother in the hope of starting to build trust so that women felt more at ease in contacting me to be interviewed.

In many cases, I built relationships with key administrators within the university who were involved with student advocacy and activism on campus. One invited me to come and speak to a group of student parents. Another person who was previously known to me worked in an Aboriginal Student Services program on campus and forwarded the call. I was grateful for this assistance and understood the increased likelihood that I would be trusted as an outsider. Building partnerships with those involved with marginalized students on campus was an integral part of the recruitment phase.
Co-participant demographics.

Overall, I interviewed 21 women in individual interviews and 4 in the group interview. I handed out a participant demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D) and explained that it was optional. Most women filled out all of the questions on the survey except for one woman who skipped one of the questions in order to protect her anonymity. Seven women identified having physical, learning or mental health disabilities and 3 of their children had disabilities as well. Women’s ages ranged from 25-44 and the ages of their children ranged from 1 year old to their early 20s. Participants were born in 12 countries, nations, or islands, including Canada, China, Holland, Pakistan, Senegal, Scotland, and Uganda. I interviewed both first- and second-generation women who immigrated to Canada between the years 1977–2002. Almost all women identified their gender identity as female, although one participant identified as queer for both gender identity and sexuality. Two participants identified as Two-spirit, one identified as bisexual, one identified as open-minded and another as not sure. The rest of the participants identified as heterosexual. In terms of race and ethnicity, among many identities, participants highlighted being Aboriginal or Native, Black, West European, Canadian-Jamaican, Canadian-Caucasian or White, Chinese, Ghanaian, Mixed (Native and White), Mixed (Black and Indian), Biracial and Irish. Seven women earned under $10,000 annually (including all government supports, Band funding, student loans, bursaries, paid employment and child support). 1 co-participant who had recently graduated and was employed full-time earned over $40,000.

Seventeen women were current undergraduate students, one was a recent graduate and employed full-time, one was a recent graduate and unemployed, five were doing their Master’s and one woman was a first year PhD student. When I interviewed women who were
not current undergraduate students I asked them to focus their discussion on their undergraduate experience. Students attended five universities across Ontario while completing their undergraduate degrees. Participants also expressed a range of religious faiths and/or spiritualities such as Buddhism, Earth-based Wicca, Christian, Aboriginal spirituality, no organized religion and some were not sure. For a more detailed account of co-participants’ demographic information see Appendix G.

**Interview guides.**

I submitted the individual and group interview guides to the University of Toronto Ethics Review Board with a list of questions I would ask during the interviews. However, I made sure to include a caveat that these were only suggested areas and the goal was for co-participants to contribute to the guides. I built in this flexibility so that co-participants shared in the decision-making process of identifying what was important in terms of their experiences as single mother students (Ristock & Pennell, 1996). Co-participants needed to underscore the importance of the issues based on their own experiences and it was necessary to provide the space in order for them to do this. I developed the interview questions based on informal and formal methods (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 66) such as reflecting on my own experiences and those of others I know who are single mother students and drawing out relevant issues from a review of the literature. The participants were provided with a copy of the interview guide beforehand through email, in order to make any changes or additions they thought appropriate. I did not formally pretest the guides as I wanted to work with the co-participants individually to see what was important to them. We discussed any changes and additions co-participants wanted to make at the beginning of the interview and this seemed to set a good
tone in terms of emphasizing to co-participants that they had some control and decision-making power. Overall, co-participants agreed upon the interview guides stating that I had covered everything they could think about. In some instances, during the interviews there were areas that they did not want to discuss such as disability or the relationship with the father of the child. Each co-participant was given a $20 honorarium and reimbursed for their travel costs.

Salmon (2007) also found it important to offer an honorarium when she interviewed young Aboriginal mothers in Vancouver, “to acknowledge her contribution and compensate her for any costs she might have incurred as a result of her participation” (p. 985). It is also considerate to offer honoraria to co-participants since many are economically marginalized and have a limited amount of time. As Salmon (2007) discusses,

> In the Downtown Eastside, one of the ways in which community leaders have responded to demands for more reciprocal research relations is by requesting that researchers provide honoraria to people participating in interviews or completing surveys. The immediacy of such an acknowledgement often ensures that participants benefit from their involvement in research in a tangible and meaningful way. In fact, according to many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members and service providers, researchers who do not offer honoraria are often viewed as suspect in the community. (p. 983)

Engaging with participants and having their contributions inform the interview guide is important for several reasons. First, participants are the experts of their own lives and know what issues are important to them (Salmon, 2007, p. 986) and should be included in the research process wherever possible (Reid, 2004, pp. 4-5). Second, providing the interview guide beforehand offers an opportunity for a preliminary discussion with participants in order to begin relationship building. This can be done over email or over telephone. One strength that emerged from the difficulty of scheduling interviews was the increased opportunity to have
several conversations over the telephone or email, contributing to a more collegial atmosphere when we finally met. Baskin (2005b) identifies her process of relationship building as an Aboriginal researcher and educator working with Aboriginal community members:

This involved spending time with potential participants prior to gathering information so that they could get to know me. It also involved my explaining what the project was about, how information would be gathered, and what would happen with the information. I was open in terms of self-disclosure, as participants’ questions went far beyond those about my education and “qualifications.” (p. 10)

In retrospect, I should have had a group interview to help establish the questions on the demographic questionnaire. For example, one of the single mother students identified as a White woman but her children were biracial. On the demographic questionnaire, I had asked about the race and/or ethnicity of the interviewee yet I did not think of the identities of the partner/ex-partner if there was one, or of the children. Another option was to include space where co-participants could add what was important to them.

It is important to highlight that not all participants were inclined to contribute in a participatory way, especially given single mother students’ time constraints; or more likely, the amount of participation single mothers contributed was more than what I could have hoped for given the competing demands placed upon them. However, providing options for collaborative decision-making during stages in the research process is crucial when it is possible.

**Sharing transcripts and findings.**

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by both a friend and me. I checked for accuracy by comparing the audio-recording against the transcription. Single mother students were offered a copy of the transcripts of their interviews and most responded that they wanted
to see them. They were encouraged to review, clarify, or correct the transcripts, which supported the principles of self-determination and participation, contributing to the overall knowledge production from this research. However, Forbat and Henderson (2005) problematize the act of sharing transcriptions with participants because of the experiences they had when conducting their own research. Their participants became concerned and self-conscious about the ways they were presented in the written text and with “the number of ungrammatical sentences in their speech” (Forbat & Henderson, 2005, p. 1116). Nevertheless, I argue the decision not to share transcripts based on these findings would be paternalistic and contribute to the ideology of “researcher knows best.” It was more beneficial and more in keeping with an egalitarian researcher/participant relationship to discuss these issues with the co-participants beforehand so they were not surprised when they read their conversations on paper. After reviewing the transcripts, one co-participant corrected her own grammar. While women had the option of contributing, changing, or omitting words in their transcripts, I could have made it clearer that this was an option, especially if they were concerned about grammar. Before the interviews, co-participants were asked to sign a consent form to participate in the study (see Appendices E and F). Included in this process was a request for permission for co-participants to be audio-recorded for the purpose of written transcripts.

One of the women who participated in an individual interview had experienced a lot of trauma in her life and had just recently been in recovery from addiction. During the interview she was hesitant to reveal some of her experiences, which she later shared was due to a sense of embarrassment about her past. I worked closely with her throughout the process and she reviewed and approved all her experiences that were included in this dissertation. She needed
to feel in control of her story so that her participation would not be retraumatizing in any way. While I thought her experiences were important and needed to be represented in this study, her situation brought to light the reality that these stories belong to those who tell them. As Potts and Brown (2005) remind us, “The term ‘data’ in its origins means ‘gift’. From an anti-oppressive perspective, we see data as a gift that participants bestow and we work to respect those gifts and treat them ethically. This means we must ask who owns the data, and what does ownership mean” (pp. 269-270).

**Data analysis.**

Individual interviews and group interviews were analyzed using descriptive and analytic coding with attention paid to the emergence of multiple themes. Common themes among the interviews were noted as well as contradictions or unique themes. I used both group and individual interviews to give some choice to co-participants and to provide different ways of gathering data. As Ristock and Pennell (1996) note, researchers use “multiple methods in order to obtain more thorough coverage of a subject by viewing it from different angles” (p. 51). Many of the same themes emerged from both the group and individual interviews, with some differences in terms of how they were conceptualized or expressed. Previous studies have been criticized for not differentiating between the findings of each method. Moreover, when group interviews were used, the analyses concentrated on the content of the data as opposed to the “interactional features” found in group interviews (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 112). So instead of presenting the information interchangeably, I identified which data were derived from which method.
In developing emergent themes, I used a constant comparative method. “The constant comparative method proceeds by placing together various statements having some interesting commonality and gradually developing a category for analysis” (Ristock & Pennell, 1996, p. 87). However, since I do not subscribe to one homogeneous category of “woman,” I also did not focus on solely grouping experiences together. Equally important were the stories and experiences that showed a uniqueness or inability to thematize. In most of the interviews, women stressed the importance of persevering in university so they could provide a more secure economic future for their children and be positive role models. Yet, one mature student made it clear that she was working towards getting her undergraduate degree for herself. Now that her children were older, she wanted to focus on spending time on what she liked to do and education was something that made her feel good about herself. Another example of the unique alternative experiences that emerged was in the situation where most single mothers in social science courses found the curricula and professors to be empowering and life-changing. For the Aboriginal women, they struggled to have their culture and worldviews supported in the classroom when they were being taught by non-Aboriginal professors. The women who participated in this study were diverse in terms of their ages, abilities, sexualities and gender identities, race and ethnicities, countries of origin and spirituality or religions. Their experiences were naturally just as diverse.

I began by listening to the interviews and transcribing them since I am a more oral learner and found that I was better able to absorb the emotion and meaning attached to co-participants’ words if I heard them. The data analysis stage and interview stage occurred simultaneously in that I was continuously reflecting on and coding women’s stories as I was
interviewing them. This process also allowed me to be more aware of data saturation. As parts of women’s stories were coded into distinct kinds of experiences or properties, I ended up with too many to manage. I began to group common experiences together and place them under larger categories, themes or headings. Each property was then placed into its corresponding category until there were no more properties remaining (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 137). If the property did not fit into an already established category I built a new one or left them as their own individual property. At times, I stepped away from writing or directly analyzing the stories and lived with the data in order to reflect on the research process as a whole, compare and contrast the stories and make links with the theories informing the study. This temporal process occurred over approximately 18 months from the time I first started interviewing women to the time I finished writing the data chapters. At the beginning, I spent almost every day analyzing, comparing, contrasting, listening to the stories and reflecting on their meanings. I was also in contact with co-participants through sending them transcripts and research findings for review and feedback. I did hold sessions near the end of the research to present the findings and although I received many responses back saying they were interested in attending, only two people were able to make it. This feedback through emails, a session, and a couple of one-on-one visits mainly consisted of changing some wording to increase anonymity or general discussions about the findings. However, for one co-participant who had gone through a lot just up until our interview, was concerned about having her story on paper. We communicated often to make sure she was comfortable with which words I used from her transcript. Throughout this process I also used a journal to document the reflections and thoughts I had about the interview, similar to how researchers use field notes. I also used the process of
journaling to reflect on my own power as a researcher in this study, with a strong desire to represent women’s stories as accurately as they tell them. The following three chapters outline the barriers and strengths that emerged from the interviews in consultation with the co-participants involved.
Chapter 4:
“I Can’t Take the Violence of It All” (Eva)

Introduction

Many have argued that education has intrinsic value and can be a transformative experience. Reflecting on my social work background, which connected theory and practice, and my experiences in teaching courses in women and gender studies, I have observed the excitement students feel when they are able to connect what they are learning to the everyday experiences of the world. However, there is no doubt these programs are marginalized within larger academe, in part because this scholarship is not deemed legitimate by the mainstream (Wiegman, 2008). Many of the co-participants studied in the social sciences and other critical disciplines and found it empowering, yet there were many barriers experienced within the education system and society at large.

My own personal journey and this research demonstrate that the role of student cannot be easily separated from the rest of one’s life. Yet, the rules, regulations, policies, and practices in university does not always support a holistic framework that includes the lived experiences students bring with them. This is in spite of an emerging trend for institutions to become more welcoming to diversity. Some universities have even developed access programs which target marginalized populations and non-traditional students with the goal of increasing participation. But what does true access encompass? What happens after students enter the doors? In speaking of access for racialized students, James (2003) argues,

I propose to show that while the student population on university campuses is becoming increasingly diverse, particularly in terms of racial and ethnic
minors, universities remain exclusionary. University programs, including curricula, courses, texts and content, pedagogical approaches, and assessments, insofar as they continue to be informed by Western European middle-class norms, values, expectations, and traditions, have contributed little else but provide entry to minority students. (p. 140)

Examining access for students means bringing awareness to the implicit and explicit ways in which they feel excluded. “Documenting the interpersonal ways in which women are devalued within higher education institutions requires that we actively acknowledge and respect women’s experiences” (Stalker & Prentice, 1998, p. 19). This chapter will discuss some women’s experiences of violence. Some of the themes that emerged in this study are commonly perceived as being directly connected to the lives of single mother students. For example, many women discussed difficulties in securing affordable, quality, and flexible childcare either on or off campus. Some disclosed feeling excluded in academe altogether because of racism or feeling uncomfortable as older students. What is more challenging to discern are the experiences which came up repeatedly during the interviews which would not be commonly perceived as barriers related to “student life” such as violence. Both interpersonal and systemic violence emerged in the group and individual interviews. What follows is a discussion of those experiences.

Violence

Some of the main barriers and difficulties reported in this study include lack of time for study, poverty, financial instability, lack of childcare options, institutional culture and discrimination, and violence. Although many of these issues arose in several of the interviews, the issue of violence was one of the most prominent in both the group and individual
interviews. This was surprising because the intersection of violence and student experiences was almost completely absent from the literature on single mother students. There is a large body of literature pertaining to family violence and interpersonal violence; however, this literature does not focus on the intersection with the student experience. One of the exceptions is Wagner’s (2008) recent chapter in Whose University is it, Anyway? Power and Privilege on Gendered Terrain. She argues that experiences of violence need to be included in our analysis when we are assessing access to education for marginalized students, particularly for women. Based on the prevalence of violence experienced by students in this study, this need is well supported. Another reason it was surprising that so many women spoke about the violence in their lives was I had not asked any questions about this topic. In every instance, this discussion was initiated by the women.

For some women, the violence had occurred in their previous relationship with the father of their children and they were eventually able to leave. Many times no further contact with the ex-partner was necessary. For others, violence was still occurring and impacted them on a daily basis, largely through negotiating custody arrangements through the courts. Ex-partners would use the children or the right to have visitation with the children in a power play in order to get closer to the women. It was also apparent that the acts of divorcing, separating from the partner, and filing for custody threatened their ex-partners' desires for control, as the violence would escalate as the women asserted their independence and parental rights. Sheffield (2004) discusses “sexual terrorism” as ways in which women are subject to patriarchal systems of power through the use of fear, violence and degradation (p. 164). Many women in this study were subjected to various forms of violence including threats and intimidation,
emotional, psychological, spiritual, financial, physical and sexual abuse. What follows is an exploration of this violence, yet it is important to view these experiences with a lens that sees violence against women as a result of broader systems of power and gender inequity as opposed to solely individual acts.

I met Julianne, a 33-year-old, White, heterosexual, able-bodied woman born in Canada, a month after her ex-partner assaulted her. When they were together, they had worked overseas and began a casual relationship. After she became pregnant she moved back to Canada to be closer to her friends and family. Her partner’s behaviour became controlling and she decided she wanted to put her baby up for adoption. This arrangement fell through and she decided with the help of her friends and family, she would raise her child on her own. Julianne had several undergraduate degrees and wanted to pursue Information Technology at a graduate level. During our interview she described the incident that happened only 1 month earlier. On this occasion, Julianne’s ex-partner was picking up their son for a weekend visit. An argument began where the ex-partner started swearing and using vulgar and derogatory language towards her. He was angry about a meeting they had to attend at court the next week. His abuse escalated to the point that he slammed Julianne against the wall while he was holding their 3-year old son. When I asked her how she felt about her son visiting with his father and if she worried about his safety, she responded, “I don’t think he’s going to kill him so I just have to hang onto that, that he will come back to me alive.”

For Sara, a 26-year-old, heterosexual, able-bodied woman who emigrated from Pakistan over 15 years ago, issues of interpersonal violence were complicated because she had sponsored her husband’s immigration to Canada. When Sara was completing her
undergraduate degree her parents forced her to drop out of school and return to Pakistan to get married. Sara felt her parents were fearful she would find a partner in Canada who did not share in her family’s Muslim faith. At the beginning, while Sara was in Pakistan, she and her husband got along well. Then she became pregnant and things changed. She returned to Canada during her difficult pregnancy to be closer to her family and immediately sponsored her husband’s immigration, at which point he became controlling and abusive. His employment in Pakistan had been prestigious, but his credentials were not recognized in Canada, which forced him to take precarious, low-prestige work such as driving taxis. This exacerbated his frustration and aggression. Many newcomers and immigrants to Canada, particularly racialized immigrants, are facing similar situations where they bring with them an education completed in their countries of origin, yet it is often not recognized and a focus on “Canadian experience” is necessary. Racialized peoples and immigrants experience higher levels of poverty compared with other Canadians (Galabuzi, 2008, pp. 88-89). Women who are immigrants and refugees may be more likely to be isolated and have great difficulty in accessing supports if they experience violence (Sev’er, 2007, p. 240).

Because divorce is seen as a taboo subject in Muslim traditions (as within many cultures), Sara felt pressured by her parents to stay with her husband. In spite of this pressure, she charged her husband with domestic violence, filed for divorce and was awarded custody of their son, but her ex-husband still had visitation rights. Sara said that she was terrified that he might abduct their son and take him back to Pakistan because, as she described it, Sharia Law gives the father sole rights over the child. While violence is difficult for all women, it can affect
women differently and their socio-economic and cultural positions can impact their access to resources. As noted by Khosla (2008),

Despite the many gains of the women’s movement in opening up the public discourse on violence, the issue remains personally difficult and largely taboo for women of all backgrounds. Women of colour are very afraid of losing face and relationships within their communities. And their own experiences of racism have taught them that they are unlikely to be well received outside in the mainstream...women of colour also reported that they have been referred to women’s anti-violence services where they had bad experiences with staff who act out of racist attitudes and assumptions about them. (p. 236)

Sheila, a 30-year-old, heterosexual, able-bodied, Canadian-born woman, had children aged four and six. Her 6-year-old had severe anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, stimulus issues, and attention-deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Sheila identified her marriage as “severely abusive.” At first, she assumed her eldest son’s behavioural challenges were associated with witnessing the abuse in her relationship. However, after she left her husband, counsellors insisted that something more was going on since her son’s behaviour should have improved after she and her children were removed from that environment. Sheila found that searching for resources for her son was difficult since there were almost no supports in her geographical area for children with mental health and intellectual disabilities. Her son’s needs were also downplayed by administrators at his school because they said his disabilities were not physical and therefore not serious. The frustration around issues of “invisible disabilities” emerged in both the individual and group interviews. Both single mother students and their children who had disabilities which were harder to “prove” rarely found supports and services. Since the 1990s, neo-liberal changes to social policies in Ontario decreased funding and resources for persons with disabilities. For example, “access to government services such as
paratransit and homecare was diminished as more restrictive eligibility criteria were introduced and responsibility for these programs was devolved to local government, non-governmental agencies, and private firms” (Chouinard & Crooks, 2005, p. 23). “Furthermore, in families, the responsibility for caring for a disabled parent, child or other family member often lies with women” (Disabled Women’s Network Ontario, 2010a, para. 6). Women were not frustrated with their children who had disabilities, but with the lack of supports and services in their communities to assist them (Owen, 2007, p. 217).

However, even with some of the barriers still present in Sheila’s life such as a lack of resources for her son, economic insecurity, and a fear of her ex-partner's violence, she is mindful of how this crisis has made her family stronger. When I asked her how she felt about her relationship with her children now she responded:

Oh, it’s so good. It’s really good. I think they’re so cuddly and affectionate. They’ve learned how to view me in a positive way and I think that has a lot to do with the way I interact with my [new] boyfriend. They’re seeing a healthy relationship and they say, “You’re so beautiful and you’re so smart mommy.” They’re always giving me compliments. They’re really happy. We’re always supporting each other. I think what I lacked in some areas I completely over-embellished in others. If they wanted a kiss I would give them 10 kisses. One story turned into three stories. I really devoted a lot of my time with them. Through this crisis, I think I made them feel really safe.

For Mariposa, issues of violence affected her school experience in a different way. She was a 33-year-old, heterosexual, able-bodied, Native woman, who commuted to complete her undergraduate degree at one of the smaller universities. When asked about any experiences in
the classroom that may have made her feel uncomfortable, she recalled an incident that made her angry. During a literature class, one of the books they were studying was about child sexual abuse. The professor asked the class to sympathize with the parent who was inflicting the abuse upon the child. She went to great lengths to explain what the motivation must have been for the parent to abuse the child. Instead of politicizing the abuse of children as unacceptable and exploring the power dynamics in society which support adult power over children, this professor chose to elicit sympathy for the perpetrator. As Mariposa described it, this discussion created tension and students were astonished by the direction the professor was taking. The atmosphere created in the classroom could have triggered and retraumatized students who had experienced violence as children. Mariposa, a survivor of child sexual violence and a student who was quite comfortable challenging injustice in the classroom, was surprised and angry at how she felt silenced.

Why do I have to understand a child sexual abuser? Why do I have to understand them... I just wanted to swear at her but I couldn’t even bring myself to put my hand up. I was so pissed off. That was the first time I was afraid to say anything because of I was afraid of what would come out of my mouth at that particular moment.

This experience demonstrates how violence and abuse can impact students during various points of their lives. Even though violence may have occurred during childhood, the trauma can still have an impact on learners into their adulthood. How violence and power are approached in the classroom can have affirming or devastating consequences. While counselling supports may assist students on campus, the focus should also be to challenge the
culture of the institution to promote equity and social justice issues, which includes ending and preventing violence against disadvantaged groups. Awareness of violence as a systemic issue of power instead of an individual or random act between adults or against children needs to be initiated both on campus and in the wider society.

In Christina’s life, a 30-year-old, White, bisexual, Canadian-born woman with a West European background, domestic violence escalated after the birth of their son. She became their son’s primary caregiver, a paid worker and a student all at the same time. When I asked her if there was something recreational she liked to do just for herself, she told me that working night shifts at Tim Horton’s was her only “break.” She would work all night while her husband was at home and then stay up with her baby all day, napping only when he would nap. For an entire summer, the only sleep she got was when her baby napped a few times during the day.

I considered myself the only caregiver in the home because his father wouldn’t take him on the weekend with him. He wouldn’t. I remember one time I had been stung by a bee and I just wanted to go to the grocery store and get an antihistamine and then came the argument to have my son stay with his dad. I just wanted to get the “H” in the car and get over to the drug store because I got stung in my ear and I could feel it swelling down my neck. There was an argument because I needed to leave to go and do that. Why wouldn’t I take him with me and that kind of crap. He just never took him. So I think going to work when I started working at night was my little break because I was not in that sole caregiver role. I had time to myself and it was quiet. I don’t know that I would want to work at Tim Horton’s again but at the time it was the night shift and there wasn’t a whole lot going on. I could just clean, there was a baker in the back and me at the front counter and we’d just go through the night and the odd
customer would come in. That was the break for me, being at the Tim Hortons working.

Christina’s experience illustrated that women do not have to be single to be the primary caregiver in the household. Even when there are two adults in heterosexual relationships living together, many times women still take up most of the household responsibilities in addition to paid work in the labour market. According to a study by Bezanson (2006),

In almost all of the 41 households in the study where a woman and a man lived together, gender determined the division of labour and influenced power dynamics. Women assumed most of the responsibility for managing basic needs, preparing foods, managing health care needs, arranging child and elder care, and carrying out household cleaning (although some children shared in the latter). (p. 127)

Many women noted that in addition to gaining independence after leaving their partners, they also had less work to do in the home. Sometimes the energy spent on cleaning, preparing food, arguing, negotiating, and compromising with their partners, especially in abusive relationships, was more than the energy they spent as a single mother when they only had to be responsible for themselves and their children. Eichler and Albanese (2007) examine the literature on housework and find that the analyses used are most often on the gendered division of labour between men and women couples within the same households. They further state,

Even when the sample consists of women and men across a variety of marital statuses, the focus of analysis is usually the division of unpaid housework by sex within individual households. While this is important and interesting, the implicit assumption remains that housework is performed only by the adults within their own household, rather than also across households, and that any help received is irrelevant, even though the questions might be phrased in a less exclusive manner, by asking for the amount of time spent on various housework tasks.
Again, while important, by focusing predominantly on the wife-husband division of labour, we obtain only a partial picture of the type and amount of housework performed. (Eichler & Albanese, 2007, pp. 229-230)

More research is needed to uncover the dynamics of the work involved in single mother households in particular. A more inclusive definition of this work is developed by Eichler and Albanese (2007, p. 248) to encompass a multitude of dimensions of unpaid work which would more appropriately reflect the realities of single mother households, among others:

“Household work consists of the sum of all physical, mental, emotional and spiritual tasks that are performed for one’s own or someone else’s household and that maintain the daily life of those one has responsibility for” (see also Eichler, 2010). This definition is important for single mothers even when they have children who are older, as motherhood and the work associated with it “lasts a lifetime” (Armstrong & Armstrong, 2010, p. 114). Most students reported they received assistance from family members (most often women), friends, other mothers and importantly, from their children. Children were expected to contribute to their own self-sufficiency in age-appropriate ways and contribute to the overall functioning of the household. Further, what is interesting is the observation by single mothers that they had far less work to do in the home than when they lived with their partners, which could be seen as one of the benefits of a single mother family.

For co-participants in the group interview, issues of violence were raised in connection to the reason why they left their relationships and pursued postsecondary education. “I left my husband” was the common response when I asked what led to the decision to apply to university. (The exception of the group in this regard was Megan, whose husband died years earlier.) Emma, a 38-year-old single mother, had emigrated from the United States in 1995 and
had one child 11 years of age. She was an Aboriginal woman who had both White and Native ancestry and had a learning disability. She shared some of the other co-participants' experiences of biracial or multi-racial identities and reported that both she and her daughter felt excluded from school. Emma graduated with her undergraduate degree in 2005 and was pursuing a graduate degree in social work. She received income from student loans, bursaries and Band funding. Emma discussed feeling marginalized within academia as an Aboriginal woman and she also had a learning disability that affected her studies. She said that the support of her friends and the Aboriginal Student Centre were invaluable to her ability to continue her studies. She discusses what led to her registering for postsecondary education, “I came here on a marriage visa to my husband. I never worked since I got here in 1995 – it’s now 2001. He cheated on me and I left him – it goes without saying. All of a sudden now I’m sitting on welfare and they’re telling me you can’t be here, it’s illegal.”

At the time of the interview, Janice was a 38-year-old, able-bodied, heterosexual, single mother who was born in Pakistan and arrived in Canada in 1982. Her two children were aged 18 and 15. She was registered as a full-time undergraduate student and relied on student loans, a work-study job, and bursaries from the university for financial support. Janice had first enrolled at this university almost 20 years earlier but dropped out due to her then–husband’s opposition to her continuing her schooling. Returning as a single mother student in 2004 in the field of Arts and Sciences proved to pose financial and emotional challenges; however, she felt it was the time to do it. She said, “As soon as I decided I was going to leave him it was almost like okay, this is my time to do it and so I came.”
Eva also attended the same university as Janice yet she reported a much more positive experience. She felt adequately funded in her program, though she relied on many sources of income including part-time work, student loans, scholarships and grants, child support, loans from her parents and social assistance. Eva also belonged to a college within the university that catered to mature students and single mother students by providing specific resources geared to their needs. Eva’s children were aged 11, 8, and 6. As a 32-year-old, White mother of biracial children, Eva discussed the struggles she had as a result of racism. Sometimes her maternal legitimacy would be questioned because she looked different from her children. She supported her children while they navigated their worlds as biracial children. She was simultaneously impacted by both Whiteness and racism. All co-participants had school-aged children, so their children’s schools were often a focus of the conversation. Children experienced racism not only by their peers but also felt excluded in the classroom by their teachers. Teachers rarely investigate their own privilege or positions of power in the classroom. As Razack (1998) notes, even when teachers attempt to create a “cross-cultural” dialogue, it rarely gets to the root of the power structures in society.

What makes the cultural differences approach so inadequate in various pedagogical moments is not so much that it is wrong, for people in reality are diverse and do have culturally specific practices that must be taken into account, but that its emphasis on cultural diversity too often descends, in a multicultural spiral, to a superficial reading of differences that makes power relations invisible and keeps dominant cultural norms in place. (p. 9)

Although the three women wanted to leave their partners, systemic barriers such as economic insecurity made this difficult and years passed before they were able to. As Eva explained, “I was really trapped in a dead end marriage and I was very unhappy. I was working in an
administrative job making $28,000 a year. I had three kids and I wanted to leave my husband but I knew that I couldn’t do that without making more than $28,000 a year.”

The fourth co-participant, Megan, was 44 years of age and had two children ages 18 and 15. She completed her undergraduate degree in 2008 from the same university and program as Emma and was doing her Master’s degree in social work. Her primary sources of income included student loans and a survivor’s pension. Megan also spoke about the challenges her children faced in school due to their biracial identities. While Megan spoke about her passion for her studies, she also had difficulties due to chronic back pain. After her husband died, she raised her children as a single mother.

The women in this group broadened the concept of violence beyond the ways it has been traditionally viewed. They spoke about the violence they felt due to racism and their single mother status both in schools and in society at large. Violence is usually perceived as individual acts of violence committed by men against women. We have been taught since we were children to be afraid of “stranger danger” as it is called, when it is most likely someone we know who will violate us. Most women have been socialized in ways to fear public spaces, especially at night and to live by a “rape schedule” (Valenti, 2007, p. 63). This socialization involves all the ways in which the abuse and assault committed against us are somehow our responsibility; we must avoid, prevent and deter violence. For my own daily schedule, this may mean:

- parking my car in well lit areas
- checking under the car to make sure no one is hiding there
- checking the back seat before I get in
• making sure to walk with my keys in my hand
• carrying a “rape” whistle or pepper spray
• crossing the street if someone is walking behind me
• not walking alone late at night
• asking security to escort me to my car or bus stop
• making sure to tell others where I am going and when I am expected to return
• keeping the porch light on for when I get home
• and not dressing in “provocative” clothing

Almost every time I hear of a sexual assault in a public space on the news, it is accompanied with the warning that “women should take extra precaution to be aware of their surroundings.” With such a focus on what we as women need to do to prevent violent assaults against us, it is no wonder that so much therapy in response to violence involves undoing these popular messages which pervade our subconscious. It is difficult to not blame ourselves when we are surrounded with a popular discourse which “blames the victim.”

The power involved in blaming the victim and stigma associated with violence may have been at work in the group interview. While women appeared to be comfortable in speaking about their experiences of physical and/or sexual assault in the individual interviews, this topic did not come up for women in the group interview. They openly discussed issues of emotional, psychological, spiritual and financial abuse but did not talk about sexual or physical violence. It could be that none of the co-participants in the group interview experienced physical or sexual violence; however, it may have been because women did not feel as comfortable to disclose this experience in a group setting where everyone was unknown to them. In the individual interviews, women may have experienced an increased sense of anonymity and confidentiality.
Alternatively, since violence was conceptualized by this group in a broader, systemic way such as racism as violence, it may be that this type of structural violence was most salient for them.

Eva described violence in ways that work both on a systemic and individual level. She explained in detail how hard she worked in researching the demographic make-up of the daycare workers and schools that her children attend. Racism and discrimination based on her single mother status and having biracial children was prevalent, so part of her resistance was finding safe spaces for her and her children. She found a daycare that was run by a White woman who was, like herself, a single mom with three Black children.

So you know, I make sure that I go places where we will be included because I can’t take the violence of it. It’s violence, the way it makes you feel. It absolutely impacts on your psyche, on your kids, on everything – on your life. It’s like I can’t deal with that. I feel like we have enough to deal with.

Interestingly, when Emma and Eva would disclose experiences of emotional, mental, or financial abuse, they received hostile comments from friends as well as workers of the state such as childcare subsidy or social assistance workers. Their abuse was not perceived as legitimate as they were often questioned as to why they would leave their partners if they had not been physically abused. The following excerpt reflects this experience and demonstrates how the interactional nature of a group interview can illuminate the importance of particular issues. The co-participants shared their frustration through humour as they discovered similar experiences.
Eva: ...the way that you became a single mom, especially when people find out that you were the one that left. I don’t know if you get that, “What were you thinking? To leave your husband?”

Emma: or “You could always go back”? Do you ever hear that one?

Eva: all the time.

Janice: I’ll get, “But he is so good looking.”

(Group laughs)

Emma: I actually have friends that look at me and say, “Why would you leave him, he’s fabulous?”

Eva: I’ll get, “He didn’t hit you? Oh really? You left him and he didn’t even hit you?”

Emma also experienced the same degree of curiosity and disdain from her childcare subsidy worker who questioned why she left her husband if he did not “beat her.” The type of emotional abuse Emma experienced by her partner was calculated and manipulative. Her husband tried to make her think she was mentally unstable and have her committed to a mental health facility. When she began taking medication for mental health issues, she found it was difficult to sleep, particularly if she had fallen asleep and then been woken up abruptly. Her husband would intentionally wake her up in the middle of the night knowing this would keep her awake.

Janice also spoke of her husband being controlling. She describes how she felt when making the decision to apply to university.
I decided to come back too. I think shortly after we separated and like you guys I just couldn’t – it really was on our 12th wedding anniversary that I thought, god help me, I can’t do this for 12 more years. Not one more year! Hell no, I can’t do this. So it probably took me another year to decide and for him to agree that I was leaving and so in that year I thought I’ve got to get out of the house. Thoughts of school kept going through my mind. I actually started university back when I was only 17 at the time, right out of high school. I dropped out within the first week. I was too young and he was my boyfriend back then and he hadn’t graduated from high school so there was no way he was going to let me go to university.

Janice explained that she tried to stay in school the first time she registered even though it was “behind her boyfriend’s back.” Eventually she dropped out when she realized there was no way she could hide the fact that she was going to school while also working full time.

The socio-economic position of women in society can impact their ability to live independently and free from abusive relationships. Using critical feminist theory and anti-colonial theory highlights the complexities for women when they experience multiple barriers. For women who have disabilities, depending on the disability, they must have access to immediate transportation to safety and have communication devices that assist them and corresponding shelters and services that can respond to these communication devices. At one women’s shelter where I volunteered, they had a TTY machine (a telecommunication device) to communicate with women who were deaf or hard of hearing, yet the staff did not know how to use the machine and often left it turned off. When immigrant women are sponsored by their husbands to come to Canada, language is often a barrier and they fear they will be deported if they report abuse. Women who are in violent same-sex relationships must face heterosexism in
social services, the police, and the courts. Women who experience poverty on top of all of these barriers have fewer resources with which to access safe spaces.

Lightman and Baines (1996) draw attention to the changes to the social safety net in Ontario when it was led by Mike Harris’ Conservative government. The “Common Sense Revolution” political platform had devastating consequences that still affect us today. Social programs and services that were almost exclusively used by women and children were targets of cost-cutting measures, particularly in the violence against women sector, subsidized childcare spaces and other equity programs. Social assistance rates saw a 21.7% (Lightman & Baines, 2006, p. 146) decrease with little change 10 years later. One of the most devastating policy changes happened when students were restricted from collecting student loans and social assistance simultaneously. Previously, students would use social assistance to help meet their living expenses and use student loans to help cover the costs of education. In one highly publicized case in Ontario, Kimberly Rogers, who lived in severe poverty, was charged with collecting social assistance and student loans at the same time and sentenced to house arrest. At 8 months pregnant, she died in her overheated apartment building where it is thought she ended her own life (Disabled Women’s Network Ontario, 2010b).

Many provinces followed Ontario’s lead by adopting similar cuts to their social safety net or rolling back provisions that were made to policies in order to increase equity among marginalized groups (Baker & Tippin, 1999; Morrow, Hankivsky, & Varcoe, 2004). The accumulated effects of these cutbacks and erosion to equity further marginalize women in society, especially economically, and restrict their opportunity to leave violent relationships. As Strega (2006) aptly puts it,
Mothers who are being battered have no good choice to make. Should they choose to leave, they are endangering themselves and their children, often plunging their children into poverty and stigmatizing themselves as single mothers. Should they choose to stay, they live in fear that the abuse may spread to their children. The conundrum of their situation is illustrated in Hilton’s (1992) finding that “wanting to be a good mother” inspired 30 percent of the women in her study to stay in an abusive relationship – while the same desire prompted 55 percent of them to leave. (pp. 240-241)

For immigrant and newcomer women who have a range of different citizenship statuses, isolation may further marginalize them if they experience violence in their relationships. Furthermore, applying for citizenship status can be a confusing and lengthy process and some women who are sponsored by their husbands may not have access to legal information and their rights. For some women, the fear of deportation can outweigh the risks of living in an abusive relationship.

Over the years, the Canadian state has increased its response to and intervention in the lives of families who experience domestic violence, usually through policing and the court system. This is widely seen as a victory as it criminalizes interpersonal violence; however, it is also a concern for marginalized women because the state has so much power and authority. Some women are fearful of police who may hold racist, classist, heterosexist, and sexist assumptions about what it means to be an immigrant woman, Aboriginal woman, woman of colour, lesbian woman, and poor or homeless woman. Women also fear Children’s Aid involvement, financial insecurity, and that their own power over their lives is compromised when police and courts lay mandatory charges against perpetrators (Wachholz & Miedema, 2000). Educators and activists in the field have challenged the effectiveness and cultural
appropriateness of responding to violence in this individualized way which maintains power at
the law enforcement level. For Aboriginal peoples, Baskin (2006) insists,

Interventions in the area of family violence within Aboriginal communities must
take an approach that is community controlled and culture based. Such an
approach must be holistic in nature and, therefore, needs to include
interventions that centre on community awareness, healing processes for the
entire family, and an alternative to the present criminal justice system. (p. 15)

Conclusion

So what happens when women who experience violence are also students? Many of the
students in this study had similar fears and anxiety in negotiating their own safe spaces. Many
racialized women did not trust the criminal justice system, some wondered what their rights
were especially if sponsorship was involved, and others were immobilized because of economic
insecurity. At one of the universities, there were several on-campus supports which women
found helpful. These included short-term counselling and student legal clinics. However, what
was difficult was disclosing their experiences to their professors in terms of needing
accommodation for assignments or exams. Most often, students did not seek assistance and
struggled through in silence.

In Wagner’s (2008) study, seven female students were interviewed about their
experiences of trauma and how it affected their postsecondary education. Seven feminist-
identified faculty members were also interviewed and shared their experiences of responding
to violence against women in the classroom. Wagner, for example, discusses the barriers for
students based on racism, sexism, classism or ableism:

As issues of diversity and equity become more familiar across Canadian
campuses, we increasingly hear about initiatives to remove/reduce barriers for
people from traditionally marginalized groups, in order to afford them greater ease of access to sites of higher education. (p. 90)

Yet, literature rarely problematizes experiences of violence as a barrier to education in itself. Wagner (2008) further contends, “This aspect [interpersonal violence] of women’s collective reality has not been widely recognized within the context of higher education” (p. 91). She acknowledges the hierarchy of oppression argument that is used to pit one marginalized group against another and instead advocates for “a more holistic perspective that acknowledges and values student diversity. Any approach that seeks to conceptualize women’s lives must recognize not only experiences of violence but also interlocking sources of oppression” (Wagner, 2008, p. 99). Violence against women may be one of the most striking indications of the lack of structural power women hold in society. If we look to discourses of education and equity and true access for women on university campuses, we must also acknowledge the potential for the occurrence of violence and strategize how to respond to this.

It is clear that multiple forms of violence against women exist and that diversely situated women experience violence differently. This is not to negate the violence that occurs against men or to assume that a single type of male perpetrator abuses power in the same ways. However, research has continuously shown that women and children are disproportionately affected by violence. A Canadian report in 2006 found that “women are more likely than men to be the victims of the most severe forms of spousal assault, as well as spousal homicide, sexual assault and stalking” (Statistics Canada, 2006b).

Feminist theorists and activists have played a major role in publicizing issues of violence against women and bringing social and political attention to this epidemic, which has been
commonly viewed as a private issue. Organizations, shelters, and activist groups focus on keeping these issues prominent in the Canadian political dialogue, despite an increase in neo-liberal policies that decrease funding for social service agencies. Several cultural services and programs have been developed to address the unique needs of women based on their race, class, ability, and age. For example, the Native Women’s Association of Canada started the Sisters in Spirit initiative in order to raise awareness of the “more than 582 missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in this country” (Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2010, para. 1).

Most co-participants in both group and individual interviews highlighted issues pertaining to interpersonal violence by their ex-partners. However, some also focused on other forms of violence such as child sexual abuse, racism, discrimination based on family status, involvement with drugs, alcohol, sex work, or incarceration, violence from state agencies such as Children’s Aid, poverty, or living on the street.

Many participants spoke about the difficulties of dealing with controlling and abusive ex-partners and during these times it was especially difficult to concentrate on their studies. While some women spoke openly in class and on campus about their single mother status, fewer felt comfortable discussing issues of violence yet it was clear they needed additional supports and services during these times. Some women in Wagner’s (2008) study were able to politicize the violence against them even though this politicization was not a part of the culture of university campuses. However, this was usually done after the person was no longer in the situation or because they felt safe and empowered in feminist classes and spaces (Wagner, 2008, p. 93). Similarly in this study, most single mother students studied in the social sciences
where issues of violence, at least in a theoretical framework, were sometimes raised. It would be important to know and possibly compare the experiences of students in other disciplines that are not as likely to discuss these kinds of issues in the classroom.

Unfortunately, violence against women has been viewed as the women’s fault (Rebick, 2005, p. 69). When friends, family, employers, and the courts view it as an individualized problem and not as a result of larger structural problems such as gender inequity, women are then faced with internalizing or resisting these messages. This is nowhere more apparent than on the university campus. I share Eyre’s (2000) frustration when she discusses her role as a feminist academic who hears the coming out stories of her students who have experienced sexual violence in university communities (pp. 293-294). These stories can go unheard, be invalidated through the official reporting process, or lead to students dropping out of school. Further, violence against women has not been politicized within a university setting (Eyre, 2000, p. 294) which contributes to an unsafe space on campus for women. If inclusive education involves representing diverse knowledges on-campus and in curricula, acknowledging the lived experiences students bring with them, then violence against women must be addressed as well.

While most students in this study experienced interpersonal violence with their ex-partners or child sexual assault as opposed to sexual assault directly within the university environment, the impact of the trauma is similar and the critique of the depoliticized culture of the institution is the same.

What lies at the heart of these issues are the embedded power relations that operate at the institutional level. When Eyre (2000) examined the discourses that were working to silence sexual assaults on a university campus, she discussed how the intellectual and physical space of
the academy is antithetical to goals of equity and social justice, particularly for women. “The anti-feminist discourses were also symptomatic of the gendered relations of power that lie buried within the systems of knowledge that are part of the taken-for-grantedness of daily life in university communities” (Eyre, 2000, p. 304). One part of remedying this problem is to include the voices and lived experiences of women and other marginalized groups on campus. This can include a movement to organize more diverse student centred activism on campus or involving students in important decision-making roles within the university structure. Wagner (2008) states:

Thus, conceptualizing change must begin with a consideration of the extent to which education functions to maintain the status quo rather than challenging hegemonic practices and ideologies. This observation introduces an interesting paradox, as institutions of higher education are not only sites of reproduction but also places where ideas about how to challenge these processes can be created and expressed. Drawing upon a fundamental feminist belief that education and curriculum are sites of struggle and teaching and learning are political acts, the goal then becomes to replace accepted ways of thinking with a framework grounded in a vision of social justice. (p. 100)
Chapter 5:
Exclusion on Campus and in Society

Introduction

While the previous chapter looked at women’s experience with violence, this chapter will explore several other barriers that were reported in this study; First, I discuss how universities cater to ideals of a stereotypical or traditional student, which do not always meet the needs of single mothers (or other marginalized groups for that matter). Next, I explore the impact of childcare barriers both on-campus and in the community, which was one of the most common barriers reported. Experiences of racism were also prominent, particularly for women of colour, Aboriginal women, and/or women who had children who were of bi- or multi-racial identities. I interviewed both first and second generation single mothers who immigrated with their families to Canada. Barriers due to immigration (and often racist) processes will also be discussed. Ageism was also mentioned as a primary concern for women being in the classroom and finding work, yet it was sometimes difficult to pinpoint explicit acts of age discrimination; women spoke about it more as an intangible feeling of exclusion. The final barrier in this chapter that will be discussed is ableism. Issues of discrimination based on ability had an impact on both single mothers as well as their children.

While there were some barriers in this study such as the social and political climate of the university and the classroom, scheduling of courses, and financial aid that are explicitly part of the student experience, there were others that were issues on a more broad or systemic level such as stigma and racism. All barriers must be conceptualized as issues affecting single mother students since they impact on their overall wellbeing. One anonymous reviewer of a
journal where I recently submitted a paper asked why it should be the role of the university to “cater to their [single mothers’] needs” or “compensate” them in any way. My answer would be that while universities need not compensate single mother students for the inadequacies found in state supports or the gender and race inequities of society, administrators within the university should respond more effectively through increased awareness, policies, and practices to the needs of all its students, including single mother students. If equity is desired in academe, then the institution needs to be challenged and reconceptualized as a place for a diverse student, faculty, and administrative body, and provide a range of supports and services; sometimes this challenge will mean at least acknowledging systemic and societal issues. If there are traditionally underrepresented and disadvantaged groups such as single mothers in universities, let us be innovative in order to create a more inclusive and welcoming space that clearly sends the message, “You belong here.” If we are serious about access to education then the institution must be viewed as both personal and political.

The Non-Traditional Student

When exploring how structures, policies, and practices in the university remains mired in its Eurocentric roots, it is difficult to pinpoint one specific issue. If it were that easy, the remedies needed to overcome these influences might be equally as easy. Presently, the institution caters to a dominant mainstream student who tends to be White, able-bodied, heterosexual, male (without caregiving responsibilities), non-spiritual/religious, full-time, and of a traditional age (straight out of high school). This normalization is done through the services provided through the financial aid offices, the organization of extra-curricular activities on campus, the scheduling of classes throughout the year, the absence of emergency on-campus
childcare and family friendly spaces such as breast-feeding spaces or children’s activities. Even if the stereotype of the traditional student existed, it is certainly not representative of all students (or faculty and administrators for that matter) on campus. Educational institutions are not always well equipped to meet the needs of a diverse student population. Universities expect that

Participants in a postsecondary institution conform to specific norms that have accrued over time, and individuals who enter the organization simply must learn those norms. In effect, a standard is set, and successful socialization is defined by the ability of the individual to internalize, accept, and meet that standard. (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996, p. 13)

Further, as Ng (1993) posits, particularly for Aboriginal peoples, “In Canada formal education has always served as an assimilationist tool. It was designed by the dominant groups to impose cultural conformity upon subordinated groups by eliminating the latter’s cultural heritage” (p. 54).

According to Adamson, Briskin, and McPhail (1988), as part of the expansion that took place in the education system in the 1960s, “Universities were made more accessible to large numbers of students in several ways: low tuition fees, easily obtainable student loans and grants, and the expansion of universities themselves” (p. 124). However, with the deregulation of tuition fees over the past decade, not many would argue today that these fees are “low.” According to Statistics Canada (2009), the numbers of female students have steadily increased and far surpassed the number of men students registered in full-time Canadian undergraduate programs. What is missing, however, is a breakdown of what groups of women are actually enrolled (Conway, 1996): for example, single mothers; women of colour; Aboriginal women;
women with disabilities; women who are immigrants; queer women; or mature students?

Research in the US has shown that participation rates in postsecondary schools for students receiving social assistance have dramatically declined (Adair, 2001; Centre for Women Policy Studies, 2002; Heller & Bjorklund, 2004; Jacobs & Winslow, 2003; Kahn & Polakow, 2004; Stevens, 2003) and “more community colleges that have historically attracted poor women are noticing a drop in the enrollment of these women” (Pandey, Zhan, Neely-Barnes, & Menon, 2000, p. 110). The number of low-income students enrolling in college has also decreased (Dahlberg, 2003, p. 172; Holyfield, 2002, p. 60). A main focus for the drop of enrollment among low-income single mothers and those receiving social assistance are the changes to social assistance policies that made postsecondary education inaccessible. In the US, Jacobs and Winslow (2003) found:

In 2000, single mothers were less than one-third as likely to be enrolled as single women without children, which represents a decline from slightly more than 40 percent in 1995. In other words, these data indicate that young single mothers, some of whom might have been welfare recipients in the absence of policy changes that significantly reduced welfare rolls, are falling behind relative to other women in accessing postsecondary education. (p. 209)

In a US study that examines how universities are responding to adult learners’ needs by providing courses in an accelerated, 7-week format, Rucker (2003, p. 47) insists that to determine academic success, researchers need to incorporate a race, class, age, and gender analysis. Simply put, the lives of non-traditional students are different. They may work on a 24-hour shift, trying to meet the competing demands of the day.

Even if numbers of non-traditional students are not on the decline in Canada as has been documented for the US, the number of students that gain entry alone, does not satisfy the
claim that true access is present. More recently, countries are beginning to see an increase in the number of mature students applying to university, which is thought to be due to the impact of the global recession (BBC, 2010; Globe and Mail, 2010). People need more or different credentials in order to compete in the paid labour market. It will be interesting to read future research that tracks these changes to see if global economic conditions impact the overall demographic of university students and increase the numbers of non-traditional students.

Nelson (2009) argues that liberal discourses, both in general and specific to liberal feminist theory, maintain that “equality of opportunity and individual freedom can ensure that all members of a society may fulfill their potential” (pp. 84-85). However, true access also involves how students experience their education after they gain entry. Are they represented in the curriculum? Are they free from discriminatory comments or claims by professors or peers? Do they have supports and services available on campus that recognize and address their specific needs? How do students construct “choice” in higher education? Several studies have found that students look for educational institutions where they think they will fit in (Archer et al., 2003; Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002; Ball, Reay, & David, 2002; Mullen, 2009; Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005). Mullen (2009) found that social and cultural expectations contributed to how students chose which educational institution to attend. In her study, students with low-socioeconomic status did not want to be a part of Yale, which was perceived as an elitist school. These students did not expect to fit in. Conversely, parents who were wealthy and highly educated made sure their children felt that going to an Ivy League school was an option.
In a study exploring the experiences of rural Aboriginal students at an elementary and secondary level, Antone (2003) found that Aboriginal voices were silenced “as a result of the Euro-western school experience” (p. 172). If the education system does not provide adequate and specific supports for marginalized students and transform the overarching Euro-western traditions and frameworks, are they not setting some students up to fail? Formal equality is not the same as substantive equality. Women in this study echoed these same findings by arguing that policies and practices within the university are not created in a way to be supportive of diverse students.

For instance, when I asked Donna, a Black, able-bodied woman, undecided of her sexuality, who emigrated from Uganda 10 years ago, if she found the university supportive of single mothers she responded,

No, I don’t think so. They are supportive of students generally. My experience has been that they cater to the imaginary student [my emphasis] because I have not encountered a student whose realities match what they have or what they have to offer. So I have found that their expectations or their support is towards the imaginary student, which leaves single parents invisible.

University campuses have a multiple array of activities for students to participate in, but these extracurricular activities are geared towards traditional students. Very few institutions offer family friendly spaces and activities or try to promote access for single mother students and their families. Most single mothers reported feeling excluded on campus and in social activities. They felt apart from their peers based on their age and family responsibilities. While students in their classes were discussing parties, films or on-campus events, single mothers
would talk about needing to get home to take care of their children. This is similar to what Christopher (2005) found:

For example, when asked why she did not participate in groups on campus, Ella, a Black mother of three said, “I don’t feel like I’m on the same level...the people in my classes are a lot younger than I am so I have different activities than they do and my main [activity] is to go home and take care of my kids. So they have more free time than I do.” (p. 176)

Childcare

Many scholars and activists have argued that the education system supports a particular dominant framework characterized by a Eurocentric curriculum, culture, and atmosphere (Antone, 2003; Bannerji et al., 1991; Baskin 2005a; Brathwaite, 2003; Carty, 1992; Collins, 2008; Dei et al., 2000; Graveline, 1998; Hampton, 2000; Henry & Tator, 2009b; Kelly, 2000; Mahtani, 2004; Monture-Angus, 2001; Ng, Staton, & Scane, 1995; Prentice, 2000; Reay, 2003; Rezai-Rashti, 1997; Sapon-Shevin, 2007; Stallberg-White, 2003; Wagner, 2008). In dominant Western society, children are viewed as needing to be kept separate from adult spaces. University campuses are not usually thought of as family-friendly spaces. With the absence of child-friendly spaces and a lack of supports and services on campus geared towards student parents, these omissions only reinforce the dominant ideals of what kind of students are attending university. From the stories told by women in this study, the schedule of university classes is also an impediment to attending school. One of the most obvious concerns is that reading week is traditionally held during the month of February while most elementary and high schools have their break during the month of March. Mothers with school-aged children must find a childcare solution, bring their children with them, or be absent from class. In my experience as a student and now as an instructor, this difficulty is rarely acknowledged in the classroom.
Some participants have had such difficulties surrounding a lack of affordable and flexible childcare that they have had to negotiate problematic arrangements such as relying on family members with whom they do not want to have contact or leaving the child (pre-teen) alone for a small amount of time during the day or in the evenings.

Many participants stated how helpful it would be to have an emergency on-campus childcare centre. If all universities offered childcare on campus it would not only address a major concern for parents attending university, but it would also increase the visibility of student parents in general. Universities offer many supports and services on campus that serve only a certain population of students. These programs, such as athletic centers, transit passes, and student groups are funded by students' fees; childcare services could be integrated into this existing infrastructure. Further, many universities offer programs such as Early Childhood Education (ECE) and could arrange a number of placements in the childcare program which would assist student parents as well as provide a learning environment for ECE students. One on-campus childcare centre believed in the importance of giving priority to student parents first on their wait lists before faculty, staff and community members which is one way to increase access for this group but it may be at the expense of others. Lack of affordable, quality, and flexible childcare is a barrier all participants had experienced. With the exception of Quebec (Albanese, 2009, pp. 125-127), Canada does not have an adequate child care policy so women and families are relying on family or the market for support (Prentice, 2001). Quebec has long been known for their progressive quality and affordable childcare program; however, the family friendly policies in Quebec are constantly under attack through the threat of rolling back the numbers of accessible childcare spaces and increasing the cost (Jenson, 2009, p. 50). Families
who are low-income (or even middle-income) are forced to find patchwork solutions or wait for subsidized spaces which were reported to be as long as 3 years, depending on the region they lived in. Most daycares are open during the typical 9-5 work day but students’ class schedules often extend before and past these hours. Many students mentioned feeling isolated in their children’s daycares and how most parents were faculty or staff who worked at the university.

As Ida, a 41-year-old, Dutch, US born, able-bodied person who identified both her gender identity and sexuality as queer noted, the daycare on her campus looked like an “ivory tower daycare.” Many students reported they felt different from other families and were not given the same positive attention as other families were. They also felt heavily surveilled by daycare staff who would make rude or accusatory comments towards them. Since daycares and schools are spaces where parents can connect with others socially and have the potential to reduce isolation, it is important for single mother students to feel included in these spaces. Extending daycare hours and providing more quality and affordable spaces in addition to reserving some of these spaces specifically for students may increase their chance to access these spaces.

Ida, a White, able-bodied, woman born in the United States with a Dutch background who identified as queer for both her gender identity and sexuality, was the only co-participant who identified experiences of heterosexism and homophobia. Daycare workers made comments that blamed Ida for any difficulties her son encountered. They told her she had “unusual parenting.” When she switched to a daycare she felt more comfortable with, these comments stopped. One of the reasons Ida may have been the only co-participant to highlight experiences of homophobia is that she seemed to be the most “out” out of the group of women I interviewed. By this I mean that she was involved in the local queer parenting group,
found queer allies to surround herself with, and viewed her own family in a political way. She was proud of her goal of creating a socially and politically involved family.

While support for same-sex marriage has grown in Canada, there is still discrimination against people who identify as queer, specifically in terms of parenting. According to author and activist Epstein (2005):

As queer parents we have historically faced many pressures; many of us gave up our sense of entitlement to have children when we ‘came out,’ gays and lesbians have had children taken away from them, some of us have not been able to be out to our children, some of us have been disowned by our families when we had children. And children continue to feel the social stigma attached to our sexualities. They suffer because of the ways our identities have been squashed, shamed, and delegitimized. (p. 7)

Even though Ida was the only co-participant who identified issues of heterosexism and homophobia, sexuality was discussed by three other women. Not surprisingly, after these women’s relationships ended with their partners, they wondered and sometimes explored sexual and/or emotional experiences with other women. Six of the twenty-five co-participants identified their sexuality as being other than heterosexual and of those women, many were excited to be single and able to explore their sexuality.

In addition to childcare barriers, the administration of childcare subsidy was also pointed out as a specific barrier for low-income single mothers. The rules and regulations for childcare subsidy are municipally based. Some women reported the wait list was a few years in length, while others who lived in other cities reported it was only a few months. While Julianne was on the wait list she had to work part-time for pay in order to pay a private caregiver $1000 a month to take care of her infant, which was still less than the cost of an institutionalized
daycare. It also seems that each city has its own guidelines surrounding eligibility requirements. Another problem is that childcare subsidy wait lists are not coordinated with childcare waitlists at the actual daycare. So when your name comes up on one list, it may not come up on the other list. The lack of coordinated services between daycare spaces and childcare subsidy also arose in a study with young Aboriginal moms (Baskin et al., 2009).

Daniela was a White, Jewish, able-bodied woman, of open-minded sexuality who emigrated from Holland. She graduated from university a year before our interview and was in a paid position she enjoyed as an employment counsellor. She had first registered at college and completed a 2-year degree when her son was 9 months old. When she decided to continue with school and register for a university degree, the childcare subsidy office told her they would only provide her with a subsidized space for her first degree or certificate program. Had she known this, she said, she would have gone straight to university and had the full 4 years of childcare provided instead of only two in college.

When I was doing my Master’s degree in Social Work and Women and Gender Studies, a fellow classmate who was doing her PhD told me a similar story. She could no longer apply for subsidy while doing her PhD because her caseworker told her “she had gone far enough in school.” The message from these municipalities is clear; they will only provide subsidy to low-income women long enough for them to find entry level paid employment, which keeps them in low-wage, precarious work. A more extreme example of this can be found in research in the US which critiques the social policies that stream single mothers into low-wage work as opposed to providing opportunities to participate in meaningful education (Adair, 2001; Austin
& McDermott, 2004; Christopher, 2005; Dahlberg, 2003; Jacobs & Winslow, 2003; Jones-DeWeever, 2005; Kahn et al., 2004; Pandey et al., 2006; Ratner, 2004; Zhan & Pandey, 2004b).

It is not surprising that difficulties with childcare emerged as a major theme in the group interview since this is also recognized as an issue nation-wide (Albanese, 2009; Baker, 2007; Bezanson, 2006; Campaign 2000, 2009; Friendly & Prentice, 2009; Hornosty, 1998; Khosla, 2008; Lavell, 1998; Prentice, 2001; Rebick, 2005). However, the unique needs of single mothers that emerge through two issues should be highlighted. First, most obviously, a lack of flexible and quality childcare is a barrier to academic success. Second, the different schedules between postsecondary education and elementary and high schools can be a thorny problem. Such schedules are often in conflict with each other, yet another illustration of how universities privilege a certain kind of student, namely one without small children. Emma had a night course in one of her programs which could not be switched. Her daughter was almost a teenager; however, Emma struggled with the arrangements she had to make in order to pass her course. Emma tried to have her daughter in after-school programs or stay with friends yet there were times her daughter had to stay home by herself until after Emma's class. Emma said, “I got stuck with a night class second term and it’s been brutal...it’s been the hardest thing and I’m just fortunate that she’s 11 years old. Do I like that she is staying home by herself? No. Would I choose that for my kid? No. Give me a choice I’d take a different thing.” Creative and institutional arrangements could be made to alleviate some of this stress for single mothers if universities would provide on-site emergency childcare with flexible hours to accommodate students attending evening classes. Further, it is helpful when universities schedule multiple sections of the same course at different times of the day, providing options for students to
choose from in order to accommodate their childcare needs. In my own undergraduate program, one year our elective courses were offered in the mornings and the following year they were offered in the late afternoons. This rotation occurred every year, so students would know from year one what their potential schedules would look like. For single mothers who have young children, an increase in the number of subsidized childcare spaces and an expansion of care during various hours of the day and evening to accommodate school schedules are both crucial steps in expanding access to higher education.

All the co-participants in this study who had school aged children were frustrated by schedule disparities; particularly in the case of March Break. Many daycares also follow the elementary and high schools’ schedules for breaks and can close during these times. This is a common struggle for all parents in postsecondary education but can be exacerbated when there is only a sole support parent responsible for providing the care. Indeed, as I am now an instructor in the classroom, I see parents struggle with this and can empathize as I began in January to find my own patchwork childcare solutions for my daughter’s March Break. An institutional response could be to schedule March Break for undergraduate students in the university as well or to provide subsidized daycare or March Break camps on-campus for students’ children. Alternatively, in my own courses I often run an “on-line” week during March Break where we do an on-line exercise or discussion instead of meeting on campus. This accommodation avoids leaving individuals to patch together livable solutions. Usually, the options for single mothers are to miss class that week or bring the children with them to school.

When I reflect on that first year I was a single mother at the end of the fourth year of my undergraduate degree, mainly I remember being in a constant state of exhaustion. I am proud
of what I was able to accomplish; however, it pains me how much my daughter and I may have lost out on. I knew in the long run that school would increase our chances to move out of poverty and so I focused much of my time on my studies. Sometimes this meant less time for me, less time for her, and less time for us together. It may be easy for some people to simply say “well just miss class if you do not have child care” but there are many reasons it may be important to attend classes. For me, my daughter got very sick when she was 1 year old the night before an exam review for one of my courses. She was vomiting for 36 hours straight. Apparently, the daycare was hit with such a bad outbreak of sickness they had to report it to Public Health. We stayed in the emergency department overnight where she was given fluids intravenously for dehydration. We were discharged at 7:00 a.m. and I had the exam review at 8:00 a.m. I knew she was too sick to go to daycare so she needed to stay home with me. She did appear to be doing better but clearly would have preferred to rest and recuperate in her crib. Instead, I made the decision to bring her with me to class before heading home so I would not miss the exam review. Getting notes from a friend would not be the same as being there and I did not want my marks jeopardized since I was applying to graduate school. I do not know what the institutional or policy response could have been for this, except to have a system of providing emergency childcare spaces on campus or have alternative options for the delivery of courses such as through distance education. Also, in terms of providing medical documentation for missing class, most universities will only accept medical documentation for sickness in the case of your own sickness, not for the care work involved in your child’s sickness.

I do know that the guilt of that decision haunts me to this very day. Of course, it was only an hour or so added on to our travel that morning and my daughter was able to rest when
we got home but knowing at that moment when I weighed the consequences of my options and temporarily decided to put my daughter’s comfort second fills me with such sorrow and frustration at what I saw then as having a lack of adequate options. I would not make that decision again. However, at this point in my life my resources have increased so that I am privileged enough to avoid being in that situation again. I live close to my mother who provides invaluable assistance with childcare and now my grandmother also assists. The flexibility at this point in my own doctoral work is invaluable too, though now I struggle with the schedule of the university in my role as an instructor. It was important for me to be honest about these struggles and I shared these experiences with the women in this study when the issues arose. Doing this made others feel more comfortable and that I was not judging them; perhaps they felt that maybe I even understood.

Other single mothers struggled with the same experiences of guilt because of decisions made due to a lack of childcare options. They spoke about the difficulties of not having emergency child care options. Children get sick quite often when they are young, or at least sick enough that they are not able to attend daycare settings. Some women in the individual interviews spoke about giving Tylenol to their children to alleviate the symptoms of a fever when they arrived at daycare or school in order to avoid missing work or school. Balancing priorities and objectives is not easy. Single mother students make the best decisions they can with the resources they have while at the same time feeling guilty for not living up to the prevailing notion of what a good mother should do.

Though most of the recent studies examining childcare needs for students are based in the US, it all supports the kinds of findings that emerged in this research. Some research even
points to the lack of childcare options directly impacting students’ perseverance. As Christopher (2005) notes, “Kids require a great deal of time, energy, and money – and because women remain the primary caretakers of children – having children decreases women’s college attendance and persistence” (p. 171). In exploring the gendered dimensions of teachers’ work, Acker (1999) also found that women with young children had numerous obstacles to overcome:

Women teachers with small children had to be even more skilful at juggling, for they had a triple shift, namely, work, home and child care responsibilities. Some were also enrolled in courses to gain additional qualifications. Two of the teachers had live-in nannies; others worked part-time and made complicated arrangements with childminders, relatives, playgroups, nurseries, and eventually, when the children were old enough, schools. Teacher-mothers had to have plenty of stamina. (p. 80)

Single mothers consistently report childcare as one of the main concerns when juggling school, paid, and unpaid work. “Women in Canada have high labour force participation rates while public provision of child and elder care are quite low” (Bezanson, 2006, p. 35). Single mothers in both Canada and the United States feel the current childcare “crisis.” With the exception of the province of Quebec in Canada, neither country has a universal childcare policy which aims to provide affordable and quality childcare for every family who needs it at the federal level. Nor do they have a sufficient number of government-subsidized spaces to meet the needs of low-income families, and even fewer childcare centers offer care on a sliding-fee service (Hornosty, 1998), which would benefit low-income and working poor families (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). One exception, noted in Christopher (2005), is a community-based childcare program; “This program uses a sliding-scale fee structure to cover daycare costs for low-income full-time students until their children are 13” (p. 171). Could this be a model for other states in the US and provinces or cities in Canada to use in the absence of a national childcare program?
Currently, many single mothers are forced to leave their children in substandard childcare spaces (Waldner, 2003). Adair (2001) also brings attention to the issues of safety for children due to precarious childcare arrangements by emphasizing one of the stories told by her participant. She could not secure and keep a full-time job due to lack of childcare options. This single mother was denied childcare assistance from the state, and felt her only option was to either leave her 3-year-old daughter alone while she worked, or return to a relationship where the partner is an alcoholic (p. 227).

There is also a need for childcare subsidy offices to be aware of the different demands placed upon students when they are studying. Classroom hours are only a small section of the amount of time required to complete a degree. When I applied for childcare subsidy while I began my doctoral work, I assured my case worker that I would need full-time childcare as the demands from school are great, in addition to the paid work I did. She warned me that she would be the one who decided this and proceeded to ask me what my PhD was – was it an online course? “The demands of postsecondary education require a time commitment that extends well beyond the classroom and includes approximately two to three hours of study time for each hour spent in class” (Duquaine-Watson, 2006, p. 567). However, this estimated amount of time starts from the premise that students’ first language is English, that they have excellent literacy skills, and have no physical or intellectual disabilities. Holyfield (2002) insists that for nontraditional students, the amount of time spent on schoolwork needs to be longer. “A student enrolled in twelve to fifteen hours of courses can be expected to invest from thirty-five to fifty hours a week toward her education” (Holyfield, 2002, p. 30). For caseworkers who are familiar with students’ schedules, this “invisible” work may be accounted for and built into
the students’ childcare requests. However, it is decided by the caseworker, as there appears to be no set policy. For single mothers who do not have this invisible schoolwork accounted for in their schedules, they are forced to complete their schoolwork either very late after their children are in bed or very early in the morning before their children are awake which contributes to severe sleep deprivation and stress. Many women discussed their frustration with state supports and workers that did not fully understand their schedules. In research by Bruns (2004) a single mother notes, “It’s hard, you know. I get frustrated a lot. I am really subject to stress. I get up with the baby in the middle of the night; my sleep is deprived. I do lots of paper writing between the hours of 11 p.m. and two or three in the morning” (p. 104). Also, working on schoolwork (uninterruptedly) during these times is only an option if your child sleeps through the night - which tends not to be the case when children are younger, have disabilities, or have health issues which may require attention throughout the night.

Racism

Most students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, or ability, noted that the curriculum, scheduling, and extra-curricular activities of the education system did not represent their lived realities. These single mother students insisted that administrators should take note of the demographic make-up of its campus and ensure that diversity is supported institutionally, paying particular attention to family status. In my own life and even within this research, I advocate for policies and practices within the university to become more accommodating for students with diverse experiences and needs, particularly single mothers. However, some participants did not want to receive what they perceived as special treatment. Overall, this group of participants felt this special treatment would contribute to the stigma and
stereotypes they already experienced and would not acknowledge their accomplishments on an equal footing. This negative perception would affect single mothers who are Black in a more pronounced way because of the interconnected oppressions of family status discrimination with racism. Meena, a 44-year-old, Black, able-bodied, heterosexual woman who was just starting her PhD, explained,

For me being a Black woman, there are already stereotypes about how our position in society is read. Even if I would say that I’m a single mother I didn’t expect or ask for preferential treatment because that would have been expected. What I wanted to be was, you know, just like any other student, be it Black or White, and just be able to be graded on my integrity and on my work – that’s it.

When I asked Meena if she felt that asking for allowances (such as extensions for papers if a child was sick) would actually contribute to the stigma of being a Black single mother student in particular she further explained,

Most definitely, because we know we live in a society that if it’s a White single parent versus a Black single parent, that’s going to be weighted and read differently – we know that. So I wanted to minimize being read from a stereotypical perspective. I wanted to minimize it as much as possible so, I just did what I had to do.

This was a worry that mostly racialized single mothers had in this study compared with White single mothers. To some degree, racialized women felt they needed to keep under the radar because of the racism and stigma associated with single motherhood. They wanted to prove they could succeed in university without receiving (what they perceived) as special allowances.
Inclusive education is not only about representation of diverse bodies on-campus and the legitimization of multiple ways of knowing in academia; it is also about the experiences of students once they are inside institutions of education. It is not enough to gain entry. The tangible and visceral ways in which marginalized students experience their lives in academia and the community need more attention. Williams (2001) writes about women of colour and activism, particularly in social work, and their feelings of exclusion. She draws attention to the emotional aspects of how women of colour experience and resist racism.

In this paper I have written about feeling betrayed, exploited, angered, enraged, pained, and otherwise agitated as a beginning scholar. These emotions are often excised from the narratives that enter academic discourse and I believe we are similarly expected to excise them from our conscious experience of academia. Whose interests are served by this silence? (Williams, 2002, p. 94)

Critical feminist theory encourages us to politicize the personal, in that the individual experiences of some may be representative of larger systemic sites of oppression and discrimination. Principles of inclusive education fit with feminist theory in that they both value the substantive experiences of marginalized populations. While equity through policies and programs is important in terms of institutional support and symbolism, a focus on how these policies are experienced once in place is critical. Multiple narratives, knowledges, and experiences need to be recognized, validated, and responded to in order to ensure not only equality of opportunity but also “equitable outcomes for all students (Dei et al., 2000, p. 3).

Another aspect of racism that emerged in the individual interviews, as it did in the group interview, was the work single mothers had to do in fighting racism at their children’s schools. This took up a lot of their time and energy and women were able to reflect on their children’s
experiences of exclusion in a way similar to their own. Karine, a 33-year-old, Canadian-Jamaican, able-bodied, heterosexual woman, had to go so far as to withdraw her children from the local school and put them in a private school that she struggled to pay for. At this new school there were only 40 children and many of them were Black. The principal was also Black. Karine was also conscious of how society at large viewed her family status. “I find that once they know your stereotype [Black, single mother], especially when you come [into the school] with your kids and people know you’re a single mom you’re done for. You’re automatically a no good worthless person in their eyes.” Many single mothers reported feeling anxious about how their children were being treated in school and worried about how the stigma attached to their family status, race and ethnicity, disability, and/or sexuality affected how teachers engaged (or not) with their children.

Meena had a similar experience with the school her son attended.

The school, yeah it was predominantly White and I felt the principal, vice principal right down to the teachers had strong racist undertones. The way they even spoke about him, “sitting like a possum” and they would take away marks because he didn’t speak loud enough – he is very soft spoken. There were so many things, even the way they spoke to me in their condescending manner. I expressed to them if this is any indication of how they speak to my son, I can see why he was traumatized. And instead of looking at what was going on there, they suggested something must be wrong in my home.

Meena also removed her son from this school and placed him in a different school. “He went from the school that he was at getting high grades to being at risk in a matter of months and then when I moved him to the school that he is currently at, his grades are back up.” While the
new school was predominately White, the culture of the institution itself was different. People at the school embraced and included him and teachers worked with students at their own levels instead of forcing a standardized manner and pace of learning. Also, the principal knew the students’ different personalities, which Meena described as giving the school “a personal touch.” Single mother students were able to reflect on how not only universities but also many elementary and high schools were created in a way to teach one standardized curriculum.

Luckily, in Karine and Meena’s situations they felt equipped to challenge their children’s schools and switch them to schools in which they thrived. Karine and Meena studied in equity programs where the curricula focused on issues of marginalization, advocacy, and resistance. Education played an important role in empowering them to advocate for themselves and their children.

Additionally, it would be helpful if more social workers and/or equity specialists were located in schools in order to provide adequate resources and supports geared towards ending discrimination and exclusion. Providing an advocate in schools specifically for parents and caregivers, could assist families in overcoming obstacles and navigating the school system.

Alongside this suggestion, changing the overall culture and Eurocentric curricula in schools may also address racism. Recently, Toronto’s first Africentric school opened. It was developed in response to high rates of Black youth leaving school early. “Supporters of the Africentric Alternative School maintain that it’s important for children to understand their history and culture” (CBC, 2009, para. 2).

Racism in the education system is well documented (Antone, 2003; Bannerji et al., 1991; Baskin, 2005a; Carty, 1992; Dei et al., 2000; Graveline, 1998; Henry & Tator, 2009b; Mahtani, 2004; Ng, Staton, & Scane, 1995; Wagner, Acker, & Mayuzumi, 2008b; Wane, 2004). However,
less research is available that explores how parents and caregivers must navigate the education system and what strategies they use to resist or fight against this racism. Lavell (1998) brings issues of racism to the forefront when she illustrates the experience of a single mother, Connie, who cannot afford childcare. Connie also “worries about the potential for racism against her Native children in mainstream daycare settings” (p. 202). As a way for Connie and her children to resist this racism, “Her mother, herself a survivor of the racist residential schools and with no hope for regular employment, spends many daytime hours with her grandchildren” (Lavell, 1998, p. 202). This situation exemplifies the additional burden families face when they experience racism. It also illustrates how “the family” can be a source of strength and resilience against the racism experienced in society.

There is some focus on improving conditions for Aboriginal students across all levels of education, from Junior Kindergarten through Grade 12, with particular emphasis on high school. When students have appropriate resources and are able to finish high school, there is a higher chance they will enroll in postsecondary school (Bird, 2008, p. 5; Weir, 2000, p. 31). Moreover, according to Phil Fontaine, past National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations (as cited in Bird, 2008, p. 5), education is an important issue for Aboriginal youth because of the rising growth of the young population in Aboriginal communities. However, as education is provincially delivered, initiatives vary across the provinces. Access for Aboriginal students and single mothers in particular is important; many feel marginalized in the university system and “drop out before the second year of university” (Hampton, 2000, p. 217). With an increase in numbers of Aboriginal youth in Canada, it is especially important that access to education is examined. “The Aboriginal population is young and growing at a rate of almost twice that of the
Canadian population” (CLC, 2004, para. 2). Furthermore, while access for Aboriginal students needs to be addressed in the mainstream university system, control over the education system by Aboriginal peoples for Aboriginal students is also advocated (Hampton, 2000, p. 219).

Education for Aboriginal peoples is an element of self-governance which “looks to constitutional amendment as the best means of recognizing the inherent right of self-government and, hence, as the best way to achieve First Nations control over education” (Abele, Dittburner, & Graham, 2000, p. 16). More initiatives must also be implemented at the post-secondary level as most Aboriginal students who go on to post-secondary education are mature students. “On average, older than other students, Aboriginal students also are more in need of child-care services and tend to have more pressing financial needs, which simply add to the overall pressure of attending and completing PSE [post-secondary education]” (Usher, 2009, p. 6).

Today, many Aboriginal women live in poverty. Compared to Aboriginal men, despite having higher levels of education and lower rates of unemployment, Aboriginal women also have lower incomes (Lavell-Harvard & Corbiere-Lavell, 2006, p. 185). The contemporary conditions of poverty, violence, and other social problems that affect many Aboriginal women and children’s lives must be situated and understood within the context of colonialist government policies (Lavell-Harvard & Corbiere-Lavell, 2006, p. 185). “Colonization is a process that began five hundred years ago, and it continues today. The dismantling of Aboriginal womanhood took place all along this path, and at different times for different peoples” (Anderson, 2000, p. 58). Although 1920 has been marked as the year of gender equality in Canada because most women won the right to vote in federal elections, Aboriginal women
were still considered to fall under the 1920 Dominion Elections Act which prohibited for “reasons of race” Aboriginal peoples, “the Inuit, and Asians (a category that included Chinese, Japanese and Hindus)” from full citizenship and the right to vote (Lavell-Harvard & Corbiere-Lavell, 2006, p. 186). Within an anti-colonial framework, it is important to recognize that the consequences of these racist and colonialist policies still impact Aboriginal peoples and other marginalized populations today. The Canadian government has had a long history in trying to exclude Aboriginal peoples from citizenship rights and self-determination. For example, as Green (2007b) illustrates, “Colonialism is closely tied to racism and sexism. These twin phenomena exist in the context of colonial society, directed at Indigenous people, but have also been internalized by some Indigenous political cultures in ways that are oppressive to Indigenous women” (pp. 22-23). The Canadian state, particularly through the Indian Act, participated in direct ways to discriminate against and dismantle Aboriginal women and children’s rights. This legislation “created the reserve system, devised artificial legal categories of Aboriginal peoples and disenfranchised thousands of women and their children by stripping them of their legal status if they married non-Aboriginal men” (Baskin, 2008, p. 33). The removal of Aboriginal women’s status prevented them from participating in health care, education, and living within their on-reserve communities (Lavell-Harvard & Corbiere-Lavell, 2006). The combination of colonialist and sexist government policies served to marginalize Aboriginal women and their children from both mainstream settler Canada as well as from their communities (Lawrence, 2003). This is the backdrop to the economic marginalization Aboriginal single mothers continue to experience today.
Throughout history, Aboriginal communities have fostered a sense of male and female balance in terms of raising children, valuing the importance that both roles had to play. However, as Anderson (2000) discusses, Aboriginal single mothers today can call upon extended family structures in the absence of fathers. “Uncles and grandfathers, biological or not, have a place in working with mothers and their children. They can fulfill the role of helper and bring men’s teachings to single-mother households or those of two-spirited Aboriginal partnerships” (Anderson, 2000, p. 209). However, Aboriginal families have been scrutinized by the state and child welfare systems for not upholding typical nuclear family structures. Indeed, the Sixties Scoop is an example of a colonialist act where thousands of children were stolen from their families because, in part, the parents were held up to Eurocentric standards and interpretations of standards of care and socialization, influenced by a nuclear family model (Dua, 1999, p. 244). Collins (2000) also discusses the importance of a wide community of networks contributing to the work of mothering in many African and African-American communities. “Organized, resilient, women-centered networks of blood mothers and othermothers are key in understanding this centrality. Grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins act as othermothers by taking on child-care responsibilities for one another’s children” (p. 178). The disproportionate rate of Aboriginal children, Black children, and other marginalized groups of children who are apprehended in the child welfare systems remains today (Child Welfare Anti-oppression Roundtable, 2009). Yet, even when Aboriginal single mothers have access to their community supports in raising their children, it is important not to assume that all have access to this.
In research conducted by Haleman (2004), single mothers were concerned about racist constructions of single motherhood and racism directed toward their children. As one participant stated:

No matter whatever label people want to put on you, everybody deserves respect. I want to teach my child that, I want him to have that legacy that I have. I want him to be comfortable with who he is and he’s a little Black kid. And they treat you differently if you’re Black; that welfare woman, she treats you differently. She makes assumptions about you...I’m not gonna be treated like I’m some kind of second-class citizen because I’m not. Not because I’m a single mom, Black, woman, any of it. I shouldn’t be treated like that. (p. 774)

Single mothers are the subject of hostile stereotypes, often presented as being: poor, Black, lazy, on social assistance, having endless numbers of children so they can receive social assistance, lacking moral compass, and being uneducated (Kahn et al., 2004; Khosla, 2008). Many single mother students who participated in research studies consciously aimed to disrupt these destructive images and stereotypes through their participation in education (Blum, 2001; Haleman, 2004; Jennings, 2004; Sharp, 2004). The completion of education or even the romantized perception of being a “student” can be beneficial in representing to the general public the image of a successful and productive member of society. “Within the tangle and fracture of today’s public discourse, education is hailed as one of the few universal goods” (Ratner, 2004, p. 45).

Another way single mothers experience racism is through the discourse of the welfare queen. The “welfare queen” is a term that has been mainly found in American literature but its premise can also be transferred to a Canadian context. This term was first famously coined by Ronald Reagan during a speech in which he vilified social assistance recipients, particularly

Although most people on welfare are not Black, many Americans think they are. The American public associates welfare payments to single mothers with the mythical Black “welfare queen,” who deliberately becomes pregnant in order to increase the amount of her monthly check. The welfare queen represents laziness, chicanery, and economic burden all wrapped up in one powerful image. For decades, the media and politicians have shown pictures of Black mothers when they discuss public assistance. Now the link between race and welfare is firmly implanted in Americans’ minds. (p. 111)

It is interesting to note that most single mother students in my study were not receiving social assistance, yet this connection between “single mother” and “welfare” remains. I remember when I moved almost 2 years ago I spoke with potential renters over the telephone and the first question they asked me after they knew the place would be for just myself and my daughter was, “Are you on welfare”? This experience made clear the hostility and discrimination in the housing market towards single mothers. Even with my single mother status, I knew that I had privilege when speaking over the telephone in that I spoke with a “Canadian accent.” I was also aware that I did not embody the image of a racialized “welfare queen” and that if I met renters in person my White body would not be stigmatized in the ways that Black and Aboriginal bodies are. Foucault’s (1997) notion of how power operates in a myriad of ways, largely depending on how the norm is constructed, is useful in deconstructing how single mothers are divided into the deserving and undeserving.
“Historically, Black women have been and continue to be defined by people from the dominant culture” (Wane, 2004, p. 146). Furthermore, Collins (2000) discusses how Black women in particular have been portrayed as the matriarch of the family and “is central to intersecting oppressions of class, gender, and race” (p. 76). Black women are stereotyped as being assertive and Black single mothers specifically are viewed as aggressive, somehow contributing to why they do not have partners. Social discourse is quick to stigmatize Black single mothers but does not address the historical underpinnings that have affected the formations of some Black families such as slavery, domestic worker programs, racism in the criminal justice system, and racism in the paid labour market. “Therefore, black women have, out of necessity, been economically independent in supporting themselves and their children. Even though they earn some of the lowest incomes in Canada, their labour-force participation is one of the highest” (Das Gupta, 2000, p. 166). The position of the independent, self-sufficient matriarch is used by society as a scapegoat, blaming the single-mother household as the reason for society’s ills. Instead of understanding how Black children and other marginalized groups of children experience difficulties in the education system because there is a lack of representation and a Eurocentric curriculum (Dei et al., 2000), Black mothers, the matriarchs, become the focus of the “problem.” The dominant discourse of negligent family values, espousing a “cultural deficiency” of neglect, irresponsibility, and poverty directed towards Black families and communities becomes the racist response to why Black children do not “succeed.” Collins (2000) argues:

Such a view diverts attention from political and economic inequalities that increasingly characterize global capitalism. It also suggests that anyone can rise from poverty if he or she only received good values at home. Inferior housing,
underfunded schools, employment discrimination, and consumer racism all but disappear from Black women’s lives. (p. 76)

An overall preference for familial relationships to fall within a typical nuclear family structure is clearly communicated by the media and through the effects of social policies with Other family structures seen as unfit and deficient (Lynn, 2003). “Variations of ‘family’ forms among people of colour, for example, extended families, single-parent families, and multiple-parent families, would also be seen as deviant and in need of being resocialized to conform to the dominant form” (Das Gupta, 2000, p. 147). Eichler (1997a) discusses the patriarchal model of the family in particular and disrupts the notion that this stereotype is representative of all families:

The longing for a return to the patriarchal model is based on a nostalgic view of that type of family life. That model is unrealistic and actively harmful: by putting forward an idealized version of the family that does not correspond to the actual range of families in existence today (or, for that matter, in the past), and by pressuring for policies that will privilege this one family type over other family types, the patriarchal model actually exacerbates the situations of families who already have problems. Its proponents usually have a conservative bias in ignoring problems of violence and domination. They endow a certain structure with the inherent capacity to function well, despite much evidence to the contrary. (p. 15)

What the co-participants in this study demonstrate is the ability for love, dedication and compassion to exist within a single parent household even despite the sometimes difficult challenges and barriers they experience, contrary to the dominant popular discourse. My goal in this study was not only to raise awareness of the barriers single mother students experience but to also highlight their resourcefulness and demonstrated perseverance. A balance must be sought; as Carty (1992) explains:
To only focus on Black women’s subordination and oppression is to undervalue the alternative perspectives they have developed as most suitable for their reality. But to focus on their historical strength as agents of change in their own world is to ignore the organized state and systemic oppression which impose severe limitations on their lives. (p. 17)

The racism children of single mothers experienced also emerged as a major barrier during the group interview; however, there was more of a focus on the complexity of racism when children have bi-racial or multiracial identities. Children who were multiracial experienced racism from both White students and from students who identified as Black or Aboriginal. Also, as mothers of multiracial children, the co-participants' biological status was often questioned. Anzaldúa (1987) challenges dichotomous either-or categories of identity by using the concept of borderlands to disrupt fixed and rigid cultural formations. Emma, Eva, and Megan all spoke in detail about their children's struggles in fitting in to different groups that discriminated against them because of being multiracial. This discussion took place at the end of the group discussion and the fourth co-participant, Janice, had left at this point to attend to another appointment. The following excerpt illustrates how co-participants were able to build on each other’s experiences and share in the complexities of systemic racism.

Emma: My daughter still tells this story to people. Like this is many years now. She was probably 5 or 6 at the time. Now she’s 11 so it’s been at least 5 years. She still tells this story to people so it obviously impacted her about the time that some ignorant witch on the streetcar called me her babysitter in front of her.

Eva: People ask me that all the time. They’re like: are they yours?

Emma: Well, she wasn’t that bad, she said, “Does that child’s parents know how you speak to her?” Because I had just timed her out. Right, she had been an asshole at the streetcar stop. And I kept saying you need to stop that or I’m
going to time you out. She said, “You can’t time me out, that’s impossible, we’re getting on the streetcar there’s nowhere for you to time me out.” I said, “Oh really,” and I got on the streetcar and I’m not talking any different than I am right now – okay maybe a little bit firmer, a little bit more annoyed. I sat her down and I said, ‘okay, you sit right there. I want your head facing forward. I want your eyes facing forward. You do not look out that window. You do not look over here. You do not look at the child behind you kicking you in the chair. You put your feet in front of you’ because she was too little to put them over and I’m like “You do not move. You do not fidget and we’re going to do this starting now, 2 minutes.” And that witch walked over; “Do that child’s parents know how you speak to her?” Well tell me how demeaning that is when you’re trying to discipline your child.

Eva: I know, constructive, I get that all the time. Are they yours?

Emma: No, no I abducted them.

Eva: Somebody asked me if I was my husband’s, step, um if I was the stepmother. If I was his new wife. Because my kids don’t look mixed, they look full on Black, like they’re really dark. So I get stuff like that all the time. People just cannot imagine, they can’t imagine families that don’t look like what they are used to. Yah, I get that all the time.

Megan: My daughter, my son is darker, like he has the Indian hair, but my daughter is more on the White side, so she is really light and her hair is curly and stuff. But she said to me one day she said “I wish I was either Black or White.” Because it’s very difficult for her even in school. Because one day she went to join their Black club and she walked in and one of the girls said well you aren’t Black enough. And this was in grade ten.

Emma: She gets that too. I’m not Native enough.
Megan: They told her she was not Black enough. And she cried. She had so many kids going to school ever since grade four they called her White washed. They call her names all the time and she says I wish I was White or Black.

Eva: That’s why for me it’s so weird right, because I’m White, raised in this country. I’ve got the Whitest parents ever and I’m turning my kids into Black Panthers, like I’m trying so hard to and I would just love somebody to try and tell my daughter that she’s not Black enough because she would fix their business in two seconds.

(Group laughs)

Megan: My kids should meet your kids!

Eva: People laugh, but I don’t care. I don’t want them to have to deal with that. So the White community is not going to accept my kids – they’re not White, they are half White and they are never going to be White enough. So for me you’ve gotta go the other way and embrace the Black side of you. So like, I’ve really tried, and the Women’s bookstore is my saving grace. All these books there and just the other day I came in with these cupcakes and I’m at the door waiting for the teacher to come and open the door and this little boy says are you our teacher for today? And I said no honey, and my daughter said, this is my mom and he looked right at me and said, but you’re White! Like all the time, people are totally confused.

Megan: That’s what happened when my kids’ grandfather came up and he walked him to school and this was the first time the kids were seeing them together – they said, “Who’s that?” “That’s grampy.” “What do you mean grampy?” “He’s my grandfather.” “But he’s White!”

Eva: I know, it totally throws people off.
Megan: And the kids, the poor kids, they are so innocent. He said, well yah, and...he’s White, and?

Eva: And because you are okay with it and you make it okay and teach them that it’s you know, good. I just tell them they’ve got the best of both worlds.

**Immigration**

Some of the women in this study had emigrated from countries such as China, Pakistan, Senegal, Uganda, US, Poland, Ukraine, and Holland. For the women who immigrated here as children, they seemed to adjust to life in Canada yet they were given clear messages by their parents that their families came here to provide a better life for the children. Sometimes this pressure was heavy on them to succeed in school and seek out what would be considered appropriate or well-paying careers. For these students, their single mother identities and the stigma attached to them complicated their relationships with their parents because it did not match expectations of a “good” life in Canada. When I asked Scarlette, a 25-year-old, White, heterosexual, able-bodied woman who emigrated almost 20 years ago from Poland, what kept her going in school, she replied,

I think pleasing my parents was a huge factor. Not because I felt pressured to please parents but because I felt obliged to return the investment because they invested so much. They sacrificed their lives for me in a way – the whole move to this country was – they knew they would not necessarily succeed, but that we would.

Second generation single mothers felt a heavy weight on their shoulders to prove to their parents that the move was worth it, that they were able to succeed even though their
parents were not able to take advantage of some of the same resources they were able to. Sometimes becoming a single mother was viewed as shameful to the rest of the family and was an additional stress that women had to face. While the process of immigration and settling in Canada was mentioned briefly in the group interview, more of a focus on these struggles emerged in the individual interviews, most likely because there were more women involved in these interviews.

For older women who immigrated to Canada and either brought their children with them or brought them later on, common themes emerged that demonstrated the barriers women faced when they tried to look for work and/or go to school. Carol, a 41-year-old, heterosexual, able-bodied woman, emigrated from China with her husband while she was pregnant in 1999. However, she could not find employers who would hire her in the field she was trained in. She had to take temporary and poorly paid positions such as telemarketing jobs to make ends meet. The discrimination in the paid work force for newcomers and immigrants (the “Canadian experience” requirement) was the impetus for her to apply for a second degree in Canada. Carol was adamant that the reason her family emigrated here was to have a better life and she felt that Canada’s government provided more social supports than China’s did. As she stated, these “very good programs make people’s life more secure.” Unfortunately, Carol was also the primary caregiver for her family through many health crises. In 2003, Carol’s husband was diagnosed with cancer and died in 2007. Her daughter had neurological issues which results in regular check-ups and tests in the hospital. Carol felt extremely stressed and found that it affected her performance in school in terms of reducing study time and the energy
needed to achieve higher marks. She struggled in spite of accessing several support services such as housing subsidy, food banks, and school breakfast programs for her daughter.

Much has been documented in the way of discrimination in the paid labour market, especially for people who are newcomers and immigrants (Arat-Koc, 1999; Boyd, 1992; Galabuzi, 2001; Hanley & Shragge, 2009). Many people receive mixed messages. In their countries of origins the West is thought of as providing more opportunity and economic security, yet after people immigrate to North America, many barriers emerge. Previously, Canadian immigration policy held explicitly racist views; whereas now, the points system is supposedly based on objective criteria (Arat-Koc, 1999). Immigration policy is largely based on the expected contributions people will make in the paid labour market.

Those people whose skills are considered useless, less useful, or irrelevant to the labour market are either totally excluded from or get differential treatment in immigration. This process may have a particular gendered dimension, as some of the skills women have, like the specifically “women’s work” they do has, either no or very low value in the marketplace. (Arat-Koc, 1999, p. 209)

Hanley and Shragge (2009) also note,

It is clear that despite high levels of education, immigrants tend to stay at the bottom of the job market. This information challenges the myth that new immigrants are economically upwardly mobile. Given the more recent concentration in the rate of immigration to Canada of people from countries of the Southern hemisphere, and given the jobs that most of these new arrivals hold, a new system of racial stratification is emerging in Canada today. (p. 356)

The Canadian government and its citizens benefit from the illusion that if a person immigrates she or he will have full and rewarding employment, yet this is often not the case. Available jobs are ones such as washing dishes in restaurants and driving taxis; many times these are the jobs
that no one else wants. “More recently, the demands for labour-market flexibility in the urban ‘globalized’ economy have disproportionately exposed racialized groups to precarious employment and higher levels of poverty than other Canadians” (Galabuzi, 2008, p. 84). In my own experience working as a waitress in the restaurant industry, every employer used and overworked their line cooks, dishwashers, and cleaning staff, who were most often boys and men of colour. These men always worked two or three jobs while getting very little sleep in order to survive, often times providing for family members at home in Canada and/or in their country of origin. While critical feminist theory represents intersectionality and multiple sites of oppression such as race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, age, citizenship status, and family status, anti-colonial and anti-racist theories may address the racial stratification in the paid labour market due to structural inequalities based on racism, which results in a severe lack of resources for racialized groups. As Galabuzi (2008) notes, “The racialization of poverty refers to the disproportionate and persistent experience of low income among racialized groups in Canada” (p. 82).

Women in this study who immigrated to Canada had a difficult time finding paid work in the fields they had studied in in their countries of origin and were instead streamed into low-wage and precarious work. The strain that is then put on the whole family contributes to the decisions made by some children to leave school, in order to work and assist with the family income (Lam, 1994). The education system has been critiqued for not approaching settlement issues in the schools in collaborative ways with families (Anisef, Kilbride, & Khattar, 2003). With many changes to Canadian student demographics, schools need to respond more effectively to an increasingly diverse student body and implement settlement workers within both schools
Marginalization due to discrimination based on intersections of race, class, gender, family status, and citizenship status is apparent in the levels of poverty experienced by many women in Toronto. Levels of poverty for immigrant women, many of whom are women of colour, are well documented (see Khosla, 2008). “Sole-support mothers face deep poverty with incomes $10,000 below the poverty line. Here too, racism creates significant separations. Racialized women raising children on their own are far worse off than women of European heritage” (Khosla, 2008, p. 223).

In another study which focused on the impact of globalization and education by uncovering the discourses which emerged through interviews with educators in Montreal, Vancouver, and Toronto, it became apparent that children who were immigrants were seen and conceptualized as the Other.

In spite of official policy advocating for equity approaches to education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1993), the structuring of school and society also continues to be informed by a deficit-oriented approach to newcomers’ knowledges, consistent with a long tradition of remedial education that privileges “norms” associated with a white, male, able, “northwestern”, Euro-American standard of superiority, civilization, achievement, and excellence, against which the difference of recent immigrants’ under-recognized background knowledges is perceived in terms of a potential weakness that threatens to diminish the standing of the target society. (Connelly, 2008, p. 166)

Previous research has shown many barriers for newcomers and immigrants which contribute to their experiences of Othering. These include discrimination in the classroom by teachers and peers, lack of social services within schools to ease transition, negotiating identities, Eurocentric curriculum, exclusion of spirituality and language barriers (Anisef et al., 2003; Dei et al., 2000).
One of the ways in which the province of Ontario attempts to ease the transition for youth who are newcomers and immigrants is a program between the high schools and community colleges where students can earn dual credits which lead to apprenticeships and study in community colleges (Anisef, Brown, Phythian, Sweet & Walters, 2010). While the attempt to bridge the gap into postsecondary education is important, the option to earn dual credits should also be extended to universities. One could argue that only providing these opportunities in the community colleges is an attempt to stream newcomers and immigrants into low-wage and precarious work.

**Ageism**

The ages of the participants ranged from 25-44. Most women had applied to do their most recent undergraduate degrees as mature students and felt anxious about their academic performances. Many women were returning to school after long absences for various reasons such as a lack of finances or taking time off to take care of young children. I find age discrimination in this study particularly interesting as this is a social category that all participants could theoretically experience regardless of other intersecting social identities. Ageism was also the most commonly identified experience of being single mother students among the “isms.” However, it was rare that a specific example was given where clear cases of age discrimination occurred. Instead, a focus was put on the invisible and intangible culture of exclusion by the institution itself. Women felt there were no supports and services geared towards mature or non-traditional students. The typical social aspect of “university life” was not something these participants experienced. While social gatherings were often held during evening hours, these women had to return home to take care of their children. While students
of a traditional age were complaining about not being able to get an assignment finished because they were out drinking late the night before, women in this study may not have been able to finish an assignment because they were up all night tending to sick children.

Gigi, a 38-year-old, heterosexual, White, Canadian-born woman with a disability, offered a clear example of age discrimination. Work study jobs are available on many university campuses for students who are eligible for OSAP. These positions are highly sought after and women in this study found they reduced travel time for dropping and picking up their children. This was beneficial because they could often schedule their paid work to coordinate with their school schedules and reduce transportation costs if they were working on campus. For women who had on-campus childcare, it was even better because work study positions are offered throughout the school year. Some are also offered in the summer months but during these times they are funded through the government. According to the eligibility requirements applicants need to be students. As Gigi pointed out, the definition of a student for these summer work study positions is under 30. Even though she was successful in her work study position throughout the year and the employer wanted her to return, she was not eligible to continue in this position during the summer, which exacerbated her financial stress. The only reason she was not eligible was because she was over the age of 30.

Most of the literature focuses on age discrimination for young mothers and the stigma they experience (Kelly, 2000; Pillow, 2004). While many women reported the stigma they experienced was exacerbated if they were considered young, almost all women reported feeling uncomfortable and excluded in classrooms and on-campus because of their age, regardless of what age they were. For some who were viewed as young and in graduate
studies, they felt like their professors and peers did not take them seriously. For others who were considered older and doing an undergraduate degree, they felt excluded on a social level and many commented how much harder it was to concentrate with all of the responsibilities they had. While this may seem inconsistent or confusing, what it does demonstrate is that most students had an idea informed through the culture of the university of what a traditional student looked like and they did not feel it represented their realities.

Mature working class women students in Reay’s (2003) study also felt excluded on campus because of their multiple roles.

All the women, but especially those with children, were caught up in a constant balancing act between wanting to study, meeting domestic responsibilities, needing to earn money, and additionally, for five [out of 12] of them, their voluntary work commitments. In this sense, the idea of a student lifestyle, with its combination of independence, dependence, leisure and academic work, was totally alien to these mature women entrants. Being a student for them meant something entirely different from the conceptions and experiences of younger students. In particular, any sort of social life was invariably sacrificed. (p. 308)

**Ableism**

Participants identified a broad range of disabilities from physical and learning disabilities to mental health issues. Although I do not want to set up a hierarchy of oppression where people feel they need to compete for resources and validation of their experiences over others (Barnoff & Moffatt, 2007), I do want to highlight the level of apprehension women showed in both disclosing and speaking about their disabilities in particular. Disability rights advocates emphasize the need to look at disability as one axes on the continuum in terms of how oppression is experienced. A person’s class, sexuality, age, race, ethnicity, family status and citizenship status can put further strain on how she or he experiences ableism in society.
Further, an awareness of sexism within the disability movement has gained momentum. “That there might be a gender dimension to disability has only recently been realized” (Ghai, 2009, p. 299). Feminist theory has also begun to recognize ableism as an important site of oppression alongside patriarchy. Indeed, Garland-Thomson (2002) argues for “feminist disability theory” (p. 3) as an intersectional analytic category along with “race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class” (p. 2). This intersectional approach worked well in this study by bringing attention to intersections of ableism.

In one interview, after the student had initially disclosed her disability, she refused to discuss it any further. Sonata, a 44-year-old, White, Jewish, heterosexual woman who emigrated from Eastern Europe almost 10 years earlier, identified having a disability. She received Workers’ Compensation as the result of an injury. Her anonymity in this study was important to her, particularly surrounding issues of her disability, because she feared potential employers would find out and not hire her. This fear increased her reluctance to expand on or explore the experiences associated with her disabilities. Another woman also mentioned her disability briefly and when I asked her if she wanted to expand on it she declined to do so. I could tell immediately from her body language as she shifted from side to side that she felt uncomfortable and repeatedly asked me if anyone would find out she participated.

Conversely, women seemed more than comfortable speaking about the care work and resource management involved in having children with disabilities. The increasing de-institutionalization of children/people with disabilities creates challenges because appropriate resources and supports are still lacking in the community. With a lack of services available in
the community, family members (in this case single mothers) must assume the burden of finding supports for their children. This privatizes barriers as well as depoliticizing them.

Coco, a 25-year-old, Ghanaian, heterosexual woman with a disability who was born in Senegal, spoke briefly about some of the challenges during a stressful day.

I don't want to get up in the morning. I've been through depression and all of that, it's difficult; you don't want to wake up in the morning. It's too much for you to handle and I just, I have to do it. There are no ifs, ands or buts about it. I just have to do it. I just know that if I don't get up and make my children breakfast nobody else is going to do it so it's something that I have to do.

Many of the participants' stories contained these kinds of struggles such as a lack of sleep, complications with a disability, or health condition. Yet the response was always the same: they persevered because they were the only ones in the household and they had to.

Disability also arose in the group interview. Barriers associated with having disabilities had a detrimental impact on Emma and Megan’s ability to persevere in school. Ableism is rooted in structural policies and practices that are geared towards able bodies. Emma and Megan were forced to develop individual responses to alleviate some of the problems they experienced. It was difficult for Megan to even attend the group interview as she was experiencing chronic back pain, especially if she sat for too long. This pain greatly affected her ability to sit and type essays on the computer. She was fortunate in that she had a friend who would come over and type out her essays for her as she spoke. Even though her professors all knew about this, no one suggested she approach the Access Centre, which is a centre in the university that provides support and services for students with disabilities. When I asked why
students did not approach the Access Centre, it seemed they did not know about the services at first and then after they found out about the services, they were given the impression by other students that it was not an effective Centre. Megan’s supervisor did suggest she take extra time to work on her assignments because she acknowledged that the side effects from the pain medication would interfere with Megan’s ability to write her assignments. Megan noted that her supervisor returned her papers with several areas that needed improvement. She wonders if she could have performed better if she had been pain free.

Emma’s situation with her learning disability is complex and she points out the difficulties when disabilities are undocumented. Documentation is often required in order to receive disability related services. However, there are many reasons students may not want to disclose their disabilities. Stigma is often one of these reasons and the fear that future employers may find out about the disability or students fear they will be treated differently in the classroom because of discriminatory attitudes by professors and peers. Many of the processes involved in registering with Access Centres require students to take the initiative to disclose their situations to their professors, yet is there a way that course design could include multiple ways of learning and flexibility in assignments to at least address some learning disabilities? Also, most times the documentation that is required needs to be signed off by a medical practitioner. Naturopathic practitioners or traditional healers are not recognized as legitimate health service providers. Emma discusses her own experience of her undocumented learning disability. She explains, “I had some friends that accessed the Access Centre and did well. But their disabilities were documented. Mine’s undocumented…it is a disability. It’s because of a disability that I didn’t get educated but not being able to write a paper wasn’t
because of my disability – that was separate.” Emma had a great support system of friends who helped her in school, especially with writing papers. Several of her friends specialized in different areas in education and so she could draw on their different expertise depending on the content of the assignment she was required to complete. While this informal support system helped Emma succeed, her situation also points to the lack of systemic supports in place, particularly for students who have undocumented disabilities.

Despite the enactment of the Ontarians with Disabilities Act in 2001, a recent study in Ontario by Reed, Lewis, and Lund-Lucas (2006) found that students with disabilities still encountered numerous barriers. In my review of the literature on single mother students, single mothers with disabilities were almost invisible in the research. While it is possible that single mothers who participated in these studies did not have disabilities, it is more likely that researchers failed to ask about disability. Another possibility is because of the stigma, participants did not feel comfortable disclosing their disability status.

Few studies have taken up the experiences of parents with disabilities and even fewer studies have not pathologized these experiences (Blackford & Israelite, 2003, p.132). People with disabilities commonly experience stigma and this can be particularly threatening when they are parents because of the paternalistic assumption that they cannot take care of themselves, let alone provide care for their children. As Blackford and Israelite (2003) explain, “Ableism reflects the commonly held view that people with disabilities are inadequate in meeting normative expectations for economic roles as well as social roles such as parenting” (p. 134). Single mothers with disabilities are at a particular disadvantage when parenting because ableism in society views this family structure as lacking a non-disabled partner to “help take
care of her and her children.” What is most troubling about the effects of this discriminatory assumption is that single mothers with disabilities may fear asking for help when they need it because they know their parenting skills are already being surveilled and scrutinized.

Women have fought for complete reproductive control and decision-making power over their bodies. For some women this means the right to terminate a pregnancy. For others, it means the right to become pregnant and carry through with the pregnancy in a supportive environment. Shadowing these issues is the reality that only certain groups of women have been supported in their desire to become mothers. Many women with disabilities, low-income women, women of colour, Aboriginal women, queer women and young women, have been discouraged from having children and in some of the most extreme cases women have been sterilized in order to prevent pregnancy (Kelly, 2000, p. 214; Prilleltensky, 2004, p. 55). In addition to various social identities, gender and disability oppression operate in interconnected ways. Wehmeyer and Rousso (2006) refer to this as “double discrimination”:

Underlying double discrimination is double stereotyping: negative assumptions about girls and women combine with negative assumptions about people with disabilities, so that disabled women are perceived less favorably than either nondisabled women or disabled men. They are often viewed as sick, childlike, dependent, asexual, or incompetent, and their talents and assets are overlooked. The presence of discriminatory patterns in schools is particularly disheartening because of the potential of education to address social inequities. (pp. 393-394)

Conclusion

Childcare was highlighted as a major barrier in many different ways. The need for accessible, quality, and flexible childcare is an issue across most parts of Canada (Prentice, 2000). Yet, when students have school-aged children, one of the major difficulties is the
uncoordinated schedules between elementary and high schools with universities. For example, with the exception of some universities that focus on teacher education, during March Break many university classes are still operating. Students are left to leave their children in less than optimal childcare situations, miss their class, or bring their children with them to class. Also, even when universities have on-campus daycares, the hours of operation may not be in line with a student’s schedule, particularly evening classes. These findings contribute to the literature in Canada by focusing on the single mother student perspective of childcare needs.

During the group interview, women built on the comments of the group, had discussions in an honest way and used humour as a way to express their frustration about barriers to single mother students. While three of the four women discussed experiencing emotional and/or psychological violence from their partners, Eva also conceptualized racism as violence. While racism was experienced by the co-participants, it was the racism their children faced in school that became the focus of attention. Racism in education and in society is widely documented (Anisef et al., 2010; Baskin, 2008; Dei et al., 2000; Ng, 1993; Razack, 1998) yet for these women it was often the racism their children experienced that devoured much of their time and energy. Children who were biracial experienced racism from all directions, not only dominant society. Many peers would exclude them because of their bi- or multi-racial identities.

All the co-participants agreed that more institutional supports are required to assist marginalized students. Many times, students were faced with a Eurocentric academy that did not include Aboriginal worldviews and did not value real life experience. As one woman put it, the university caters to the “imaginary student” and does not provide supports or services that
are specific to single mothers’ needs. These can be provided on an institutional level through ensuring adequate childcare spaces on campus, specialized financial aid services, and providing practical resources such as food, clothing, and supports group. More family-friendly spaces and activities would also make single mothers and all families feel more welcome on campus.

Although most students did not feel welcome in the university because they were older than many of their peers, one explicit example of ageism arose in the example given by Gigi where she did not meet the eligibility requirements for work-study jobs on campus during the summer. Students of any age can participate in these positions throughout the year, yet during the summer it is funded through the government and they require that students be under the age of 30. This is a clear violation of mature students’ rights and restricts these students from continuing in their paid employment through the summer, when many times it is through the summer that they need the income the most.
Chapter 6: 
Poverty, Stigma, and the “Imaginary Student”

Introduction

This is the last chapter which focuses on the barriers single mothers reported. It is obvious after reading these three chapters that the barriers are many. While I focused on asking questions in a strengths-based way and wanted to learn about what supports students had, this strategy did not diminish the sheer volume of barriers reported. In this chapter, women discuss two different types of poverty: poverty as we usually think of it in terms of lacking financial resources and a poverty of time, which impacts women’s ability to juggle multiple responsibilities, for example, single mother, student, household work, and paid worker. This scarcity of time or multiple demanding roles had consequences for women, particularly for their health. Many reported feeling exhausted and knew their time crunch negatively impacted on their relationships with their children and their studies.

Women also spoke about their experiences of stigma which were interconnected with racism, sexism, and classism. They were not only frustrated with their own experiences of stigma but also worried about how it impacted their children. Racialized women also criticized the academy for its Eurocentric application of its curriculum and worldviews. They often felt marginalized on campus, especially when they did not see or read about others like themselves.

Economic Insecurity

Poverty is not discussed as a problem on university campuses, partly because of the stigma and also because the social, emotional, physical, and spiritual parts of ourselves are
sometimes not seen as important compared to the “academic” part of ourselves (even though all parts of ourselves are inter-connected). It seems reasonable to think that with some visibility of supports on campus such as food banks, clothing banks, and student and family housing, awareness of economically disadvantaged students would also increase. However, not all universities provide these supports and when they do, awareness of them is often low. As a new part-time instructor working at two different universities, it astonished me that many faculty and staff were not aware that these universities offer food banks. Also, most faculty and staff expressed surprise that I was a low-income single mother student and instructor, in part because the university is conceptualized as a privileged space. Student poverty is often romanticized in a way that implies that it is temporary and easy to escape. This concept is connected to the ways that people who work and study at universities view the demographics of the student body. When students are seen as being of traditional age, it is assumed these students receive some financial or material assistance from their families. So while these students may visit poverty for a time, some students have the privilege of returning to families who support them, either after school or during summer breaks. By contrast, many single mother students start off being poor and heads of their own households and continue to live in poverty year-round.

Overall (1998) discusses the intersection of gender and class as a challenge for her as a working-class professor within the university setting. She often feels more comfortable with the administrative staff who have similar economic backgrounds, an experience to which I can also relate. She (1998) argues that while gender and gender performance (Butler, 2004) is something that is more visible on-campus, class is less so.
One’s class identity is, and expected to be, much less obvious, especially at the university, where wealthy students dress in ragged jeans, and poorer students inconspicuously work twenty or thirty hours a week, ‘part-time’, in order to be able to afford the same social life funded, in the rich kids’ case, by daddy. It is hard for working-class people – whether students or faculty – to recognize the difference class makes; after all, we’re all here at university, aren’t we? (p. 116)

Stigma and lack of awareness of student poverty may be one of the reasons this issue is not very visible on-campus. Further feminist theorizing on the experiences of lower-income or poverty-class students and how they negotiate their space on-campus is also needed in order to better understand the needs of low-income or poverty-class single mothers and students in general.

Not all women in this study were poor or low-income, however. A few had entered academia with extensive paid work experience and had been able to acquire some savings. Some women also had parents who were financially secure enough to help support them. However, there were many more women who were financially insecure. They felt ongoing, high levels of stress that were exacerbated at the end of each semester when OSAP ran out. The stress and anxiety associated with finding patch work solutions in response to their poverty was salient during the interviews.

Most of the 25 women attended a postsecondary educational institution on a full-time basis. However, many had also first enrolled in university in the 1980s or 1990s as a part-time student. While part-time studies provided more flexibility to complete courses while being able to work full time, the interviews made it clear that there were fewer supports available to part-time students both in the way of funding and social and academic supports on-campus. Single mothers already felt completely invisible on campus and somewhat marginalized within the
social atmosphere on university campuses. As they put it, while younger students were out socializing with each other on the weekends or after class, single mothers had a very tight schedule and were spending all of their remaining time with their families. Also, there was no financial support for students when they attended part time, mostly because they did not qualify for OSAP, which requires a full course load. Single mothers could only apply for additional funding, scholarships or bursaries through OSAP. Even funding provided directly by the school or private donors almost always required OSAP eligibility. Further, in some cultures acquiring debt is not considered appropriate, even debt in the form of student loans. Scarlette reflected on her own struggle between needing to apply for student loans in order to be eligible for additional bursaries and grants and her Polish culture, which looks down upon debt. She also highlighted how other cultures view debt in similar ways. She stated,

This was a huge controversy and finally the Canadian Association of Muslims came out and had a public statement where they said, “Yes, it’s true we don’t want to take out the interest but we do want Muslim students to get their education. Therefore, we, the collective, the Islamic faith, we will say our youth can have the right to take out OSAP to get their education.”

Gemma’s story complicated the dominant discourse of single motherhood and poverty. Gemma, a 41-year-old, able-bodied, heterosexual woman born in Scotland, viewed her interactions with school as a major bolster to her self-esteem. She repeated how much she loved being in school as a mature student while being separated from her husband. Her children were 10 and 11 years old and she felt she could finally devote some time to herself by being a student. Despite the burden of a 40-minute commute to school, she felt supported by
the institution, her professors, teaching assistants, and students. She was excited at the
beginning of every semester and planned to apply for a Master’s degree in the same program.

“I get butterflies in my stomach when I come in September” (Gemma). While her relationship
with her ex-partner had improved over time, her marriage had not been a particular source of
strength or affirmation. After the birth of her second baby, she was admitted to the mental
health facility for post-partum depression where she experienced overt sexism.

   I was there for 2 weeks and the doctor who was a very renowned psychiatrist in
   his own right, but really was a bit of a male chauvinist pig, said, “Okay you’ve had
   your break. You’ve done no laundry, you’ve cooked no meals, you’ve changed no
   bums, you’ve had your break for 2 weeks – now go home and deal with it.”

Following her discharge from the hospital, Gemma was medicated for mental health issues for
8 years. She stopped taking the medication the day she left her husband. She had originally
started her degree in 1988 but never finished. After leaving her husband she went back to
school and, in spite of increased financial insecurity, she felt liberated and independent. “We
lived pretty sparingly when I was married. If anything, I’m marginally better off now because
I’m in complete control of the budget.”

   The co-participants in the group interview experienced a variety of financial statuses.
They were receiving multiple forms of income including social assistance, bursaries, OSAP, paid
work, Child Tax Credit, Band funding, and child support payments. At one of the universities, an
additional financial support was available. This university provided a grant for any unmet need
not covered by OSAP. This is a grant distributed by financial aid services in the university to all
students who qualify through OSAP and is automatically distributed based on a predetermined
level of need. This type of assistance can decrease the stigma attached to funding specifically directed towards single mother students because it is available for all students with insufficient income. Also, Eva found her life as a single mother student to be adequately funded, which increased the amount of time she could spend with her children. There is no question that single mother students face many challenges in juggling their multiple roles and competing schedules. However, the student schedule (alongside adequate funding) provided flexibility and time that could be spent with their children. As Eva explained:

I’ve had pretty secure funding since I’ve been there. It’s allowed me to be with my kids more. You can leave and run to the school if somebody is sick or you can study at 2:00 in the morning in your pyjamas. But you can’t do that when you’re working full time. So that was a part of it too, I knew I needed some flexibility in the first couple of years when I was going through my divorce.

This additional funding was the main reason Eva made the decision to apply to this university. After looking at all of the other universities in her area, hers was the only one that offered this grant.

Janice was surprised at how well Eva was doing with the additional grant provided by financial aid services at the university. For some reason, she did not receive as much financial support. The university Janice and Eva attended was so large that students belonged to separate colleges, each of which housed its own registrar’s offices, programs, and funding. The progressive college where Eva attended had a reputation for providing supports and services specific to “non-traditional” students such as mature students, part-time students, and single mothers. This progressive college continuously made their students aware of bursaries and
grants that were available. Even though Janice did not receive this same level of support, she emphasized the importance of what she did receive when she stated, “I think they’d [her children] starve without it.”

Most of the research exploring single mother students and poverty emerged from the US. Stevens (2003) found financial aid was the “most frequently cited structural facilitator to higher education” (p. 117). However, even when low-income single mothers received the maximum amounts through student loans, they still experienced high levels of unmet need (Heller & Bjorklund, 2004). Students use the income from student loans, funding, work-study positions, and paid employment to absorb the every day costs of living. In addition to the expenses that students who are poor have, parenting students who are poor carry the burden of trying to make ends meet for their families. In a study examining student loan policies in Canada and Saskatchewan, Digney (2002, p. 52) found that single mother students are forced to use credit cards in order to make up for student loans not covering all of their expenses. This was also a reality for many students in my study. Many reported they would not be able to have made ends meet without going into debt. This has long-term consequences for this population and many others who are already going in to high amounts of debt through accruing student loans. As tuition fees increase and monies for bursaries and scholarships decrease, loans and other forms of debt will increase. This may have devastating consequences for low-income students more broadly.

In Canada, the student loan program provides higher funding amounts to students who have children compared with students with no dependents. However, they do not increase the amount if there is more than one child. Student loans are seen in the literature and in this
research as both a barrier and a facilitator. It has been documented that some single mothers do not apply for loans because of the fear they will not finish the postsecondary program they are registered in, resulting in higher debt to pay down – while having to return to the same low-wage work they were in before entering school. Student loans by themselves, are a lot of money to pay back, but the interest rates that accrue on this debt raise the total amounts significantly. Many worry they will spend the rest of their lives paying off this debt. What is mentioned only briefly is the inequity in the repayment schedule of student loans. “How does it benefit a working-class single mother who has struggled for 5 years to get a university degree, if her salary (assuming she gets a job) is dedicated to loan repayment for twenty years after graduation?” (Lavell, 1998, p. 206). Furthermore, a woman who is poor must weigh the consequences of having such a high student loan debt for many years against the consequences this poses for her child’s educational advancement (Dahlberg, 2003, p. 190).

The relationship students have with their loans is a paradox. On one hand, the debt accrued from student loans is a burden, contributes to emotional and mental stress, and is another “system” students need to engage with. Almost every co-participant sat with the heavy weight of worry at the thought of paying back their loans. For undergraduate students, this often led to them wanting to pursue graduate studies for fear of not being able to find a job that will earn them enough to pay the monthly interest. On the other hand, student loans were seen as an investment for the future; the good versus bad debt debate. Many single mother students could not look forward to the future without having the assistance from student loans to help pay for school, so it served as a temporary relief of the poverty they currently experienced.
A case study of three postsecondary institutions revealed one financial aid department funded a unique position (Sharp, 2004). This position was not a part of the financial aid office but was a part of student services and provided support to vulnerable students. The need to create this position reflects that traditional financial aid offices do not meet the needs of non-traditional students such as single mothers. This need includes financial support for crises such as unpaid utility bills or getting behind on rent payments. This position not only liaises with utility and mortgage companies, it also connects with and locates emergency food and shelter provided in the community. Food security is an issue that many poor students contend with:

For students who face daily financial concerns over how to pay for food and keep a roof over their heads, the routine availability of free food on campus is a very supportive act. “They always feed us here. Everyday they’re giving something away. I never go hungry,” comments one student mother on public assistance. (p. 120)

If universities employed a person within student services or access centres who were able to connect marginalized students to services in the community or to bring social services on campuses this would serve at least two purposes. First, it would provide tangible and practical supports to students in a meaningful way. Second, it would raise awareness more broadly of non-traditional students on campus.

**Single Mother Stigma**

When we think of single motherhood, our focus is usually the increasing numbers of single mother families over the past several decades; however, it is important to note that single motherhood is not a recent phenomenon – although the terminology is. During the late 1800s and into at least the middle of the 1900s, single mothers were referred to as unwed
mothers, deserted wives, or widows (Brady, 2007, p. 193; Gordon, 1994, p. 19). Poor Law institutions had been in place largely to house those marginalized in society. In Nova Scotia,

These poorhouses were an important and troubling aspect of welfare provision. Most of these institutions dated back to the late nineteenth century, and a significant majority of them also served as chronic care mental hospitals. In the 1940s and 1950s, most municipal homes accommodated a miscellaneous population of ‘sane paupers’ and the ‘harmless insane.’ Little segregation was effected, and the homes served a mixed population of patients who were mentally challenged or chronically ill, as well as unmarried mothers, prostitutes, juvenile delinquents, and the elderly poor. (Guildford, 2005, pp. 54-55)

Even though Poor Laws no longer exist, their ideology, which blames the poor for their poverty, (Fay, 2005, p. 143) does. Instead of focusing on structural causes of poverty, individuals are left to scramble to make ends meet in a Darwinian maze of survival of the fittest. “The individual-centered discourse from both the Left and the Right over the causes of and antidotes to poverty ignores the power of the social context in which poor families live” (Holloway et al., 1997, p. 5).

Historically, single mothers have always been under the moral gaze of state workers, charity workers, and social workers who often judged and compared their families against middle-class norms and standards (Gordon, 1994, pp. 15-17). However, it was not until the establishment of financial support provided by the state in the way of mothers’ allowance in 1920 in Ontario that women were so strictly separated into the deserving and undeserving poor. The main category of the deserving poor consisted of the “worthy widow” (Fay, 2005, p. 143). Before the Mothers’ Allowance Act, mothers in need would depend upon “the ‘whims’ of private charities or municipal relief, or be forced to place their offspring in orphanages or foster homes” (Little, 1998, p. 33). The Mothers’ Allowance Act was established across Canada in
different years depending on the province. In theory, state support should be welcomed and was needed to demonstrate that “mothers were entitled to income assistance because they were performing the socially valued work of raising their children. This recognition by the state gave them a certain legitimacy and moral authority” (Fay, 2005, p. 141). However, the eligibility requirements were so strict in Ontario that not everyone qualified and when they did, many women felt heavily surveilled by the state (Little, 1998). Mothers’ allowance, in addition to several other state delivered social assistance programs, has been critiqued as a means of social control (Bashevkin, 2002, p. 19). Even the phrase *mothers’ allowance* invokes the image of a parent-child relationship with the state being in the position of authority, doling out an allowance based upon rewards or refusing it as a means of punishment. Further, immigrant mothers were often excluded (Little, 1998, p. 35). It was not until 1960 in Nova Scotia when the Mothers’ Allowance Act was replaced with the Social Assistance Act, that Aboriginal mothers were eligible for assistance if their husbands were dead or had a disability (Guildford, 2005, p. 64). Certain mothers being eligible over others at different points throughout history created “hierarchies of motherhood based on race, class, and family status” (Fay, 2005, pp. 141-142).

Several conservative political pundits, political leaders, and right-wing organizations have used single mother families as scapegoats for society’s ills and these families are blamed for the alleged breakdown of society (Sidel, 2006, p. 2). When single motherhood is approached through a deficit framework, these women are seen as challenging the very moral fabric of the culture. Further, they are seen as “part of a subculture that disregards traditional values of our society” (Nelson, 2005, p. 14). Single motherhood is also seen as challenging conservative family values that only condone sex within heterosexual marriage (Sidel, 2006, p. 26).
The women’s rights movement began addressing the needs of some poor women with children and fought for the right for improved economic security (Gordon, 1994, p. 31).

However, work-first policies still remain in Ontario and put single mothers at a disadvantage by expecting them to participate in low-paid, precarious work or unpaid volunteer positions without providing the necessary resources such as childcare (Caragata, 2009, pp. 162-163). Neo-liberal policies expect that social and financial supports will be provided by the individual person or family and are not seen as the responsibility of the state. Work-first policies are implemented with an aim to provide a transition from social assistance to paid work – “women and their children often lose out to [these] neoliberal policy objectives” (Butterwick, 2009, p. 185).

It was not until the 1970s and 80s that single parents and single motherhood took hold in popular discourse and were firmly embedded in the “policy imagination” (Brady, 2007, p. 194). There is contention about which phrase to use when speaking about these family statuses. Nelson (2005) argues that attention must be paid to the “social economy” of motherhood and a focus needs to be put on supports and networks that are utilized by women in society (p. 3). Nelson (2005) comments on another popular construction commonly used to describe these families – lone mothers, which “evokes images of solitude and perhaps even isolation” (p. 3). I have felt the same response to the term lone mother and avoid using this phrase throughout the thesis, even though the category of single motherhood has received similar critiques (Hertz, 2006, p. 141; Nelson, 2005, p. 3).

The stigma associated with being a single mother was mentioned by almost all of the participants in both the group and individual interviews. Donna was able to compare her
experiences of being out alone in public with her daughter to being out in public with her
daughter and her daughter’s father:

Even just going to the restaurant and asking if the waiter can steam broccoli for
my daughter – they give me such a hassle. But when he’s there [the father], it’s
“Yes sir.” And it’s never “Yes ma’am.” I’m the one who asks for the frigging
steamed broccoli, why are they addressing him?

When Donna was out in public with just her and her daughter she never received the kind of
attention and pleasantry the way her daughter’s father did. I have also observed these different
responses since I have moved back home to a small city that still holds many prejudices about
what a family should like. I am much more self-conscious of my single mother status living in
this small city compared to a more urban and diverse city such as Toronto. Single mothers in
the study did not compare their experiences in different cities with the exception of Mariposa
who discussed feeling more at ease and accepted in Toronto, compared to the conservative
norms and expectations found in the smaller city where she went to university.

Stigma was often something women spoke about, sharing stories of unsupportive
caseworkers who made discriminatory and racist comments or family members who did not
believe in them. For women who had their first child in their teenage years the stigma they
experienced was compounded by being judged negatively as young teenage single mothers.
Many barriers are documented in Kelly’s (2000) feminist ethnographic work with young
mothers in the school systems which were largely associated with the ways in which teen
pregnancy is used as a scapegoat for structural issues such as poverty. She explores the need
for inclusive schooling and deconstructs the political discourse surrounding “teen motherhood.”

Karine often spoke about a social assistance worker’s judgmental and suspicious attitude. She said that the worker acted as though the financial support was coming out of her own pocket. Sally, a 27-year-old, Irish and Aboriginal, two-spirited, Canadian-born woman with a disability, had been street-involved as a young person and became a ward of child welfare. When she became pregnant as a teenager, her caseworker informed her that the only way to receive financial support from them was to have an abortion or give the baby up for adoption. Later, Sally discovered her case file was never closed with child welfare. Even worse, she discovered there was no official policy in place stating that she could not receive support from them while having a child. While the experiences she had living on the street and being involved with child welfare were traumatic, she also credited this experience as teaching her survival strategies that directly related to how well she did in school. When she reflected on her experience becoming a young mom she said, “It saved my life.” Being responsible for someone else became the motivating factor for her to survive.

The theme of having a child saving a woman’s life was a prominent feature in Edin and Kefalas’ (2005) findings of the experiences of low-income single mothers in the US. Contrary to the popular discourse that early pregnancy ruins a girl’s life and her overall life chances, this study found that for some girls and women, it was the most important event and sometimes led to aspirations of higher education. Edin and Kefalas (2005) deconstruct the middle-class expectations of what a ‘normal’ trajectory looks like concerning career and family and instead offer an alternate discourse that having children saved some women’s lives.
In an America that is profoundly unequal, the poor and rich alike are supposed to wait to bear children until they can complete their schooling, find stable employment, and marry a man who has done the same. Yet poor women realize they may never have children if they hold to this standard. Middle-class taxpayers see the children born to a young, poor, and unmarried mother as barriers to her future achievement, short-circuiting her chances for what might have been a better life, while the mother herself sees children as the best of what life offers. (p. 170)

One participant in the Edlin and Kefalas (2005) study emphasized the strengths over the barriers,

“My kids, they’ve matured me a lot. If I hadn’t had them and had gone to college, I probably would have gotten introduced to the wrong crowd, and would have gotten lost because of the drugs and stuff...Maybe I needed my kids [to keep me safe]. They come first. I’ve always stayed off of drugs for them, and they helped me grow up.... I can’t picture myself without them.” (p. 170)

Some of the co-participants in this study (as well as in mine) emphasized that their children were the reasons they got up in the mornings. “Nineteen-year-old Adlyn declares that if she were childless, ‘I would be on the street...because I used to be out on the streets getting high. And look at me now! I’m going to school, doing what I got to do’” (Edin & Kefalas, 2005, p. 180).

The reason I present these stories is not to romanticize mothering during difficult situations or glorify what must still be a difficult journey for these women, but to present an alternate strengths-based way of viewing their situations. As Edin and Kefalas argue:

Middle-class observers often believe that the lives of poor youth could be salvaged if not for the birth of a child – but this is seldom the case. Our mothers’ stories show that young women raised in poor neighborhoods can suffer far worse fates than having to drop out of school to care for a baby. (p. 180)

What women worried about in my study even more than the discrimination they experienced as a single mother was how this stigma impacted their children. In the group
interview, Megan states, “that’s the thing that bothers me is that being a single parent trickles down to my kid...It’s a disadvantage to our kids when we are single parents because I think they get treated differently.” Emma discussed her frustration in dealing with a teacher who treated her daughter negatively and eventually caused Emma to remove her daughter from the school. Another parent told Emma that the teacher had said, “I don’t have trouble from these kids over here because they don’t go to daycare. It’s all my daycare kids...who give my class trouble.” As Emma pointed out, “So who’s in daycare? Single parent kids and usually low income families – which are usually single parent kids. And that was her attitude; it was the daycare kids who were all the problems.” According to a report based on data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY),

Children below the LICO [low-income cut-off] were consistently the most likely to be cared for in a daycare centre and the least likely to be cared for outside the home with a non-relative compared to the children at the other income levels... In 2002-2003, children at the lowest income level had a daycare rate of 42% versus a rate of 18% for care outside the home with a non-relative. Conversely, children at the highest income level had a rate of 40% for care outside the home with a non-relative versus a daycare rate of 26%. (Bushnik, 2006, p. 18)

Also, “daycare centres were [reported as] the most common type of care for children in households with a single parent who worked/studied” (Bushnick, 2006, p. 12).

The stigma single mothers experienced were often referred to as insidious and difficult to pinpoint in tangible ways. The climate of the university on-campus and in classrooms plays a key role in how students feel about attending school. Reay (2003) interviewed twelve working-class mature women students in Great Britain and found that women who attended (or applied to) universities in the old sector (universities established before 1992) reported feeling the
effects of the institution’s elitism for which it was known. One participant described her experience there as, “a very very ambitious place, ruthless even” (p. 310).

Duquaine-Watson (2007) argues, “there is a conspicuous lack of attention to the experiences of women who are pursuing degrees while raising children on their own” (p. 230). Research shows single mothers experience a multitude of barriers: hostile attitudes, practices, and policies that accumulate to create an unwelcoming institutional climate. Institutional discrimination is difficult to pinpoint because it combines interconnected and complex institutional practices with individual acts of discrimination.

Institutional Climate

“We’re just not in the academy” (Emma).

An uncomfortable climate can manifest itself in the academy in various ways. Women in this study felt excluded based on the lack of positive representations of their life experiences. In addition to a curriculum that was not reflective of real world issues and of the experiences of single mother students in general, Emma from the group interview was particularly impacted by the dominance of a Eurocentric academy. Even though Emma wanted to write papers that reflected the use and content of Aboriginal scholars, restrictions placed by the professor on the perceived “quality” of sources was a contentious issue. When students are instructed to use only peer-reviewed, academic sources, this may include a more privileged body of knowledge over others. It was important for Emma to be able to draw upon research and knowledge that was developed and authored by Aboriginal scholars and educators but she found her university libraries and professors in her classes did not provide connections to these bodies of work or did not support them because they were not peer-reviewed. As she explained, “Anything I
could find did not have the word Aboriginal in it...I fought for certain things to be acknowledged as academic stuff to inform my research because there’s just not enough of us doing it. I mean it’s better now, but 7 years ago it wasn’t so good.” Emma discussed the increase in journal publications by scholars in her community, which improved her access to relevant materials; however, she also identified the barriers in academia formed by strict and rigid guidelines for what is considered legitimately “academic.” These sources and modes of publishing do not always reflect culturally diverse perspectives that have been marginalized within academia. Emma credited one of her professors for advocating alongside her to allow “non-academic” materials in her assignments and considering these to be legitimate areas of knowledge and research. Hart (2010) echoes Emma’s frustration when he writes:

To thrive in this colonial environment, we, Indigenous peoples, have little choice but to participate in academic endeavours that either devalue or do not recognize our cultural identities. More specifically, Indigenous peoples’ knowledge is given little, if any, legitimate academic role in higher education, and foundational aspects to Indigenous knowledge, such as spirituality intertwined with the land, are ignored. (p. 27)

In Baskin’s (2008) research with 27 Aboriginal women in social work programs across Ontario, women emphasized the need for all social work students to receive education about colonization in Canada and learn about Aboriginal world views. As Baskin (2008) explains,

Other students raised points about miseducation that relate to who teaches Aboriginal content and how this is relevant to the political project of decolonization. Miseducation means that when history is taught in the academy, it is not taught accurately. One student talked about non-Aboriginal students’ ignorance, which usually goes unchallenged by instructors. She described how some students in class make comments such as “why should those Native people be getting four billion dollars, free education, free housing and that no taxes stuff” without receiving any responses from educators. In these situations, silence affirms what has been said. Thus, some social work educators are not
taking responsibility for the damage that social work has caused, such as its involvement in racist child welfare legislation and practices and its silence at times regarding miseducation when it comes to issues that affect Aboriginal peoples. (p. 34)

One of the recommendations made by women is to bring more members from Aboriginal communities into the academy to help correct this ignorance and incorporate alternate pedagogy.

For some Aboriginal peoples, especially those living on reserves, pursuing postsecondary education can mean losing community ties. As Monture-Angus (2001) notes, “Access to post-secondary education requires the willingness to leave your community, your people, your way of life and all that feels comfortable to you” (p. 37). She further discusses how access is not really achieved,

Given all the losses that First Nations experience as a result of a commitment to pursue post-secondary education and despite the fact that most post-secondary institutions now have equity entrance policies for students, I have yet to see a policy that truly reflects the contours and reality of my own life as a First Nations citizen. I have noted elsewhere that I think universities are equity literate (at least the ones that I have experienced), meaning that they can write it down but cannot practice or live equity. (p. 37)

This illustrates the need to truly transform the culture of the university instead of focusing on the act of entrance as the measure of access for marginalized students.

However, in the group interview, while co-participants were supportive of each other, they also gently challenged each other to pull out areas of strength and resistance in their stories. For example, in response to Emma feeling as though she and her community are not represented in the academia, Eva responded “because the thing is, you can’t just say we’re not
in the academy, because if people like the woman that you are talking about hadn’t had done
that you would have had no access to those sources.” Eva referred to these experiences of
resistance and strength as “push back.” She said, “I know my experience is probably different,
but I just keep pushing back and so far it’s worked. I’m sure – yeah, sometimes you run into
roadblocks, but you can’t just let things stay the way they are.”

Emma responded by talking about other Aboriginal students pushing through university
and also more well-known and established scholars in her community.

They are just trying and trying and they are making it easier for me. I’m probably
not going to have to fight to use tobacco. I won’t have to do that fight because
it’s been done so many times. I’ll have different fights that I’ll have to deal with,
probably. But it is tiring and it’s still a heterosexist, White dominated, male
academy. That is what is seen as valued, mostly male.

From an anti-colonial perspective, Anderson (2000) brings attention to how many Aboriginal
women use writing as a tool of resistance against the racist stereotypes that populate the
Canadian political and social landscape. “Writing also gives women a means of surviving
oppression and a way to engage in a healing process” (Anderson, 2000, p. 141). Writing can
therefore be viewed as a vehicle with which to challenge the dominant discourse and infuse
counter narratives. The more Aboriginal students who can read material written by Aboriginal
educators, scholars, and writers, the more representative their education will be. Sinclair (2010)
also supports the need to have literature written by Aboriginal peoples, specifically in the field
of social work,
Until relatively recently, those of us who have worked in the field have had to satisfy our need for Indigenous writings about social work by scouring the limited collection of journal articles and hoarding assorted unpublished reports and documents that had emerged over the decades out of Aboriginal social organizations. To a large extent, we have had to rely on mainstream articles and texts and make our individual adaptations to the material. (p. 21)

However, students’ overall experience of the culture of university needs to be taken into consideration. As Henry and Tator (2009a) argue,

Within the social spaces of the academy, largely controlled by the dominant White culture, there is a constant moral tension between the lived experiences of racialized and Indigenous students and faculty, juxtaposed against the perceptions and practices of those who have the power within the institution, that is, White educators and administrators. Both the structure of the university and its policies and practices reflect the White and Eurocentric cultural values and norms that define it. In the modern Canadian university there is a deep polarization between how racism is imagined, understood, and acted upon by those with White skin privilege, and those whose life experiences, including their experiences with the academy, are marked by their racialized identities of ‘otherness.’ (p. 197).

Anti-colonial theory not only pays attention to the barriers experienced by Aboriginal peoples and people of colour but also emphasizes the resistance and strength in marginalized communities. Smith (1999) emphasizes this resistance when she writes,

To acquiesce is to lose ourselves entirely, and implicitly agree with all that has been said about us. To resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve what we were and remake ourselves. The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages and social practices – all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope. (p. 4)

Sinclair (2010) also notes that literature written by Aboriginal peoples has expanded over the past decade.
Explicit and implicit processes of exclusion serving to disenfranchise some groups from institutions of education is well documented (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Bannerji, 1991; Baskin, 2008; Bensimon, 1997; Dei et al., 2000; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Eyre, 2000; Henry & Tator, 2009b; hooks, 1994; Kelly, 2000; Kitzinger, 1993; Lorde, 1992; Mahtani, 2004; Monture-Angus, 2001; Prentice, 2000; Razack, 1998; Reay, 2003; Reed et al., 2006; Rezai-Rashti, 1997; Rich, 1993; Webber, 2006; Wong-Wylie, 2007). Although students experience explicit acts of discrimination it is also the intangible “feeling” of not belonging and of being Othered. However, there were also elements of hope in their stories and “push back” as Eva described where even their presence in the university meant their bodies were becoming more visible. Inclusive education advocates for the representation of multiple and diverse bodies, knowledge, and spaces. These principles aim to transform the overall feeling or culture of university campuses to decrease the feelings of otherness experienced by single mother students.

**Classroom policies.**

One policy the co-participants in the group interview raised as a contentious issue between themselves and their professors was the “shut off the cell phone” rule. When I was working on my undergraduate degree, I had one professor who would explicitly state that she needed to keep her cell phone on hand in case of an emergency with her child. This professor demonstrated this push back that Eva talked about by beginning classes at 9:30 instead of 9:00 because she needed to take her child to school. For Emma, the cell phone rule was particularly problematic since there were times she needed to leave her child alone so that she could attend her night class. She said:
I’m sorry, this stays on. I don’t care if it interrupts you. I will put it on zip zip but I will be getting up if it is my kid and if it’s anyone other than my kid I’ll shut it off, I will not take it. But if it’s my kid’s school or my kid, like her phone, I’m out that door. I don’t care what you think. I don’t care. I’ve gotten up in the middle of my presentations and I’m like – I’m sorry that’s my kid. Talk amongst yourselves.

When professors outline classroom rules, they may not have a single parent in mind. I too experienced this as a student and now as a part-time instructor. I explain at the beginning of every class that I need to keep my phone out and on vibrate because I am the first and often only point of emergency contact if something happens to my daughter. Emma explained her response when people questioned her about her phone:

I’m not turning it off and she is number one...And they are like well that’s you know, this is your job and I’m like yes and when I’m at my job my daughter can get through to me. My kid can get a hold of me. She knows where I am, she knows how to access me and if it’s an emergency I need to be there. “Well can’t you have somebody else?” Who?

But many times we feel pressured to conform to general rules because we do not wish to draw attention to ourselves or to appear disrespectful. Meagan shared a traumatic experience that occurred during one of the times she decided to turn off her phone during class.

I was in class the other day and it was off. Then I turn it on after class and there’s my daughter on the phone whispering, “Mommy, there’s a shutdown at my school and we’re in the room locked up.” Well I just start bawling. I just get in and my friends start coming round “what’s wrong”? I was shaking and just hearing her voice whispering we’re locked up I can’t talk right now. She says, “You know a guy came to school with a gun.” So I’m going oh my god, where is
the guy? Is he next door to her class, everything – and I’m shaking and I go to my girlfriend, “Okay okay do you know the school?” So she called the school number and says, “Okay my friend’s daughter says the school is in lock down,” and they go, “Okay, yeah it was in lockdown but everything is taken care of. They caught the guy and everything.”

The educational system is not without its limitations. Educators, researchers and scholars emphasize the Eurocentric nature of education in North America. Marginalized populations often do not find their histories or their present day experiences (re)presented well in the classroom (Dei et al., 2000). Families who are newcomers to Canada, whose first language is not English, or students who are among the first generation to enter postsecondary education face tremendous obstacles. Aboriginal students, who have suffered intergenerational trauma because their families were victims of Canada’s notorious residential school system, may be particularly hesitant or explicitly hostile towards participating in a Eurocentric education system. Many Aboriginal students still view post-secondary education as a means of assimilation (Malatest & Associates, 2004, p. 11). Single mothers expressed concern that their children would experience racism and colonialism in school. One Aboriginal mother mentions homeschooling her child in order to protect him (Lavell, 1998).

Previous research has shown that the institutional culture of postsecondary education plays a significant role in students’ participation rates and persistence factors. This is especially true for students who experience racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and heterosexism. For single mothers, there is an added stigma associated with marital status and social assistance status. The literature shows one of the most prominent themes that single mothers discussed
were their experiences with faculty and other students. Many single mother students reported facing explicit discrimination from students/peers (Adair, 2001; Duquaine-Watson, 2007) and instructors (Adair, 2001; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Sullivan, 2003). In research conducted with single mother students amidst punitive welfare reform policies in the US, Adair (2001) states:

> Our work reflects the fact that, for some poor single mothers, the academy becomes a place of fear and diminished value, rather than a site of empowerment. For it is here that a culture that often “others” poor single mothers is represented and legitimized by those who profess authority over their lives. These low-income, single-mother students often experienced profound and debilitating terror, shame, humiliation, and objectification, even in classrooms meant to foster independent scholarship and critical thinking. (p. 234)

In other cases, the mentoring relationships built between single mothers and faculty, advisors, and administrative staff has proven to be critical in supporting persistence for single mothers in school (Austin & McDermott, 2004; Branscomb, 2006; Clarke & Peterson, 2004; Sharp, 2004). Jennings (2004) found that instructors involved in on-campus support programs positively affected the students they supported. Duquaine-Watson (2007) conducted a 2-year ethnographic study with a focus on access in postsecondary education for single mothers. Her aim was to provide an analysis at a more micro level, exploring changes that could be made to improve single mothers’ experiences in postsecondary education and thus, positively affect retention rates for these women. She points to how much of the literature in this area focuses on structural level barriers as opposed to micro level obstacles. Based on the findings in her study, she recommends specific and creative solutions that will ease the institutional culture of postsecondary education into better accommodating single mothers. Many initiatives that need to take place on campus are consciousness-raising involving the “student parent” population in
general and single mothers in particular. One of the ways found for faculty members to support consciousness-raising about single mothers on campus and in the classroom is to incorporate a statement in their course syllabi. Research participants provided feedback into what this statement would look like:

*For Student Parents*: If circumstances arise that necessitate your absence from class – such as the illness of a child, closing of day care for inclement weather, etc. – please contact me as soon as possible so we can make arrangements to keep you up-to-date with course material and activities. (Duquaine-Watson, 2007, p. 236)

**Time Poverty**

One of the final barriers I will discuss that single mother students experienced was stress associated with a lack of time – a lack of time to finish their school work, household work, paid work, time for themselves and finally, a lack of time to spend with their children. Megan shared a story about how upset her daughter was with her for spending so much of her time on school work.

I could tell you it’s just the time. My kids complain that I have all this time that I could spend with them. In school with all the papers that you have to write, my time was devoted to that. And you kind of get resentful. I’ll say to the kids I’m doing my paper and I find that what was happening in my house was I was not paying them a lot of attention and they need it. My daughter complained. She complained just a few months ago. She said all you do is go in your room reading, that’s all you do. She’s like when do you find time to spend – she was asking me a question and I was right into something and I said look can’t you wait. And I thought about it and I thought it’s been 4 years that I’ve neglected them. I try to find time to spend with them. That’s my only regret...that is the most difficult thing, spending time and *quality* time at that. The 4 years that I
had, like I know I keep saying to them you know what? I don’t know where I’m going to find the money from, credit it, as soon as I finish my Master’s, we’re going somewhere on vacation. A trip, just the three of us. Because those times, when my daughter said to me, and she cried, she said you’re always in the book.

In terms of paid work, Janice had a work-study position on campus and Eva also worked part-time; however, in the group interview the discussions focused mainly on the amount of school or household work that needed to be done. When time was not spent on school work or paid work, it was taken up by household work. Eva added, “You’re cooking or cleaning or doing laundry. Like yesterday was Family Day and my kids were home and I was in the house with them but I didn’t interact with them I...did some laundry and cleaned my house for the week and then it was bed time.” I also shared similar feelings during the interview, “I think that torn feeling – I’ll be spending time with her – I’ve only known her as a student. So I’ll be spending time with her and then I’m divided because I’ve got all these papers to write so you’re constantly distracted. Then I’m working on papers I feel guilty for not spending time with my daughter.”

The group discussed how they organized their schedules in order to try to finish all the things they needed to get done with strategies such as getting up very early in the morning before the kids woke up or staying up late to finish papers or household work. Janice kept a list of everything she needed to do for the day and all that was left would get carried over onto the next day. Eventually any major appointments or events would be left for reading week or during another break from school but by the time that “break” came, there were more immediate tasks that needed to be completed. Overall, single mother students were on a 24-
hour shift where there was never a moment when there was nothing to do. Then, exhaustion would hit. Eva gave a brief outline of what one of her days looked like and how she had no energy left for school work by the time her day was over:

The difficulty is feeling so damn tired all the time and I’m only 32. I don’t think I’m that old but I’m exhausted. You go to class during the day and you’re running around doing errands and just to make your house function. You know just base minimal stuff. Get to class and then you get home and my son now he’s 11 so I don’t have daycare for him anymore. So I gotta get him at 3:30 right or 4:00 at the max. Same thing my son walks to the library, hangs out because some days I have class until four so I can’t and so then I got to pick him up, pick up the girls, make dinner, do a little bit of laundry, clean up, do their homework, sign permission forms, get this shit ready for tomorrow – it’s 10:00 and I do not have it in me. I try and I feel so guilty about it, and I’m so hard on myself for not getting it done.

As a way to try to cope with all of the work that was needed at home, Eva tried to delegate some of the responsibilities to her children and gave each of them a chore. She reflected on the struggle to maintain the same level of household work going from a two-parent household to one:

Because trying to do everything yourself, you all want to be supermom and sometimes you look at two parent families and some people weren’t ever two parent families, but when you have been and then you go down, you have all this guilt all of the time. You still feel like you have to maintain that sort of standard of everything. You know and you can’t do it, like one person doesn’t have enough time.
All co-participants felt that this stress and lack of time negatively impacted their studies. Janice reflected on the amount of stress she felt with little financial and emotional support. She says, “Stress really mediates how well you do in school. I’m not doing as well as I would have, you know I’m sure, I guarantee I’d be a whole grade higher had I been at the supportive campus.”

The lack of time also contributed to students delaying doctor’s appointments for themselves or other areas of self-care that were necessary to maintain their health. In a recent study by the University of Toronto’s Family Care Office, student parents were interviewed using an oral history method. One male student parent who is a doctoral candidate in a two-parent relationship spoke about “time management” tips (University of Toronto, Family Care Office, 2010, para. 13). Several single mothers in my study critiqued this approach and workshops geared to this framework because, as they put it, “there is simply not enough time in the day” when you are a single mother. Even though learning time-management strategies could be useful in some cases, this approach focuses on the need for the individual to focus on her time-management skills as opposed to structural and societal barriers that may be contributing to a “lack of time.” The single mothers in this study were incredibly efficient with the time they had; there just was not enough time to do everything.

Academic work is quite literally a non-stop activity, as is parenting (see Acker & Armenti, 2004). One of the most striking themes that emerged in this study was the notion of time poverty or single mothers working a 24-hour shift. Typically women were up early and in bed late. For women who had younger children, nights were often interrupted if children were sick or could not sleep. This care work is non-stop and by the time single mothers were able to put their children to bed and finish household work it was at least 11:00 at night. They would
continue to work on school work while getting only a few hours of sleep. This would continue night after night for the whole of the undergraduate degree. Coser (1974) captures this phenomenon as the greedy institution in his discussion of institutions (in this case university and family) and how they compete against each other for scarce human resources and energy.

These findings of time poverty are consistent with the literature. Single mother students have been shown to be under high levels of stress and struggle with balancing multiple roles and responsibilities (Austin & McDermott, 2004; Christie, 2002; Deprez et al., 2004; Duquaine-Watson, 2006; Haleman, 2004; Holyfield, 2002; Jones-DeWeever (2005); Mason, 2002; Reay, 2003; Scarbrough, 2001; Snow, 2005) as well as non-traditional students in general (Kortesoa, 2009). Many times policies that influence how women respond to these roles are contrary to each other. For instance, the hours of operation of childcare centers do not meet the needs of single mothers who are taking classes during various times of the day, including evenings and weekends. In Canada, single mothers are forced to stop being on social assistance and instead, apply for student loans. This only serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty because of the high debt load incurred upon graduation, which may take a decade or more to repay. One of the consequences single mother students face in response to the overwhelming demands placed upon them is exhaustion. Self-care makes it last on the list of things to do. “Here we glimpse another form of poverty: a paucity of time for ‘care of the self’” (Reay, 2003, p. 302). Time is also something that single mothers look forward to having in the future. One single mother, who participated in a focus group in Washington State, recognizes that education may be her only option to increasing opportunities for herself and her daughter. The hope is in the future she will have more time to spend with her. She states:
When I think about the future, I think about having a good enough job that pays enough for me to spend more time with Kaiya. I’ve missed out on so much of her life trying to work and go to school, just so we can get ahead. She’s grown a lot in that time. Getting a degree is really all about spending more time with her, being there as she grows up. – Joanne, welfare recipient, and mother of one. (Watts & Schaefer, 2004, p. 214)

In a mixed methods study in California, Jones-DeWeever (2005, p. 127) found that while some women expressed concern over not having enough time to manage competing demands, they insisted these sacrifices were being made in order to provide better futures for their children. Unfortunately, as dedicated as single mothers are to both their children and their education, in the end, the time crunch can have devastating effects on the relationship with their children (Deprez, et al., 2004, p. 230; Mitchell, 2003, p. 117; Scarbrough, 2001, p. 268; Snow, 2005, p. 62). In one study, a single mother reported that she withdrew from college because she needed to attend to her daughter who was “rebelling in a very big way” (Scarbrough, 2001, p. 268). Another single mother reflects on her life since welfare reform in the United States. She does not have money to pay for basic things like shelter and has to put her twins in substandard daycare for 10 hours a day while she works. She explains, “My girls are generally asleep when I drop them off in the early morning and sound asleep by the time I get home in the evening. But even if they had been able to stay awake, I am usually too tired to read to or play with them. This is what breaks my heart the most” (Mitchell, 2003, p. 117). The results from these studies support the single mother students’ reports of stress and time poverty.
Conclusion

Overall, single mother students’ experiences were intense, the barriers were many and some of these barriers depended on the social location of the students. Barriers included the stigma associated with a single mother family status, which permeated every aspect of their lives. It was impossible to separate this stigma from their other experiences of racism, sexism, and classism. Sometimes it was difficult for single mothers to discern where one oppression started and another one ended because they were so interconnected.

Most of the women discussed issues of poverty and security. Students had an ambiguous relationship with their student loans. On one hand the amount of stress they experienced even thinking about the amount of debt they were acquiring was palpable throughout the interviews. Many times they still struggled financially throughout the year, especially near the end of terms when their money would run out. However, they were all grateful for what money they did receive and knew they would not be able to be in university without it. Graduating with high student debt loads may have serious consequences for this population, especially because one could assume many of the same barriers which exist in university, such as a lack of childcare and discrimination, may also exist in the paid labour market. Facing these additional barriers in the paid labour market may make it particularly difficult for them to repay their student loans while still trying to provide for their children.

On a more micro level, since professors have the potential to play a strong role in terms of mentorship and support, they should be provided education about issues specific to single mothers and other disadvantaged groups of students. Some practical ways to put equity into practice is to acknowledge that if single mothers need to have their cell phones out (on vibrate)
it is not because they are trying to be rude in the classroom but because they are often the only contact people for their children in cases of emergencies. Also, since they may be the only caregivers in the household, if their children are too sick to go to school they will not be able to attend class. Accepting this reason as an excusable absence is necessary in order to acknowledge the responsibilities this student group has. Also, participating in consciousness-raising activities on campus and in the classroom is important. One of the ways that research suggests doing this is in the way of an introduction to the issues in the course syllabi such as acknowledging student parents may be absent from class because of issues with children’s illness or daycare closures (Duquaine-Watson, 2007, p. 236).

A clear narrative emerged from women’s stories that sought to challenge the dominant culture of the institution itself. Not only should the institution be transformed to value and demonstrate multiple forms of knowledge and pedagogies, and be representative of diverse faculty and administrators, it also has a responsibility to partner with the community instead of holding itself outside of the community. One of the ways it can do this is to provide supports on campus for students who need assistance with and information about childcare, social assistance, bursaries, scholarships, food security and housing. Simply put, single mother students did not have enough time in the day to attend to family responsibilities and school. They often compensated for this through depriving themselves of any social activities and sleep. Any improvement in terms of on- or off-campus supports would help to alleviate some of the stress.

The process of interviewing women for this study has been both exciting and humbling. Women often expressed their own excitement in participating because they felt their realities
had been rendered invisible or devalued. In a neo-liberal political climate that encourages individual responsibility and accountability, single mother students were often left to navigate academia alone, unless and until they found others like themselves. The co-participants expressed clear desires for their stories to reach a broader audience with the hope that things will change for the better for future single mother students.
Chapter 7: Supports and Strengths

Introduction

This chapter will outline the supports and strengths women reported in this study. In spite of the onerous barriers described in the previous two chapters, women also identified many supports which helped their families persevere. Many women also saw the strength their family represented and felt free to be the sole decision maker for their children. They viewed their families as unique, inspirational and loving. Some even identified their family status as being free from the constraints sometimes found in a stereotypical nuclear family. For Ida, a queer single mother by choice, she welcomes the opportunity to bring her child up in an environment of equity and activism. She is frustrated with responses from people who pity and feel sorry for her.

Much of the research discusses facilitators for education by drawing conclusions based upon the barriers to education. I wanted to make sure I explicitly asked the questions, “What do you see as a strength to being a single mother student?” and “What or who supported you?” This way not only do the hardships emerge but also what women found to be important sources of support. The findings that follow, therefore, represent various elements such as the determination to be a good role model for their children, on-campus supports and services, helpful pedagogical and institutional practices, self-care, reciprocity and the empowerment of being the sole-provider in the household.
Economic Security and Role Modelling

Above all else, women reported attending school in order to provide what they described as a better life for their children. Women defined a better life as the ability to provide economic security and stability for themselves and their children. They all hoped for stable and secure employment that would also mean more time with their children. An important point that repeatedly emerged throughout previous research was that single mothers persevered in postsecondary school by reminding themselves they were doing this in order to provide a better life for their children (Jones De-Weever, 2005, pp. 126-127). Children were a motivating factor for many single mothers to enroll in postsecondary education to begin with (Haleman, 2004).

In order for single mothers to persevere through nearly insurmountable obstacles, children are cited as being one of their main sources of strength. Single mothers are fiercely dedicated to being a positive role model for their children (Deprez et al., 2004; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Holyfield, 2002; Jones-DeWeever, 2005; Mason, 2002; Pandey et al., 2000; Ratner, 2004; Reay, 2003). In one example, Hilary Clinton details her experience of becoming the “founding Board President of the Arkansas Single Parent Scholarship Program” (Holyfield, 2002, p. ix). She reflects on the story of a single mother who is concerned that her role as a student is taking away the time she needs to be a mother. Her son’s schoolteacher replied with, “Don’t you dare drop out. Not a day goes by that your son doesn’t brag to his classmates that his Mom’s going to be an engineer” (Holyfield, 2002, p. ix). The theme for single mothers to be a positive role model for their children not only increases their motivation to stay in school despite the struggles they face, but also shows to the children the importance of education. In
previous research, most single mothers reported that by valuing education and taking their studies seriously, this resulted in positive educational outcomes for their children in terms of children feeling like they belonged in the education system and enjoying their studies. Sometimes children even felt there was an opportunity for them to go on to postsecondary education. Women wanted their children to take going to university for granted, instead of thinking it was not an option for them. Therefore, the educational pursuits by single mothers can serve as protective factors for their children by decreasing risk factors associated with living in poverty (Haleman, 2004, p. 779). One single mother, Elaine, highlights the importance of encouraging education for her children:

I think if I do the best I can do and go the farthest I can go, then my children are going to do that too. And they know I’m in school and they know I’m going on to graduate school. They know what graduate school is because I’ve told them. They know that I get good grades and they know why that’s important. And I think that’s something they’ll carry with them. (Haleman, 2004, p. 778)

Jones-DeWeever (2005) uses findings from a mixed-methods study conducted in California to show the positive impact single mothers’ education had on their children. The purpose of the study was to examine the impact of higher education on the lives of women, especially women of colour, who were also on social assistance. Jones-DeWeever (2005, pp. 126-127) found:

Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) indicated that their children are now more likely to express a desire to go to college, 42 percent said their children had improved study habits, and almost a third (30 percent) indicated that their children are making better grades. The positive effects on children are perhaps not surprising, particularly given that 9 in 10 respondents indicated that they now feel better equipped to help their children achieve educational goals and many described how their successes have ultimately expanded their children’s horizons.
The benefits school-aged children receive from seeing their mothers attending school are well documented in the literature (Holyfield, 2002; Jones-DeWeever, 2005; Kahn et al., 2004; Stevens, 2003). Single mothers may also be able to better manage their time balancing schoolwork and parenting responsibilities when their children are school-aged. Their school schedules may provide flexibility in trying to create this balance; one participant noted how she and her son used to study together (Adair, 2001, p. 227), which can support time together for family as well as practically combining the work that needs to get done.

Many women desired more quality time to spend on recreation and leisure activities with their families. While most women loved being in school, some also expressed the desire to have a more normal 9-5 schedule where they could leave their work at work and not bring it home. Daniela, a recent graduate and full-time employed single mother said,

Any time I had for myself I spent on school. It’s different when you’re working. I go to work. I leave work at work. I never have work to bring home. So when I’m home I know it’s just my home stuff to do. I hadn’t really parented without being in school for much of the time. I spent more of the first 5 years of Joshua’s life going to school then I did not going to school. The first 9 months I stayed home with him but after that I was in school so I didn’t really know any other lifestyle. So when I graduated I realized how much time I’d actually invested and I think if I had known that I’m not sure I would have...I don’t regret that I did it but I think wow! The amount of time I invested! I don’t know how I had the energy.

Although some of the single mothers in this study had graduated with their undergraduate degrees, the focus of the interviews were on their experience while still completing their undergraduate education. Some single mothers felt more economically secure while others
were looking for work or continuing on into graduate studies. What was commonly expressed, however, was the perception that the more education they could complete, the more economically secure they would be in the long run. According to the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities’ (2009) website, “By 2013, more than 70 percent of all new jobs, even entry-level positions, will need some postsecondary education or skills training.”

Credentials are not the end-all solution to poverty; the root problems of poverty are more structurally based. However, given that most jobs require some postsecondary education it is important to look at education as one possible factor that can contribute to increased economic security.

It is likely that some of the same experiences of classism, racism, ableism, heterosexism, and discrimination based on family status that women faced in the education system and in the community will also be experienced in the paid labour force. With the current recession and widespread unemployment, women were also worried there would not be any jobs available after graduating. This global recession sometimes encouraged them to stay in school and contributed to many women deciding to apply to graduate studies.

On a more micro level, many participants noted the positive effect doing well in school had on their self-esteem and confidence. Particularly for women who experienced violence in their previous relationships, education was seen as emancipatory, encouraging independence, and increasing feelings of self-sufficiency. Many times their children were seen as the number one driving force that enabled their perseverance against exhaustion and burn out, yet women were also doing it for themselves. A few women dealt with the pressures and high demands of education by making the conscious decision to let go of expectations to be that “perfect A+"
student. Often these women would express a need for balance in their lives and since they would not compromise in their role as a mother, the quality of their school work had to suffer. They accepted passing or average marks because they felt it was not possible to be good at both school and motherhood simultaneously.

While all single mothers reported feeling tired and exhausted because of the amount of paid work, student work, childcare work, and other responsibilities they took on, some found taking care of themselves a priority. Sometimes this meant negotiating what was most important for them and in some cases children were placed near the top of their priorities while schooling fell in importance. Many women had something they liked to do for themselves such as exercising, reading a book, watching a movie, sleeping, or having a glass of wine at the end of the night. For women who were able to carve out a bit of time for themselves, balance in their lives allowed them to concentrate on mothering and school work. As Donna explained,

I have learned to sleep and eat. I actually learned why children get fussy when they are hungry and when they haven’t slept because when I am incredibly stressed, when I haven’t eaten, and when I haven’t slept, I cannot parent the way that I should. So I have been forced to actually sleep. I don’t want to sleep. I have so much work to do, but I know in the mornings or the evenings I will pay. So that is something I have learned to do; rest my body and eat. Because I am one person. If I fall apart, then she has nothing and nobody else.

For women who were able to maintain high marks, education and being “good” in school was closely tied to affirming their single mother student identities and raising their self-esteem. As opposed to being in an abusive relationship where they often felt controlled and of
low self-worth, being good at something and being able to complete something transformed their lives. This positive student identity also affected women who had experienced homelessness or street involvement, mental health issues, and/or addictions. When I asked Gemma what it was about school that she enjoyed so much she explained,

It’s freedom. It’s an opportunity for me to shine in an area that has nothing to do with family or home. And if you put the work in, you get the rewards back. I mean in my marriage, there was very little self-esteem building and confidence building. There was very little affirmation – well, none basically.

**Family and Friends**

All of the single mother students identified at least one support person they had in their lives. Inside the institution administrators, professors, and other students were helpful. Outside of the institution advocates from social services, family, and friends were supportive. Single mother students particularly appreciated assistance with childcare, meal preparation, housecleaning, financial assistance and emotional support. Single girlfriends of single mothers or “aunties” were also identified as playing a supportive role, especially when they did not have any children themselves. In the group interview, they talked about these connections in depth. Janice’s mother had died and she felt isolated where she lived. She credits a friend with providing emotional support through email contact. For some, the grandparents also played a role in taking care of the children; however, it was pointed out that children are viewed differently in various communities. From an anti-colonial perspective, Emma discussed how within Native agencies and communities, family is first. This cultural view assisted her in her role as a single mother since children were seen as part of a community, not solely an individual
responsibility. Eva also emphasized the importance of how her ex-partner’s family view children.

Emma: They are not seen as a burden. My daughter is seen as an active participant and the attitude is that this is how she learns, being in the environment. So if she misbehaves, well that’s how she’s going to learn not to misbehave. So they are welcome.

Jenn: There isn’t this strict dichotomy between adult-only space and children-only space?

Eva: I find that’s a really big difference. I sort of inhabit these two worlds because on my side everybody is White and on the ex’s side they are from Jamaica and it’s so different. So different the way they view children and family. Like my mom will take them for a couple of hours and she’s like are you coming back? Oh no, three kids! My mother-in-law, she’s my ex’s mother, she’s like oh leave them they’re fine. Come pick them up on Monday.

[Group laughs]

Eva: It’s just like, I couldn’t believe – it’s so different the way kids are viewed.

Emma: It’s how cultures view family and extended family.

Eva: Yeah, it’s very different, very different.

This example shows how different types of families view the roles of children. Many women who were women of colour or Aboriginal pointed out how restrictive Western culture was in terms of thinking childcare should be an individual mother’s responsibility whereas, in this culture children were seen as a community responsibility and not a burden.
Family and friends provided valuable emotional support and sometimes financial. Most often, the support was in the way of childcare. This finding is consistent with previous research on single mothers in higher education; family members, most often the mothers of single mothers, take up the childcare responsibilities to compensate for a lack of effective childcare policies across North America. The act of providing this unpaid childcare is described in the literature as assistance from social networks such as family and community (Austin & McDermott, 2004; Christopher, 2005; Holyfield, 2002). I would suggest it is problematic framing it this way. There is a lack of analysis which looks at this assistance by social networks and family as unpaid work. It is done primarily by grandmothers of the children who have unpaid work of their own to do in their homes as well. While many grandmothers, sisters, and aunts enjoy the time they spend with children and may even not see it as work, the economy is directly benefiting from it, providing no financial compensation to the family members providing this work (mostly women). Furthermore, the grandmothers may go through their own feelings of apprehension toward the arrival of their grandchildren, which may complicate this childcare work even further. In one study, “Low-income mothers dreaded the added financial burden of a grandchild, and they felt stigmatized by their daughter’s out-of-wedlock birth” (Jennings, 2004, p. 122). Further, single mothers experienced additional stress when they did not have a good relationship with their own mothers but needed to rely on them for assistance. With an absence of a national childcare program across most of Canada, grandparents are increasingly being relied upon to provide this carework (Albanese, 2008, pp. 121-122). Feminist and anti-colonial theories have played a major role in uncovering the gendered, classed, and raced implications of carework, both paid and unpaid. In my own case, I
also rely on my mother, my daughter’s grandmother. However, it is also important to note that in some cultures, for example, in some Aboriginal cultures, children are seen as being part of a larger community. Children are raised by and are the responsibility of all in their community, regardless of the circumstances. Biological parents are not seen as being the only (or “natural”) caregivers, as seen in many dominant Western cultures (Anderson, 2000, p. 205-206). In this example, childcare would not be separated out and viewed as unpaid work.

Bezanson (2006) analyzed data retrieved from the *Speaking Out* project that explored the effects of neoliberal state policies on low-income households that were implemented when the Conservative government, led by Mike Harris, came into power in Ontario during 1995-2000. The researchers’ purpose was to examine how these households absorbed the shock of punitive and restrictive social policies and more specifically, how this affected the unpaid work of “social reproduction” primarily done by female members in the household. The result was an increase in the unpaid work for women. The government directed policies to support the accumulation of capital in the marketplace at the expense of downloading services and unpaid work onto families. “Female household members especially habitually underestimated the amount of time they spent on unpaid work. Many noted that they could not easily separate the work of caring for children with their sense of love while doing it” (Bezanson, 2006, p. 127).

While parents and other family members may be willing and able to provide this carework, it should not be the only option made available to families. Additionally, state supported childcare must also be available to assist families who work and/or study.
Institutional Policies and Practices

Institutional policies and supports were discussed at length by many of the women in this study. While they recognized the institution should not be solely held responsible for all of the challenges they faced in academia, they did highlight many areas that need improvement and services which need better coordination such as on-campus supports. Also, co-participants felt as though their identities as single mother students were invisible within the institution so they especially valued the supports they did receive.

Family housing.

Participants offered a mix of responses regarding on-campus supports. Many reported being aware of no supports specific to single mother students including bursaries, scholarships, support groups, or food banks. However, some of the co-participants lived in family housing. Family housing differed from regular student housing in that the units were only available to students who lived with their partner and/or child(ren). No consensus emerged as to the value of family housing as a support. Some enjoyed the collegial and community environment of their living quarters since many of their neighbours had children and there was a playground nearby. Julianne also started a child care co-operative using a point system where parents would earn points for providing child care and would be able to pay for child care from others in the group by using these points. Many women found this system helpful.

The location of family housing was also ideal as it was within walking distance of most of the university campuses which saved students transportation costs. However, some single mothers were frustrated because of the cost of the units. While single parents receive priority on the wait list for family housing, they still have to pay rent based on the unit's cost.
Participants expressed some resentment that they were not provided with a subsidy for having a dependent. Couples with or without children were able to access the same unit for the same cost as single mother families.

**Student parent centre.**

Research has shown that single mother students experience many systemic barriers. Most supports and services on campus are geared towards the traditional student stereotype; single, White, male, without dependents, and young (Christopher, 2005, p. 170). This plays out in the ways that extra-curricular events are organized, orientation sessions are conducted, and how financial aid departments are run in the universities. Extra-curricular events are not always family friendly nor provide childcare. In general orientation sessions, student parents may not be made aware of applicable resources and financial aid departments do not always demonstrate the knowledge of resources specific to single mothers or low-income students. One of the exceptions I found was the Student Parent Centre established at one of the universities. While having this centre on campus may increase the visibility of student parents as a whole, many women criticized the centre for not paying attention to the needs of single parents and single mothers in particular. The centre offered money management sessions with the assumption that two adults were living in the household and provided strategies accordingly. The needs of single parents are different from those of two-parent families. Single mothers spoke about challenges associated with paid and unpaid work, dating, time poverty, violence and custody, exhaustion, and frustration, many of which either do not apply to two-parent families or are at the very least experienced differently. Further, the “problem” was not
how single mothers or other marginalized students managed their money; the problem was
that they did not have *enough* money.

A single parent support group was widely identified as an important support. This group
was not institutionalized but started by an administrator on her own time over a decade ago.
Students meet once a month and discuss a range of topics. The administrator arranges to bring
in speakers to talk about issues the students identify themselves as important. What seemed to
be most important about belonging to this group was that single mothers experienced
validation from each other. They were there for each other during custody issues, discussed
effective parenting strategies, and as Donna explained, kept her “sane.” She continued,

> Around the time I joined the group I was feeling guilty the whole time and
> honestly was surprised I did not go really crazy. One woman in the group said,
> “Donna, you are trying to do the job of two people. Do your job as a mother,
> that’s the best you can do.”

Through meeting others like themselves, they were able to share their frustration about
social systems, insensitive professors, controlling ex-partners, curriculum that did not reflect
their social locations, and discrimination in the work force. However, they were also able to
connect with each other and share strategies about how to deal with the difficulties they faced
as well as share information about important resources. This experience decreased their
feelings of isolation and invisibility.

Bruns (2004) also found that having a support group on campus for single mothers
reduced their feelings of isolation and provided a space where single mothers could express
their fears and trepidation about their experiences on and off campus. Single mothers were
also able to debrief situations in which they were stressed and how this stress impacted their children (Bruns, 2004, p. 103). This is important because in this context, it is more likely other single mothers would understand these experiences of frustration without passing judgment on each other.

Other services provided on campus proved to be helpful. Women with custody and safety issues often used on-campus security. Several women also took advantage of a legal assistance program offered through services in the university. Several accessed short-term psychological services on campus to deal with feelings of frustration, stress, and depression. They found these supports beneficial but were sent back into the community where long waiting lists were common for more specialized or long-term services.

**Access programs.**

The single parent support group was created by an administrator during her own time. Another program which was useful was the Transitional Year Programme (TYP). This program was developed in order to address the marginalization of disadvantaged groups of students and improve access.

The targeted groups included (and still include) Aboriginal students, Black/African Canadians, women who are single parents, and working-class students. Students with disabilities and of diverse sexual orientations, refugee students, and those who have experienced homelessness are now among the students that TYP serves. (Brathwaite, 2003, pp. 12-13)

Some of the students from both the group and individual interviews entered academia through this route. The program was open to students who were generally out of school for a period of time and needed assistance in transitioning into the academic environment. A key component
of this program, and how many students found out about it, was through their community outreach program. This program is quite innovative and critical in increasing awareness of marginalized students on campus. It seeks to disrupt how society traditionally views students and acknowledges the strengths and challenges they bring through their lived experiences. Stallberg-White (2003) captures these complexities best when she writes,

> The underlying factors, or what leads to successful academic credential, are much more complex than a numeric index – like the number of courses passed or the grades received – can reveal. There are students who cannot afford childcare or whose child keeps them awake before the final exam; who are harassed or discriminated against because of their skin colour, accent, or ethnicity; who, upon entering the classroom, replay the sexual abuse they experienced at the hands of a school vice-principal. There are students who recall the failure of earlier school days; who wrestle with a learning disability or chronic illness; and who have experienced incarceration, drug/alcohol abuse. Some live in poverty, in a noisy, crowded home, waiting with baited breath for their next OSAP cheque; some are individuals who may experience isolation, reduced self-esteem, lack of confidence, and financial or other stress in addition to academic upgrading. All students need support, confidence boosting, acceptance, role models, and a place to belong so they can fulfil the dreams that may have been stolen from them. (p. 183)

Although there were limitations to this program, Antone (2003) also discusses the importance of the access program for Aboriginal peoples. Drawing upon interviews with Aboriginal students of the TYP, she found that many found this program to be supportive and a good way to transition into a predominantly Eurocentric atmosphere. Many peers and faculty were also supportive of Native issues (Antone, 2003, p. 176).

This type of access program was successful in another study where an educational institution ran a preadmissions bridging program to assist students before they began their college degrees. It was a federally funded program, created to support particular groups of
students entering the institution. This included students with disabilities, low-income students, and first generation students. Many of these students were women on social assistance. This program made sure to link students with appropriate financial and academic resources and served as an advocate office for students, assisting in monitoring and supporting their progress (Sharp, 2004).

One of the universities had particularly strong ties with Aboriginal communities in the area. Mariposa attended this university and was first introduced to it through the Native University Access program that assists on-reserve Aboriginal students in transitioning to university. She was able to take courses on-reserve that were transferred to participating universities’ undergraduate degrees. Mariposa emphasized how important it was for Aboriginal students to have a connection with their culture and community. These courses were a way for students to be immersed in their own on-reserve communities while learning traditional university courses in a culturally relevant way. Not all professors who came from the university onto the reserve were Aboriginal themselves, but they were at the very least critical of a Eurocentric perspective to education, open to new ways of thinking, and encouraged students to think about the course content from their own contexts.

Students who were involved in access programs were made aware of various financial and emotional support offered through services in the university. Others who were not a part of any of these systems were less aware of potential resources and felt isolated. It could be argued that some of these non-traditional services and supports/access programs need to be developed and implemented by all universities in order to increase the participation and success of single mothers and other non-traditional students.
However, the stigmas associated with targeted supports on campus can be a barrier; some of the single mother students who were aware of the support group or student parent office were reluctant to make use of them because of the larger societal stigma associated with single motherhood. Some women kept their family status hidden, either intentionally or unintentionally, especially the women who were studying in non-social science faculties.

**Administrators.**

What emerged as a major facilitator for single mother students was the support, guidance, and advocacy they received on the part of key administrators or professors within the university. Interestingly, the two students in the group interview who went to the same university named the same administrator and professors who played large roles in their student lives. Even one of the co-participants who went to a different university had heard of this one administrator. Whenever students were interested in registering for this particular program, his name came up as the key contact for students.

Eva: Even I know him.

Megan: He is so amazing, so amazing.

Eva: He is famous.

Megan: I tell you he’s my godsend. He knows everybody’s name. I went and I spoke with him and he told me exactly what to do and I said, you know, I just quit my job and I need to go full time because it’s costing me a lot of money to have people come in the evenings to pay them money to babysit. He said, “Okay, you need to write a letter to Tom explaining this” and I wrote the letter and the next day (snaps fingers) I was in.
Emma expressed the same sentiment that he was there for her during difficult times, particularly during a time where she had a professor she felt was racist. She said,

I wasn’t dealing with it anymore. I went to him. I’m just like, I don’t know what to do and he walked me through it. Every single time his door was never closed. I never felt I was interrupting or bothering him. Even now, there have been times since I graduated that I’ve called up and said, “Oh I need this – am I bothering you” and he’s done it within 30 seconds.

It was agreed by all co-participants that there is a need for internal advocates to be within the university. An often corporate and bureaucratic institution such as a university has many confusing protocols and procedures to follow. Also, it becomes clear that some flexibility exists on the part of administrators. Many times rules and regulations appear to be strictly enforced, when actually they can be changed at the discretion of the administrator. This can be both encouraging (if you meet with the administrator who appears to be working with you) and frustrating (if you meet with the administrator who appears to be working against you). Co-participants not only spoke about the insightfulness and helpfulness of the administrators but also whether they were supported with respect.

Eva also knew two administrators who worked at her university who were advocates of single parents. When I asked what made these two administrators somehow different, she responded:

They are just really good at what they do. Sort of a little bit outside the traditional university. Like I find a lot of people who you know – there’s a lot of people at this university who really think they are hot shit because they are here, right? There is a real snobbininess that goes with that. But they are just a little bit
outside of that box. Like Sandy is a total communist, she’s a total Marxist and the other guy, he’s gay and so I think maybe their own particular social location in terms of being outside – they might not fit into what the university privileges as being a White, straight, and male academic...it’s a huge place, you can’t go up against a huge bureaucracy like that and win when you’re not in a position of power. So yeah, I think that’s a big thing, is knowing someone on the inside.

Janice was equally impacted in a negative fashion by an administrator associated with her university. Because the university is so large, it is separated into several different colleges which have its own Registrar’s Office and academic advisors. When Janice originally applied to university she was young, single and childless and listed a college on her application that fit her profile at that time – one that had a reputation for its academic success. When she returned to school 20 years later and as a single mother, she was still assigned to this college. She wanted to attend the college that was specifically geared towards mature students and students with children but did not find out about this option until much later. She went through most of her undergraduate experience not feeling supported in school because the college was not able to respond to her needs, nor did the academic advisor suggest she switch to the college which specialized in services and needs of students with children. Janice stated that at her college:

I had the opposite of support. The insults that I had to listen to were horrific. I thought of dropping out of my first week again and if my kids weren’t this age – you know I can’t drop out in front of my kids – I would have absolutely dropped out... she was an academic advisor. She told me if I wasn’t smart enough to make it through the first time I should consider going to [community] college and not come back. She had no idea why I dropped out. That was her reason, well if you weren’t smart enough to stick with it the first time then you should think of
[community] college – it was meant for people who aren’t as smart. Those were her exact words.

Janice finally found out by accident near the end of her undergraduate degree that she could switch colleges. Eva could see how this could happen:

The woman who I said was so great, she said to me one day, “We live in our own little world over here.” It’s true. They are so used to dealing with mature students that they are very sympathetic, so supportive, and so wonderful. I heard people from other colleges say, “We get no help, we get no support, we get no understanding.” That’s why we all flock to this college.

Eva and Janice both went to the same university; however, their experiences were substantially different. While Janice felt isolated, experienced discrimination from her advisors, and received little financial support from the institution, Eva felt she belonged to a larger community. Overall, Eva felt supported in her program, mainly because of the emotional support, academic guidance, and financial support her progressive college offered her. Also, this campus known for supporting mature students does community outreach. Eva had first been introduced to university through the adult learning centre, which is a centre that assists students who are out of school to complete their high school education and move on into postsecondary education if they so wish. Eva explained:

I went straight into the bridging program. They gave me a grant. I didn’t pay for it. I had no money so they covered my child care and my transportation and then I ended up in the university at this college. So that’s why I’ve had such a great experience is because I ended up in the right place from the start and that makes all the difference in the world. If you end up in the right place to start – like if I
had ended up with professors in the beginning that were like you know too bad for you, screw you if you have kids, you aren’t smart enough – I would have dropped out too because I was so insecure about coming. I was like I don’t belong here. Right away I found a community of wonderful supportive people and that’s what makes the difference I think.

It is clear that the lack of coordinated services played a role in how these two students experienced their undergraduate programs. The large size of the university may contribute to the challenges in coordinating services, which is why these specific colleges may have been developed. There is something to be said for having one specific college geared towards mature students and single parents where they can provide specialized services, hire people who are knowledgeable and empathetic towards single mothers, and be aware of the available resources and be able to respond to the diverse and often “non-traditional” needs of single mother students. Also, as Emma points out, she felt as though she belonged to a community and was often encouraged to apply for many bursaries that were geared specifically to single mothers in cases of emergencies. However, this same system is problematic because of the experience Janice had. What happens when students are not made aware of their options? It may be helpful for bursaries and scholarships to be made available at a university level instead of at a college level so that all students are made aware of potential resources. Also, to assist in reducing the confusion for students, information could be gathered in one place that has resources grouped and listed according to eligibility requirements so students know upfront what resources are available to them. Further, motherhood and relationship status can always change so it is not as if these are fixed categories throughout entire undergraduate programs.
Because of this fluidity, it may be beneficial for all students to receive this information, regardless of which college they are a part of.

As a response to the experiences discussed above, internal advocates/liaisons should be available on campus to meet with students, provide them with clear information and connect them with appropriate resources. Among many possibilities, this advocate can help navigate various financial aid, social assistance and resources on campus. A comprehensive and centralized system needs to be in place where single mothers are automatically enrolled for resources, social supports, scholarships and bursaries they are entitled to. An alternative option would be providing comprehensive packages to single mothers that list all of their options in terms of accessing social assistance, financial aid and postsecondary education in a clear and transparent way. These findings are consistent with research that calls for an increase to on-campus support for single mother students in the form of an on-campus advocate (Austin & McDermott, 2004; Bruns, 2004; Sharp, 2004). This advocate could be responsible for organizing special orientations for single mothers upon arriving at the school. Doing outreach in the community at large would also be beneficial so that single mothers can be aware of what supports are available to them if they decide to apply for postsecondary education. The advocate could also play a vital role in liaising with workers from various branches of government who are responsible for services such as social assistance, childcare subsidy, and subsidized housing.

A question that does not emerge in previous research is how do single mothers engage in these confusing and often contradicting systems of financial aid and postsecondary education when their first language is not English and/or if they are immigrant women? What if
they do not have high levels of literacy or they have learning or physical disabilities? What additional barriers are in place and are they communicated with in the language they are most comfortable in? How are their needs met in terms of accessing this information?

Previous research found other on-campus supports and resources that assisted single mothers during their time in school. In one study, the Commuter Service and Housing Resource Centre were available to assist students in finding housing and daycare. They also provided the space and food for a weekly dinner for student parents to attend, which enabled them to meet other student parents across the university with an aim to network and learn from one another (Austin & McDermott, 2004).

**Professors.**

Emma and Megan went to the same university but at different times. They both highlighted the same professors in their program who went beyond what is typically expected from them. These professors offered support outside of the classroom and made Emma and Megan feel they belonged in the university. Megan discusses the nervousness she felt in returning to school as a mature student. She says:

I walked into class the first day and I’m looking around and I saw 18 year olds. I go what the heck am I doing here? I looked around me and I’m looking for people who are my age. Thank god there was one probably 5 years younger than me, two were parents but they were still young but I go that’s okay, at least they are parents and we happened to just sit next to each other so we formed a group (laughs)...I didn’t know if I wanted to come back but I had this professor and we’re walking out and I introduce myself and I said I don’t know what I’m doing here. The professor said, “What do you mean you don’t know what you’re
doing here?” I go do you know how old I am and how many kids I have? She said, “I didn’t go back to school until I was a mature student so don’t worry about it – you can make it!” And just having her say that, just those words. All the encouragement I got makes me want to say okay I can do it.

Emma mentioned the same professor as being instrumental to her success in her undergraduate degree by advocating for her during important administrative decisions. Another professor was mentioned as playing a role in how Emma and Megan experienced their education. All of the co-participants discussed their frustration with curriculum that solely focussed on abstract knowledge without making the links to how theory and practice play out in everyday life. One professor in particular was noted as offering alternative ways of learning and writing in her courses. Emma and Megan were critical of how certain ways of writing with an aim to publish in scholarly journals were privileged over others. They noted how this one professor writes from the heart, incorporates her own personal and community’s experiences into her articles and how refreshing it was for them to learn in this way. Megan said, “I know what she’s talking about. I enjoy her readings. It’s like yes, I can go and tell my daughter guess what I just read and tell her about the journal article.” Megan finished her undergraduate degree last year and was completing her Master’s at the time of the interview. She said, “I will be so proud to get that, you know the book that they bind for you. My mom wants one and when I give it to her to read I want her to know what I’m talking about. I don’t want to be writing and my mom says, “Okay, I don’t know what you are talking about.” I said this is the reason that this is the way I want to write.” When she told this to her supervisor, the supervisor supported her and said she would challenge the university if administrators questioned her
about it. For many co-participants in this study, learning and writing in a way that used reflexivity and a connection to personal or real world issues was key in contributing to the passion they felt about their education and to their own success as students.

Several students discussed the barriers they experienced based on policies or practices in the education system. Mandatory attendance policies were problematic for single mothers. Austin and McDermott (2004) refer to a university’s policy in the Northeast United States: “The university’s absence policy identifies illness, scheduled activities for other classes, military service, and athletics as excused absences, but not illness of family members” (p. 104). It is clear this policy was not created with the needs of single mothers in mind. Daycares have strict policies in place not allowing sick children to be in care and so it is left to single mothers to scramble for emergency childcare that does not exist or take care of their children themselves. Incorporating the illness of family members as an acceptable reason for being absent would also benefit other students (most often women) who may have various caregiving responsibilities such as caring for older people in their families, family members with disabilities, and/or family members with health complications. It is troubling that the illness of a family member is not considered a legitimate excuse for absence, yet “athletics” is.

Adair (2001) argues for educators to be aware of the social injustices wrought against single mothers who are trying to persist in school. She insists, “we must begin to understand, critique, and creatively redress the traditional, allegedly ‘neutral’ pedagogical practices that can act as barriers to this population’s academic success” (Adair, 2001, p. 220). Some institutions have begun to recognize the need to interact with students using holistic pedagogy and
institutional practices that acknowledge and respect the whole individual in hopes of promoting academic success all around (Duquaine-Watson, 2007).

For single mothers, the design of a course makes all of the difference in whether or not they will drop the course. When there are meetings assigned outside of class time such as for group work projects or a field trip to somewhere in the community, many single mothers find this difficult to negotiate in terms of accessing childcare, finding the finances to support extracurricular events, and actually finding the time to participate within an already stretched-to-capacity schedule. Possible suggestions to curb these barriers are to schedule time in class for students to work together on group projects and to make attendance to community excursions optional (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). Moreover, educators should evaluate how they teach material in the classroom. Are the teaching methodologies they use meeting the needs of their students? Sharp (2004) insists, “Pedagogies in all subject areas that connect systematic knowledge and skills to students’ experience and everyday lives appear to resonate with first-generation, and perhaps all, students” (p. 127). What is lacking in previous research on single mother students is an analysis of the institutional pressures that faculty experience. If the university designed ways in which faculty were evaluated with specific attention paid to the retention of diverse students, and provided the time and space in which to engage in meaningful pedagogy, perhaps access would be increased for non-traditional students and single mothers not be made to feel like “outsiders within the academy” (Conway, 1996, p. 37). However, not all professors and instructors have the same access to power within postsecondary institutions and thus, should not be assumed to be in a secure enough position
to deal with risk and to challenge the system, particularly with the increase of precarious
temporary contract work in the university (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2008).

Nearly all of the women emphasized the importance of having a good relationship with
their professors and that professors needed to be compassionate and understanding. Since
accommodations for single mothers were rarely institutionalized, it was left up to the individual
professor’s discretion. This lack of institutionalization is problematic for several reasons. First,
professors and instructors do not receive institutional support to offer critical pedagogies in the
classroom or to make specific arrangements with different students in order to create the
optimal environment for the success of students. Further, who are the professors most likely to
have ample resources, time and energy in the university? In general, the role of professor holds
a high status and prestige in the community; however, it is important not to assume that all
professors occupy the same privileged role in the academy. Atkinson (2003) discusses her joys
and frustrations with being a single mother academic in the university in her article aptly
subtitled, “Single Motherhood in an Academic Culture of Doubt.” She writes,

Sessional teaching is exhilarating. The opportunity to engage students in a
freplay of ideas, to draw out their strengths and open their minds to new ways
of looking at the world, is a challenge that inspires me daily. But sessional
teaching is also debilitating. The need to create courses, write lectures, mark
assignments and set examinations while being paid – on average – less than
$8000 (Cdn) per course, is such time-intensive work that it can (and often does)
stop research in its tracks. Since research leads to publications, and publications
lead to permanent employment, there is a constant tension between the need
to work as a sessional in order to survive, and the need to stop working in order
to research and publish so that you can land a tenure-track position which
actually pays you to do the research that, as a sessional, you have to steal time
away from teaching to do. This situation is further complicated by the fact that if
you do not perform adequately in the classroom, the institution that hired you is
under no obligation to do so again the following year. (Aktinson, 2003, p. 30)
This passage clearly demonstrates the difficulties involved with sessional teaching, in addition to the unpaid work of raising children that single mothers are responsible for. Also, in terms of pay, I have earned as little as $4,800 per course, which can be argued is a clear example of exploitation by the university and one of the main reasons why universities are relying more and more on sessional instructors (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007; Rajagopal, 2002). Part-time instructors earn even less in Canadian colleges, compared to Canadian universities.

As universities become more for-profit, it is likely the quality of education, including the relationships between students and faculty/instructors are at risk. So, while I strive to accommodate the needs of my own students in the classroom and while I am more conscious of their needs, especially because of this research, I am also much more exhausted by the end of the day since any extra work that adds to my workload can easily be viewed as that - “extra.” More institutional supports are needed for faculty to engage with students in equitable ways. For example, Wolf-Wendel (2000) found in some institutions, “teaching and working directly with students was an important factor in determining promotion and pay raises” (p. 333). Although one could argue promotion and pay raises tied directly to teaching and work with students is just another form of regulation, at least it supports aspects of teaching that do not usually receive recognition.

There are specific ways in which part-time instructors, or the “reserve army of workers”, are impacted upon by their precarious positions (Trow, 1999, p. 308). However, women who are in more secure, tenure-track or tenured positions are also negatively impacted. Pierson (2008) shares her personal and political (and pedagogical) struggle (p. 111) in coming to terms with the ever increasing/competing demands of her career, family, and personal health, which
ultimately led to a chronic fatigue collapse. Between supervising students, conference presentations, departmental tasks, developing new courses which focused on equity issues, and health issues, she became overwhelmed. If it had not been for her “salvation”, a woman appointed head of the department who lessened her workload, she would not have known what she would have done (p. 114). Pierson also questions the strong connections she had with her women students and the realization that women would disclose and confide in her about many non-academic issues that she was expected to handle. The expectation that women professors, especially feminist professors, be nurturing (maternal), easy graders, therapeutic in the classroom, and understanding is clearly a gendered process. Acker and Feuerverger (1996) also found that women faculty took on an excessive amount of caring work within their departments, yet were offered few rewards or recognition for this work. Morley (2005) argues, The morality of quality can be profoundly gendered, with women heavily responsibilized for student-focused services, while men are frequently more connected to the thrusting power of international research and publication. Women’s career ambitions can be more easily tied to domestic, rather than worldly arenas. (p. 413)

**Aboriginal and Critical Worldviews**

Many participants spoke in detail about feeling invisible on campus as a single mother. By contrast, women who were enrolled in women and gender studies or sociology courses often spoke about how empowering it was. This was the first time they felt validated in academia and the content made sense to their everyday lives. They also became more political and felt better equipped to challenge injustices. However, some women also expressed concern over the way the larger structure of academe did not support their worldviews. Many Aboriginal women, women of colour and queer women pointed to discrimination they
experienced as a major barrier. Their worldviews were not a part of the curriculum or represented in the bodies they saw on campus.

Many single mother students also pointed to Aboriginal worldviews as being supportive of their family status and role as students. Aboriginal and Indigenous professors, courses, and community agencies often welcomed both single mother students and their children and saw the institution’s role as contributing to the education of the student and her family. This finding is strongly supported in Baskin’s (2008) study involving 27 Aboriginal women and their experiences in schools of social work. When education and pedagogy are political, marginalized students can feel included with their worldviews represented. More specifically, the process of decolonization in the classroom was imperative for Aboriginal women to feel valued. Baskin (2008) notes, “Since colonization encompasses our total existence, decolonization must include a holistic framework of mind, body, emotion and spirit” (p. 38). What is also important is not only how Aboriginal women have been excluded through Eurocentrism but how other marginalized groups and European settler populations have been impacted as well.

“Decolonization involves all people and includes issues around class, race and gender,” declared one of the participants. Indeed, colonization is not a process that only affects Aboriginal peoples. Everyone is affected by the impact of colonization in Canada, including the descendents of the settler population and those who immigrate here today. White people are affected because they have been robbed of the opportunity to have what could have been – an environment founded upon Aboriginal values and world views, which have much to offer all of humanity. Racially minoritized peoples – both those who are born in Canada and those who immigrate here – are affected because the way in which they are treated here by the dominant population is similar to the way Aboriginal peoples were treated when Europeans first arrived. (Baskin, 2008, p. 39)
Emma also found those who had Aboriginal worldviews welcomed her and her daughter and acknowledged that difficulties in juggling school and family arise. She credits the Aboriginal Student Services at her university as one of the main sources of support during the times she struggled with childcare options. She said, “I would have died without them. I don’t know how many times I’d bring my kid in and said I’ve got to go to class! And she would sit there with one of the peer workers so I could go to class.” It is especially important that Aboriginal mothers be socially, economically, and politically supported on-campus and in society. Anti-colonial theory is a useful framework for deconstructing the dominant discourses around living as an Aboriginal, single mother. The legacy of oppressive state policies such as the Indian Act and Residential Schooling that impacted Aboriginal families in such a profoundly negative way and contributed to the dominant perception of Aboriginal mothers being “unfit” (Cull, 2006, p. 141).

Motherhood is an important and revered experience in Aboriginal communities. “For Aboriginal women, motherhood represents a core aspect of a woman’s being and it constitutes a benchmark component of an Aboriginal community’s well-being” (Cull, 2006, p. 141). Given the magnitude of marginalization facing Aboriginal single mothers, services and programs that are working in universities such as Aboriginal Student Support Services should be built upon and expanded.

Many single mothers in this study, both Aboriginal identified and non, related to holistic teachings of Aboriginal world views. They found support from professors, curriculum and pedagogy which focused on holistic intersections of identity as well as the “mind, body, emotion and spirit” (Baskin, 2008, p. 38) connection. For these students it was difficult to separate themselves from their studies and they welcomed the opportunity to politicize their
own worlds within the classroom. The extended ways in which family was viewed also contributed to an increased feeling of belonging for students on campus. In many cultures, extended family and non-biological kin contribute to the care of children. Rarely is family viewed within a traditional nuclear family model with two heterosexual parents expected to provide the only care and economic support in the household. Also, children are not seen as a burden or as a threat to adult-only space. Children are valued and the care work involved with them is seen as an interconnected part of life in general. Mariposa often spoke about the importance of spirituality for her and her daughter. She strived for balance in her life and focused on providing her daughter with traditional healing knowledge and ceremonial practices such as smudging. Though Mariposa did not learn about her culture when she was a child, she was committed to bringing the teachings she had learned as an adult to her daughter.

In classroom atmospheres that contributed to feelings of belonging, comfort and ease, diversity was seen as adding to the richness of the classroom. Sometimes professors or teaching assistants would discuss their own social location and experiences as a single mother or survivor of violence that would positively impact women in their courses. When single mother students were made to feel comfortable and valued in the classroom, they were able to politicize their own experiences. After they were able to connect their experiences to issues of larger systemic structures and barriers they were able to let go of some of the negative internalized messages in a society that often told them they were responsible for their challenges.

While some women were self-conscious about bringing their children to class with them and would only do so out of necessity, several of these women had positive experiences with
their professors, teaching assistants and peers who welcomed their families to the academic environment. This culture of inclusion was only apparent in courses or departments where social justice issues were prominent in the curriculum and pedagogy such as in some women and gender studies, social work, and sociology courses. In contrast, Scarlette took a science class where the professor would make derogatory comments about feminists and make sexist jokes. She felt powerless to challenge him. As she described it, “He was a frat boy; a 55-year-old frat boy but he had tenure.” The few single mothers who were not studying in the social sciences did not seem to share their personal experiences with their peers or professors in class. There was little opportunity for students to be social in the classroom and even when there were extra-curricular activities they were individually based and did not include family members. Family life as a whole was seen as completely separate and often times single mothers’ friends at school did not even know they had children. Throughout the interviews, these single mothers reflected on the realization that they unconsciously kept this part of them silent when they were at school.

A qualitative difference was apparent for women who took women and gender studies, anti-racism, social work, sociology, Aboriginal studies, and other social justice courses. These classrooms were most often sites of strength, collectivism, awareness, and political activism. They fostered self-confidence and critical analysis that assisted some women in ridding themselves of the dominant messages put forth by society in general. Mariposa was able to see herself, her own history, and those of her ancestors in a strengths-based way by taking a women and gender studies course.
The theories themselves made more sense to me – the application of the theories. I needed something that helped teach me about myself and that is what women’s studies does. It kind of in a weird way helps you to understand yourself as a woman and your ancestors. For me, a Native woman, it makes me want to find out more about other Native women. Women’s studies helped me look at and understand multiple sources of women’s oppression. It just helped me to understand myself better.

This experience in women and gender studies courses was contrary to her experience in mainstream physical health science courses. When she was doing a presentation for a physical health science course, she was challenged on the effectiveness of traditional medicines used by Indigenous communities because there was no “proof” they worked. Shahjahan (2010) found that many faculty of colour incorporated spirituality in the curricula as a way to integrate anti-oppressive pedagogies and social justice issues in the classroom. However, these pedagogies were often resisted by other faculty and students as being outside of the norm.

For Christina, who took a women and gender studies course that focused on domestic violence, she was able to see how her previous relationship with the father of her child was abusive and controlling. It was this professor she turned to the morning after her partner had kicked her and her son out of their house. With an exam that morning, Christina felt comfortable enough to disclose her situation to her professor. In my own experience during my undergraduate degree, I greatly credit the critical feminist and anti-oppressive perspectives that were taught in my social work education. I had been living with my partner (a person I was with before I started the relationship with my daughter’s father) for 3 years and I started to see his controlling patterns. After one argument where he became violent I was able to apply what I
had learned in school to my own life. After I left him, he employed several common controlling
tactics including threatening me with his suicide and spying on me. He told me once that when
he spoke to his own male counsellor about our break up, his counsellor told him “often times
when women take women and gender studies courses they start to see things that are not
there.” To the contrary, I credit these courses with providing me with information that possibly
saved my life.

These findings were in direct contrast to much of the literature that focuses on single
mother students. Most previous research (Adair, 2001; Austin & McDermott, 2004; Conway,
1996; Dahlberg, 2003; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Sharp, 2004; Sullivan, 2003) finds that even in
the social sciences, diversely situated students are feeling devalued, objectified and
pathologized. When students do self-disclose their social locations they do so with much
apprehension and fear because of the hostility they feel due to racism, classism and family
status discrimination. In these studies, the classroom was often not a site of empowerment or
politicization; however, there was no discussion as to what kinds of theoretical frameworks
were used in the research. It could be that these courses were taught in a traditional,
conservative department, or be representative of the professor’s own conservative theoretical
frameworks. In this study, single mothers specifically discussed Aboriginal world views, anti-
colonialism, feminist content and pedagogy that may have been more critical in its approach
compared to conservative ideologies.

Reciprocity

Many co-participants also mentioned a desire to give back to their communities. With
the exception of Reay’s (2003) study looking at the barriers for mature working class women
students in England, the theme of giving back was rarely discussed in the literature and I had not asked any direct questions pertaining to this issue. Helping other single mothers through working or volunteering with community agencies or becoming an educator was an important motivation for why these women were in school. This was particularly true for single mothers who had struggled with food, housing, and income insecurity, racism, mental health issues, and/or addictions. For some women, they wanted to change the system and address inadequate policies, supports, and services. Elizabeth, a 30-year-old, White, heterosexual, Canadian-born woman with multiple disabilities, was in recovery from addiction and experienced anxiety over financial instability. At the time of the interview, Elizabeth’s son was 12 and was living with her but that had not always been the case. Her parents cared for him when she was unable to do so. As she stated, “My life in the last 10 years has been a journey of destruction and recovery.” Her struggles and the rewards of school as well as the joy of reconnecting with her son fuel her determination to become an advocate and work on policy issues to help other marginalized women.

For other women, key social support workers had believed in them, treated them with dignity and respect, and made a difference in their lives. Often times these were not either-or experiences; some support workers and policies worked for them and others did not. Regardless of the nature of their experiences with the social service system, women wanted to work or volunteer in it so they could believe in and make a difference for other single mothers. This theme likely emerged because most of the women I interviewed were in disciplines such as social work, women’s studies, or sociology. However, it could also be because of their social, economic and political positionings in society which are often connected with stigma and
discrimination. Those who live through these inequities may be more sensitive to the injustice experienced by others. This sentiment was echoed by the participants who reflected that they would not have wanted to live different lives since their experiences have made them who they are today.

In the group interview, it was disclosed that Emma and Megan both studied social work. Eva studied political science and women’s studies and Janice studied psychology and sociology. Megan’s husband was diagnosed with cancer and he passed away 6 months afterwards. Her children were 2 and 5 years old. During this time she said she met a beautiful social worker who helped them through this grief. Later on when she was thinking about what field to study in, she remembered this social worker and decided she wanted to help families during bereavement as a social worker. Eva also wanted to pursue social work in her graduate studies. She described this feeling of reciprocity and giving back to the community:

I’ve had so many people advocate for me and help me move along – wanting my family to succeed. Even though we don’t fit into the norms of what society thinks a successful family is. I think that’s got a lot to do with it too. You look at it and you know we’re all going to end up helping, being that person and helping people.

Emma shared a story about how she already knew she had an impact on a young single mother:

When I was doing my third year placement I did it at a youth shelter. I encountered a young lady who was, I can’t remember I think she was 19 or 20 and she had at that time two kids. Two little ones and I had my little one. There were times when during that placement that thank god I knew everybody that
worked there. That one of the agencies in my community, I knew the ED [Executive Director], I knew them all. So they were cool with me and I would bring her in, if she was sick or if I couldn’t get a sitter. There were times they needed me to do later shifts because we did some youth groups at night so I would just bring her in and the youth would watch her and hang out with her while I was doing my work. This young girl saw all this and a couple of years later I ran into her and she said oh I just wanted to let you now I’m at university. I did the bridging program and she’s like I figured if you could do it, I could do it.

That year Megan’s daughter was registering for the same social work program where she did her undergraduate degree. As the co-participants stated, you do not get into social work for the money, you get into it so you can give back to your community. The group agreed that their children were the biggest encouragement to go to school. Eva also pointed out that one of the greatest benefits is being able to educate your children.

My son was watching something on TV or whatever and when he came in he said how did Africa end up in so much debt? And I was like, well let me tell you. Let’s start with the history of colonization. And I was able to tell him, after the war of...and I even amazed myself with how much stuff was up there you know. And being able to offer your kids that – it feels really good. It feels really good.

Emma and Megan talked about how great it was to share similar experiences with their children since the whole family was in school, such as failing a test or studying for an exam. The single mother students saw education not only as an investment in them but also an investment in their children and in their wider communities.
Challenging the Dominant Family Discourse

Despite their struggles, many women in this study found satisfaction in being a single mother student. When I asked women if there was anything positive about being a single mother, Sheila noted, “I think for myself, it’s made me a lot stronger... As for the kids, I’ve always tried to make the environment in my house non-judgmental. I’m glad that I have that control; they live in a feminist house, which is great.” Many women spoke about the kind of freedom they experienced in not having to negotiate major decision-making with a partner.

Sometimes it was stressful for women who had ex-partners involved in day-to-day activities with their children, yet the concept of a more socially just or feminist household was an important aspect of their lives. Ida felt frustrated when people expressed pity or sadness when they found out she was a single mother. She found great strength in her status and preferred to identify as “single mother by choice.” Scarlette also consciously framed her life in strengths-based terms and she explained how she did this in the classroom,

In the beginning I didn’t [disclose my family status] but I have learned through experience that the best way to feel empowered is by reclaiming the very things that people use to make you feel bad. Does that make sense? So if people think you’re poor then I’ll say, “Yes, I am poor and you know what, it’s not my fault”... yes I am a single parent and I am proud because that means I’m a super hard worker and that means I am able to prioritize and I know what’s important in life.

Elizabeth enjoyed doing all the little things with her son. “I love making his lunch. I love washing his clothes. I love making his bed nice and comfy and cozy, tucking him in. You know, all those little things that I missed out on and I’ve since realized how important those things were.”
Women also felt they were building a positive academic climate for their children by serving as role models, emphasizing the importance of education and the opportunities it opens up. For Christina, making sure her 10-year-old son was comfortable with being on campus was important to her.

I always talk to him and strongly encourage him to go to university. I talk to him about my university being his and how mommy went to school and you go to daycare there. I told him you can go to school there when you’re done high school. I wanted him to feel somewhat familiar with the campus itself so it wouldn’t be so much of a scary idea to go to university.

The path to postsecondary school may seem a normal trajectory for some children, but for those who are not acclimatized to the language of academia and the culture of university, it may be difficult to believe that the path to university is open to them. Mothers in this study were conscious of normalizing this experience for their children and making sure they knew they had doors and options open to them.

Viewing single motherhood from a strengths perspective is lacking in previous research. As a single mother student who has experienced many of the barriers discussed in this dissertation, I can understand the inclination to solely focus on the challenges through a lens that only sees the negative aspects of this family status. However, it is equally important that we reconceptualize this family status in a way that celebrates its diversity and strengths. When we can stop comparing families to the traditionally viewed nuclear family and pay attention to what works and what the possibilities are of various organizations of family we can begin to disrupt the dominant discourse which pathologizes single motherhood. Many women viewed
their families as strong, independent and loving. Moreover, given the prominence of violence as a theme which emerged in this study, we see firsthand mothers who have struggled to create families that are safe and thriving.

**Conclusion**

Supports ranged from individual family members and professors to systemic inclusion of services and diverse pedagogies and curriculum in the university. In previous research, caseworkers were seen as being part of an apparatus of the state and behaved in demeaning and discriminatory ways towards single mother social assistance recipients (Kahn & Polakow, 2004, p. 77) but these experiences with caseworkers were outside of the university. What was interesting in this research was that in an education context (contrary to a state context) certain administrators were singled out as being incredibly helpful, supportive and integral to women’s navigation of academia. Ways in which administrators were helpful to single mothers was by providing their time to listen to their frustration, connecting them to resources that they might not have otherwise been able to find, and providing knowledge of loop holes in the system that would help them receive more money from funding or bursaries. Unfortunately, without many systemic supports on campus geared towards single mothers in particular, the culture or environment on-campus depended largely upon the kindness, understanding and patience of individual actors. Other research has shared these findings as they have found one of the major facilitators for single mothers was the mentorship provided by faculty, advisors, and administration (Austin & McDermott, 2004; Branscomb, 2006; Clarke & Peterson, 2004; Jennings, 2004; Sharp, 2004). At the same time however, a few students reported feeling discriminated against by administrators in the university and felt their single mother status as
well as racism were connected. An important recommendation both from this study and in previous studies is made for administrators in universities to create an advocate position on campus that would advocate with and for single mothers to locate the resources they need both on and off campus (Austin & McDermott, 2004; Bruns, 2004; Sharp, 2004) and also to work as a liaison and address discrimination and harassment.

Single mothers continuously reminded themselves that they were enduring the hardships they were because they wanted to have the best possible chance to provide an economically secure or better life for their children, a finding which was also reported in a previous study (Jones De-Weever, 2005, pp. 126-127). While some research found that children were actually a motivating factor for many single mothers to enroll in postsecondary education to begin with (Haleman, 2004), this research found that there was a paradox in the single mother student experience. On one hand, the exhaustion women felt trying to juggle all of their responsibilities was palpable. On the other hand, their children were the inspiration and motivation for perseverance and deterrence to dropping out. Women were proud of their accomplishments and were glad their children were able to witness these. Despite this overwhelming sense of doing it for their children, a contrary theme also developed. What was less reported but still emerged in a couple of the women’s stories was the view that their educational endeavours were their own; their motivation for enrolling in university had nothing to do with wanting to provide for their children. This alternative narrative emerged with women who had older children and had recently left their partnership. Education was seen as something solely for them to enjoy and a way for them to focus time and energy on
themselves; they were happy to have something they loved that was completely separate from family responsibilities.

Previous research has shown that in the social sciences, curriculum is criticized for objectifying and pathologizing single mothers’ lived experiences, which contributed to them withdrawing from school (Adair, 2001; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Sullivan, 2003). Contrary to those findings, this study showed the opposite. Although most students were registered in the social sciences and other critical disciplines, many found these spaces to be progressive, open, and safe in terms of their lived experiences of marginalization. This outcome was not always so when students had instructors who did not encourage multiple ways of knowing in the classroom. Those instructors that were cited as being supportive were ones that valued scholarship and pedagogy typically viewed on the margins. Legitimizing alternative pedagogies helped to make the classroom environment a comfortable and inclusive space.

What is a new finding in this study and not highlighted in previous research is the strengths-based way many women viewed their own family status. This is most likely so because I asked women a direct question about what strengths there were to being a single mother student. Many women reclaimed being a single mother as a positive identity, noting strength in overcoming adversity. In fact, many women found it liberating to be free from a traditional, patriarchal, and nuclear family model. Instead, they independently organized their family, with some focusing on equity and human rights in their household. These findings were not present in previous research most likely because women were not asked questions in a strengths-based way. It is important for future research to balance the focus on barriers with a focus on strengths. These perceptions are important because they challenge the dominant
traditional family discourse and open up possibilities for a diversification of the family as whole. Pandey et al. (2006) found that for women obtaining postsecondary education, these accomplishments symbolized independence and achievement; proving that single mothers do not have to conform to the culture of dependency through government “assistance” and programs which tend to focus on marriage promotion or low-wage work. In one way, it is not surprising that women in this study were able to feel proud and self-sufficient and even use the role of a student as a way to disrupt other negative stereotypes held in society about single mothers. Because as Ratner (2004) notes, “Within the tangle and fracture of today’s public discourse, education is hailed as one of the few universal goods” (p. 45).

With the exception of Eyre (2000), Wagner and Magnusson (2005), and Wagner (2008), there is a gap in the literature pertaining to violence against women in terms of how it intersects with their student roles. Violence was one of the most prominent themes that emerged in this study, despite never having asked any questions pertaining to it. The impact of this violence often interfered with women’s ability to do well in school and feel safe. While one student found on-campus security and the student legal assistants helpful, most reported feeling isolated and without appropriate resources and information. Moreover, despite the amount of stigma felt by co-participants, many would disclose their family status at school more readily than the violence they previously or currently experienced. Often times women discussed how leaving their partners who were abusive was a catalyst for applying to postsecondary education, wanting to provide physical and economic safety. With women who left violent relationships and became single mothers in order to protect their families, this act
of resistance was in direct contrast to the dominant oppressive discourse of single motherhood being irresponsible and neglectful.

Food and clothing banks, law students providing legal advice, and advocates on campus who were familiar with resources specific to low-income single mothers’ needs were all reported to be useful. One of the universities provided top-up of funding for any unmet need not covered by OSAP. When their situation became particularly stressful, they remembered they were doing this in order to provide a more economically secure future for their children. The student parent centre was seen as a support by connecting them with others, providing resources and increasing the visibility of parents as a whole. Bruns (2004) also found that having a support group on campus was instrumental in reducing feelings of isolation, connected them to others with experiences like themselves and provided an opportunity for students to learn from others in terms of practical on-campus supports and single parenting advice. Specific administrators and professors were outlined as being helpful in navigating the many policies and practices of the university and supporting them during difficult times. This helpful support points to the need that advocates need to be embedded within the structure of the university. Most agreed that universities should provide an advocate on campus to assist single mothers who try to navigate the many confusing practices and policies and who may need additional supports in place compared to the traditional student.

Student loans were also a paradoxical issue. Most women relied heavily upon student loans to support themselves throughout their education. Statistics Canada (2006a) reports that more women than men are student loan recipients; however, they attribute this to a higher enrolment of women than men. Women were relieved to have this funding and many grants
and bursaries were attached to the students’ eligibility to receive OSAP. However, the heavy burden of knowing how much debt they were accruing added to a state of constant stress. Most often, women had to simply not think about it because they would feel discouraged and immobilized. The fear of not being able to pay back their monthly OSAP payments upon graduation sometimes contributed to students’ decision to apply to graduate school instead of looking for paid work. While students with dependents receive more OSAP funding, this means they may also have a higher debt load and since there are more single mothers than single fathers this high debt will impact more women. In addition to OSAP, women also used other forms of credit to survive which increased their overall debt loads. Also, in the face of childcare barriers, it may be more difficult for women to find paid employment that will suit their schedules. The issue of debt for single mother students has not been explored as much as it needs to be. One exception to this is Digney’s (2002) dissertation which looks at the inequities found in the Canadian and Saskatchewan Student Loan Program. This study also underscores what could be viewed as a rising trend towards credit card use to finance postsecondary education and basic living expenses; essentially a neo-liberal approach to the funding of education.

Despite the many barriers explored in the previous chapter, students felt passionate about their studies and their desires to go further with their education – some were either already in graduate studies or planned to apply to graduate studies in the future. They would like to increase the visibility of their population and access to information about supportive resources. Perhaps because of the educational field that many belonged to, reciprocity also emerged as an important theme and a facilitator for their retention. They had all experienced
someone in their life who had supported them and they wanted to give back by providing support to others in turn.

These data chapters contain many of the stories that women shared with me in this study. I am able to infuse my own style of writing and reflexivity because I am a part of an institution that -- despite my own critiques -- acknowledges multiple ways of knowing, doing, feeling, and learning. I have truly felt privileged to be a part of this department and will forever honour the women who have partnered with me in this journey.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

This final chapter will discuss my contribution to the literature and the significance of the main findings. I will also discuss policy recommendations that can be implemented in universities and communities. Although I cannot change the increasing globalization of the education system or punitive social policies in Canada, I can bring awareness to the issues single mothers face while trying to juggle their multiple and competing roles within these larger structural contexts. As an instructor in the academy, I am in a position where I can advocate to make the classroom a more equitable experience for single mothers and other marginalized student groups on campus. I will end this chapter with reflections on the limitations of this research and possible directions for future research.

Contribution to the Literature

What are the experiences of single mother students? Is the university supportive and inclusive of single mothers? These research questions were meant to be broad in their focus because no comparable research exists in Canada. Future research will be able to provide more focus on one or more of the barriers or supports that arose in this study. Also, I wanted to leave it open for women to discuss what was important for them. It is apparent from the sheer volume of barriers reported in chapters 4, 5, and 6 that the single mothers faced many obstacles while pursuing post-secondary education. However, it was also important to seek a balance by focusing on the strength and resilience of women in this study and the supports they found useful, a topic which was discussed in chapter 7. Using critical feminist theory that
focuses on the intersectionality of social and political identities was useful in this study because it provided a framework of analysis that examined how inclusion and exclusion were experienced differently depending on factors such as race and ethnicity, sexuality, age, ability, citizenship status, and family status. Women shared common experiences such as the lack of affordable and quality childcare, poverty, and the importance of support from professors and administrators. However, women also experienced barriers and supports differently based on their socio-political and cultural backgrounds and worldviews; for example, they had varied encounters with racism, ableism, ageism, immigration, Eurocentrism, and family and community supports. Anti-colonial theory enriched my analysis by pointing to multiple ways of knowing in the academy, as opposed to one standardized Eurocentric curriculum and by situating the history of education in Canada as a colonialist tool in the oppression of Aboriginal peoples. The concepts and principles of inclusive education, such as the importance of diverse bodies in positions of power, transformative and critical pedagogies, and linking social justice in the classroom with social justice in society, are a response and challenge to Eurocentrism and dominant norms within the academy. Although inclusive education is usually discussed within research that investigates barriers for students in elementary and high school levels of education, these frameworks are important and can easily be transferred into discussions of higher education.

This study contributes to the literature in several important ways. First, this exploratory research focuses on single mothers and university education, a topic that has received little attention in Canadian studies. Barriers to university education have been explored for marginalized groups of students except for single mothers. Students who have children have
specific obstacles to overcome while pursuing education; being a single mother only exacerbates these challenges and so it is important that attention be paid to understanding single mothers’ specific experiences.

The findings from this study also bring attention to supposedly perceived neutral policies and practices on university campuses and in classrooms and discrimination experienced by women because of family status and other intersecting social locations. Many of the barriers explored in this research spring from the traditional student stereotype present on university campuses, of a white, able-bodied, childless individual. Policies, practices and services cater to this imaginary student. As long as university policies, practices, services, curricula, and pedagogies continue to serve this idea to the exclusion of serving the diversity of its real students, equity in education will remain elusive. It is not enough to make sure that a diverse population enters the doors of the academy. Students must feel that they are represented, their knowledge is valued, and they belong in the education system (Adair, 2001; Antone, 2003; Baskin, 2005a; Brathwaite, 2003; Collins, 2008; Dei et al., 2000; Graveline, 1998; Henry & Tator, 2009b; Kelly, 2000; Mahtani, 2004; Ng et al., 1993; Reed et al., 2006; Rezai-Rashti, 1997; Sapon-Shevin, 2007; Stallberg-White, 2003). Even though there may still be groups of students who closely resemble the characteristics of the stereotypical traditional student, there may be many more who need some kind of services and supports on-campus. The principles underlying inclusive education address not only marginalized students but an aim to represent and meet the needs of all students.

Next, the contributions to the literature stem from the findings in this study. Interpersonal violence had a major impact on single mother students, whether it was occurring
during the time of the interviews or before. “Clearly, universities have not yet considered the ramifications of their practices on differently situated learners, such as trauma survivors” (Wagner & Magnusson, 2005, p. 453). With such a large population of women on campus and knowing that violence is a systemic issue, it would be useful for universities to provide appropriate services for students in need of support in this area. Scholarship is slowly emerging that advocates including violence as an equity issue (Eyre, 2000; Wagner & Magnusson, 2005; Wagner, 2008). These findings confirm and contribute to this emerging scholarship.

It was also important to hear the stories told by women who left their partners in order to protect their children. In many cases, this was the reason why they were single mothers in the first place, which is in direct contrast to the dominant discourse that pathologizes this family status as being neglectful. Strega (2006) discusses the challenges faced by mothers who have “no good choice to make” (p. 240) when choosing between the violence of their partners and the violence of poverty and the stigma of single motherhood. While many women felt that being a single mother was the impetus for them pursuing post-secondary education, the many barriers contributed to exhaustion and stress.

The lack of affordable and quality childcare was an important concern that almost all women spoke about. This is not surprising considering the lack of affordable and quality childcare across most of Canada (Prentice, 2000). However, the ways in which this lack of provision impacts students in particular has not been adequately explored in the literature and this is where this study makes a contribution. Women had to make patchwork solutions to their childcare barriers, some of which were not desirable. Even when women found daycare services, the schedules they operated by did not match their needs as students.
Experiences of racism, ableism, and ageism were also mentioned as major barriers in students’ lives and the lives of their children. While explicit acts of discrimination were reported, many issues arose in less tangible ways and were often attributed to the overall culture or environment on university campuses. These implicit forms of discrimination or feelings of exclusion are consistent with the vast amount of literature that explores inequities in education (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Bannerji, 1991; Baskin, 2008; Bensimon, 1997; Black, 2005; Dei et al., 2000; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Eyre, 2000; hooks, 1994; Kelly, 2000; Kitzinger, 1993; Lorde, 1992; Mahtani, 2004; Monture-Angus, 2001; Prentice, 2000; Razack, 1998; Reay, 2003; Reed et al., 2006; Rezai-Rashti, 1997; Rich, 1993; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996; Webber, 2006).

While unsurprising, this finding is still significant because, while it can be argued that much progress has been made in terms of diversifying the student and faculty body, more systemic change needs to occur in order to improve the culture of the academy.

Interestingly, even though many women identified their sexuality on a continuum, this rarely came up in conversation as a barrier. Heterosexism on campus or in society was only raised by Ida, possibly because she was socially “out” and political about her sexuality. However, there were some discussions around issues of sexuality and how liberated a few of the women felt because they were in a position where they could explore their sexuality if they wanted to. Some women resisted using specific labels such as lesbian or bisexual because they felt those labels restricted them in terms of how they expressed their sexualities.

With cutbacks to the education system and rising tuition fees, student loans become a popular option for students to help fund their studies. Student loans and other forms of credit were cited as providing much needed financial assistance and relief for women. However,
women also felt a large burden and were fearful of not being able to pay their loans back. With the global recession contributing to the cuts in employment and increasing poverty, more research needs to be done to explore how increasing debt impacts economic security for single mothers. More grants and bursaries need to be implemented in order to offset the cost for all low-income students.

It is also important to situate the financial difficulties experienced by single mothers within a larger context of the globalization of a knowledge economy. With a decrease in government funding, institutions of education are expected to rely on (and compete for) private industry funding sources. As a result of globalization, neo-liberal policies and practices are having a negative impact on the education system. Universities are becoming corporatized as a way to respond to government cuts and increased enrollments, but the fall-out of reduced government funding also impacts the education system at the most local and micro level – the students. While some grants and bursaries were available, single mothers in this study primarily relied upon student loans and other forms of credit to finance (and privatize) their increasing tuition fees and living expenses.

In addition to the barriers, it is also important to note the strengths and facilitators women highlighted in this study. Almost all of the women in this study reported at least one person in their lives who provided invaluable support. Sometimes this was a family member or a friend (usually a woman) who provided childcare assistance and other times it was a professor or administrator. When women did disclose that they had experienced violence, it was often to professors when explaining the difficulties they had in completing assignments. Administrators who were able to work the system or find loopholes in order to better support students were
mentioned as being helpful in navigating the often bureaucratic institution. Other research has also found that mentorship by faculty and administrators was integral to women’s perseverance (Austin & McDermott, 2004; Branscomb, 2006; Clarke & Peterson, 2004; Jennings, 2004; Sharp, 2004).

One of the larger universities offered services on campus that students found helpful such as a Family Care Office, student support groups, student legal clinics and family housing. Bruns (2004) also found that support groups on campus were helpful for mothers as it reduced their feelings of isolation and made them feel connected to others with similar experiences on campus. The literature makes no mention of the usefulness of student legal clinics but it played an important role in some women’s persistence, especially those who were separating from their partners and/or escaping violence.

Various types of access programs are available through multiple universities that look at bridging the divide between non-traditional students and those who apply straight from high school. Access programs are meant to rectify disadvantages that many marginalized students experience in the education system and in society. They acknowledge the social factors involved in educating students and value the lived experiences they bring into the institution (Brathwaite, 2003). One Aboriginal student enrolled in university through a bridging program on her reserve where she could start taking courses within her own community before going off-reserve to continue her education.

Most of the co-participants in this study majored in a social science or other critical discipline. As a result, many felt empowered and validated within the classroom and were able to politicize their experiences, connecting them to larger structural systems of oppression,
thereby reducing feelings of guilt or self-blame (Mullaly, 2000). This was in direct contrast to much of the literature that cited oppression and discrimination occurring to students belonging to social science courses (Adair, 2001; Austin & McDermott, 2004; Conway, 1996; Dahlberg, 2003; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Sharp, 2004; Sullivan, 2003). However, some Aboriginal women in particular noted that they still struggled even within these critical disciplines to have their worldviews legitimized by professors or other peers considered to be more mainstream. Nevertheless, in spite of this critique, Aboriginal women in this study were able to name many other Aboriginal women who were their mentors both inside and outside of academe and felt some sort of progress being made.

Previous research has ignored the positive ways in which women viewed their families. Many women felt relieved to be the sole decision maker for their families and had a strong sense of independence. They were able to raise their children in ways they wanted and some even mentioned raising feminist families with an aim to promote equity and social justice. Not surprisingly, women were also eager to give back to their community. One person had often made such a difference in their lives that they in turn wanted to help others. This might be a bias of this study, since most of the co-participants belonged to disciplines that foster community involvement, or it could be that the hardships these women endured engendered an interest in these fields to begin with. Women’s cultural backgrounds and worldviews that focus on giving and reciprocity could also have contributed to this theme. Overall, most women felt that their personal lives should not be kept separate from their schooling and that their lived experiences actually contributed to their student roles.
Most of the research on single mother students has been done in the US and within a particular policy context that frames single mothers as social assistance recipients, dependent upon the state. The findings from this study provide a context within Ontario, Canada. While the findings of this research are important first steps to illustrating the experiences of single mother students, more research is needed that focuses on the specific themes in more detail. Longitudinal research would be extremely useful to examine the long-term impact of education, and simply to see if women completed their educations and/or moved on to graduate studies. A comparison between the disciplines to examine experiences for single mothers across different departments within the university would also be of value.

This study also makes a methodological contribution by exploring the ways in which co-participants were able to contribute to the design and analysis of the research wherever possible. It was also important for me to learn was that not all women had the time or the energy to participate beyond the time they had already given by being interviewed. Single mother students are extremely busy women and I was grateful that I was able to speak with the 25 women who did volunteer. So while there is a focus on community-involvement in participatory models of research (Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Potts & Brown, 2005; Reid, 2004; Ristock & Pennell, 1996), it is also important to underscore the nuanced complexities of co-participants’ lives which may restrict the amount of time they have available to participate. For those who experience time poverty, it can be difficult to devote the amount of time and energy needed to conduct community-based participatory-action research. As researchers we must work with co-participants to involve them in ways that are reasonable and do not infringe upon their limited resources, but enhance their overall involvement in the research.
Policy Recommendations

Ideally, improvements could be made simultaneously in a number of areas: (a) to legislation, policies, and practices at the federal and provincial levels of government; (b) to educational institutions and (c) in micro approaches on campus and in society; however, even if only some changes could be made, they would create a significant advantage for single mothers in the academy. The following section outlines recommendations I am proposing based on the needs expressed by the single mothers in this research study to increase access and visibility for them on campus and in the community. While some recommendations will be particularly useful for single mothers, many will also benefit student parents and other marginalized students more broadly. I will begin by discussing changes at the government level.

Childcare needs to stay active on the political agenda and avoid “partisan politics.” The state needs to provide quality, flexible, and affordable childcare spaces to be made available to all families. For low-income families, childcare subsidy should also be administered at the federal level as opposed to the municipal level so that rules and responsibilities are universal so parents know what is required of them. There also needs to be a childcare ombudsperson available for all parents who have any concerns.

The government needs to reconceptualize their own perception of the student body; namely, to include student parents. Maternity and parental leave programs need to recognize the precarious roles students are in when they are pursuing education full-time and trying to juggle employment. There should be a basic minimum amount of maternity leave benefits distributed to women by the state (whether they are students or paid workers or both) so they are not penalized financially for going to school. One way to do this is when women collect
OSAP, consider this as actual income when calculating what they will receive for maternity benefits. Students are required to report OSAP earnings as earnings in every other aspect (for example, social assistance and financial award applications) so why not when applying for maternity leave benefits?

Work-study positions on campus that are funded through the government, particularly during summer months, should not place an age restriction on who is considered a student. One of the women in the study, who had completed a successful work-study job on campus, was ineligible to continue this position in the summer because she was over the age of 30. This stipulation is a clear example of age discrimination.

While OSAP is considered to be a barrier for many women in this study, they also pointed to the financial support as much needed. OSAP needs to increase its amount of funding for single mothers through bursaries, scholarships, and loan forgiveness. Since mainly low-income students are going to be the ones who qualify to receive OSAP, it will also be those students who will be at a greater disadvantage upon graduating by having a large student debt. Its current interest relief program enables students to delay paying back their loans if their income is not adequate, however, the time period for interest relief must be extended until students obtain secure employment. The repayment amount should be based on current income and also take other debt amounts into consideration.

OSAP also needs to provide flexible support for students whose studies are interrupted and allow sufficient time for students to reenter their studies full-time after an absence. Currently, OSAP penalizes students who do not retain a 100% course load. Women returning
from having a baby may wish to reenter the university slowly, instead of on a full-time basis, while their children are infants. However, they should still be eligible for some OSAP funding.

Institutional-wide policies and programs can have a great benefit to a diverse student body. It is important for policies and programs, which are meant to address the needs of students, be accessible and visible to students across the university. While individual departments or faculties could initiate their own programs, if they are embedded within the larger university structure they have the ability to receive more attention and perhaps more funding. Also, if these services are centrally located in one place, for example, a student centre, students will have a greater chance of being aware of the services than if they are scattered across campus. If universities want to provide access for diverse students in universities they need to provide social, economic, and political supports on campus. These supports include: food banks; clothing banks; free legal services; counseling; childcare (regular and emergency); support groups; equity spaces – for example, student centres for students who are queer, women, Aboriginal, belong to a racial and ethnic group, and have a disability. Although controversial, the university may want to document more specific demographic information about students.

Students in general, and marginalized students in particular, need to have a more prominent voice systemically throughout the administration of the university. Since many of the policies and practices that operate throughout the university impact students directly, students should have some degree of decision making power, or, at the very least, a real opportunity for consultation. It is important that administrators work collaboratively with students or student groups to ensure the incorporation of student issues into strategic
planning. We can begin to see progress being made in this area with examples of student centers, student parent groups, centres for students with disabilities and so forth; yet are students included in the decision-making processes of these centers? Further, diverse groups of students, single mothers for example, need to be represented in these positions to ensure a multiple of perspectives are included within the “student voice.”

Financial aid departments are often the first place students in need go to for guidance. Women commonly reported that these offices rarely understood their sometimes complicated circumstances. For students who have multiple state benefits such as childcare subsidy and housing subsidy, financial advisors were more often than not unaware of how to help them. Financial aid advisors need to be trained in financial circumstances that are not a part of the traditional student experience. More importantly, advisors must take these situations seriously, because if a student unknowingly is a recipient of multiple benefits and has not reported it properly to each source, they can undergo severe penalties. Also, many times single mothers are particularly impoverished during specific time periods throughout the year; for example, at the end of each term when OSAP funding has run out. It is imperative that advisors understand and are aware of bursaries, scholarships, and emergency funding that is available for low-income single mothers.

Along with financial aid advisors, it would be useful to have a specific community-liaison advisor on campus that would not only know about on-campus supports and services but also know how to connect students to resources in the community. Better coordination of services is needed between services in the university and the community. Since it is not realistic to expect students to be able to separate all personal, social, political, and spiritual aspects of
themselves from their roles as students, services in the university should build partnerships in the community; providing a liaison on campus would signal that partnership. This would be particularly useful for students who wanted to be connected to other racial-ethnic and cultural groups, needed to be directed to domestic violence services, or emergency housing or food. It would be beneficial to have this position remain in the university throughout the year since many single mothers are left scrambling in the summer months when they do not have OSAP, and most programs stop running on campus.

Family housing was a resource some women found helpful, yet they raised important concerns, namely the cost (and sometimes the conditions) of the unit. Although single parents were given preference on the wait list, the cost of the unit was the same whether you were a single parent or a couple. Given the additional expenses of having a child without that child being able to contribute income to the overall household, it does not make sense that they be expected to pay the same for the unit. The cost of rent should be geared to income or housing subsidies should be made available to help cover the cost.

Another aspect that would improve the lives of women on campus is to create a political anti-violence-against-women climate on campus. With so many women on-campus, one would assume that this would have already been done. Unfortunately, this is not the case and instead of politicizing violence against women, many women students, who have experienced violence, are left feeling silenced and to blame for the violence committed against them. With an increased awareness of violence against women on and off campus, social and legal services could be more readily accepted by the administration in order to address individual and systemic concerns and reach women who want assistance.
Some universities also have mentoring type programs such as a first-generation program or mature students program. A program or association specifically geared towards student parents at the very least would help to increase visibility of this population. This association could also provide valuable knowledge and resources about the “student parent” life. A mentoring program could be established where a recently registered student could be matched with a senior undergraduate student who has gone through the university system as a single mother in order to ease the transition. It would also be useful to provide an advocate on campus who would address inequity concerns raised by students in universities.

In terms of student orientations and extra-curricular activities, they need to be designed in a way that is family-friendly and inclusive of children or be ready to think about how to provide childcare for these events. Many times, the theme of undergraduate get-togethers seem to focus on alcohol and late evening and night hours. Providing a balance of different kinds of activities during different times of the day may prove more welcoming to students who have childcare responsibilities. Also, many women discussed how important it was for them to bring their children with them on-campus so that they would feel a part of this community and that they belonged there. For women who felt like an outsider to the university, they saw this as an opportunity to make sure their children did not grow up feeling that way. It would be great if play spaces designated for children and families were provided on-campus. Usually, women ended up having to bring children to the library or the cafeteria to entertain them when they came with them to school.

More also needs to be done at the departmental level. Faculty need to have additional resources provided to assist them in creating an equitable space in the classroom. Resources
may take the form of continuing education workshops, mandated anti-oppression education, student-led “student equity issues” workshops, and education in inclusive course design. While universities have anti-discrimination and harassment policies, how are these actualized in the classroom? What happens when an explicitly or implicitly discriminatory comment is made? Are faculty aware of how to address these comments or are they held accountable when it is they themselves who make them? These learning opportunities can also be implemented at an administrative level in order to help build an equitable workplace for faculty. Mentorship is a key support for students so faculty and staff need to have as much education in anti-discriminatory practice in order to assist students throughout their education.

However, one of the issues with trying to introduce or implement anything that is seen as “extra” to faculty and administrators’ workload is the resistance to this extra work. Sometimes this resistance may be because of discriminatory attitudes on the part of faculty and administrators, while at other times it may be due to the increasing amount of work faculty are expected to complete with fewer resources. As the corporatization of universities increases, and a quality assurance and audit culture ensues, professors’ work is often technocratized and measured in terms of research and publication output. Within these productivity measures, little attention is paid to the importance of quality teaching, the ideology of education as a public good, or the importance of creating an equitable space in the classroom.

If not at an institutional level, departments can issue a policy asking faculty to accept the sickness of a child (or another family member) as a reasonable absence from class by students in addition to their current practices of requiring medical documentation. Also, being aware of how the development of assignments may impact students in the classroom is useful for single
mothers. While group work is often seen as a useful pedagogical evaluation, it also poses barriers for single mothers who cannot meet outside of regular school times because of their childcare responsibilities. Allowing time in class to work on group work assignments would be helpful. Consciousness-raising on campus and in the classroom is also important. In a study by Duquaine-Watson (2007), single mothers contributed ideas as to what this could look like. As noted earlier, they provided feedback to a statement that could be included in course syllabi:

_For Student Parents:_ If circumstances arise that necessitate your absence from class – such as the illness of a child, closing of day care for inclement weather, etc. – please contact me as soon as possible so we can make arrangements to keep you up-to-date with course material and activities. (p. 236)

This is a statement I often include in my own course syllabus now that I am teaching and find it opens up a space at the beginning of the term to start talking about these kinds of equity issues and barriers. It also signals to all students, not only single mothers, that I may be a safe person to talk to in terms of recognizing their multiple difficulties and barriers.

Of course, while it is important to implement these policies, programs, and services, it is also important to challenge stigma and discrimination in society. Single mothers should not be made to feel worthless, guilty, or ashamed of receiving “specialized” services and part of this is undoing the myriad negative messages that are sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly perpetuated in society (including in institutions of education).

**Limitations and Future Research**

This study only looked at single mothers who were currently enrolled in university or recently graduated from university. This means that a large number of women, namely ones who were not able to access university in the first place or who did not graduate from
university, were not involved. Future research should continue to investigate both the barriers to accessing university and the barriers experienced once inside of the university.

Longitudinal research also needs to be done to see what happens to women after they graduate. Are they able to manage their high debt loads? Are they hired for secure, stable, and well-paying positions? Do some go on to graduate studies? My study has only looked at the experiences of single mother students at one point in time. Will they feel differently about what they considered barriers and facilitators 10 years from now? Do some of these same barriers exist for them in the paid labour market? Do they feel having a postsecondary degree actually makes a difference for them?

Most of the students in this research study were enrolled in the social sciences or other critical disciplines, for example, Aboriginal studies. We do not know what the experiences would be for students involved in other fields such as business management, engineering, or medicine. In some instances, students did report that when they took science or physical health electives they felt particularly uncomfortable in the classroom but what about those who major in these fields? Are the experiences the same, better, or worse than the ones in this study? Are faculty representative of a diverse student body in these other fields? What are the gendered implications of studying in different programs? Were so many women engaged in volunteer work, notions of reciprocity, and giving back to their communities because they experienced many injustices as single mothers, or would I find this notion of reciprocity with other students in these programs? Is the single mother in engineering just as mindful of social justice, equity, and helping others as students in this study were? It would be interesting to do a comparison of students in different fields across the university to see if their experiences were different.
Various bridging programs were highlighted as important entry points into university. Many times these spaces were seen as the most inclusive in their approaches, supports and services, pedagogies, and representations, which is representative of the principles involved in inclusive education. More research is needed to examine the impact these programs have on improving access for marginalized students. Until marginalized students are fully represented and their needs are acknowledged and addressed, these access programs provide a valuable step in opening doors for students who may not otherwise have these doors open to them. Also, are there areas this program can improve on? Routinely evaluating the program from the perspectives of students, faculty, and administrators will help to have on-the-ground experiences of the program inform its design and implementation.

Despite the numerous barriers reported in this study, single motherhood was also presented in a strengths-based way. Many women found this family structure empowering and liberating compared to sometimes inequitable partnerships. Some also felt relieved and independent being the sole decision maker for their child(ren). They were proud to be positive role models for their children and wanted their children to feel comfortable in the university environment so that they would grow up feeling like university was an option for them. Some of the women were excited about the possibilities of creating an inclusive, equitable, and socially just family where they could educate their children about many injustices, not only ones due to family status; they saw themselves as allies, fighting against all inequities. More research which focuses on the positive aspects of single motherhood is needed in order to counter the single mother stigma which permeates the media, politics, and society.
In some instances, the findings of this study point towards the need for individuals to change or for changes to occur on a micro level, I have also tried to emphasize the need for institutional support and broader social policy changes. While previous research mainly focused on oppressive state policies, I wanted to broaden my approach to include all possible aspects in which women felt marginalized. Nevertheless, my purpose was to look at access for single mothers in education and thus some of the responses by co-participants may have focused on the immediate or the individual. As demonstrated in the policy recommendations, it becomes clear that there is no one easy remedy or no one person who can fix the system; instead, a multipronged approach to improving access to education is needed. In an Australian study on higher education, Blackmore & Sachs (2007) finds “that equity is most likely to have effect with multiple strategies, and a combination of top down interventions by the state and organizational leadership together with bottom up activism by networks of practitioners and social movements” (p. 243).

**Theoretical Contribution**

Critical feminist and anti-colonial theories enriched the design of the study and the analysis of the themes that emerged. The findings show that a focus on diversity and the intersections of single mothers’ identities is important for accurate analysis. If I was using a lens of, for example, Marxist feminism, my focus would have been on class and gender hierarchies in relation to women’s unpaid and paid work. Using only this lens, I could have missed or underrepresented the issues women experienced based on racism and ableism. If I were looking solely at class in my analysis, I might have focused my interview topics and questions on women’s experiences with the state and poverty, overlooking other important barriers and
facilitators. Exploring how women experienced their other socio-political identities such as race, class, ability, age, family status, sexuality, and citizenship status enabled discussions that represented a wide variety of issues. Using this spectrum also enabled women to identify their most important experiences. Further, it became apparent in some of the interviews that family status discrimination was so closely intertwined with race, gender, class, ability, and sexuality that it was not possible to separate them. Focusing on these intersections better reflects women's lived realities in the education system and in society.

Ultimately, these theories also informed the ways in which I used spaces to invite women to be interviewed. I visited culturally specific services in the community, approached organizations and listservs that were a part of gender and sexually diverse communities, disability support services and support centres, financial aid offices and other student support services on campus, and child-specific services such as Early Years Centres, playgrounds, and daycares.

Anti-colonial theory provided a framework that raised awareness of the Eurocentric and normalized standards of classrooms and services on-campus. Anti-colonial theory also focused on women’s experiences of racism on-campus and in the community. This theory situates the education system as historically oppressive due to the atrocities of Canada’s residential school system. While the Canadian government portrays the residential school system as a system that operated in the far-away past, the last residential school did not close until 1996 in Saskatchewan (Assembly of First Nations, 2010). The trauma of residential schooling affects not only the survivors but also their children and entire communities. However, as was discussed in the group interview, an increasing number of Aboriginal peers, professors and services on-
campus provide support to Aboriginal students. Their presence illustrates Aboriginal agency and courage in fighting oppression every day. Anti-colonial and feminist theory also focus on resistance, which provided an opportunity for study co-participants to talk about the positive aspects of being single mother students. Exploring anti-colonial theory also brought awareness to the principles of inclusive education as one response to racism, social, and political exclusion in the education system. Inclusive education challenges the dominant norms in education that contribute to inequities in the school system. These norms include: the ways in which curriculum are developed and delivered; pedagogies used in the classroom; the socio-cultural representations of bodies on campus, including those of students, faculty, and administrators; social activities and spaces on-campus; services and programs, and the kinds of knowledge which are produced and implemented. Supporters of inclusive education would argue that all of these norms need to be deconstructed and more representative knowledge and practices implemented so that all students feel they belong on-campus. These principles are especially important for marginalized students who are disadvantaged in the education system but all students would benefit from these types of principles. Overall, inclusive education means a better education for everyone.

Critical feminist and anti-colonial theories have provided a strong foundation of balance in terms of the new knowledge that was produced through this thesis. Both theories support an intersectional approach where race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and citizenship status was explored. The multiple ways in which women are affected by discrimination is important. However, a tension exists in feminist theory (as it does in many theories). In some situations, is one part of a person or group’s identity more important? I do not view this tension as a
limitation but as a continuous point of reflection and dialogue. Putting a focus on one part of a person’s social location does not preclude the other parts; it only brings awareness to the specific circumstances at the time. For example, in chapter 5 Meena discusses how being a Black single parent is read differently in society from being a White single parent. In this circumstance, even though she has intersecting identities, she has focused on race as being a determining factor in how she experiences potential discrimination. Barriers due to immigration were also discussed in chapter 5. Racism is often a focus when deconstructing oppressive Immigration policies and practices. Some of the worst jobs in Canada are occupied by people of colour. While gender, class, ability, and age can compound issues of racism, racism is the common and often determining factor in the racial stratification in the paid labour market. In chapter 7, Scarlette discusses sexist jokes that were made in class by one of her professors. In this context, being a woman was the site of her oppression. Similarly, for some co-participants age, ability, and/or being Aboriginal was the focus of conversation. On the other hand, many women will experience points of oppression differently based on their other intersections of privilege and oppression. Valenti (2007) argues that it is not possible to “separate out your gender and race in your lived experience” (p. 230). Demas (1993) also brings attention to the complexity of discrimination and oppression based on being an Aboriginal woman with a disability.

My point in raising these examples is to show that focusing on intersectionality is necessary, especially in terms of representing multiple kinds of voices and different kinds of experiences so as not to assume one homogenous identity of single motherhood. However, sometimes an understanding of specific parts of someone’s experience can also be required for
a complete analysis. In some situations, anti-racist theory, anti-colonial theory, or disability studies may provide more depth. So for me, this raises the question of what theory “specializes”, in a sense, in single motherhood?

At present, a theory focusing specifically on family status discrimination in terms of single parenthood is missing. While feminist theory and anti-colonial theories can take these points of discrimination up, no theory specifically deconstructs how power operates in society based on this family status. It is usually conceptualized within a legal context (see Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2010), which is only one important category. Much has been written on the topic of unmarried women, divorced women, and even widows who face scrutiny, humiliation, and judgment regarding their single status (Blount, 2000; Byrne, 2000; Fink & Holden, 1999; Franzen, 1996; Holden, 2007; Jeffreys, 1997; Nicholson, 2008; Oram, 1992; Seal, 2009; Smart, 1984). Sole providers, independent women and those who do not have a heterosexual partner have been subjected to suggestions that they are not whole and self-fulfilled people. Dominant discourses construct single women as spinsters or lesbians (actual or perceived) and as “marginal, or oppositional, to normative womanhood” (Seal, 2009, p. 210). Qualities such as strength, assertiveness and independence are characterized as unladylike, out-of-control, and disruptive. Literature countering these discourses advances social justice and equity for single women and helps to challenge the normalized assumptions prescribing rigid categories, roles, and expectations for women. This is useful, yet I am suggesting we go further by developing a complex picture of how the intersection of single parent identities creates a nuanced understanding of the barriers and facilitators in society.
A social theory is needed to uncover the multifaceted ways in which people are discriminated against based on their single parent family status. This focus would not exclude gender, race, sexuality, class, ability, and citizenship status, but bring awareness to single parent family status discrimination in its own right. The one experience that all women in this study shared was of single motherhood. Can one theory encapsulate the complexities of this kind of oppression? Could it be named *single parentism*? What are the dominant discourses associated with this theory? How does power operate on structural and micro levels? How are resources in society distributed based on this status? In my own anti-oppressive social work education I have learned about racism, colonialism, imperialism, ableism, heterosexism, ageism and how they all interconnect to impact marginalized populations but family status is often absent from this dialogue. The findings from this research offer a strong starting point for an expansion on future theoretical analyses with single motherhood as a focal point. At the very least, family status needs to be included in the spectrum of oppressions when we investigate discrimination based on race, class, gender, sexuality, age, citizenship status, and ability.

As I conclude this research study and the discussion of the aspects of both my and the co-participants' lives shared in this dissertation, I am left knowing that it is not the end of this work. Even though there was not a strong action component within the design of the study, my co-participants and I were able to connect as a group outside of this research and I look forward to using the findings from this study to make changes. As my own role has continued in academe, now as an instructor, I will be able to apply all that I have learned to my own classroom setting. I will be able to use my privilege in the university to advocate for systemic change and to disrupt the stigma of the single mother status, which I attempt to do in the
classroom. I am also reaching out and having discussions with administrators in universities about the findings of this study.

I would like to close in the same way as I opened: by thanking those who had such an impact on me in my life. I am left in awe of the strength, possibilities, and challenges experienced by women in this study and wish them and their families all the best in the future. Many expressed to me how happy they were to see me doing this research and persevering in school. We also discussed next steps for those who wished to apply to graduate school. I saw this as a reciprocal process—while they were supportive and encouraging me in my own endeavours, I was moved and inspired by them. During my own times of doubt, guilt, and exhaustion, their perseverance supported my own. Every day I thank the women who gave so much of their time, energy, joy, and tears to this research.

My daughter has now finished her first year of kindergarten, and for all of her life she has known me as a student. She has come with me to school many times, sat through boring meetings, woken up to me already awake by 5:00 a.m., on the computer, and shared and sacrificed her time with me, all so that I could finish my doctoral degree. Though she may not remember our struggles as she gets older, she will be able to reflect on our stories and know that if it was not for wanting to provide the best chance for an economically and emotionally secure life for her, I would not have had the motivation and perseverance to be here in the first place. She is my life; she is the reason I have done what I have and come this far.

I have had the privilege of having so many wonderful women in my life. First, my mother, who has been a source of unconditional support and love. Next, my grandmother and my aunt who continue to show me strength and beauty by just being themselves. My friends
have also been a strong circle of support and wisdom. Finally, the academic women in my life continue to amaze me with their support and generosity, and their ability to make me believe in myself. Those who have come before me have made my life in the academy so much easier than it would have been. Those who have had to fight against discrimination and create their own spaces from the margins have contributed to building a space for me in the academy. I have no words to express the depth of gratitude I have for each of you.
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Appendix A

Individual Interview Guide

1. What made you decide to apply to university?
   - what do you hope to do when you graduate

2. Who or what do you find supports or assists you?
   - family, friends, community agencies, on-campus supports, childcare (formal or informal)

3. Who or what do you find makes it difficult to be a single mother student?

4. Who or what makes it easier to be a single mother student?

5. Are there any supports on-campus you find helpful?
   - in the community

6. Have you ever told any professors you are a single mother? If so, what happened?

7. Have you ever told any peers you are a single mother? If so, what happened?

8. Do you bring your child(ren) on campus?
   - where, do you feel welcome to?

9. Have you experienced discrimination while being a student?
   - based on class, age, race, sexual orientation, gender, sex?

10. Has anything happened in the classroom that has made you comfortable?

11. Has anything happened in the classroom that has made you uncomfortable?

12. Do you find the university supportive of single mothers?
   - why, why not, examples?
Appendix B
Group Interview Guide

1. What was the reason you chose to apply to university?

2. What or who has helped you balance your role as single mothers and students?

3. What has been difficult for you?

4. What has been positive for you?

5. Do you experience discrimination from your peers, instructors, or administrators, in the classroom. For example, based on race and ethnicity, ability, age, sex, family status, sexuality or class?

6. Are there any supports on campus or in the community that you find helpful? Any individual supports such as friend or parents?

7. What are the advantages of being a single mother? What are the difficulties?
Appendix C

Call for Participants

Current or Former Single Mother Students

Are you a single mother and working on an undergraduate degree in university?

OR

Have you graduated while being a single mother in the last 5 years?

Do you want to share your experiences in a research study?

My name is Jennifer Ajandi. I am a single mother student doing research on the subject of the experiences of single mothers and postsecondary education and would like to interview you. I am working on my Ph.D. at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education.

I know your schedule is busy. I will make every effort to meet with you at your convenience in terms of time, day, and place. You can decide to either be interviewed one-on-one or you can participate in a group interview with other single mothers, whatever is more comfortable for you.

You will be compensated $20.00 for your participation, refreshments will be provided, and transit costs will be paid for.

Please contact me at 905-341-0005 (St. Catharines) or collect 1-905-341-0005.

You can also reach me by email at jajandi@oise.utoronto.ca

This research study has been approved by the Research Ethics Boards at the University of Toronto, Ryerson University and Brock University.
Appendix D
Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age? ________
2. How do you identify in terms of race, ethnicity, or Nation? ___________________
3. Were you born in Canada? __________________________ If no, where were you born? ____________ What year did you arrive in Canada? ____________
4. What is your gender identity? ___________________
5. What is your sexual orientation? _________________
6. Do you have a disability? _______ If yes, what? __________________________
7. What is your marital status (single, married, divorced, separated, etc.)? ____________
8. How many children do you have? ___________
9. What is/are their age(s)? ________ ________ ________ ________
10. Do any of your children have disabilities? _____ If yes, what? _________________
11. What is your custody status? (eg. sole, joint, etc.) _________________
12. If you do not have sole custody, what is your visitation schedule? _______________
13. What year did you enroll in an undergraduate program? __________
14. Did you graduate? If so, what year and from where? _________________________
15. Are you currently a graduate student? ______ If you graduated, what year?____
16. In what field do/did you study? _____________________ Are/were you a full-time or part-time student? _________________
17. What university do/did you attend? _______________
18. What range would best describe your income? Under $10,000 ______
   $10,000-$19,999 ______ $20,000-$24,999 ______ $25,000-$29,999 _______

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$30,000-$34,999 ______ $35,000-$39,999 ______ above $40,000 ______

19. What sources of income do you receive? ______________________

20. What is your religion or spirituality? ______________________________
Appendix E

Consent Form for Interview Participant:
Individual Interview

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project exploring the experiences of single mothers in postsecondary education. My name is Jennifer Ajandi and I am a Ph.D. student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education, Graduate Collaborative Program in Women and Gender Studies at the University of Toronto. My supervisor is Dr. Margrit Eichler.

I am asking for single mothers to participate in this research who are currently working towards a university degree or who have graduated from a university degree program in the past 5 years. Participants will have the choice to participate in either an individual interview with the researcher or a group interview with other single mother participants. This research will involve 10-15 individual interviews and 2-4 group interviews, containing 6-8 participants in each group. The individual, semi-structured interviews are expected to last approximately 1 ½ hours in length and the group interviews approximately 2 hours in length. However, the length of time can be negotiated depending on the needs of the researcher and the participants. I will ask about the experience of balancing multiple roles associated with being a mother and a student. What are the barriers and facilitators? What was the decision making process like when deciding to apply for school? What are your experiences of discrimination (ie. racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism) in the education system? These questions are merely subject areas I am interested in. You will also be able to contribute subject areas and questions that are of importance to you and your experiences.

Participation in this research is voluntary. During the interview you can choose to pause, stop, or withdraw at any time, without any penalty to you. Your identity will remain anonymous and you can choose your own pseudonym. The interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed. The research data will be kept in locked files in a locked room. The findings from this research will be used as the basis of my PhD dissertation, publications, conference presentations and/or workshops. After all data analysis is complete, the data will be destroyed by a paper shredder. You will be offered the opportunity to receive a copy of the transcripts for your review, clarifications, and/or corrections. If you have any changes you wish to be made, you are asked to return the revised transcripts within one week’s time. You are also welcome to a summary of the findings after it is completed.

There are no foreseeable risks or harms associated with your participation in this research. However, if the unlikely situation arises where you become upset during the interview, you will be directed to local resources and given emergency numbers to call. If at any time during this interview it is disclosed that a child under the age of 18 is being abused or is at risk of harm I am obligated under the Child and Family Services Act to report this to the authorities. You will be
compensated $20.00 for your participation in this research and will be provided with reimbursement for transportation costs.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics approval from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Ethics Review Office at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273. Should you have any questions or concerns about the interview or the study in general, please feel free to contact Jennifer Ajandi, the researcher, at jajandi@oise.utoronto.ca or the researcher's doctoral supervisor Dr. Margrit Eichler, at meichler@oise.utoronto.ca. Please keep a copy of this letter for your own reference.

I have read and understood the above. This study has been explained to me and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and am now ready to begin the interview.

I would like a copy of the summary of the research findings:

- Yes
- No

I would like a copy of the transcript to review and if I have changes I agree to submit these to the researcher within one week:

- Yes
- No

Name: ___________________________________ Date: ____________

Signature: _______________________________

Researcher's Signature: ___________________ Date: ____________
Appendix F

Consent Form for Interview Participant:

Group Interview

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project exploring the experiences of single mothers in postsecondary education. My name is Jennifer Ajandi and I am a Ph.D. student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education, Graduate Collaborative Program in Women and Gender Studies at the University of Toronto. My supervisor is Dr. Margrit Eichler.

I am asking for single mothers to participate in this research who are currently working towards a university degree or who have graduated from a university degree program in the past 5 years. Participants will have the choice to participate in either an individual interview with the researcher or a group interview with other single mother participants. This research will involve 10-15 individual interviews and 2-4 group interviews, containing 6-8 participants in each group. The individual, semi-structured interviews are expected to last approximately 1 ½ hours in length and the group interviews approximately 2 hours in length. However, the length of time can be negotiated depending on the needs of the researcher and the participants. I will ask about the experience of balancing multiple roles associated with being a mother and a student. What are the barriers and facilitators? What was the decision making process like when deciding to apply for school? What are your experiences of discrimination (ie. racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism) in the education system? These questions are merely subject areas I am interested in. You will also be able to contribute subject areas and questions that are of importance to you and your experiences.

Participation in this research is voluntary. During the interview you can choose to pause, stop, or withdraw at any time, without any penalty to you. While the researcher will uphold confidentiality of the participants and you will be asked to provide a pseudonym, it will also be up to the group participants in the group interview to uphold confidentiality. The interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed. The research data will be kept in locked files in a locked room. The findings from this research will be used as the basis of my PhD dissertation, publications, conference presentations and/or workshops. After all data analysis is complete, the data will be destroyed by a paper shredder.

There are no foreseeable risks or harms associated with your participation in this research. However, if the unlikely situation arises where you become upset during the interview, you will be directed to local resources and given emergency numbers to call. If at any time during this interview it is disclosed that a child under the age of 18 is being abused or is at risk of harm I am obligated under the Child and Family Services Act to report this to the authorities. You will be compensated $20.00 for your participation in this research and will be provided with reimbursement for transportation costs.
This study has been reviewed and received ethics approval from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Ethics Review Office at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273. Should you have any questions or concerns about the interview or the study in general, please feel free to contact Jennifer Ajandi, the researcher, at jajandi@oise.utoronto.ca or the researcher’s doctoral supervisor Dr. Margrit Eichler, at meichler@oise.utoronto.ca. Please keep a copy of this letter for your own reference.

I have read and understood the above. This study has been explained to me and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and am now ready to begin the interview.

I would like a copy of the summary of the research findings:

- Yes
- No

I would like a copy of the transcript to review and if I have changes I agree to submit these to the researcher within one week:

- Yes
- No

Name: ___________________________________ Date: ____________

Signature: ________________________________

Researcher's Signature: _____________________ Date: ________
Appendix G

Characteristics of Single Mother Students:
Self-Reported on the Demographic Questionnaire

Sample

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<td>30-34</td>
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<td>32</td>
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<td>35-39</td>
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<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
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<td>$20,000-$24,999</td>
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<td>Above $40,000</td>
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<td>Rental Opportunity for Ontario Families</td>
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<td>Paid Part-time Work</td>
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<td>Child Support Payments</td>
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<td>Grants/Scholarships/Bursaries</td>
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### Race, Ethnicity or Nation

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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Ghanaian</td>
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<td>Goan</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Irish/Aboriginal</td>
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<tr>
<td>White (kids biracial)</td>
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### Birth Country

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### Arrival Year in Canada (of those not born in Canada)

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### Gender Identity

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### Sexuality

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<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
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<td>Two-spirit</td>
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### (dis)Ability - Mothers

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<tr>
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### Type of Disability - Mothers

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<tr>
<td>bipolar, Depression, and</td>
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<tr>
<td>Back</td>
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<tr>
<td>Severe Mental Health</td>
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### (dis)Ability - Children

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<tr>
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<td>22</td>
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**Types of Disability - Children**

Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Anxiety, And Sensory Issues | 1 | 4  
--- | --- | ---  
Social Anxiety | 1 | 4  
Non-verbal Learning | 1 | 4  

**Spirituality**

Spiritual | 2 | 8  
--- | --- | ---  
Earth-Based/  
Wicca | 1 | 4  
Catholic | 1 | 4  
Christian | 2 | 8  
Atheist/Agnostic | 1 | 4  
Not Sure | 5 | 20  
Energy/Karma | 1 | 4  
Buddhist | 1 | 4  
Christian/Aboriginal Traditions | 1 | 4  
Roman Catholic | 1 | 4  
Left Blank | 9 | 36  

**Marital Status**

Single | 13 | 52  
--- | --- | ---  
Separated | 5 | 20  
Divorced | 5 | 20  
Widowed | 2 | 8  

**Ages of Children**

LT1 Year | 0 | 0  
--- | --- | ---  
1 | 1 | 4  
2 | 1 | 4  
3 | 3 | 12  
4 | 3 | 12  
5 | 0 | 0  
6 | 6 | 12  
7 | 1 | 4  
8 | 2 | 8  
9 | 0 | 0  
10 | 3 | 12  
11 | 3 | 12  
12 | 3 | 12  
13 | 1 | 4  
14 | 2 | 8  
15 | 2 | 8
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**Number of Children**

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**Custody Status**

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