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**Seeking Their Voices:
Improving Indigenous
Student Learning Outcomes**

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Seeking Their Voices:

Improving Indigenous Student Learning Outcomes

for

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by

Mere Berryman, PhD

Sheila Carr-Stewart, PhD

Maggie Kovach, PhD

Cornelia Laliberté, BEd

Sharon Meyer, BEd

Brenda Merasty, MEd

Anne Sloboda, MEd

Bonnie Stelmach, PhD

Larry Steeves, PhD (Principal Investigator)

Saskatchewan Instructional Development and Research Unit

Faculty of Education

University of Regina

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Executive Summary

Setting the Context

In May 2013, Dr. Mere Berryman and Te Arani Barrett, University of Waikato, visited Saskatchewan to share the experience of the Te Kotahitanga program and its success in improving learning outcomes for Maori youth attending New Zealand secondary schools. Mere's influence was catalytic and led to a decision to explore the relevance of their work within the Saskatchewan context. The Joint Task Force on First Nation and Métis Education in Saskatchewan also reviewed the Te Kotahitanga program and recommended further exploration of the program in their final report entitled *Voices, Vision and Leadership: A Place for All* (2013). The result was the Seeking Their Voices research project. [While the Executive Summary provides a brief overview, readers are encouraged to refer to the larger research document, in particular the Conclusions/Recommendations chapter.]

Perhaps the most telling description of the research results was captured by one of the students,

You come to school and you bring your life with you so it's good to know who you're working with. I find that here at this school a lot because [of] my personal relationships with my teachers . . . It's almost like they are friends, good friends or even uncles or brothers like a family and that's I think how school should feel . . . I think you should know who you are teaching (Engaged Student, S5).

Another outcome from the research relates to the need to reconcile Western and Indigenous cultural worldviews – program success requires this reconciliation. In a practical sense this meant an often difficult, yet collaborative, research process that sought to respect what Willie Ermine (2007, preface) described as the “ethical space of engagement”. He indicated that “The ‘ethical space’ is formed when two societies, with disparate worldviews, are poised to engage each other. . . The new partnership model of the ethical space, in a cooperative spirit between Indigenous peoples and Western institutions, will create new currents of thought . . . and overrun the archaic ways of interaction” (pp.193-194).

Following Their Voices: The Research Findings

The Seeking Their Voices research project focused on improving Saskatchewan Indigenous student learning outcomes. The research is based on the voices of students, parents, teachers and school administrators in six Saskatchewan high schools.

Hearing Their Voices: What They Said

The heart of the Seeking Their Voices research related to the “voices” provided by students, both engaged and non-engaged, parents, teachers and school administrators. Key findings/themes are outlined below.

Student Voices

- There were few differences expressed between engaged and non-engaged students, however, non-engaged students reported more negative experiences than engaged students. Negative experiences for non-engaged students revolved around stereotyping, racism and/or classism, bullying and intimidation among a large school population. Engaged students spoke positively about their general school experiences.
- What helped non-engaged students with their learning was an understanding of the “relevance” of what they are learning to their life. Engaged students perceived that “good” teachers were genuinely concerned that students not only understood the material, but had opportunities to use their skills. Personal connections with teachers were a positive factor supporting student learning.
- Non-engaged students believed that being treated poorly by teachers and teacher favoritism detracted from their learning. Both engaged and non-engaged students referenced family circumstances and home influences as factors that impacted their learning. Students also identified teachers who were disengaged and not adequately prepared to provide the supports students required.

Parent Voices

- Concerns were shared that Indigenous people would share their stories and experiences with the risk that these would be ignored, as often happens with research concerning Indigenous peoples.
- Parents shared their own positive and negative educational experiences, in the hopes that what worked and did not work for them would help their children. The themed positive responses included positive supports for learning and the knowledge of the value and utility of education. The themed negative responses included absence of supports, abuse, bullying, stereotyping and racism that contributed to their own disengagement.
- Parents expressed what engages their children in learning. Themed topics included knowing the purpose of schooling, Indigenous sensibility and presence, parental and family support, and school programming. Parents felt their children were motivated to learn if they were able to recognize the utility of education for the future. Parents identified a range of different program initiatives that were helpful, including flexible scheduling, the block system, and practical and applied arts.
- Parents identified a number of things holding their children back, such as teacher disengagement, detrimental teacher behaviors, racism in the school environment, teachers low expectations, Indigenous culture gap, home dynamics and negative peer influences. Parents also discussed the lack of Indigenous cultural understanding by the school and the impact this had on their child’s education. Stressful family dynamics at home emerged as a theme hindering their child’s learning. Parents referenced the need to reinforce Indigenous traditional values in childrearing.
- Parents discussed the importance of effective teacher/parent relationships and communication; they acknowledged that effective communication requires teacher/parental involvement. Parents also believed effective teachers cared about their students inside and outside the classroom.

Teacher Voices

- Teacher voices with a strong deficit tone focused on the problems of dysfunctional students and families who they held responsible for continuing student failure. Teachers that were less deficit oriented expressed the need to establish relationships, focus on success and responsive teaching, being flexible and relevant, and finding ways to engage students.
- Responses regarding teaching approaches, responding to students' needs and improving student engagement focused on the teacher, system or student needs to improve engagement and learning. Teacher responses focused on making the learning relevant for Indigenous students and how this increased student engagement. Teachers stressed the need for classroom learning that was culturally relevant.
- Teachers stressed the importance of establishing relationships with Indigenous students before learning could commence. Relaxed and informal relationships based on getting to know students to help them through the learning process were expressed. Getting to know students' abilities was also seen as important.
- Some teachers acknowledged the possible negative impacts that community, family and socio-economic issues could have on Indigenous student success.
- Teachers identified the need for high expectations for Indigenous student success. Concerns were raised about a perceived mismatch between what the system wanted and what the students wanted, with the implication being that the students were expected to change, not the system.

School Administrator Voices

- Regarding building and achieving success, common themes identified by administrators included promoting success, a sense of belonging, relationships and engagement.
- Administrators discussed the following themes: school structure and policies, societal issues, and the value of support systems that assist in areas such as poverty, hunger, homelessness, drugs and alcohol issues, lack of transportation and learning gaps. Administrators further commented that relationships were important as a focus for student support.
- Administrators included teacher inexperience, racist behavior, deficit thinking and lack of cultural understanding when discussing what does not work when teaching Indigenous students.
- Administrators highlighted what good teachers do and the importance of humor – it being a part of Indigenous culture. They also considered sharing the power of learning, the importance of relationships, a commitment to the student, and being flexible and accommodating as important issues.

Recommendations

Province

- Continue to build working relationships with Indigenous communities in practical ways that promote truth, understanding and reconciliation of Western and Indigenous cultural worldviews. Consider what Willie Ermine (2007, preface) described as the “ethical space of engagement”. A critical aspect of the success of the Seeking Their Voices project has been an increasing awareness that a more collaborative, respectful way of working together was necessary. This is necessary for progress on improving Indigenous student learning outcomes.
- Jointly develop, with Indigenous communities, initiatives to target poverty, racism and assimilative practices within schools and the wider society. While uncomfortable to acknowledge, these unfortunate attitudes exist within schools and the wider society, often in ways of which we are unaware.
- Prioritize the development of programs by, and with, Indigenous peoples that focus on improving Indigenous student learning within Saskatchewan schools.
- When renewing curriculum, utilize collaborative practices in the development and delivery of relationship based, culturally affirming curricula for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth. Prioritize the opportunities posed by Treaty Education and related initiatives to influence curriculum renewal.
- Work with Indigenous communities and consider best practice research findings to explore the development of a school/community engagement model that is based upon a philosophy of “ethical space”.
- Prioritize to the development of culturally relevant assessment practices that provides meaningful information for use by teachers, schools, school systems and the province in improved classroom instruction, student learning and, more generally, system planning and improvement. Base this work on proven evidence based decision making models.
- Engage and collaborate with Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Indigenous people to provide a foundation of Indigenous knowledge and understanding.
- Support educational partnership initiatives that focus on improved Indigenous student learning. Initiatives may be requested of teacher education institutions, provincial school jurisdictions and other educational partners.

Universities/Teacher Education Programs

- Give priority to the further development of Indigenization initiatives within existing structures and programs, both within educational and broader university faculties. Foster closer relationships between Indigenous and broader program areas.
- Enhance the role of Indigenous teacher education programs such as Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP), Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP), Northern Teacher Education Program (NORTEP) and First Nations University of Canada (FNUniv) when engaging in Indigenous education program development.
- Explore credit/non-credit programming that supports the development of new and experienced teachers in their efforts to improve professional practice and learning

- outcomes with Indigenous students. Prioritize programming intended to provide undergraduate/graduate students with:
 - a greater sense of the value of a caring, supportive relationship between students and teacher;
 - Indigenous cultural awareness to build relationship instructional strategies to actively support Indigenous student learning;
 - effective use of evidence based decision making strategies;
 - the importance of agentic, rather than deficit thinking; and
 - an understanding of the effects of racism and colonialism.

Schools/School Jurisdictions

- Provide meaningful support to teachers who are asked to improve the learning prospects of Indigenous youth. Recognize that changing professional practice is a challenging process and requires ongoing, sustained support.
- Support strategic provincial initiatives intended to improve Indigenous student outcomes, whether at the classroom, school or system level.
- Actively foster programming to address the legitimate view among Indigenous people that schools often operate as agents of dominant western colonial values.
- Support local initiatives that focus on improving Indigenous student learning and consider local community needs and priorities.
- Recognize that there is a local community of Indigenous experts, such as Elders, story tellers and cultural carriers, who should have a strong and permanent presence within the school.

Teachers

- Prioritize the development of strong, meaningful and caring relationships with Indigenous students.
- Become more culturally responsive through the understanding of cultural background, worldview and values of Indigenous students. Spend time getting to know the students' family and community.
- Continue to improve professional practice including:
 - the need for caring and effective relationships;
 - strategies for effective classroom instruction;
 - the use of evidence based decision making; and
 - the need for increased cultural responsiveness and awareness.
- Expect the best of Indigenous students; a culture of supportive, high expectation is critical for student success. Avoid deficit thinking that encourages a remedial approach that accepts poor quality work. Recognize the importance of personal agency—teachers can make a difference.

Acknowledgements

Willie Ermine (2007) talks about the “ethical space of engagement”, a place that is formed when two disparate worldviews come together to find a place for meaningful and productive dialogue. The success of the Seeking Their Voices research project to date has occurred because of genuine efforts by all concerned to engage in this complex and sometimes uncomfortable process. Both Western and Indigenous educators have worked diligently together on this project; this has required new learnings and adjusting to different ways of knowing by all concerned. The fact that everyone involved undertook this difficult work, effectively working towards ethical spaces, speaks to their commitment to the work involved within this project.

Within the Western context of research, specific individuals may be singled out for recognition; however, given the ethical space we are attempting to work in it seems best to acknowledge a collective group of individuals. These individuals came together to engage in work that forced an enhanced understanding of one another’s worldviews and provide “ethical space” for one another. This group included the first people involved in supporting and encouraging the initiative; it quickly became others who also engaged in the research and program development. In this spirit of collaboration, an acknowledgement of individuals within school divisions, on the research team, and by others that simply volunteered to assist at critical junctures is necessary. Similarly the contributions of organizations such as the Métis Nation-Saskatchewan, the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation, the Saskatchewan School Boards Association, the League of Educational Administrators, Directors and Superintendents, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, and the Universities of Regina and Saskatchewan must also be noted. The Seeking Their Voices research project and program development work is a result of the efforts of all these people and organizations.

Finally, a special acknowledgement to the schools, the students, parents, teachers and administrators who willingly volunteered to participate within the study is necessary. Actually arranging the focus group and interview sessions was a major commitment of time by the six schools involved in the study. And to those students, parents, teachers and school administrators who participated in the focus groups and interviews, special thanks is due. Without your involvement, there would have been no “voices”. The rest of us owe you a debt of gratitude in sharing your experiences in such an open, honest and candid manner. We commit to ensuring that your voices will be heard, and followed.

Foreword

Research reports focusing on Indigenous education typically follow a familiar pattern. They begin with a statement of the problem, usually focusing upon demographic change, poor educational and socio-economic outcomes, and the need for action to remedy these challenges. They often discuss the pernicious effects of cultural assimilation and racism, reinforcing the need for substantive action to address these historical inequities. While all these things are accurate, they also can create an unfortunate perspective that essentially reinforces a deficiency narrative. Within this narrative are the often missed voices of strength, resilience and perseverance that can lay out a path to success. It is the intent of this document to be hopeful and thoughtful as we endeavor to illuminate this path. While many problems and issues related to historical inequity and oppression – do exist, the research results reported here tend to adopt a more hopeful tone. We believe that the research helps identify a path forward; rejecting a deficiency narrative and focusing upon concrete strategies to help support improved learning outcomes for Saskatchewan Indigenous youth. To fully appreciate these statements, a brief review of the circumstances that led to the research reported in this document, and subsequent program and development strategies seems helpful. From our perspective, the story begins with Dr. Mere Berryman and Te Kotahitanga, the only large scale reform initiative that has demonstrably provided improved Indigenous secondary student outcomes.

In May 2013, Dr. Mere Berryman and Te Arani Barrett, University of Waikato, visited Saskatchewan to share the experience of the Te Kotahitanga program and its success in improving learning outcomes for Maori youth attending New Zealand secondary schools. Key Saskatchewan educators were already aware of the work by Russell Bishop and Mere Berryman in developing Te Kotahitanga and its contribution to Maori secondary student learning. The opportunity to spend time with Mere and Te Arani was enthusiastically received in well attended meetings in Saskatoon and Regina. Their presentations to educators and provincial Ministry officials were formative in nature.

Mere's visit reinforced existing discussions regarding Indigenous education in Saskatchewan and potential future directions. Her influence was catalytic and led to a decision to explore the relevance of their work within the Saskatchewan context. In November, a party of 13 educators travelled to New Zealand to explore the Te Kotahitanga program. They returned convinced that the program model had the potential to make a difference within the Saskatchewan setting. Concurrently, the decision to use Bishop and Berryman's research framework in relation to the Saskatchewan context was taken. Mere had been clear that any Saskatchewan model should not adopt Te Kotahitanga practices slavishly but rather needed to be set within a local educational and cultural setting.

The result was the Seeking Their Voices research project. Like Te Kotahitanga in New Zealand, the research focused upon Saskatchewan high schools attended by Indigenous students. And like Te Kotahitanga, focus groups were conducted with groups of engaged and non-engaged Indigenous students, teachers and parents. In addition, separate interviews were conducted with school administrators. The focus of the research was to be on the voices of these participants. Future program development was then to be based upon the messages left

by their voices. This commitment has guided the overall process related to the actual research and subsequent program development outcomes. This report provides an initial summary of the messages left by the voices. It may be viewed as the first substantial statement of the messages from the participant voices. It is unlikely to be the last. We expect that the voices, as the participant feedback has come to be termed, will continue to shape future program and policy direction over the coming months.

Early in the process, the need for a thorough literature review that would help inform the process being undertaken and set context to the Seeking Their Voices research was also emphasized. The result was a decision to initiate a comprehensive review of the literature regarding Indigenous student learning. In addition, a series of 18 individual interviews with prominent academics, school administrators and policy people in Canada, the United States and New Zealand was also undertaken. These individuals, from Saskatchewan, Newfoundland, Alaska, Hawaii, Wyoming, Utah, Arizona and New Zealand, brought a unique perspective to the discussion. Of the entire group, 11 came from Indigenous backgrounds while seven were non-Indigenous. Almost all brought a lifetime of working in education with Indigenous children. Their perspectives essentially parallel the conclusions drawn from the literature review and the Seeking Their Voices research.

The most critical aspect of the Seeking Their Voices research related to the actual focus groups and interviews conducted with students, parents, teachers and school administrators within the six high schools who chose to participate in the study. The “voices” of these groups were profound in terms of the issues that they identified. Their words and accompanying insights will go far in shaping potential responses and actions that flow from hearing and following their voices. Issues such as teacher knowledge of the students’ cultural assets, on effective instructional practice and the importance of a knowledgeable and caring relationship between teacher and student were reinforced in the results of the focus group and interview sessions. Other issues included a focus on success, on the importance of language and culture, on issues related to racism and colonization, and the need to see the importance of relationship within a broader context that transcends the student and teacher within the classroom.

Perhaps a most telling description of our research results is captured by one of the students,

You come to school and you bring your life with you so it’s good to know who you’re working with. I find that here at this school a lot because [of] my personal relationships with my teachers, they know why I’m late for school. So I feel comfortable with them. It’s almost like they are friends, good friends or even uncles or brothers like a family and that’s I think how school should feel . . . I think teaching is one of the most important jobs in the world. I think you should know who you are teaching (Engaged Student, S5).

Thus far the voices and resulting outcomes provide information that we can then use to begin to build a roadmap for change. Researchers, Ministry officials, school division staff and representatives from a variety of stakeholder groups concerned about the life prospects of

Indigenous youth within the province have come together “in a good way” to consider research findings and explore future directions that will actualize these results. This work has not always been easy – the work itself is demanding and the ongoing reconciliation of competing cultural perspectives and worldviews has been sometimes challenging. Whether bringing together university research traditions with current accountability frameworks or reconciling Western and Indigenous worldviews, this work has often been complex. The good news is that all involved in the work have paid close attention to the voices, which is the direction provided by students, teachers, parents and administrators. Yet the ability to reconcile these often competing interests is critical to overall success of the work identified within the research. All parties have endeavored to move beyond traditional narratives anchored within a colonial discourse that often impairs all parties and their ability to move forward on a positive agenda. It is our sense that the ability to transcend these traditional discourses rooted with a deficiency narrative has, thus far, been critical to the success of this work. Within a message of hopefulness, we believe that this engagement will continue and within it help create the future that is necessary for Saskatchewan Indigenous youth.

Willie Ermine (2007, preface) captured our sense of the process that has gradually developed within this research and accompanying work. He indicated that “the ‘ethical space’ is formed when two societies, with disparate worldviews, are poised to engage each other The new partnership model of the ethical space, in a cooperative spirit between Indigenous peoples and Western institutions, will create new currents of thought . . . and overrun the archaic ways of interaction” (pp.193-194). Through this process of meaningful engagement, we are hopeful that a new learning narrative based upon the “voices” captured within the study will emerge and will benefit the learning opportunities of Saskatchewan Indigenous youth.

Neal McLeod (2007) in his book, *Cree Narrative Memory*, provided a metaphor from which to view the coming work. He stated that, “Cree narrative imagination is . . . a visionary process of imagining another state of affairs. This does not imply that one is seeking Utopia; one is simply seeking a different possibility, trying to conceive of a different way in which people might live together” (p. 98). McLeod further stated that “Great stories challenge the status quo. They challenge the social space around us, and the way society structures the world. Great stories urge us to rethink that social space” (p. 99).

We are hopeful that the research and voices contained within this report will encourage us all to re-imagine our stories, challenge our current social space, and rethink the ways in which we may envision a new way of teaching and learning within the province’s schools. Our children deserve no less – if we are to honour the voices of the students and others captured within this study, we must continue on our path of meaningful engagement. Only by doing so will we successfully re-imagine a better future for our youth; only then can we “conceive of a better way in which people might live together” (McLeod, 2007, p. 98).

Seeking Their Voices: The Research

Consistent with the initial research conducted by Bishop and Berryman (2010), the decision to conduct similar research in Saskatchewan to ground the work within a local context was taken. This approach was consistent with the desire by all involved with the project to not merely attempt to replicate what had occurred within the New Zealand Te Kotahitanga experience but rather to situate the research and findings within a Saskatchewan Indigenous student perspective. The result was the Seeking Their Voices research project.

This section of the research report will first provide a statement of research methodology and methods followed by the thematic analyses of the five groups drawn from six Saskatchewan high schools that participated in the research. These five groups included students, both engaged and non-engaged, parents, teachers and school administrators. With the exception of the school administrators, who were interviewed, all of the remaining groups participated within a focus group setting.

Research Methodology and Methods

This study received ethical approval by the University of Regina/University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board on October 31, 2013. Description of the research design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, and procedures for establishing trustworthiness of the interpretations are discussed in this section of the study.

This research study utilized multiple case study design (Stake, 2005); this afforded us the opportunity to examine various contexts while learning about particular factors and conditions regarding Indigenous student outcomes. Both Indigenous and western approaches were incorporated into the research methodology. The Indigenous principles that have guided this research can be defined as principles that: a) value Indigenous philosophical and community knowledges and experiences (Tuhiwai Smith, 2013); b) recognize the use of story as method in Indigenous knowledge creation (Archibald, 2008); and c) respect the utility and significance of relationality within research involving Indigenous peoples (Kovach, 2010). To ensure congruence with these principles, appropriate actions were taken in the planning and data collection phase of the research.

In the planning of the project, the principle of relationality was considered in the selection of the research team. The research team included individuals that possessed the following attributes: knowledge and experience in Indigenous student engagement; familiarity with Indigenous research methodologies; knowledge of the Saskatchewan Indigenous context and Saskatchewan schooling context; and capacity in the relational nuances and diplomacies in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts. The research team included seven researchers; four of the researchers were of Indigenous ancestry. The actual field data collection was primarily conducted by Indigenous members of the team. Prior to the data collection phase First Nations Elders were approached with respecting traditional protocols

and consulted for their guidance to ensure the research process was respectful, ethical and beneficial to Indigenous peoples.

The data collection method for this study included focus groups and one-to-one interviews. At each site one or more of the researchers included an individual of Indigenous heritage with a working background in Indigenous education in Saskatchewan. The method of data collection reflected a semi-structured conversational approach (Kovach, 2010) that allowed for participants to share their experiences and stories in response to the research questions.

Protocols that reflected Indigenous custom were followed at each of the sites. Many traditional Indigenous traditions and beliefs remain intact today as normative practices that are rooted in a deep-seated belief that everyone must be acknowledged and those guests are provided for and are comfortable. For example, personal acknowledgement in the form of handshakes at the beginning and the end of each session and the provision of food and a comfortable environment are norms in most Indigenous cultures.

With respect to the focus group and interview sessions, taking the time to personally reach out to each person and to greet him or her and ensure their comfort with the process demonstrated gratitude, respect, and established a sense of importance to the person's attendance at the gathering. What usually happened after the hosts shook hands with the guests was that they in turn shook hands with other participants. This gesture demonstrated a willingness to partake in the food and beverages provided. The result was that people were more likely to get to know each other, share stories, laugh, become more comfortable with each other, and therefore share their thoughts as it was deemed to be a relatively safe and welcoming environment. At the beginning of each focus group or interview, the researchers introduced themselves, establishing where they were from, their community and relational ties, as well as their work in the area of Indigenous education.

Research Sites

This study was premised on the assumption that context such as residence (rural or urban) and school governance and funding structures (provincial or federal) impact upon Indigenous student school experiences and outcomes. Given this, we aimed for maximum variation in perspectives by selecting six research sites with these distinctions:

- one rural provincial school with significant Indigenous student population;
- one rural First Nation school;
- one urban provincial school identified as an Indigenous “lighthouse” school; and
- three urban provincial schools with moderate to significant (25-50 per cent) Indigenous student population.

We delimited the study to secondary schools. While our primary aim in this study was to gain insight into Indigenous students' experiences with school and perspectives on teaching and learning, we were deeply motivated by the need to redress persistent challenges that have impacted upon Indigenous students' graduation rates in Saskatchewan. Secondary school

students, families and educators were assumed to have direct insights to inform our inquiry.

The participating schools ranged in student population from 181 to 1013. They were situated in communities in Saskatchewan’s largest cities and in communities with populations of fewer than 250. With the exception of one federal First Nation school, all remaining schools were located within the Saskatchewan provincial system. One of the rural schools was located in proximity to a number of First Nations communities. The other rural school was located on a First Nation community. Two schools were from Catholic school divisions. Table 1 summarizes the demographics of the participating schools, using September 30, 2013 enrolment and staffing levels.

Table 1: Demographics of Participating Schools

School	Grades	Jurisdiction	Student Enrolment ^a	Staff Population ^b
School 1	9-12	Urban Provincial	295	24 (12/12)
School 2	9-12	Urban Provincial	1013 (496)	80 (55/25)
School 3	Pre K-12	Rural First Nations	453	46 (27/19)
School 4	Pre K-12	Rural Provincial	181 (172)	29 (17/12)
School 5	9-12	Urban Provincial	827 (206)	58 (44/14)
School 6	9-12	Urban Provincial	848 (420)	84 (57/27)

^a September 30, 2013 student enrolment with self-identified Indigenous students in parentheses.

^b September 30, 2013 full time staff equivalents with teaching and non-teaching staff in parentheses.

Participants

Sample size in qualitative case study is small. The aim of case study research is to gain depth of insight rather than breadth (Mertens, 2014). Our concern was to capture different perspectives; therefore, we considered grade level and gender as criteria for participant selection. With one exception, all student and parent participants in this study identified as Indigenous.

Among the teachers and principals who participated in this study, 13 identified as Indigenous. Anonymity and confidentiality were promised as a condition for participation, and although we could not guarantee confidentiality because of the public nature of focus groups, we assured participants that we would take measures to protect their and their school community's identity. Given this, in the presentation of the data we indicate the source of statements based on a generic identification by school only. For example, statements that were made by a participant at School 1 were indicated in parentheses as *S1*.

To create the parent, student and teacher samples, we requested the principal identify a staff member with whom parents, students and teachers would not locate central authority. These school principals suggested a cultural liaison or school counselor would be most appropriate for inviting parents, students and teachers to participate in focus groups.

Students

Students are at the center of this research. We sought their voices first. In total 76 students participated in the focus groups. As noted in the dedication, one of the students died during the data collection. With his family's agreement, we have honoured his voice and included quotes from the focus group to which he contributed.

To create the student sample, we asked the principal to identify a staff member with whom students would not locate central authority. Since we were interested in potential differences between the experiences of students considered by the school to be "engaged" in school and those students who were not, these liaisons identified students to form two focus groups in each school: a focus group composed of "engaged" students and a focus group composed of "non-engaged" students. As the decision to assign individual students to two different groups was made by the school, to our knowledge, students and their parents were not made aware of these designations. Parents provided written assent for their minority children after receiving information about the purpose of the study and the nature of their children's involvement. Those students who were of majority age provided written informed consent. Students who agreed to participate were provided with a leaflet that outlined the purpose of the study and the questions that would be asked during the focus group (see Appendix I). These questions were made available to participants during the focus group as well.

Characteristically, these students ranged from grade 8-12. The engaged students totaled 41 with 18 of the students being male and 23 were female. The non-engaged students totaled 35 with 22 of the students being male and 13 being female. More females participated in this study than males. They reported various First Nations, non-status First Nations and Métis ancestry, originating from various First Nation, Métis, urban and rural communities throughout Saskatchewan. One student was not Indigenous. Every student had experienced moving to different schools at some point in his/her education. They came from myriad family compositions: two-parent, lone-parent, foster parent and grandparent. One student reported living independently. One student was expecting a child at the time of data collection and two others were mothers to infants. Many students described participating in sports teams, school council or social justice clubs in addition to attending classes. Some students held part-time

jobs. All students claimed graduating high school was an immediate goal and aspired to post-secondary education or training, or had identified a field of work they intended to pursue after graduating.

Parents

The parents of the student participants were invited to participate in focus groups and were given an information leaflet which included the focus group questions (see Appendix II). Thirty-five parents participated, eight male and 27 females, after providing written informed consent. All parents identified as Indigenous. Mothers, fathers, grandparents, foster parents, and in one case, an older sibling, comprised the focus groups. As was the case with the students, the gender balance tipped toward females. Some of these parents attended residential school. Few of these parents had an uninterrupted school experience; many reported leaving school, and of those who did, most returned to complete their schooling as adults. Many of these parents pursued post-secondary education or training.

Educators

The principals of each school participated in an individual interview. In one case, an Indigenous vice-principal was included in the conversation. Five of the principals were non-Indigenous and one principal was of Indigenous ancestry (See Appendix III for a copy of the Principal Interview Guide). We also conducted a focus group with teachers at each school. In total, 38 teachers participated in this study, 11 of the teachers were Indigenous and 27 were non-Indigenous. The educators were asked to provide written informed consent before participating in the study. They were also provided a leaflet with questions that aligned with those we created for the parent and student focus groups (see Appendix IV). Information was provided to the teachers, some were asked by the cultural liaison or school counselor or they volunteered their participation in the study.

Data Collection Methods

Focus groups were the chief data source. We selected this method based on Creswell's (2007) observation that focus groups "are advantageous when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information, when interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other and when time to collect information is limited . . ." (p. 133). Further, because of their dialogic potential, focus groups afford opportunities to "capitalize on the richness and complexity of group dynamics" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 903).

This is particularly suitable when interviewing participants, such as students, who are unaccustomed to interview situations. Consistent with Indigenist principles a conversational method of data collection (Kovach, 2010) was incorporated to build upon the dialogic approach.

Given the primacy of relationship in Indigenous methodology, the data were collected by Indigenous members of the research team except for one instance in which a non-Indigenous member assisted. Two focus groups were conducted with students at each school, one with their parents, and one with the teachers. In total, 24 focus groups were conducted. In keeping with suggested practice, the size of the focus groups did not exceed 10 (Janesick, 2000) and ranged from five to eight in many cases. The focus group sessions and interviews occurred from November, 2013 through February, 2014.

Participants were provided a meal, snacks and beverages to demonstrate our appreciation for their insights and time. At the beginning of the meeting participants were reminded of the purpose of the study and their rights, and they gave permission to audiotape the discussion. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour. A research assistant transcribed verbatim the focus group discussions within weeks of the focus group interviews.

As we were privileging students' voices, we wanted to ensure they had a second chance to consider our questions. Following the creation of the transcripts, our school contact person reconvened the students to make editorial comments. This served as member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Focus groups with teachers were conducted in a similar manner and the questions aligned with the same six that were asked of students and their parents (see Appendix IV, Teacher Information Leaflet). Almost all focus groups were conducted on the school premises during school hours, except for one. One focus group with teachers and four focus groups with parents were scheduled outside of hours to accommodate their schedules.

Given the importance of the role of the principal in student success, we interviewed the principal of each school. These individual interviews were semi-structured, as described by Fontana and Frey (2005) and followed the same structure of the six questions we asked the other participants.

Data Analysis

Six members of the research team participated in data analysis. Both manual coding and computer-assisted coding using *NVivo 10* were used. The questions that guided our focus group and individual interviews served as our conceptual framework. Specifically, in examining the data we aimed to reduce it according to these broad categories:

- school experiences and aspirations;
- what supports students' learning;
- what hinders students' learning;
- what "good" teachers do (and should continue doing); and
- teaching approaches that do **not** work with Indigenous students.

Qualitative data are dense and disperse; therefore, we approached it in what is commonly referred to as "cycles." First cycle coding followed what Saldaña (2013) called simultaneous coding. This means that the same excerpt might have been assigned multiple codes. In this

cycle we noted similarity, novelty, recurrence and divergence. This was our way of “chunking” the data into the basic topical categories of meaning regarding our interview questions. Second cycle coding employed axial coding to identify correspondence within or divergence from these topics. The second cycle focused on refining data within the main topics to develop categories until a level of saturation was reached (Creswell, 2007). For example, data coded as “supports learning” were further coded as “relationship” and “teacher assistance.” We approached this individually then met to identify convergence in our analyses. The concept of validity does not apply to qualitative research because of its inherent subjectivity; however, we aimed to ensure fidelity to the data. We achieved this in two ways. First, criteria were established to justify how themes were developed. For example, a theme of “teacher assistance” was defined by participant statements that emphasized the perception that teachers’ one-on-one or group explanations supported students’ learning. Second, our researcher meeting served as a check on our approach and interpretations. We were then able to combine and conceptualize codes thematically in terms of factors and conditions that contributed to Indigenous students’ experiences and perspectives on teaching and learning.

Limitations

All research is limited; no study can claim to be exhaustive. Furthermore, interpretive research is a social accomplishment: both the asking of and the responding to questions are filtered through a researcher-participant dynamic, which impacts the data (Yin, 2003). It is critical to acknowledge the limitations of this study so that it is clear what our interpretations can and cannot answer with respect to Indigenous students’ schooling.

Interpretations from case study research are not generalizable. The subjective element of qualitative research enhances the emic perspective into Indigenous students’ schooling; however, these students, parents, teachers and principals reflect a perspective caught in time and place. These participants are socio-culturally located and represent their own perspective rather than the perspective of all students, parents, teachers and principals in Saskatchewan for all of time.

Related to the above limitation, while our intention was to privilege Indigenous students’ and parents’ experiences and perceptions, the exclusion of non-Indigenous participants means that we cannot conclude that these experiences are unique to Indigenous Peoples. We do not know, for example, whether non-Indigenous students share the perception that having relationships with teachers who care supports a positive school experience.

Additionally, these data were collected within a narrow time period; therefore, the findings of focus groups and interviews shared in this report are a snapshot in time, which also impacts upon generalizability. Focus groups have their own set of limitations peculiar to this approach (Morgan, 1997). Individuals may not be expressing their individual viewpoint but rather a response to the context, itself. The groups may also not be representative in all cases and dominant voices that often emerge in this open ended method, despite the invitation to

be mindful of each other and importance of hearing from all the participants may have biased the outcome. Further, because focus groups are not fully confidential or anonymous, it may discourage participants from speaking their truth.

Finally, who we are impacts upon what we notice and understand. Having Indigenous and non-Indigenous eyes looking at the data may sharpen our vision. We also know that seeing is a form of not seeing in qualitative research (Silverman, 2005).

Hearing the Voices: What They Said

Students' Voices

We have long ago understood that schools reproduce an arbitrary cultural scheme (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). For Indigenous students the privileging of Eurocentricism that has characterized education in Saskatchewan and elsewhere has created a collective disadvantage. Educational research concerned with social justice has been a welcome response to this (e.g. Bingham & Okagaki, 2012); however, students' voices are persistently eclipsed. Our overarching aim in this study was to begin to remedy these oversights. It was important that we honoured these Indigenous students by presenting the themes *in vivo*—Latin, meaning “within the living”—so that the interpretations we brought to the data remained as authentic to these students' voices as possible.

Levin (2000) aptly pointed out that students for whom schooling is not always positive tend to get fewest opportunities to make decisions about their learning. Heeding this, we were concerned with including in this study not only students who were considered to be positively engaged in school, but also those who were considered to be “non-engaged.” We assumed these students' level of engagement might influence their perspectives on our questions, keeping in mind that it was school staff who made these distinctions, and students themselves did not categorize themselves in these ways. In some cases, the data showed different responses to questions for non-engaged and engaged students; in other cases these students had similar perspectives regardless of their level of engagement. In most cases, the interviewers themselves had trouble distinguishing the two groups as both groups engaged in the interviews, and at times the non-engaged were more talkative and eager to share what supported them in their learning and what did not. The following responses by the students were divided into three sections: students' school experiences; what helps students in learning—what good teachers do; and what holds students back from learning—what teachers should stop doing.

Students' School Experiences

Students' responses to the question regarding their school experiences did not point to clear-cut themes across all schools for either the non-engaged or engaged students. What was common to both groups was that these students attended more than one school. In both groups students reported positive and negative experiences with their past and current schools. If we were to make a distinction, however, non-engaged students reported more negative experiences than engaged students. Negative experiences for non-engaged students revolved around stereotyping, racism and/or classism, bullying and intimidation among a large school population. Engaged students spoke positively about their school experiences; however they did have suggestions for improvement. Among these groups students' negative experiences such as racism, were divergent but important voices.

Non-Engaged Students' School Experiences

When sharing school experiences, some students described it positively, other students reported negative experiences: *"There are some bad days and there are some good days"* (S2).

Positive school experiences were connected to curriculum: *"Before I came here I had a lot more opportunities . . . I would have had my welding and construction, mechanics . . . I was taking all of those classes"* (S3). This particular student lamented having to change to the current school because of a perceived lack of optional courses. Students from another school seemed to share the enjoyment of such courses:

When it comes to school . . . I learn that I am more of a hands on type person. I would rather learn by doing it than actually reading about it (S5).

Instead of doing tests like for finals I would rather like to do a final project for the test, like going on the computer and put it on a poster and anything, like that 'cause it's easier for me and it's—a test is basically nothing . . . it proves to you that you can remember stuff instead of actually learning it (S5).

A student's comment, *"I am learning a lot"* (S6), indicates academics had central importance in students' positive experiences.

A social aspect of school also seemed to contribute to students' positive experiences: *"It was a fun school . . . I liked it. It was a real nice school, and I made a whole bunch of friends"* (S1). Moving to a larger school was intimidating for one student: *"I came from a school with only a little bit of people—only 30—and it is scary now because I ended up in a school filled with so many students"* (S2). When asked to talk about school experiences one student said, *"Mine is great. But sometimes I am scared to lose my real friends or lose who I am"* (S4). A different student reinforced social security:

I really liked it when I first came here. It was nice. Like, I actually felt welcomed like with the teachers and the staff. They were really nice and the students here were, they were awesome, you know . . . Lunch would be provided here and I just felt real safe here (S1).

This student also described drumming and dancing as part of lunch time activities.

These students were more likely to share negative experiences with school, but not necessarily with their current school. Words that these students used to describe their school experiences included *"crappy"*, *"boring"* and *"too easy"*. Bullying among students accounted for some students' negative experiences. Typically these examples came from past schools they had attended rather than the schools that were under study. One student reported he had dropped out of school because he *"used to get bullied a lot"* (S3).

In some schools racism came up in the conversations so the interviewers asked the question,

“Is there racism?” In three schools students affirmed this. One student commented, “*Oh, it’s a white school. It’s a racist school*” (S4). When interviewing students in School 2, an interviewer asked, “What’s it like to be an Aboriginal student in this school?” One student responded, “*Not good I guess. You kinda feel different from everybody else cause there is kind of like less of us and more of them*” (S2).

Negative stereotyping and/or racism was sometimes associated with teachers’ assumptions about Indigenous students’ abilities. Some students described experiences with teachers that made these students feel academically inferior:

They acted like we were slower and we didn’t understand things, and they explained it slower. And sometimes they put us in a different class. Automatically we were assigned to talk to the counsellor, and to do work with the counsellor . . . They didn’t test us (S4).

There was this kid that I didn’t really know, and he was a lot darker than me because I look like a white kid. I grew up like a white kid, right? But I am Aboriginal, not like a whole lot, but you know, a little bit counts . . . What I noticed with the teacher is every time I asked for help I got help right away. But every time this kid behind me—he was Native, he was darker—every time he asked for help he didn’t get very thorough help . . . it wasn’t good help, it was like, here I am going to dumb it down for you because you look like you don’t know what you are doing, you know? (S5)

Some students shared disciplinary measures that were exact and inflexible when it came to them. A couple of students shared incidents they believed demonstrated racism:

. . . a white kid bumped into me. I pushed him back and we fought. And no one believed me. The principal did not believe me, so I got kicked out (S2).

We weren’t doing nothing. We weren’t even around the area and so they get taken to the office. The cops get called and essentially it’s not us, but we are getting blamed for something that’s not even our doing, and it’s just because. Like most of the time it is from a racial standpoint and stereotypical ideas and everything. Teachers jump to conclusions like that, and the fact is, they are not even bothering to find out the truth . . . And it bothers me so much when they do that and the fact is they didn’t even apologize to those students when they did that . . . they didn’t bother to apologize when they found the right kids that did it (S5).

. . . I was like, that’s ridiculous. That is stereotypical to say we are a gang because we are all wearing the same color. Maybe we just don’t like wearing bright colors that stand out. We just like wearing what we wear. I mean, fashion has nothing to do with us going to class (S5).

Indigenous students felt that when there was trouble, they were more likely to be assumed to be the culprits: “. . . *there was one time when it wasn't even us and [teacher] blamed us*” (S5). Elaborating on this incident, another student offered, “[Teacher] basically blames it on us. He kind of stereotypes us because some of us are Native” (S5).

Students shared the collective impact of individual Aboriginal students' behaviors:

Some of the Natives are making us have a bad name, like when they steal. Like that one girl who stole from Wal-Mart. Something like that. She is making us have a bad name. Making us all seem like we are thieves and all that (S4).

A student in that same focus group contributed another example:

Or like when anyone of the kids here steal from [a store]. Alcohol, then all of a sudden all of us are like that. We are all just little alcoholics in the making. But we are not (S4).

In School 2 there was recognition of ethnic segregation. When an interviewer asked if students mix together, one student said they “*Stay in their own groups*” (S2).

Not all students in these three schools agreed with their peers about teachers' racist behaviour, however. For example, one student perceived students as resisting teachers' help: “*I can list all the teachers in this school that help us. It's just the students aren't deciding to choose to take that help. They are denying it just because of their skin color*” (S5). When asked by the interviewer if “it feels better to be in [a school with more Aboriginal students] or a school where there's less Aboriginal kids” one student responded, “*It doesn't matter 'cause I like to meet new people*” (S2).

The above provides some insight into why some of these non-engaged students described school as “*stressing sometimes*” (S5).

Engaged Students' School Experiences

If anything set these engaged students apart from the non-engaged students it is that most engaged students reported more positive, rather than negative experiences. Their responses included, “*I love school. It's wonderful*” (S4), or “*It's a fun school and fun to learn*” (S3). Like students in the non-engaged group, option courses enhanced these students' enjoyment: “*I like the carpentry program*” (S4), “*My favourite subject in school is Industrial Arts*” (S4), and “*We have the guitar and everything and that really is interesting. A lot of people are into music. We have drama. We have choir. We have lots of different things here.*” One student said, “[School is] *pretty positive for the most part. I am personally in AP, in advanced classes*” (S5).

Extracurricular involvement was also reported as part of what made these students'

experiences positive. This was noted as unique among the engaged student groups. There were a couple of students who, like non-engaged students, commented on school size as a potentially negative experience:

. . . it's all like so many kids there . . . They just rush everything . . . it's just better to be taught here than it was there. I like it way more here than I did there (S1).

. . . it's pretty big and you get lost (S2).

Comments about negative school experiences generally indexed schools they attended in the past. One student shared a memory of a past school teacher: *"She was really abusive towards us kids and she was really loud . . . she threw scissors at a wall and it hit a girl"* (S2).

Another student said, *"Some of my school experiences sucked because I would always be the one who beat up kids. I would always get suspended from school"* (S5).

Almost all students had negative experiences in their past schooling, but were positive about the school they attended at the time of data collection.

Racism also came up in the conversations with the engaged group in School 5. Students there shared similar sentiments to the non-engaged students who described racism as part of their negative school experiences. For example:

All those horrible jokes—and Listerine jokes and stuff like that . . . I kind of said, "I am Cree. Do you guys want to stop that?" And they didn't believe me . . . I just really didn't understand how Aboriginal people make up so much of the population but yet we have all these stereotypes and we are still mocked in a way. That's not really fair to us as people, to have that done in a society that it's so common now (S5).

Some students believed racism to be the reason for differential treatment, as described by the following:

. . . the girls that made the team, like our First Nations was only two of them and they like never get to play. Like the only time they ever get to play is when some girl gets hurt and that's about it. They just sit on the bench (S5).

This student said the coach later asked her to join the team. She believed that she was only invited after initially being cut because the coach realized he needed her and her response was, *"I am not going to go for a racist team"* (S5).

These engaged students who spoke about racism demonstrated resistance. For example, one student described an incident of being mocked in a library. She believed that she was mocked because she had a baby.

Her response: *“I am going to be on the honor roll. My teachers told me so. Like, it’s kinda funny how they judge me even though I’m doing better for myself and they are probably failing and everything. It was kind of dumb”* (S5).

Rather than assimilate the racist behaviour, these students focused on their own behaviour by saying: *“I am more mature than him [the coach]”* (S5).

Although these students thrived in spite of these negative experiences, they described the toll it took on them:

It kind of just stings a little to have to keep on proving myself over and over, showing that I am not like the stereotypes . . . A lot of us don’t fit in that category we are labeled as. It’s just kind of tedious work to show I’m not stupid and naïve (S5). It’s almost if, just because we are Aboriginal students, we have to prove so much (S5).

What further complicated life was the double bind of stereotyping:

There are the students that strive to be more, and then they get stereotyped from their own people because they are trying to be something else and we get stereotyped that, ‘Oh, you are trying to be white. You are trying to be that. You trying to be something you not. So I guess on both sides of the table you are going to get stereotyped as an Aboriginal person and that’s what sucks. It’s dealing with both ends. It’s like you have to choose—either way you are going to have some kind of stereotype on your back (S5).

What Helps Students in Learning and What Good Teachers Should Do

Because our aim in this study was to gain emic perspective about Indigenous students’ learning, we asked them: “What helps you with your learning?” and “If you were given the power and authority to tell teachers what they should be doing to be awesome teachers, what would you tell them?” Since these students answered both these questions primarily with respect to teacher behaviour, we collapsed these data. As indicated in the introduction to this section, convergent themes are represented in vivo.

Non-Engaged Students

What helped these students with their learning was when they found learning relevant. Teachers who took the time to help students, who developed personal, caring relationships with students and who were pleasant to be around were also among the themes that reflected what supported these students’ learning, and what they perceived as “good” teachers.

Theme 1: *“ . . . like true bearing and stuff like, how far does a boat have to turn to be parallel with this other boat? I’m like, I don’t know, get the fishermen to figure it out. It’s frustrating”* (S4).

Most consistently reported across all schools was that it was helpful to these students when they perceived the material they were learning as having applicability to their lives and future plans, or when it held their interest. For instance, one student contemplating her post-secondary plans said, *“How to convert measurement and stuff, yeah, ‘cause if I’m not a child psychologist, I want be a chef. So, like the conversion of milligrams to grams to kilograms . . .”* (S4). She elaborated, *“I don’t see geometry helping me be a child psychologist or how wide is your forehead”* (S4). Cooking class, for example, was viewed by another as *“something you need to survive on”* (S1).

Further, when subjects were perceived as *“boring”* students admitted they were *“slack”* (S5). There seemed to be an affinity for option classes, such as in School 3:

A new class would be nice, such as arts.

Yeah, arts, mechanics or electrician.

Yeah, electrician would be pretty fun. All we got is a construction shop.

Related to the idea of options was the opportunity to do project based work. *“More projects than tests”* (S5) was what some of these students wanted.

The importance of being interested in what they were learning was emphasized in School 6, where a discussion took place about students’ use of drugs as a coping mechanism for their disengagement from learning. One student explained, *“Teachers don’t know how to make it fun.”* In that same discussion another student said, *“They [teachers] just give us a booklet and make us do work.”* And a third student reported, *“You sit there, have a boring day and you could look at something and say, “That’s boring,” but if you get high and you could look at something and say, “Hey, that’s awesome.”* These students were forthcoming and honest about the fact that they found school boring and using drugs was the only way they could get through a school day.

In School 4 and 5, courses about Indigenous culture were referenced. These students expressed disappointment over the fact that the topic of residential schools is avoided: *[Teacher] doesn’t like talking about residential schools, but some of us wanna learn more about that”*(S4). Further, these students said Idle No More was similarly taboo, *“And if we try to talk about it and all of that, they are like (imitates teachers), “Stop that and get to work! . . . Be quiet. Talk about that at break”* (S4). These students wanted to engage in these topics as they were contemporary issues relevant to their lives.

Theme 2: *“If they know you personally, like they know most of their kids personally, they will know who wants to succeed . . . ”* (S5).

Many of these students reported an aspect that helped their learning was when teachers took

the time to get to know them. One student said, “*Some teachers, they don’t care who you are*” (S5). This extended into their personal lives as indicated by this student’s comment:

Focus on not so much what are your issues at school, but like what are your issues at home? Like what’s going on? Like, tell me. I think we need more teachers that are like guidance counsellors . . . make sure each individual is doing alright and trying to help them in several different ways (S5).

They also described caring teachers as those who looked beyond students’ negative behaviour, and made an effort to find out what was causing it. Consider the following examples:

They help you all the time, and they talk to you when you’re down (S2).

You can feel free to say what you want to say (S3).

They kind of see when you’re upset (S4).

. . . when we are skipping class, they are not so much like, “Get to class! Get to class!” They are like, “What’s going on? How was your weekend? How is home life? . . . When there are terrible things going on in my life, I talk to [teacher] (S5).

If you look down, she will ask you what’s wrong and you could always cry on her shoulders (S6).

Further, teachers who validated students’ experiences were perceived as caring. Two students had opposite experiences with this and both examples demonstrate the impact of a caring teacher on students’ school performance:

We are young. We can’t go through it like how some adults do. Like, we are teenagers. We are gonna go through a breakup. We are gonna think it’s the end of the world ... But some teachers don’t see that (S4).

I usually got doubted by [Teacher], and he’s one of our teachers that I do not get along with. So I don’t do [his] classes that much ‘cause there is that one point there he didn’t allow me in his class because of how my past was. So I don’t really bother with him anymore . . . he put me down and everything. Made me seem like I couldn’t do it (S3).

Their appreciation for teachers who demonstrated compassion towards them was balanced by the recognition that when teachers told them to get to class it was because they wanted students to “get a way better education” (S1). One student explained to the group that if teachers did not bother to tell students to go to class, it would mean they did not care about the students’ success, “*That all goes back to caring*” (S1).

Bluntly put, it was important to these students that teachers “*actually gave a shit about what matters*” (S5). This either fostered or cut a connection with teachers and learning: “*If you don’t like the teacher, you are not gonna want to be in class and you are not gonna wanna learn*” (S6).

Theme 3: “*They stay with you until you are done needing help*” (S1).

These students reported that it helped with their learning when teachers spent time with them either to further explain material or help them catch up with schoolwork. When students reflected on this question, they said things like, “*Whenever I was behind, [teacher] would always help me . . . If I need help, she will help me*” (S4). Falling behind in class seemed to be a concern. Statements such as, “*They could try help us and say, ‘You could come in tomorrow at lunch and I will help you with this’*” (S4) and “*Let us get caught up before they give us another assignment*” (S2) reflected this. Some students shared examples of teachers who spent time with them outside of class to “*help [them] get through*” (S2). About these kinds of teachers they said, “*We need more teachers like that*” (S4).

Unique to these groups of students was their shyness about asking for help. One student thought teachers should be “*walking around and if they see you struggling come and help or something*” (S4). If teachers were on the watch for struggling students, this freed students from judgement by peers:

You shouldn’t always have to ask for help ‘cause sometimes you are too scared to ask ‘cause you are scared people will be like, “Oh, she needed help. She must be dumb. She must not understand this lesson. She must be slow.” And then you get made fun of for it. I get made fun of for it, but I already know I am slow (S4).

Other students recognized their own and others’ fear of asking for help:

Interviewer: Do you like asking for help?

Student: Not really, especially when you’re in a big class and you’re a quiet person (S2).

Some don’t even know how to read or write and they are just too nervous to ask for any help. You ask them if they want help. They just say no. And then if you ask are they doing okay and they will say “yeah”, when really they’re not (S2).

They also recognized the detrimental effect of not being able to seek the support they needed:

The reason I see why people skip is this: Because they get agitated and they can’t sit down for a long period of time. The work, they get stumped. They don’t know what to do, and they don’t want to ask for help so they get frustrated, and they end up, don’t

know what to do, so just walk out and that's what they are known best for—just to stop. There are a lot of kids that have been dropping out this year 'cause it's too hard (S3).

The importance of having a strong teacher-student relationship (Theme 1) was emphasized in this theme as well, for students who did not feel a connection to the teacher were unwilling to seek help and if the teacher did not bother to get to know the student, he/she may assume that the student did not care about her/his school work. In reflecting upon why some students do not ask the teachers for help, this student said, *“They [students] might find themselves not smart. Maybe, yeah, scared, nervous” (S3)*. Adding to that, another said, *“Because they don't know the teacher that well, too. So, bonds are important, too” (S3)*. A comment made by another student reinforced how important it was for teachers to get to know students and to understand why they were reticent: *“You have to see it inside of them that they need help [rather] than them saying it because they are not going to say it” (S6)*. One student's comment warrants citing at length because he summed up both the importance of teachers initiating support and the advantage assertive students have when it comes to getting help:

. . . just sending them home, like, what kind of education is that? It irritates me sometimes when teachers do that because you could interact with a kid and help him rather than just say, “Go home, no one wants you here if you are just going to sit and stand around.” Like, I could be standing around for a reason—because no one is trying to help me.

Some kids do need support more than others. Some kids just support themselves, so it all depends on who you are . . . I don't know, just able to stand up for yourself and ask for help because they just don't come to you (S5).

This student further described a classmate who was failing but would not seek help from the teacher because of a “grudge” between them. We frequently heard about students choosing to stay silent to avoid feeling *“dumb in front of everybody just because [they] don't get something” (S6)*.

Theme 4: *I hate when teachers say, “You're in this class to learn, not to fool around,” and you're learning, but then it's good to have a little laugh once in a while But they are real serious and then it makes the day go by slower” (S2 & S3).*

This theme was all about teachers *“lightening up.”* We heard these types of comments in five of the schools we studied. Humor was one of the most common descriptions of what good teachers do. Teachers with a sense of humor were reported to inspire students to *“want to go to class more” (S2)*. Most of these students shared examples of teachers who could *“joke around” (S3)* and *“make it fun” (S6)* because of their sense of humor. One student enjoyed the repartee with her teachers: *“You use sarcasm with them and they use sarcasm right back” (S4)*. A good teacher *“knows how to take a joke.”*

These students also craved an environment in which teachers were *“open minded” (S3)* and willing to *“compromise more” (S6)*. A concrete example of this was being able to listen to

music while they worked, or being able to leave the classroom to have a “*soft place to work instead of these hard chairs*” (S4). We detected resentment regarding teachers who were dogmatic about the rules, such as in the following:

When the bell rings and you're going to class and they shut the door on you and they tell you, "You can wait out here until I am done speaking to the other students" (S2).

Students in one school noted, “*rules . . . are pretty strict*” (S3). In this same school, one teacher was regarded as “*cool*” because “*he gives everyone a long leash unless you mess it up . . .*”. Although they did not resist rules outright, they did not like the way they were sometimes enforced. For example, one student said teachers should, “*Stop being so harsh when they take you to the office*” (S6). In this same school, a student reported a teacher who took pictures with his personal cell phone when he saw students on school grounds skipping classes. This student expressed concern: “*Like, we understand he is going to show the teachers and stuff, but what is he going to do with it afterwards? Is he going to delete it? "Cause we don't know, it's his personal phone.*” The bottom line was that students were more positive about teachers who injected humor into their lessons, refrained from policing them, and de-institutionalized the learning process.

Engaged Students

Theme 1: “*Feels like they want you here. When you are stuck they want you to get an understanding . . . and we should be challenging our creative minds*” (S2 & S5).

By far the most frequently reported factors that helped these engaged students with their learning were attributed to teacher behaviour. This first theme captures students’ perceptions that “good” teachers are genuinely concerned that students not only understand the material, but have opportunities to “*utilize [their] skills*” (S5). Many students reported that teachers who explain lessons clearly, seek alternative ways to explain concepts and who are willing to spend “*one-on-one time*” (S1) with them to ensure they can be successful in their classes play a key role in their academic lives. This was articulated in the following:

They explain stuff more so you get it, or they relate it to something that you know you can get instead of just saying, like, the facts (S1).

Some teachers will just make sure that everyone knows (S2).

Explain our assignments. Give more examples . . . They reward us. They encourage us to do better and they also tell us what we are doing wrong or right (S4).

They will have extra explanation so if there is something people don't understand, to be able to give them that one-on-one attention to help them understand what they are learning a little bit better . . . that's always a good thing to have that extra attention from a teacher (S5).

I am terrible with math, but [teacher] could figure out ten different ways to explain a problem . . . the fact that she was creative enough to think of something for every student to kind of figure out what she was teaching was really awesome (S5).

They go over and do things on their own time to make sure that you succeed (S6).

In describing a supportive teacher one student said, “I loved going to his classroom because he would make sure that if I didn’t know what I was doing that he would take the time and teach me” (S6). A student from another school shared a similar perspective, emphasizing an empathic dimension to teaching: “. . . that’s what a teacher is and I love when a teacher isn’t so much of an authority figure, but they come down on your level” (S5). “One-on-one teaching” was how one student described “being shown that the teacher actually cares” (S1).

Although the non-engaged students also reported clear explanations as a factor that helped them with their learning, what set most of these engaged students apart was that they were confident in their abilities and expected to be challenged. This was articulated in the following:

The class is getting bigger and bigger for AP (Advanced Placement) because more people want a bigger challenge. My class is really accepting for anybody—like, all ideas work and they are just a really good community ‘cause you know everybody there wants to excel in English . . . it’s fun (S5). When I came here all the teachers [were] even mad at me—well, like, not mad at me, but as in a good way: (imitates teacher) “what’s wrong with you? You are always handing in big stacks of work. We have nothing for you to do, nothing you could work on. You are ahead of everyone” (S5).

Some students expressed a need to have teachers believe in them. Their advice to teachers was, “Don’t judge a book by its cover” (S1) and “Don’t doubt [students’] working abilities” (S1). Further, while the non-engaged students questioned what they were learning, the engaged students did not. Rather, they critiqued the delivery of the curriculum. Several students made comments to this effect:

It really depends on how the teacher introduces it to you. That’s what makes it boring or . . . (S2).

I had this teacher and she always talks about the stupidest stuff and it’s nothing to do with the topic . . . then you get into the conversation and you put your work back. Then when the day ends I didn’t even complete anything at all. So, it’s like, you should focus on the topic rather than getting off track (S5).

Additionally, students were self-aware about their learning needs, as this student related:

I think it was three years ago, it was like Science 10 or something, and all [teacher] did was give us a textbook and . . . it was very dry and a lot of students hated that

class. I think teaching is way more, like, everyone learns in different way . . . so I think that's the thing. Teachers should . . . work on different forms of teaching (S5).

Contrarily, while it was helpful “*when teachers [were] exciting*” (S2), these students identified teachers who lacked passion and innovation and who were not willing to challenge the students: “*They will basically hand out anything . . . and it's, like real easy*” (S3). This appeared to discourage these students who described themselves as “*curious*” (S4).

Theme 2: “*It's almost like they are, you know, friends, good friends or even uncles or brothers, like a family. That's I think how school should feel . . . I think you should know who you are teaching*” (S5).

Similar to the perception of the non-engaged students, students in the engaged groups discussed a personal connection with teachers as a positive factor that supported their learning. One student suggested teachers should, “*make more like a friend relationship with you—personal relationship. Like, actually get to know you and your background*” (S1).

Although most of these students were performing well in school, they, too, encountered personal circumstances that sometimes interfered with their school lives. It was helpful to them that teachers accepted them as “whole” persons, with personal lives and responsibilities, such as maintaining a job. For example, one student said, “*They understand if I have a certain situation, that [I] need to miss some school for. They understand that*” (S5). In this same group another student said, “*A lot of us do have jobs and activities outside this school. The school isn't just our whole lives. We have other stuff outside of school that we should probably be doing*” (S5). This sentiment was shared by another in School 6: “*They ask you about what's going on in your life, not just your school life.*” One student felt a stronger connection to First Nations teachers, claiming, “*they know who they are teaching [and] would want to get to know me personally*” (S1).

The personal connection was enhanced for these students when teachers were equally willing to “*just talk about themselves*” (S2). Along this vein, one student's discussion of trust provides valuable insight:

I trust most of my teachers, but it's a two-way thing where . . . I will share stuff with them, but they share stuff with me. That's why I feel comfortable enough to tell them stuff. It's because, you know, they tell me about their past hardships . . . so I feel comfortable enough to tell them about my life . . . other students, I don't think, you know, they don't even want to share the, “Oh, maybe I had a fight with my boyfriend over the weekend and that's why I couldn't get some stuff done, you know?” Like, that's too personal to tell the teacher and they won't understand, instead of going to them and like, “Oh, I just didn't finish my assignment” and then the teacher kind of gives you heck for that. But when you know your teacher on a personal basis like that . . . to tell them, there is trust there and then that takes some of the pressure off the institution of coming to school (S5).

What Holds Students Back from Learning and What Teachers Should Stop Doing

To gain insight into the other side of these students' learning experiences, we asked them: (1) What kinds of things get in the way or hold you back from learning? and (2) What should teachers stop doing? Both the engaged and non-engaged groups of students reported issues at home, lack of family support, and personal circumstances outside of school as inhibitors to their learning. The similarity of their comments prompted us to combine their perceptions. Themes specific to the non-engaged and engaged groups follow the "shared narrative."

Non-Engaged Students

Specific to these non-engaged students, the factors they believed that detracted from their learning fell into the following: being treated poorly by teachers, and teachers who have "favorites."

Theme 1: *"If they want respect, they should give us respect back" (S6).*

This theme speaks to the way students perceived teachers' treatment of them. Several students in most of the schools reported disrespectful behaviour such as yelling. For example:

[Teacher] yells a lot (S3).

It embarrasses me when I get yelled at by a teacher (S2).

[Teacher] just sits there and she is angry and stares at her computer . . . I swear, I have only seen her happy once (S4).

These students also singled out teachers who they felt were impatient and/or unfair: *"Two minutes late, he is gonna start yelling" (S3); "If you get mad at both of them [teachers]—office. They don't even try talking to us about it. Right away—office!"* Teachers' yelling made them *"uncomfortable" (S2)*. They also identified inconsistency between teachers' expectations of students and teachers' own behaviour, as in the following:

Some teachers are late in the morning and you are waiting outside your classroom . . . (Another student chimes in) . . . And then you go for a walk and you get in trouble for being late when they finally show up (S3).

Just because they had a bad day and got into an argument with someone, they don't need to get mad at us, taking it out on us . . . They say, 'Leave your problems at the door.' But how are we supposed to do that when [they] are yelling? (S4)

. . . she wasn't focusing on how she was treating him in the class, what she was doing and if she wasn't helping him enough . . . [teacher] will just say, "You're wrong and this is how it is" (S5).

Some of us get suspended for stupid reasons. Like when the teachers piss us off. When they get mad at us and get us mad, then we get suspended for it. Like it's our consequences . . . they expect us to act like adults when they treat us like children (S4).

Many students commented on teachers being “grouchy” (S1). What hindered their learning was how teachers, “set off their moods. If they are feeling good, I will feel good. And if they are mad, I will feel mad,” one student explained (S5). Further, they detected inauthenticity: “They can go cold to warm in a blink of an eye when the principal comes around” (S4). In describing teachers who “[gave them] attitude” (S2), these students hypothesized that unhappy teachers disliked their job. The significance of this perception is inferred by this student’s response to the interviewer’s question: “Why do you think they say that [they don’t want to be here]?” “Because they say that they don’t wanna be here: ‘You don’t’ want to be here? Well, I don’t want to be here either’” (S2).

Theme 2: “Some of them are her favorites. On her good days she likes me . . . other days, she is not so crazy about me” (S4).

We learned from these students that a good teacher was “a teacher that pays attention to all of their students” (S1). We also learned from these students that “teacher’s pet” is not a thing of the past: “They say they like you. You are not a problem, but actions prove those wrong. They don’t realize that we understand more than they think we do” (S4). These students made us aware of teachers who “totally pick favorites” (S5). Hierarchy of student cliques was the explanation for this:

I know there are a couple teachers that definitely pick favorites and stuff like that, right? And what I have noticed, if you are not, like, super preppy, then they don’t really care, right? (S5)

This was corroborated by another student’s comment, which also emphasized the detrimental effects of favouritism:

. . . this semester is almost done and [student] is not gonna pass. The second time doing that class and all because every time she wants to ask for help, or every time she does ask for help or I ask for the teacher to come over by us and explain it to the two of us or something, then she is always like too busy helping all the little preppy kids behind me, you know? (S5)

Other students described similar experiences:

. . . hand up and they are like walking past you and helping other kids and you are just chilling there waiting (S6).

Most teachers are all like really, really busy, you know, like they are always helping

everybody else and then when you are like, “Hey, I need help.” “Oh, just one second,” and, like, the whole class is gone and you like, okay, what do I do now? (S5)

Some students perceived academic standing as the reason for differential treatment:

. . . it also depends on how they (teachers) treat you. Like, oh, this kid’s smart, maybe he will actually understand or she will actually understand, then they will give them like, oh, teacher’s pet, you got this right. I will give you another assignment and then the rest of the kids that are struggling . . . (S4).

. . . a teacher will be helping all the A+ students and then leaving the failed students behind . . . so I prefer to go into seclusion by myself . . . or like tutorial classes . . . (S5).

They just talk to you like you are stupid sometimes (S6).

Poignant was that these students observed that teachers’ liking or not liking them was set in stone: *“If you are on her bad side, you are on her bad side” (S4).*

A Shared Narrative: *“It’s tough to . . . put yourself out there for school when you are just trying to survive . . . (S5).*

We were cognizant that students from both the non-engaged and engaged groups in almost all the schools perceived family circumstances and home influences as a factor that held them back from their learning. This was indeed a convergent response. Several of these students talked about a challenging home life, *“Some of us grew up in a dysfunctional home” (S4)* and said what held them back was, *“The way you live at home. The influences at home . . . living conditions and distractions” (S1).* Some described a concrete relationship between their home and school lives:

It’s not our fault that we miss too much school . . . some of us have family problems (S4).

You know, like family-wise, there are a lot of broken families—alcohol and drug abuse. A lot of us can’t even get here, you know, like even just visiting [Teacher’s] class. A lot of us don’t have bus passes to get to school (S5).

A student living independently made the latter comment. She believed she was one among many Aboriginal students *“just trying to survive.”* Other students told us about negative family influences they navigated and how this affected them. The following exchange between a student and an interviewer demonstrates this:

Student: Growing up, my dad was a gangster . . . Two years ago I went to see him when he just got out of jail that day, and he asked me, “Do you want to join a gang? Do you want a tattoo?” He was pointing to where it was going to be, and I am like,

“No, I’m good.” He gave us some money and just took off because I didn’t want to be around him at the time.

Interviewer: *Wow. Those are tough choices.*

Student: *Especially when it’s coming from one of your parents and they are supposed to help you better your life instead of bringing you down with them . . . (S5).*

Other students were not able to circumvent what one interviewer described as the “*cycle of addiction*”: “*You want to do drugs and all so you feel better*” (S4). Another student in that group agreed:

Just because you think it numbs the pain. A lot of us know it doesn’t, but a lot of us have the addiction that takes the pain away. We all have something we think makes us happy when it doesn’t. It makes us like hypocrites, but . . . (S4).

These students also shared their unmet expectations of family: “*I think we need more family encouraging through sisters and brothers, but most family drink with siblings*” (S2); *Some family members need to start asking what is wrong and what do you want out of life . . . the only time we talk is when it comes to holidays*” (S2). Lack of family role models was part of their discussion: “*Maybe no one graduated from your family and you think you can’t do it because no one did*” (S1). For some, hard times and the absence of school success in families motivated them to be the first in the family to graduate and/or to set a positive example for others. The students had high expectations for themselves:

I wanna graduate ‘cause my father left my mom when me and my brothers were just a little baby. We want to prove to our dad that our mom is like bette, and strong enough to raise four children on her own . . . (S1).

None of my brothers graduated high school and I wanna be the first out of all my mom’s kids to graduate before my older brothers (S2).

I wanna be the first PhD holder in my family (S5).

For others, the fact that no one in their family graduated high school added pressure on them to perform:

My family is small. None of them graduated, which, I don’t know, fills me with anxiety or pressure . . . to . . . carry on with school (S5).

We have the pressure of trying to graduate . . . you are the baby girl, you are supposed to get somewhere. You are supposed to be the role model for your little brother. You are supposed to be the role model for this person, but how can we be it when we are dysfunctional ourselves? (S4)

A couple of students were exceptional: “*My whole family—they always tell me education has been the most important thing in life*” and “*I come from a good family so I don’t really know anything about . . . the struggles of needing to have someone bringing money in or anything like that*” (S5). The latter student was keenly aware of the experiences of Aboriginal people and said, “*I don’t really want to accept that and I don’t want to like turn out to be just another statistic.*”

Clearly, coping with an unhealthy and unsupportive home environment while juggling their own, others’ expectations for them to break a successful academic trail was considerable for these students. This student articulated the complexities:

I am going to be the first one to graduate, too, in my family and I think that’s one of the hard parts, especially doing it on your own. It’s like you hold the weight of your whole family—you take all of those people that didn’t have those chances and it’s on you to make it for them. In a way as an Aboriginal person you carry the weight of all Aboriginal people when you make it. So, it is quite a big, uh, pressure on you to do well and succeed and then the same time it also is a scary feeling. Success is something that’s scary because a lot of us come from homes where we don’t have too much and so, you know, they expect us to fail. But once you start doing well in school and all of a sudden you can make it to university, now you have something to lose and that’s a real scary feeling that I think a lot of us aren’t used to (S5).

Teacher Disengagement: In addition to family life getting in the way of these engaged students’ learning, teachers’ disengagement from the class was frequently raised. This statement captures this theme well: “[*Teacher*] *quickly gives you the work and just sits at his desk . . . he doesn’t really communicate with you*” (S3).

Descriptions of disengaged teachers were noted in the following from both engaged and non-engaged students:

. . . [teacher] just handed me a book and then expected me to know everything. So now I go to a different school (S1).

They just make you do work. Just give you work and just does his own thing (S2).

When she is done she just hands out the assignment and sits down . . . and goes on her computer to do “teacher things” (S4).

We frequently heard about teachers who presented a lesson then retreated to their desks and became preoccupied by their computers, or were “*always on their phones*” (S3). Teachers who appeared to these students as disengaged did not provide the kind of academic support these students required. These comments reflect this from both engaged and non-engaged students:

We just usually ask [teacher] a question and then they will give us a brief answer and

then we will just figure it out on our own (S3).

Most of us don't ask anyone and that's what makes us fall behind . . . and when we do ask someone, the teacher is yelling at us, "Stop talking!" or something like that (S4).

They always say that if you need help, ask for it, but when you do, they get frustrated in trying to teach you when they shouldn't (S4).

We noted irony in this example:

When you go over there to try and find out, like get them to help you, 'cause like (names two students) are smart and when they try and ask someone for help, "Quit talking!" And when you say, "Well, I was asking for help, they say, "Well, you can ask me" (S4).

Since these engaged students reported that it helped their learning when teachers explained lessons in alternative ways, it was perhaps unsurprising that they perceived teachers who did not make this effort as unhelpful:

The grouchy ones don't like being here. They don't like being surrounded by a bunch of kids who they think are simple. But really, it's their teaching . . . It's not our fault. It's their teaching. They don't explain it to us and when we don't understand they get mad (S4).

These students did not want teachers to "expect everyone to learn the same" (S1).

Lesson pacing was part of their concern, as this example demonstrates:

The teacher [was] talking and they tell you write down notes when they are talking, and that was pretty hard, and I couldn't really understand . . . the teacher could be going on from one topic to another and then just get off topic and I am stuck writing down notes that I don't understand anymore (S5).

Worth including in this discussion is the topic of Indigenous culture that was raised in School's 4 and 5. Within this data set these were divergent voices, but given the literature on the connection between ethnicity and engagement (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012), the matter has currency. Within the discussion of racism and negative stereotyping of First Nations people, students commented on the absence of "Cree classes and Saulteaux classes." These students argued for teachers to, "Teach us to respect the culture, teach us how to talk so we could help our family with that . . . why can't they have these studies here?" Another student critiqued a course for emphasizing European perspectives: "They are just focusing on the European part of you and they never taught us about residential schools or anything." Another student further reflected on what was offered at this school and held a contrary position:

They should call it Indigenous History because they are teaching us the history. As an Aboriginal person you are going to that class and all they teach us is the hardship that we went through and the hardship we are going through in present day. And they are not so much teaching us about our identity and who we are. I think a lot of the—especially like Native Studies—they don't, well, I actually think all across Canada they don't point out the uniqueness of each culture.

A different student extended her critique to the school environment:

This school barely has anything to do with Aboriginal students at all. Like the mascot. We are working on that in Native Studies about trying to change the mascot because like in 1984 or something there was a European man—he was wearing a headdress and everything to do with First Nations people and so I found that kind of really racist.

Our aim in this section was to present the voices of the 76 students who shared their stories and experiences with us. The above comment prompts us to state that while we did not reiterate from the beginning sections the negative experiences some of these students articulated, it is important to include those voices here because unequivocally negative experiences at school impede engagement and affect school performance. Persistent issues such as racism and bullying cannot be ignored. Nor can the other issues that the students so poignantly raised be neglected.

Parents' Voices

As indicated in the methods section of this report, six schools participated in this study. In each school a parent focus group was conducted. Parents either volunteered or were asked by their child to participate in the focus groups. The majority of parents who participated in the focus groups had students who were also part of the research study. Before each focus group started, parents were provided an opportunity to discuss any concerns they had about the research. Many parents strongly expressed concerns about Indigenous people being “researched to death” and the fact that this was yet “another” research study on Indigenous people. Parents also expressed dismay about the misrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in research and how most studies simply end up gathering dust on a bookshelf with no plans for action. They viewed this as disrespectful, exploitive and were unsure of this research study's legitimacy. There was concern that as Indigenous people they would once again be sharing their stories and experiences at the risk of being ignored by governments, researchers, decision makers and educators.

All parents agreed to stay, to share and to participate motivated by their desire to see change within the schools for their child and other Indigenous youth. In total 35 people participated in the six focus groups. The participants were parents, grandparents, family members, guardians and foster parents. Twenty-seven of the parents were female and eight were male. All of the parents were Indigenous and were employed in schools, Federal, Provincial, First Nations, Métis Government positions as well as private businesses. Some parents were homemakers while others were in the process of upgrading their own education levels.

Parents were asked about their own schooling experience and their perceptions of their child's engagement with schooling including what helps and hinders that engagement. The thematic analysis of the parent interview findings are organized into four sections: parent's own school experience; what engages and helps their child with learning; what hinders their child from learning – what teachers should stop doing; and what good teachers do and should keep doing.

Parents' Own School Experience

Parents openly and honestly shared positive and negative educational experiences. They shared this information in the spirit of wanting to support their child and Indigenous children within the community. They strongly expressed their beliefs that education should be positive and empowering for their children. Parents attended school in various locations that included residential schools, day schools, provincial schools, federal schools as well as First Nation managed schools. Parents were asked the following questions about their school experience, 'Tell us about your school experiences. What engaged you in school?' The themes that arose in response to this question include: positive supports for learning; knowledge of the value and utility of education; absence of supports; and abuse, bullying, stereotyping, and racism.

Positive Supports for Learning

Parent's identified the importance of support. Within the theme of student support, parent's identified two sub-themes of support: a) support inside the school; and b) and support outside the school.

In the statements concerning student support inside the classroom, several parents denoted that a positive relationship with teachers and a supportive school environment helped to keep them engaged as learners. Statements that supported this theme included reference to the teacher's disposition and desire to be instructive, “. . . *but it was all about the teachers that kept me going back.*” (S1) and “*I excelled with professors or instructors that were very supportive. And they wanted you to learn what they were teaching you*” (S1). In considering support inside this parent referenced the importance of safety and warmth. “*He warmed me up to high school*”(S6).

Support outside the classroom such as involvement in sports, parental involvement and peer group were identified by the parents as determining factors in whether their school experience was considered positive. One individual spoke of peer support, “*So then I had all these other people who were in university. So then again it was that sense of belonging*” (S2). Another individual spoke about the importance of sports. “*I excelled in sports as well so I used that to kind of bolster, stay away from the bullying stuff and I actually ended up making a lot of friends . . .*”(S5).

Value and Utility of Education

In reflecting upon aspects of their education that supported their school engagement, parents spoke about the impact of the value that family and extended family placed upon education, *“My grandfather was the one that always said that my great grandfathers are the ones that kept insisting we all go to school” (S1)*. Another individual expressed the importance of encouragement by extended family, *“ . . . back then there was more a community sense and there was the extended family the aunts and the uncles would encourage you” (S2)*. Several parents also spoke about the importance of knowing the utility of education and where it can lead. Statements that demonstrate this perspective include, *“I think what my grandparents were trying to teach me was, it was through education that we were going to get ourselves out of the rut that society, the dominant society put us in, that oppression.”* This individual went on to say, *“To them education was freedom and that’s how I taught my own children” (S1)*. One parent articulated the utility of education in employment and the ability to support a family, *“I actually kept a job, walked to school, walking to work every day so it was really hard. But I did it because I had her so I kind of had no choice and I am done” (S1)*.

Absence of Supports

A number of parents identified the absence of necessary supports as posing a hindrance to their schooling. One parent voice spoke of a general disinterest by others, *“It was slack for me. If I went I went. If I didn’t, I didn’t” (S4)*. One parent spoke about the absence of positive teacher engagement as causal in leaving school, *“I tried going to GED. I went for about a month and I just couldn’t handle it. Couldn’t sit there in class and concentrate and then I had no support in class from the teachers” (S1)*. Another parent spoke of the absence of Indigenous support staff in the school system and its impact, *“there were no aboriginal people to go to – no counsellors, nobody that you could talk to right. Whereas now at least there is aboriginal people in the school” (S2)*.

One parent spoke about barriers and lack of necessary supports to participate in extracurricular activities, *“I guess in a sense it isolated us where we couldn’t do the extracurricular activities because it required time after school and you know parent involvement.” (S6)*. In summarizing the importance of support, this parent stated, *“I too was a high school dropout. I made it up to Grade 10 and support is really important from your family, from your teachers, friends. If you don’t have that you really got nothing” (S1)*.

In contrast to the theme of absence of support, a divergent parent voice put forth this perspective, *“I wasn’t interested and it wasn’t for the lack of teachers not trying. The teachers were trying it was just me not being motivated enough.”*

Abuse, Bullying, Stereotyping and Racism

Several parents shared painful and negative school experiences that identified bullying and abuse as factors contributing to their own school disengagement. For example, parents spoke about the presence of abuse in their schooling experience: *“I had my Grade 3 teacher . . . I*

remember doing my work and I went and asked for help and she would use that stick and hit me, "Get it right, get it right". That was how we were taught." This parent went on to say, "So we were attending high school. We became the bullies of the bullies. We even mistreated our teachers, that's how we were bullied we became the bullies" (S3). Another parent shared this experience of bullying,

But it was the nearest Catholic School my mom and dad wanted me, for us – there was nine kids in my family and just about all went there. We all got beat up real bad. Constant bullying, constant, vicious sometime, just because we weren't from there (S1).

A number of parents in this study spoke of the stereotyping and racial stratification that occurred in their schooling experience. *"I think I knew there was something different because through the system we were called those names like savages" (S2) and as reflected here, "we all get lumped into that 'we are all lazy Indians'" (S6). Another parent shared "I struggled through school myself . . . just internalizing a lot of the hurt because of the stereotypes and not being able to have some safe place to share that or to bring it out to people" (S6). One parent spoke about the racial stratification and the teacher's inability to respond, ". . . the aboriginal kids would sit in one corner and the white kids would sit in the other corner and the teacher didn't know how to deal or how to get the kids to interact properly" (S2).*

In relation to the racism theme a divergent parent voice expressed a different perspective on the racism experienced. *"In retrospect, I guess you know the racism stuff was definitely there because we were usually the only Indian kids in white communities." This parent went on to say that in the school, "I was one of very few and it [racism] didn't affect me in a negative way, it was a strength-building sort of process. I excelled in sports as well so I used that to kind of bolster . . . yeah stay away from the bullying stuff and I actually ended up making a lot of friends and stuff like that and like I said went through the school system like everybody else" (S5). This parent was able to participate in sports and "went through the school system like everybody else"– he however, still experienced racism.*

What Engages and Helps Their Child in Learning

In seeking a parent perspective of what engages and helps their child in learning two questions were asked, 'What do you think would engage your child?' and 'What do you think helps your child with their learning?' Themes that arose in response to these questions include: knowing purpose of schooling; Indigenous sensibility and presence; parental and family support; and school programming.

Purpose and Utility of Schooling

As in their own schooling experience, several parents felt their child, too, was motivated in their schooling if they were able to recognize the utility of education for their future. As put forward here, *"In the beginning he wanted to be in the army. So I tell him you need Grade 12*

if you want to be in the army.” This parent went on to establish the criticality of knowledge in this instance, *“You can’t be dumb in the army because there is the geometry of firing the guns and everything like that. I explained it to him and then he was, ‘why didn’t you tell me that before’”* (S4). The interrelationship between their child’s academic success and the child’s understanding of the value of education for their future was further reflected in statements as this: *“He wants to become a male nurse, to give back to communities, to be helpful and focus with the elders and the disabled”* (S1).

Indigenous Sensibility and Presence

In considering what engages their child in schooling, several parents identified the worth of a school environment with an Indigenous sensibility and inclusion of an Indigenous presence within all aspects of the school culture. One parent stated, *“he really likes the school because the school is so involved with our traditional ways of knowing and he’s involved in with a social justice group in the school”* (S1). Another parent offered, *“I think they have drumming here, they have lots of culture stuff that’s, why my son comes here and he wants to. My older son, too, he graduated here in 2004”* (S6). Another parent expressed the importance of an Indigenous content in curriculum, *“You know where, who they, like their roots, their ancestors or anything. Nobody’s taught them”* (S3). This theme was succinctly summarized by this parent voice, *“. . . if you come from First Nations, that is our perspective. We need that. That makes us who we are. If we are missing that, we are unhealthy, and we are sick and we are out of balance”* (S4).

Importance of Parent/Family Support

This theme highlights the parents’ perspectives of the importance of parent and family support as a determining factor in school success, *“I think what they [students] need are more supports. There is no parenting at home, so they need more supports and some direction.”*(S4); and *“. . . the more successful students in our school are those [with] parents that really support their kids.”* This theme encompasses two sub-themes: a) the importance of role modeling by parents, extended family and community; and b) active parental engagement in their children’s school life.

Statements that demonstrated a sub-theme of role modeling included: *“I think what motivates my children and all five of them is they saw us trying to do our best in bringing them up and trying to be a role model for them”* (S4). In encouraging an older child to stay in school one parent spoke about the impact and responsibility, of older siblings role modelling for younger ones, *“you are a role model for your younger brothers, they will follow what you are doing”* (S1). As one parent succinctly stated, *“It’s partly my fault maybe as a parent [if] I’m going home smoking joints and drinking down, guzzling down beer? No. I am trying to be a role model here for my kids and my grandkids”* (S3). In reflecting on role modeling, family was considered an important role modeling factor, *“a lot of it comes from family and it all starts from the family and how you’re wanting to educate your children”*(S2).

The second sub-theme focuses on active and involved parenting. The following statements

from the interviews demonstrate the role of involved parenting in their child's schooling.

“My daughter is gay and I love her to the T and the teachers were really, really rude. I went to the school (pauses) and raised commotion” (S3). Another parent voice stated, *“We have to keep asking him, where's your homework and he says I did it in school – right. So we double-check when we have our parent teacher interviews” (S5).* In reflecting upon what involved parenting means, one parent referenced the need for consistent communication between parents and the school, *“I guess there should be more constant communication there between teachers and parents” (S6).* This was further emphasized here,

When the teacher engages a parent or involves the parent in what's going on in the classroom, at least we can say something about it or do something about it as a parent. But otherwise, if you are going to keep me up outside of the glass door, like I said, that's where I will stay . . . (S1).

Impact of School Programs

Parents identified the role of school programs that assist in ensuring that the school environment is conducive to helping their child with learning. Quotes from the parent interviews identified a range of different programmatic initiatives that were viewed as helpful:

“If it wasn't for the block system, I think my daughter would have quit school. She quit at Grade 9 in [school name deleted] and not even three months later she quit because they had the semester system” (S3). The integration of practical and vocational orientated programs were identified as helpful, *“I think doing it hands on, just getting out there and doing it more - practical life skill stuff is where he gets his greatest learning” (S4).* One parent identified how flexibility in school programming can assist with differing learning needs of students,

You know like I see my own son, it took him two years. He failed Grade 12 twice. He could not get it from his mind to his pen. So then we implemented this program with the computer, because he could type anything and once he got it from here on to his fingers to his computer, he was able to print it. It was like two totally different kids and he passed that year and didn't have to do the second half of that year, because he had gotten all the work done . . . (S4).

What Holds Their Child Back from Learning and What Teachers Should Stop Doing

To gain further insight into Indigenous parental perspectives of what holds their child back from learning, the following questions were asked: “What kinds of things do you think get in the way or holds your child back from learning? What would you tell them to stop doing?” The following themes emerged: teacher disengagement; detrimental teacher behaviours; racism in the school environment; Indigenous culture gap; home dynamics; and negative peer influences

Teacher Disengagement

The theme of teacher disengagement in their child's learning arose as a clear theme in this category. As one parent reflected, *"He [child] is gentle and he is respectful and all that kind of stuff. Always made it through, not the best marks or anything, but he is making it through. Soaking through the cracks right"* (S2).

The parent went on to say, *"But they don't know how to write an essay. They don't how to write. I don't know what they were teaching them in school but they don't know how to write a sentence you know"* (S2). Another parent spoke about teacher response to children 'acting-up' in the classroom, *"Don't let him go do what he wants to, because he is going to think they let me do – I will throw a fit they will let me do what I want."* This parent went on to implore teachers to become involved, *"Well, put your foot down and get somebody. I don't know, do something with him different instead of letting them run around the school because he knows, the school doesn't care"* (S3). In reflecting upon teacher disengagement one parent spoke about teachers disengaging with their child because of the child's learning needs,

... she is borderline special needs. So she's struggling with her reading and she's got a 2.3 average in reading right now. So her teachers, I don't know she had time for her? I think she had her favourites and my girl was in the corner here all the time and she didn't like it. (S3)

In reflecting upon teacher disengagement, the following parent statement demonstrates insight into the interrelationship between teacher disengagement and stereotyping, *"Oh the teacher doesn't expect, doesn't expect us to do much'. I said, I do'. I did say I expect him to do better."* The parent went on to say, *"And it's that kind of attitude where not to lower, for the teacher not to lower their expectations because they are First Nation"* (S2). In considering why teacher disengagement happens in this context, one parent reflected,

I think that's what a lot of these teachers get intimidated too. It's the parents are already engaged in their children life, they are not used to handling that at all because they are so used to seeing First Nations being passive. And like [name deleted] said, sixties and seventies are not good enough for our children anymore (S2).

Detrimental Teacher Behaviours

In asking parents what they thought teachers should stop doing the theme of detrimental teacher behaviours arose. The following excerpt from one of the focus groups demonstrates parental perceptions of negative behaviours by teachers,

Stop yelling. Parent 8: Stop being a bully. Parent 3: Stop being bullying to the kids, try to teach them not bully them. Parent 5: Don't have favouritism . . . Parent 6: Don't put them aside. Parent 7: Don't send them home. Parent 1: And don't put them at the, in a corner you know. Parent 8: Work with them. (S3)

Further specific statements that demonstrate negative behaviours by teachers include having low expectations for Indigenous students, stereotyping or conversely ignoring the child because of lack of knowledge or fear of Indigenous students. In regards to teachers having low expectations the following comments were made,

. . . I have been to interviews where, I know my son can do better . . . [than] 60 per cent and the teacher said “Oh that’s okay” And I thought she is saying that’s okay because he is who he is and I want better. And I talked to my son before I came about his report card and he said “Oh the teacher doesn’t expect us to do much” and I said “I do” and I did say I expect him to do better. And it’s that kind of attitude for the teacher not to lower their expectations because they are First Nation. (S2)

And,

I think good teachers also challenge the students’ right. To do a bit better . . . From experience my son’s two teachers, he made two teachers cry because they didn’t know what to do with him. Because he knew more than they did, right. Instead of crying to me and saying can you talk to your son, they should instead, challenge him with more advanced school work. To challenge him because that was what he was looking for right. And then one of the teachers, the other teacher she, she didn’t cry, she’s, “oh I use him all the time. I put him up and he explains all these things”. So that was good about her recognizing that right. But some of them are, are intimidated by students who know better or who know a little bit more than others. So I think teachers need to recognize the, the strong points from some of the children that are learning right (S5).

And,

Just understanding that, even though they have a lot of family dynamics at home. Coming to school is still saying that they wanna learn. Regardless of what they feel or what they are going through, they come here as a safe haven or as a safe place to be. But in reality, they still wanna learn. So just caring that they are here and that they are willing to participate. Just giving them a few minutes of your time can change their whole day (S4).

With respect to stereotyping, this comment was made, “*don’t stereotype us*” (S2). Along with these words, “*And stereotype us just because we are Indians and we are obviously stupid you know*” (S2). With respect to “*turning a blind eye*” this parent gave this insight, “*It’s just not going to go away if you turn away from your child that you are trying to help. They should, don’t turn your focus off on these children and I mean don’t turn a blind eye on them*” (S1).

Another parent shared,

He [the teacher] is passive and if the child doesn’t understand, “Well just come at lunch hour we will see if you can get it then” or “Go ask so and so, they got it so you

should be getting it. You can get it from them.” You know and it’s and it’s disrespectful and we made it a point at interviews this time around to say, “Okay this young lady is having trouble with Math and she has come for help at noon hour and she’s still not getting it. So now what are you going to be doing for her?” (S2).

The parent reflected upon teachers being of afraid of Indigenous students, “*Stop being afraid of the kids. I know on the reserve. My aunt is a teacher, my mom teaches the language out there. The biggest issue with new teachers that come in is they are scared*” (S5). In conclusion to this theme, this parent recommended,

I think beginning teachers need lots of PD. They need lots of help. I say they should be more understanding and knowledgeable about First Nations people but they are not and they need that PD. They need that training and they need to be given some direction on what to do. I think we need to go back to the communities and pull out some resource people, some mentors to come in and help the teachers because they are struggling because they don’t know what to do. It’s the plain truth they don’t know what to do. (S4)

Racism in the School Environment

This theme reflects the role of unexamined racialized pedagogies and its impact on Indigenous student learning. In offering a descriptor for this theme, one parent articulated the power of racism in contaminating the learning experience for children, “*Like bullying, racism and stuff like that could stop your child from wanting to go to school or their learning*” (S1). Statements that demonstrate parent perceptions of racism within the school environment include an understanding that racism creates a wound, “*These kids have felt the hurt of racism . . . (S2)*”. As one parent stated, the child who does not fit in becomes a “target” as articulated here, “*You become a target if you don’t fit in. You tend to be bullied and be ridiculed. You know, they start picking a fight if it is not the right shoe, if they are not the right kind you know*” (S6). In the following three quotes, parents shared stories of their child’s experience of racism in three different scenarios:

. . . she came one day and she said, ‘I think them, that teacher is racist toward me’, she said. And I said, ‘Why?’ ‘Because she didn’t want to help me’. She heard these boys saying names to me. I thought, “What kind of names?” ‘They are calling me a ‘ho’ and that teacher gave me shit instead of those kids (S1).

And,

She [child’s name deleted] said, “but some of my white friends ask me why I am not like that, like the other Indian kids”. She is gets it you know . . . yeah and even the other side too you know. Like she doesn’t have really dark, dark skin or anything like that but she even gets asked ‘well why are you trying to act white?’ She gets it too from you know (S2).

And,

Just talking to my kids and knowing about it now like my daughter is twenty-five, twenty-six and she even struggles with the school system now. She has dropped out a couple of times because of racism right . . . and nobody . . . even seem[s] to want to do anything to change or deal with stuff (S6).

Indigenous Culture Gap

The following comments offer parental perspectives on the impact of gaps in knowledge, practice, policy and relationality relating specifically to Indigenous culture and positioning. These gaps work to frustrate a positive learning experience for Indigenous students. The first comment references the absence of a cultural connection in Indigenous young people's lives and how this estrangement impacts confidence and identity; *"I think they are so lost that they need to know. They have no idea who they are and where they are from"* (S4). With respect to teaching practices and school policies two specific points were made about the lack of cultural understandings in the schooling environment. This is the flipside of the theme of Indigenous sensibility in the category of what helps your child to learn. In this instance, both comments were made in context of what hinders your child's learning:

Sometimes teachers or EA's that are not familiar with like culture and will touch his braid and say "Oh, I love your hair" and he will get offended so now he wears his braid inside his shirt. So that's like, that's kind of like he is not very proud to do that but he has to. He has no other choice (S6).

So I told the principal I wanted my kid to smudge and they made a big fat hairy deal about it, policies. You can't smudge cause it's religion but it's not a religion. So I said "Well we are not Indians before nine or after three we need to like you know" (S6).

A final statement related to this theme references First Nations people as a distinct cultural group but in context of the experience of past injustices. One parent commented upon whether the history of past injustices has created a situation where Indigenous peoples have isolated themselves and whether this has created an unintentional barrier on the child's learning. This was reflected in this passage,

There is a misunderstanding about us First Nations people, I noticed that my cousin has instilled her past hurts on her children, who in turn seem angry about the injustice that has happened to their parents, and when they enter school they are guarded, towards their fellow students and teachers. We have learned to segregate ourselves, and have unintentionally reflected our fears onto our children (S2).

Home Dynamics

Stressful family dynamics at home emerged as theme in factors that hindered their child's learning. One parent shared this reflection, “. . . we are in a very strange place right now our family. My husband, there has been some deaths in his family that's why he had to give up and walk out. He is grieving right now . . . ” (S1). Another comment referenced changes in the home environment, “My daughter looks after me now instead of me looking after her. I am realizing she's not, she's missing a lot a school and that's really affecting me because education is very important to me” (S1). Reference to parenting skills was articulated, “Its kids being thrown away like not being cared about. They can't get up in the morning, the parents are still sleeping and you know they are getting themselves up if they really want to have an education and it's not pretty” (S2). This was further elaborated on here, “. . . there could be a student, you don't know what's happening at home, coming to school, crying and then the teacher is like, ‘What are you crying for?’ . . . They don't know what the family is like at home” (S4).

In connecting parenting with schooling, one comment referenced the need to reinforce Indigenous traditional values in childrearing,

We should be more respectful to older people but we lost that. And somehow we need to bring that back and I think that is where we really lack with some of our kids. They have absolutely no respect for teachers. They will tell teachers in here to “F” off, I don't have to listen to you” and that type of thing. It is really shocking but that is the reality you know. It happens every single day, every single day. That is what these teachers have to put up with (S4).

To conclude this theme, one parent commented upon the role of literacy, or lack of with many Indigenous homes and its impact on a child's learning, “. . . in many of our homes there is no literacy. Their language is not developing so they are really delayed. They go to school and they are already a year behind. . . they are lost or frustrated” (S4). A comment was also made about the impact of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD), *I think teachers coming out of the university – a very important thing for them to learn about is FAS.*” This parent voice went on to say, “. . . so many of our children that are suffering with Fetal Alcohol some of them are not even assessed and will probably never get assessed” (S4).

Negative Peer Influences

Parent's offered their perspectives on negative peer influences that hinder learning and reflected upon the choices of their child in relationship to these influences. One parent articulated the impact of choices, “. . . we decide to walk forward to make a difference with our lives –change it. And it will be a struggle to get there because there is a devil on this side and an angel on this side, right? Which one are you gonna follow?” (S3) In reflecting upon choices that negatively impact positive outcomes in their learning, several comments referenced the influence of peer groups, “She met a boy and the boy took her down the

wrong path and it was hard to get out of that. We struggled and everything” (S5). Another parental perspective shared this experience,

. . . that kind of stuff gets in the way – with gangs or people, their friends, or they try be cool. I said, “What’s so cool about someone who doesn’t go to school, who stays, sticks around at home, lays around like a lump on a log all day long. What’s cool about that?” (S1)

Parental voices spoke about the impact of substance use as articulated by here, “. . . kids are being sent home because they are stoned out of their wits. And they are lighting up joints and the smoke comes flying into the school and you can smell that stuff.” The individual went on to say, “They are taking away pipes, they are taking away this. How can we help to stop all this and let’s focus on education?” (S3). One parent spoke about their child’s experience of peer pressure to drink, “. . . he had it rough here cause he chose not drink or do drugs and throughout high school everyone “Come on just one beer. Come on do it” (S6). Other voices referenced the high incidence of teenage pregnancies among young Indigenous women, “You know, the aboriginal kids like 50 per cent of them have children and they are sixteen. And she gets upset by that and the only problem I have with her is her bedroom, it’s messy” (S5). Another parent spoke about the impact of social media, “They should be bringing homework home and doing that instead of Facebook you know get that done. Then maybe we will let you have Facebook” (S1).

In conclusion to this section there a final insight emerged. The comments referred to the quality of education within reserve schools. This was identified as a structural factor hindering a positive educational experience for First Nation children:

. . . there is a difference between on reserve education and education that they get out here. Which is why my kids are out here and not on the reserve because of the quality education on the reserve and their access to the quality is not the same on the reserve as here. The resources are not the same you know the programs . . . they are not going to have a mentorship program on the reserve. So I think when you guys are doing your research I think you should look at really what’s lacking out there because you know the whole quality of education . . . it’s the government you know with their lack of funding and stuff like that (S5).

That’s what I mean you know our funding it’s so limited we can’t even expand. We can’t even provide what the white schools can provide because they double or triple their revenues and in here we have just a small pot that we have to work with. And we have to go and write proposals to try and bring TAs over here to work with children one on one . . . What we get six thousand per kid a year. If I went to school and into the city school there, it’s twice the amount, of course they can afford all these different types of programs. Over here we can’t, we can’t, we just have this one budget so limited it doesn’t even increase the following year . . . We are still stuck with this for the next 5 years, ten years. . . We were writing proposals left and right here trying to

access more money so we could have these people come in to help our children one-on-one . . . That's how reserve schools are, lack of funds to improve (S3).

In response to this question and category of this study, a divergent parent voice expressed this sentiment, *"I don't think my kids are held back . . ." (S5).*

What Good Teachers Do and Should Keep Doing

To conclude the parental voice presentation of findings, the following category focuses on what good teachers do and should keep on doing. Parents were asked the following, 'Describe to us what it is that good teachers do.' And 'If you were given the power and authority to tell teachers what they should be doing to be awesome teachers what would you tell them?' The themes that arose include the centrality of communication, the criticality of caring for students and awareness of the child's context.

Teacher-Parent Relationship and Communication

The following quote from this parent concisely represents the essence of this theme,

When the teacher engages a parent or involves the parent in what's going on in the classroom, at least we can say something about it or do something about it as a parent. But otherwise, if you are going to keep me up outside of the glass door like I said that's where I will stay (S1).

Several parent voices articulated the importance of communication and dialogue. *"Communication is a big thing" (S5); and "If something comes up [teacher] will text me . . . lets me know when things are going on with him and we just keep an open dialogue when it comes to his education" (S5).* One parental voice identified the importance of communication between teacher and parent in determining pre-emptive action, *"I want to know as a parent sooner rather than later. If you're ten assignments behind what can I do? If your assignments are behind then I can do something and I am going sit down, see if you need any help right" (S5).* Parents acknowledged that effective teachers (and schools) create open lines of communication with parents: *"And what I notice here from this school is that if one of our children doesn't show up they are calling and asking if everything is okay" (S2).* It was acknowledged that effective communication between teachers and parents requires parental involvement, *"The principal and counsellors know that I am very proactive about my children's education and sports activities. When they see that my kids aren't doing the work, I receive calls about their class performance" (S2).*

Care about Students

From a parental perspective, teachers that were able to show that they cared about their students were perceived as effective teachers. This parent had this to say, *"They [the school] didn't pay me to say this. But with the kids in the classes I really see the care and what the teachers put into it" (S4).* Another parent offered, *". . . with my two daughters they talk a lot*

but when they build up a closeness with their teachers they listen more and they really like going to school” (S1); and “So just caring that they are here and that they are willing to participate. Just giving them a few minutes of your time can change their whole day” (S4). This parent shared a story of being impacted by a teacher’s care and concern,

I remember going to one of the teachers and thanking him for making a difference. All he did was, he just spent time with one of the children, and the boy is really shy . . . he just sat down and all he did was just sit with him. (S1)

In particular reference to First Nations children, the importance of caring was stressed in light of Indigenous children often being minorities in school settings,

But I think especially for First Nations kids they want to feel comfortable first and foremost because in most cases, in the urban centres especially, you’re one of the minorities. And that comfortability is huge as far as being able to then focus on the important thing which is learning rather than the self-doubt and everything else. And that’s what a good teacher, in my opinion, would teach and allow you to feel confidence (S5).

With respect to a positive focus on students, this parent reflected, “. . . well the teachers need to know that one student to your thirtieth student, they are not the same. They are all individuals and they should all be treated as individuals.”(S6). This parent commented on the power of teachers who do not give up on their students, “They never gave up on her. And if we had that in every one of these schools I think we would have a huge success story for children in school” (S3). In concluding this theme, this parent voice summarized what good teachers do,

. . . that’s one thing I like about a lot of teachers here is they will take the time and see your child and not try and force something out of that child. It’s almost like they are watering this plant and hoping the flower will bloom (laughing). I didn’t know how else to put it (S1).

A Conclusion: Inside and Outside the Classroom

In concluding this section, several parent statements demonstrated the importance of caring about the student experience both inside and *outside* the classroom as identified here: “Anyways I think I want the teachers to I guess to step into our children’s shoes for a while and to see where that child is coming from”; and “They care about your home life. They care if you are coming to school” (S6). One parent voice expressed the importance of looking at the big picture of a student’s life,

Teachers and guidance counsellors that have compassion and empathy and to put yourself in someone’s shoes like that to be able to say, ‘Hey, ok, take a step back and see the big picture’, and say, ‘Ok, they are struggling with this, struggling with that,’ maybe we could, how can we help them? (S6)

One parent acknowledged the good work of the teachers and the school were their child attends, *“I have no complaint about any of the teachers at my school. They are all amazing. They care about what’s happening to that kid before they get onto the bus and after they get off the bus and the next morning” (S4)*. In reflecting upon what good teacher should do, this final insight was offered. Although this sentiment did not emerge as a theme it warrants inclusion. One parent comment referenced the importance of teachers engaging in self-care so as not to bring personal discontent into the classroom,

Well they need prayer in their life I think more than, well everybody does but with my sister I always tell her you should smudge yourself before you go to school so you don’t have a big load to take care of when you get there. How many kids rely on you? You know you can’t be going there and just like when you have a rough day don’t go there showing it to the kids, leave it wherever it is . . . (S1).

This concludes the presentation of findings of the parent voices in this study.

Teachers’ Voices

It is important to note that there were some clear differences among teachers and certainly differences from school to school. Two schools seemed especially more focused on locating problems within the students’ culture and home circumstances. These voices demonstrated a strong focus on problems: e.g. students are behind academically, lack of parental support, socio-economic issues, mental health issues.

Teachers in one of these schools expressed an opinion that it was too late to do anything for these students because by the time they reached high school they were too far behind academically. These teachers offered few solutions other than more staff and resources to fix the problems created by dysfunctional students. While there was a strong emphasis by teachers that all students are the same and that they treat all students the same, they acknowledged that students have different “needs.” A large section of the interview (over twelve pages) focused on dealing with behaviour issues in class or in school.

In the second of these schools again the voices maintained a strong deficit tone and were focused on the problems of dysfunctional students and dysfunctional families who they held responsible for continuing student failure. While teachers said that they cared about Indigenous students, these interviews did not show evidence that getting to know those students was a priority. The teachers offered few solutions to engage Indigenous students in their learning and didn’t know or see what they could do to improve student outcomes. The voices of teachers from both of these schools focused strongly on teacher needs and structural issues that impacted on their ability to “fix” the multiple issues related to Indigenous students.

The voices of teachers from two other schools came from a very different perspective. These voices maintained a strong focus on what teachers could do in the class to help students; although much of this focus tended to be of a remedial nature. Socio-economic issues were mentioned but only in terms of how these schools could mitigate these issues so the learning

could continue. No blame was attached; it is what it is, the focus was on what the school and teachers could do to make things better. There was also a focus on looking for success and not looking for reasons for failure and a focus on students' futures and what is best for them, not what was best for the system. The teachers from these two schools expressed the need to establish relationships with students and the need to demonstrate they cared for Indigenous students. However, they seemed less clear on how this would transfer to academic success, focussing instead on a lack of resources and the need for more Indigenous staff and other faults in the education system.

These two schools were far less deficit oriented than the first two. The voices of these teachers demonstrated a very strong focus on relationships, on getting to know students and on understanding their needs. Large sections of the narratives focused on "responsive" teaching, being flexible and relevant, and finding ways to engage students. These teachers understood the social issues that students brought into the class but they focused on what they as teachers could do. However, again that focus seemed to be more on remedial activities rather than on extending students or helping them see their own potential.

Identified Themes

Four major themes were identified from the teachers' voices; these were:

1. Teaching approaches and responses to students' needs and improving student engagement with learning.
2. Relationships: The importance of knowing and understanding your students.
3. Impact of home life and socio economic conditions.
4. Expectations for student academic success.

While this analysis has deconstructed the voices into different themes, it was clear that all themes were inextricably inter-related and linked to each other. While only some of the teachers' voices from across the schools have been used to exemplify these themes, it must be acknowledged that multiple examples from across the schools could also have been used.

Teaching Approaches and Responses to Students' Needs and Improving Student Engagement with Learning

The voices that focused on Theme 1, improving student engagement with learning, fell into two sub themes:

- (a) responses that focused on teacher or system needs; and
- (b) responses that focused on student needs.

The first sub-theme came from teachers who were concerned with what they perceived as the needs of the system.

Teacher 2: *If that is your situation with 20 students in your classroom, you are trying to help them with Math, you can't help all, you are the only one in there. It's hard to sit there and go over the same question four times when you have got 18 other kids who need the same help . . . We don't have enough support in our school from the government. We need more people.*

Teacher 4: *Educational assistants are a huge help so when we do have that support it's always great to have another body in the room. Have somebody else who can help them.*

Other teachers also stressed the need for more support and articulated their feelings of inadequacy in having the specific skills required to help Indigenous students.

Teacher 2: *I think there just needs to be a lot more support. We have our Aboriginal advocacy which is wonderful but it's not enough. These kids are in crisis and these are extreme crisis that I don't know what the answer is. I don't know how to help you or support you because I don't know this. I need to have someone there that I can say this kid really needs some help and I don't feel I am qualified to give that to them and I don't feel like I can do them justice and I think we need just more supports for that crisis element.*

The second sub-theme came from the voices of teachers focused on what could be done to fix the students' problems up.

Teacher 9: *Sometimes trying to listen to or figure out what's a priority for the learner in the moment and if you can address that and support that then you seem to be able to go to the English work they don't care so much for. Sometimes it's getting something to eat. Sometimes it's filling in an application form or finishing up a resume because they want a job. It goes like seriously all over the map. Or to phoning an employer, don't know how to phone an employer and say "I can't come in today" or "I can't come in tomorrow" some of us do that and then if we get those kind of things out of the way all of a sudden we are ready to work so.*

Another teacher was clear that the education offered at their school was student focused in that it offered what the students needed, when they needed it.

Teacher 2: *What I do see at this school is it's a school that is going out of their way to service students and get them what they need on their timeline within their life. And I think it's a model that most high schools should follow. Unfortunately I think a lot of mainstream high schools if you want to call it that they serve up an education that works for teachers, administrators and boards and then students just take it because there is no alternative.*

Teachers' voices from four of the schools also focused on making the learning relevant for Indigenous students and discussed how making the learning "real" increased student

engagement with the learning. This teacher discussed making literature like Macbeth relevant to Aboriginal students.

Teacher 2: Try and make whatever lesson you are doing relevant to them, like Macbeth. Well what's Macbeth about? Well Macbeth is about greed and what happens to the guy and well he gets what's coming to him as the students would say. If you can relate it to something that is relevant to them that they understand.

Although many of the teachers' voices would seem to be of a remedial nature, they often demonstrated, as in this comment, a level of care for the students and their achievement and realising the potential of those students by fostering a sense of self-belief.

Teacher 1: I think finding a way for them to achieve first the basics. So whether that's one on one attention they are getting . . . to give them evidence that you are capable of this and communicating to them, that you are capable. I believe in you but you need to believe in you too and here's evidence that you can do this. That can kind of get the ball rolling.

Some teachers also stressed the need for classroom content and learning that was culturally relevant to Indigenous students.

Teacher 7: Our FNIM students want current and up to date lessons that they are into and actually are relevant and that they see . . . how is this going to play a role in my life, how is this going to carry over? So they want relevant in the sense that they are going to be able to use what they are learning in school in their day to day lives or in their future lives But also I think culturally relevant lessons are important for our FNIM students. It engages them because it maybe something that they have learned at home and then they see it in school and feel a stronger sense of belonging or that this is valued in our classroom and in our school these teachings, these lessons and I think it helps engage students.

Some teachers felt that providing Indigenous students access to cultural activities in the school made students more comfortable in the school environment. A Métis teacher stressed that identity was important and the school was not always a place where Indigenous identity was valued.

Teacher 3: I am Métis so I always make sure that my students know that. I know that when I was in high school there would have been a lot of students who would have been scared to admit that they have an Aboriginal identity.

Sometimes Indigenous identity was also expressed in negative terms by teachers.

Teacher 5: They are egocentric. They are stuck in a very immature state, no self-esteem, no self-worth, no self-confidence and that self-fulfilling prophecy; I am nothing

I will be nothing. I can do nothing. I am helpless. That learned victimization is hard to overcome. It's really hard. And we were even talking about how immature the kids are. . . . most of them don't mature till what age, 29, 30? They keep dragging in the past all the time. I don't know how to say it other than "Poor me, well I am just Native. We are from the Res you know Miss". We have more special education teachers here on this staff than any school in the province.

A few times a voice emerged that identified the importance of having a positive focus towards students and focussing on what teachers could do to engage Indigenous students, rather than simply focussing on deficits.

Teacher 8: We get hung up over some of the factors that limit students to be able to make improvement from one school year to the next. And one of the big factors is we always talk about socio-economics in the family and those are huge, they have an absolutely huge indicator whether a student can be successful and that's where the conversation ends and a teacher can take a very negative view point "Well what can I do I mean there is nothing I can do it comes from the students background, the students socio economics there is nothing I can do". But I am starting to discover that there is a lot of things that actually have greater impact and some of the ones I am focusing on right now I am trying to incorporate in my practice; timely and consistent feedback, trying to have meaningful conversations with students every week, once a week with every a student and that's not easy to do. But that is a very important factor, actually having really meaningful engaging conversations more so than maybe written feedback on an assignment. And another one is getting students to be extremely aware, self-aware and really involved in their own evaluation. There is a long list. There are actually a lot of things we can do.

Relationships: The Importance of Knowing and Understanding Your Students

Teacher voices focused on Theme 2, relationships, generally stressed the importance of establishing relationships with Indigenous students before any learning could commence. This was certainly the case in four schools. While teachers understood the importance of relationships, these were generally not expressed as power sharing relationships where teachers and students were equal partners in the relationship or in learning. Instead the relationships were based on the concept of "getting to know" students so that that they could be coaxed, shepherded and generally guided through the learning process i.e., teachers understood the need to establish a trusting relationship with Indigenous students that would then enable them to attempt to fix the students' problems.

In one school relationships between staff and students were seen as needing to be relaxed and informal.

Teacher 4: I think one of the biggest engagement focuses that . . . students have said to me, the one thing I like about this school is that we can call you by your first name. And to them that's a real big thing and, and we can laugh and joke about simple things with each other and that

really breaks down a lot of barriers, for a lot of these kids . . . I think we are a little more relaxed here and that allows kids to relax a little more too and know that they are not being managed too much.

Teacher 1: I think relationship is key . . . That's kind of the biggest thing, that's what I think keeps our students coming back even after, maybe they don't experience success in one block they will still come and give it a shot again . . . because they have that relationship with not only the students but also the staff here.

In another school, relationships were again seen as needing to be informal, where students and teachers could laugh at each other, but getting to know students abilities was also seen as important.

Teacher 2: You want a positive atmosphere in the classroom. I poke fun at my students and once they get a little bit of confidence and get to know me, they poke fun back at me and that's good I like that. I don't mind that at all. And try to encourage them lots.

Teacher 1: You have to understand where the kids are coming from and what their abilities are. I know what the kids can and what they can't do and what they can't do I try and make more easier for them to understand.

Knowing when students needed space:

Teacher 2: They may come in having a bad day or whatever and you have to give them some space and just let them work it through because they are not mad at you. You know they are not mad at you but they got to work it out before you can actually start working with them again. You can't just suspend them.

This teacher from another school expressed the importance of maintaining connections with students when they didn't come to school.

Teacher 4: We have a lot of students with some serious attendance concerns. Often times in the past I kind of ignored that [and] thought "Nothing I can do about that". What I have started to do is starting to say, "Tell your friend we missed them" and so that's actually that we have acknowledged that they have been missing from class and then they get it's a welcome place and we want them here. I hope it's a good thing that teachers do.

Teachers from one school talked about the importance of shared relationships where teachers were willing to share their personal experiences with the students.

Teacher 4: Engagement in my class often comes from sharing stories with each other like when they find out that it's normal to fight with their parents. If I tell them a story about when I was 16 and had a fight with my mom or something. They often think that

everything that's going in their life is something that is only happening to them. So sharing those stories, the good ones and the bad ones and they realize that it's just not happening to them and that it's okay that those things are happening.

Teacher 2: It's those conversations that really build the relationship because they know they are not going to get judgment from you. That they are going to get understanding, they are going to get empathy, they are going to get compassion and hopefully a plan to address the issue that maybe they hadn't thought of because of your prior experience, friends or whatever. So they are usually pretty forthcoming about that stuff now.

In one of the schools relationships were discussed in terms of “getting to know their needs” and there was a sense that some teachers struggled with the concept of “getting to know” students.

Teacher 3: Some teachers are better at this and sometimes even I struggle with this but getting to know a kid's home life and getting to know what the problems or issues might be can go a long way as well. You know, you talk to the student, ask him what's going on, what's wrong or is it something else. I mean sometimes they won't talk to you but if the school would try to find out what's going on, then it seems to help sometimes.

Teacher 1: You need reasonable teachers that can still make them do what they need to do but also understand how to make that happen and take those other life things into account. I feel like teachers at this school are good at not giving up on students. I feel like we get to know their needs. When kids see that you want to help them and that, you're not there to judge them. Then they usually buy in a bit.

In one school, one teacher discussed the importance of establishing relationships with Indigenous students in the context of developing trust between the teacher and the students.

Teacher 4: I find in my experience, the more relational I am with my students the more they get to know me then a trust is developed. The respect is there then they are willing to actually try academically. If that foundation is not there, they are not interested.

Impact of Home Life and Socio-Economic Conditions

Narratives from Theme 3, socio-economic impacts of home life, fell into two broad areas:

- (a) a focus on the negative impacts; and
- (b) an acknowledgement of the negative impacts but a focus on what schools and teachers can do to mitigate those impacts

The participants from all schools discussed the impact of home life, community, and socio-economic circumstances on the achievement of Indigenous students. These comments had a strong focus on the negative impact of the students' home life and socio-economic conditions on their academic achievement. Some teachers, especially those from three schools, did not

blame students and their families for the socio economic circumstances they faced; the discussions from these schools focused on what positive support was needed or being provided in schools to help mitigate some of the negative socio economic impacts faced by these students. However these responses focused on “fixing” issues rather than on student potential.

A focus on the negative impact of dysfunctional family circumstances of Indigenous children was particularly strong in two schools. The following edited discussion took place between teachers in one of these two schools. Here we heard teachers who were strongly focused on the problems of Indigenous children and their home communities and who also located the blame for those issues with these families.

Teacher 5: They don't know what it is like to live in a home and have a constant adult who is there for life.

Teacher 4: We are not saying that the family has to look a specific way . . . We are just saying that they are lacking the stability of a family . . . the stability of a connection . . . what I suppose we consider normal. I'm not saying that being raised by grandma is wrong but they are just missing that element of closeness, that stability, that guidance that they could or may have with their parents, their biological parents.

Teacher 5: If children do not have a constant adult, they do not have self-esteem and that's why they have attention deficits . . . They do not have that behaviour, that skill coming from a stable environment, it's nurtured, hyperactivity is nurtured too in the dysfunction.

Teachers from another school also acknowledged the negative impacts that community and family issues could have on the success of Indigenous students in school and the barriers those issues created for learning.

Teacher 7: All the problems surrounding poverty, like housing, transportation, food and then parenting . . . racism; these are external problems but the effects are internal. Those are all barriers that we have and a lot of our FN students are dealing with.

The teachers in one school also acknowledged that the issues were intergenerational and that many of the parents of Indigenous children had difficult memories of school.

Teacher 5: It's not that parents don't want to be supportive, they love their children and they want what's best for them. A lot of these parents don't know how to support their students; they haven't been somebody that has experienced success. [School] isn't a safe place in their memory so for them this is a difficult place and a difficult time and they don't know how to support their students.

While the teachers from this school talked of their understanding and had a sympathetic viewpoint they also acknowledged that they had no control over what happened outside the school.

Teacher 5: *It's easier for us to control the things that are within these walls. The things that are outside of these walls we have so little control over so the family members that are in crisis, that's obviously that's going to impact students. The life style choices, the gangs, all of the things that are outside of these walls. So those things obviously have an impact.*

Teachers from another school also expressed a sympathetic attitude towards the issues faced by Indigenous students and their families and did not locate blame with those families for the circumstances that they faced.

Teacher 4: *The housing issues that you could see for a lot of these families, because as our city continues to grow and rents continue to go up and the cost of living continues to go up. I don't think it's going to get any better anytime soon . . . I have seen lots of kids really bouncing around with housing just because of what's going on . . . with their own family. Whether it's parents in school or parents between jobs or parents not working at all and that's no fault of the kids or the parents. It's just life, so then all of a sudden kids are getting pulled out of the house or out of the school to be at home. We've got students that are part time jobs. . . They have to kind of work because the bills at home and, and it may not be their bills but they feel obligated to help out too.*

While teachers from another school did not use deficit terms when discussing the Indigenous students and their families, the solutions they offered were largely structural interventions to mitigate the impact of home life and socio economic conditions.

Teacher 4: *When you also talk about supports . . . we offer simple things like bus passes and there is a cost tied in with that obviously. But, that's kind of where this school goes above and beyond to make sure that kids get here and even offering cabs for young moms and things like that.*

Teacher 1: *Since we have got the new day care . . . the availability to students is a lot nicer than it was. Like prior to that opening up I think we only had nine spots for infants. Since the new day care opened up and there are a lot more spots I think that's been a positive thing for our students. But again we have the support staff in place that can help them, try and find spots for them too, which is helpful to fit in.*

Teacher 2: *There is breakfast in the morning for anyone who wants it and lunch is served for anyone who wants it or is in the building.*

Teachers from one school spoke of school as a safe place to mitigate the negative impact of home life and harsh socio economic conditions faced by Indigenous students.

Teacher 1: *Community, a lot of negative things, aspects in their life, they carry them with them all the time . . . They find the school like a place where they are sheltered, they are cared for . . . Somebody says "Here, eat this", someone is here to listen to them, to listen to their problems.*

In all the discussions that emerged from the voices of teachers from all of the schools, the focus on the negative impacts of socio-economic circumstances on Aboriginal students was the most common theme. What varied in these discussions was the extent to which some teachers blamed Indigenous students and their families for their circumstances while others saw these students and their families as victims. However in all cases the solutions offered across all schools were of a remedial nature. One comment from one school was different; this teacher spoke of students' resilience in their efforts to succeed in school in spite of the barriers they faced.

Teacher 5: We have had lots of discussions in this building about resiliency and I argue that our students are resilient because they do show up again. They drop off the radar for an entire semester and they show up again and they try it again, our students are resilient.

Expectations for Student Academic Success

Teachers' voices from Theme 4, expectations for student academic success, also fell into two broad areas these being:

- (a) low expectations of student achievement by teachers due to perceived student deficits; and
- (b) high expectations of student success

Across all the schools, with the exception of one school, teachers had low expectations for Indigenous student success. They talked about the low academic levels of Indigenous students when they started school which made it difficult for students to "catch up" to the levels required in high school. The following voices are representative of these low expectations.

Teacher 1: I think the challenge for us is we get them in Grade 9 or 10 and a lot of times there's so much that is lacking at that point that it's hard to deal with it. It's so late in their schooling to try and fix the gaps . . . The damage is already done and they move on to the next year and it keeps growing and by the time they get to Grade 10 or especially with Math, it is very difficult for them to be successful when they don't have a good grasp of the pre-requisite skills.

Teachers talked about Indigenous students who did not have the skills required to achieve.

Teacher 2: They don't have the coping mechanisms to work in class. They don't have time management skills and so even beyond like paper, book, whatever kind of skills that we're lacking, we're also lacking like just how to be a student. Because we're not forcing them to be at younger ages because we're just moving them along. We put out little check boxes saying that they are placed in the next grade. Well they don't care, they're moving on. Doesn't matter if it says promoted or placed, they're moving along with their buddies. So I struggle with what the answer is to that but I feel like that is also I think an issue too.

Teachers talked about the lack of academic success as a problem located with the Indigenous students.

Teacher 5: There is a lot of dysfunction, alcoholism, a lot of abuse, a lot of in and out of rehab. It will take them 7 years to get high school because of a lot of the issues.

Teachers from this school also felt that Indigenous students did not have the basic skills that were required to be a successful student (i.e. they did not know how to sit still and listen).

Teacher 2: They can't handle [the teacher talking] a lot. And you never make it through without comments, there is always comments. They can't sit, they can't listen . . . so we can't make it through a period without pretty much every kid having to go for a walk, go to the bathroom. They don't need to pee, but they need a break.

Teachers from three schools questioned whether many Indigenous students understood the relevance or purpose of school, or indeed whether they understood what education success actually was.

Teacher 8: I think there is a huge variance but I get a sense that, generally . . . just like any other student our First Nations students want to succeed, but there is a pretty broad variance to whether or not they understand what that means. What does succeed mean to you? And I kind of get a feeling . . . from a lot of our Aboriginal students that there isn't a huge awareness of that; not sure what that means. I want to be successful, I want to do well, but what that means they haven't maybe processed it that far yet or there is a really big variance in what that means to our students.

While this teacher from one school spoke positively about the ability of Indigenous students, the expectation expressed was that the students were still going to struggle because there was a mismatch between what the school and the system wanted and what the students wanted, with the implication being that the students needed to change.

Teacher 2: We have so many kids that are really, really, really bright kids but they just don't know how to apply that intelligence in the way the school wants it and the way it's structured. The kids want to be successful and I think they understand that education is important in abstract terms. They get it from their parents, they hear it everywhere, but to translate that into how can I be successful at school, is where I see a lot of the struggle.

Only the voices of a few teachers from two schools talked about or expressed the benefit of having high expectations of Indigenous students' success.

Teacher 4: I think there is a little something to be said for having high expectations for students. I don't believe in lowering the expectations of the course and your curriculum . . . just because you may have a room full of Aboriginal kids.

Teacher 1: Assuming the worst too isn't always good. Because sometimes we think kids aren't capable or we avoid challenging kids which is what sometimes they really need and some kids will take advantage of it, "oh yeah I am the poor First Nation kid you know." They can read us when we are not being sincere or honest and if we are prejudging them they feel that. Oh she thinks I am this kind of kid.

One teacher from one school stressed the importance of seeking out student success and that it was important to have the expectation that every student was successful at something.

Teacher 4: Good teachers search out success. They go looking for success in student's work. Somewhere there is something that they did that was good and it's so important to look for that first and then deal with the rest later. I think that really builds confidence and then future success.

A Conclusion: Differences and Similarities

As noted earlier, there were some clear differences amongst teachers and certainly differences from school to school. The teachers in some schools adopted a deficiency tone, seeming more focused on locating problems within the students' culture and home circumstances, rather than expressing a positive voice regarding a future path forward. The voices of teachers from other schools adopted a different perspective, focussing on what teachers could do to help students. These teachers expressed the need to establish caring relationships with students and the need to demonstrate they cared for Indigenous students. They focused on "responsive" teaching and finding ways to engage students. However, they also focused on a lack of resources, the need for more Indigenous staff and other faults in the education system.

However, even here the focus seemed to be on remedial activities rather than extending or helping students see their potential. In conclusion, it would appear that teachers do want to contribute to the lives of their students; it would also appear that they will need support in accomplishing their desired goals. The role of meaningful professional development to support this growth will be critical in this process.

School Administrators' Voices

Six principals and one vice-principal shared their experiences in this chapter of narratives. The interviews began with an introduction of the two interviewers and an invitation for questions from the administrators. We informed the administrators that we had a framework of six questions regarding their school experiences. If the administrators had any questions at any time, they were invited to do so. We began the interview by having the administrator share their personal reflections of what Indigenous students wanted from their school experiences. Further reflections centered on student engagement, including student supports and factors that may keep a student back from learning. We then had the administrator reflect their thoughts regarding who is a successful teacher, what is successful when teaching Indigenous students, and the factors that prove to be unsuccessful when dealing with Indigenous students.

The seven administrator narrative reflections within this chapter are discussed in the following sections: what is insisted upon to build and achieve success; what gets in the way or holds students back from learning; what does not work when teaching Aboriginal students; and what is it that good teachers do

Administrators reflected upon their understanding of what is insisted upon to build success for Indigenous students. The four common themes discussed in this section include promoting success, a sense of belonging, relationships and engagement.

Promoting Success

The discussion began with administrators being asked to share what Indigenous students want from their school experience. The responses included evidence from the Tell Them From Me (TTFM) Saskatchewan Student Online survey, family positioning, sense of belonging and relationships.

An influential source of information was shared in result from the outcomes of the TTFM that reflected Indigenous students' high expectation of school success:

They want to succeed in school I guess one of the things that I have observed or learned over the years that clearly dispels the myth that I think often exists that school is just not a priority for Aboriginal kids . . . and that attendance is kind of so-so and all that and that's just simply not true. And that comes through in different data, for example TTFM data which actually indicates that the desire to succeed and the expectation to succeed in school, in high school and post-secondary exceeds that of the general Canadian high school population (S1).

Student response for the TTFM may indicate the desire to succeed but the administrator of School 4 conveyed personal insight as to why the actual graduation results did not support the student desire to achieve higher educational achievements. The administrator explained the position of the student is a reflection of their family experience that defines what success is to them:

I think that varies from who the student is and what their background is and partially it comes from the . . . backgrounds that the family has. We have clusters that would have two sets of parents that have always worked so that student just naturally feels that "you know what life does not end at Grade 12. I am going on and so I know I need to get Grade 12 and I need to go on." Whereas, you have the other scenario where we have families where neither parents work, neither parents have graduated so those students are kind of like "hey if I get to Grade 10 that is good that is further than my parents did! I will be able to survive because they survive"(S4).

The administrator further explained the benefits of having a relationship with someone that helps build the drive to succeed if the family lacks the driving force for educational betterment:

. . . sometimes there is the intrinsic drive. They have seen what home life is like and either they want that so there is that drive to get to where they can have that or there is the other intrinsic drive that is like “I do not want that necessarily so I am going to work and see what I can do to get better.” The other thing is there has just been some adult . . . that connection to someone who puts a spark in them and say “Hey, you know what? You can be superman. You know what you can! . . . I will show you the way (S4).

The following administrator explained the positive family perspective of education they have encountered. The families involved in education at their school reflected desires that other students and parents want from schools such as a feeling of belonging, having a voice, and relevant curriculum content:

Our Aboriginal families highly value education. I really hear that when I talk with them. I mean they really know that learning is the way to . . . have more . . . power, more in life . . . a better life for their families They want a sense of belonging in a community. They want to be heard. They want to have learning experiences that they can connect to and relate to (S5).

A Sense of Belonging

Administrators reflected on the need for the student to have a sense of belonging in their school environment where students experience value and respect. An environment in that they can have a voice and be heard, “. . . students need, a very warm environment . . . [and] making sure kids have to feel like they belong and that they matter. If they do not belong or have a sense of belonging and a self of mattering then [even] I would not want to be there” (S4).

A sharing, and recognition of culture, assisted in promoting self-identity and a sense of belonging as stated by the following two administrators:

I think the cultural side in this school is helping some of our First Nations kids feel like they belong here more . . . not in a trivial way where we just put things up on the wall but we really have programs that sort of say hey we do value your culture and here is a way that you can celebrate it (S6).

For all young people to learn and for Aboriginal people a sense of identity and a sense of belonging and a sense of community and those things can all be incorporated into the classroom into a curriculum (S1).

Indigenous students desire the opportunity to be a valued member of the classroom learning environment. The following administrator provides personal insights regarding student contribution:

Giving them an opportunity to have a voice and to be experts . . . every kid gets excited about something they know about. And it doesn't matter if it was something they saw on

TV or YouTube last night or the fact that they are a wrestler, or a basketball player They wanna be able to get excited about the fact that they have some area of expertise they wanna share] (S2).

Relationships

In creating a school environment where students can experience a sense of belonging, the administrators reflected many insights regarding the important process of building relationships. Indigenous culture establishes connectedness and relationship to the land that extends to family. Cultural protocol includes members belonging to extended family members following the cliché “it takes a village to raise a child”. One administrator shared a perspective referring to the significance of the need for relationships among Indigenous students, associating the behaviour as an extension from their cultural upbringing:

I have learned [that] relationship is front and center Sometimes we use the . . . metaphor cliché of family. But there is an expectation and a desire that () students want to relate to you as a person so that’s really critical and I don’t think that’s anything () new In my opinion () in an Aboriginal context that’s just doubly critical. That’s just part of . . . their life ways, their experience, they are connected, connected to family They want that relationship with an adult that respects them as individuals . . . and as Aboriginal students. So a good relationship is really, a really critical piece (S1).

The need for constructive conversation is required for school staff to build a positive relationship. This school administrator detailed how the process of relationship building is developed through genuine conversation based on caring questions instead of personal assumptions:” *We ask questions rather than assume. The assumptions tend to sink us pretty quickly, but when we take the time to, to really ask questions about why and how and what their likes and dislikes are. I think it really lends to their gift shining” (S2).*

The administrators were asked to reflect based on their experiences what they thought engages Aboriginal students. Again relationships and connectedness was focused on maintaining student engagement in the classrooms as well as enabling students to have a voice and the administrator being an advocate for the students.

Engagement

Student engagement involved positive teacher connectedness that developed into a relationship. That relationship development also required the need for diverse personalities on a school staff to suit the diverse needs of the student, “*We have some really funky teachers on staff and so I think that makes a difference. The kids see who the funky person is and everybody has a different funk We have tried to ensure that we have a diverse enough staff that they can be funky enough that [they can connect with someone]” (S4).*

In an established relationship and engagement the student needed to have an advocate that

enabled them to have a voice. This administrator explained their important role as of being a student advocate, “*It’s that you always advocate first for the person with the least amount of power*” (S2). The administrator further explained that when a student had that relationship of being able to confide in you then you are able to relate parallel experiences so that a student can connect with the circumstances and deal with the outcomes in a respectful way:

But maybe [the teachers] are getting a little fed up. So when you babysit your little brother and you ask him three times in a row to do something and he doesn’t do it do you get angry? So you try and you know make something an analogous in their life to it and kids can kind of work though that with you. (S2)

There is divergent thinking that there are longitudinal conditions that cause breakdowns or inability for a student to develop student-teacher relationships that interferes with successful student engagement:

I think for lots of our students, if they don’t know the teacher or even something small happens where they can think the teacher doesn’t like them, they just won’t come back. They just won’t go through the door and then they wonder or go out into the community so then some of the other symptoms that we see like addictions and smoking and skipping, I think all of those are more armour symptoms rather than the cause of failing in school but with that said I mean lots of our students haven’t regularly attended school from grade three. So it’s not something new that happened when they came to high school. It’s something that’s been there for a long time already (S5).

Barriers: What Gets In the Way or Holds Indigenous Students Back

Administrators discussed their experiences in what holds students back which included the following themes: school structure and policies; societal issues; and the value of support systems that assist in areas such as poverty, hunger, homelessness, drugs and alcohol issues, lack of transportation and learning gaps.

School Structures and Policies

This administrator expressed the lack of concern or compassion that school structures had in trying to accommodate individual Aboriginal student truancy:

Sometimes there is lots of family issues that kind of intertwine with not wanting to come to school because sometimes they feel that there is going to be issues with other students so there is a safety factor in regards to issues that happened say on the weekend . . . There are those factors that keep kids away for two to three days in the week you know. (S4)

There was concern that school structures are not adequate enough to assist students with social symptoms. There is a need for outside agencies to be a part of the school resources to help with student issues:

We need better things. We need better resources and resources do not always mean money. It means we need some Ed. Psyches around. We need a drug and alcohol worker that can work with our kids and wants to work with kids and those types of things. We need some of those outside agencies that can come in and can work with us so that we have that whole child idea and not just the idea you need to know Math and you need to know English and Science and Social Studies (S4).

Societal Issues

Many factors outside the school affected Indigenous student learning:

I think that gaps in education are huge, huge. Kids that engage and want to be engaged and realize that they are quite far behind and I don't want to sound stereotypical but there are gaps, there are significant gaps for a lot of our aboriginal kids that come in, especially from outside communities. And the gaps get in the way big time and then the social nets, the homelessness, the no transportation . . . the hunger issues, the food issues (S2).

The administrator further stated, “*I didn't realize how much homelessness there was,*” and further provided an example of concern, “*. . . it was winter time. We found out that . . . there were 16 kids and five adults in one house . . . the house was just so congested and nothing was happening for anybody*” (S2).

Another administrator further shared the disposition of students:

The reality is we do have students, we do have parents, and we do have community members that are into drugs and alcohol. Sometimes some of our students only come to school Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday because Mondays and Fridays are not built in for that (S4).

Transportation was considered to be a huge deterrent that held Indigenous students back and this administrator went beyond school policy to provide service so that the student could attend school:

. . . Transportation is a huge issue and not a small one but a huge one. We actually sell bus passes at the school for 20 dollars . . . the city [cost] is \$54.00. So our board in the city partially subsidizes each but I will give a bus pass free of charge to any kid that doesn't have transportation to come (S2). Learning gaps were previously mentioned and this administrator shared concern in regard to servicing low academic needs with respect to the dignity and age of the student:

. . . Low literacy rates make school work really hard and so that's something we are finding hard to address with high school learners. . . [there are] many youth with a Grade 3 reading level or a Grade 2 or 3 math level and then it's not easy to do work that's responsive to them at their level but also respectful of their age (S5).

Divergent thinking is used to associate school scheduling with poverty and money implying that there was a need to adjust the school calendar to accommodate the dates when impoverished families received money:

Money is another thing that kind of gets into it. You know when we look at the calendar The 20th is highlighted every month so the teachers know not to put any assignments or anything big there because nobody will be at school . . . that is part of our system that is part of our kids; we need to work with our kids within those confines, so we need to let them go (S4).

Hunger is a part of poverty and holds Indigenous students back from their learning. The following administrator described how the school helped out to deal with student hunger:

Hunger is an issue and through our cafeteria we have a policy where any kid on any given day with no questions asked gets a free lunch. They just go to the office and ask for a lunch card then families first move in or maybe when there is turmoil in the house . . . a lot of the kids that take advantage of that are Aboriginal kids. (S2)

Support Systems

Administrators were asked to share what supports the Indigenous students to be successful in school. Relationships were repeated as a focus for student support. With relationship and understanding of individual student circumstances, the administrators shared some of their school initiatives that assisted Indigenous students to find support for success.

Historical factors play a key role in some cases when Indigenous parents are affected by issues stemmed from negative residential school symptoms and how it affects their children. Relationship plays a key role in awareness and understanding of the after effects of residential school survivors:

I would say one of the downfalls with our kids is . . . I do not know if enough of them have a cheerleader at home when it comes to education. I think that is partly due to many factors in regards to maybe parents who had a poor experience with school. You know if parents were at the Residential school . . . people who went through the Residential school did not really have that attachment to parents. So in reality, do they have the skills to parent? You know, because they did not have those bonds and have those connections. So sometimes we think those connections are a bit lost and so parents do not necessarily know how to say you know “wow I am so impressed.” . . . And if they do not have a cheerleader in their corner then we just kind of become their cheerleader (S4).

The present school system is not a fit for all and various school systems are developing alternate programs to aid the success of Indigenous students. One view is that many schools offer modified courses and are unsuccessful for the individual student because “*Modified*

courses are a life sentence. Soon as kids are in modified they are never going back into regular right, very seldom. So . . . we can try and place as many supports as we can to keep these kids in the regular stream as long as we can.” The principal further detailed the difficulty of some Indigenous students not understanding or succeeding in the credit system:

Grade 10 is the hardest grade to get in high school cause it’s the first year you enter the credit system. So kids can have social passes or failed a particular subject in the past but still move to the next grade. But in Grade 10 you got to get the credit to go to the next one . . . So Grade 10 is the absolute hump . . . So if English is something you haven’t done well in for the last five years. By the time you get to Grade 10 you are behind whether you are Aboriginal or not but for, you know some of these kids that’s a reality (S2).

The following administrator provided some guiding words,

The other engagement piece is finding out what kids, what are they into, what are they interested in, whether it is sports . . . talent, arts, and music so we have kind of upped our technological anti here and created studio space where like any day after school you can go down stairs to the studio and there is kids in there working with technology, recording music and that kind of stuff (S1).

Another administrator celebrated the diversity of programs offered at the school that assisted in the success of Indigenous Students:

I think engaging is that we have many different programs within our school to suit whoever you are. The whole world is not made up of circles, there are a few of us squares out there so you have to be able to have that within our school . . . We have programs set up that are more hands-on at the rink, [such as] the carpentry and construction program (S4).

The administrator further explained a recovery program offered at their school to assist those to succeed at a class without having to repeat from the beginning of a subject:

. . . there is a recovery program so that you know what “come on in and let us just finish! Let us not start again and keep doing the same thing over. We are going to start and move you from where you are so we can get you to the end and you can be successful” (S4).

The following school offered a program to initiate the ability for teachers to build supportive relationships to aid the Indigenous student to success:

We are experimenting with a one-room schoolhouse model for kids who are struggling, so that we can really focus on relationship more like in an elementary classroom where you have one teacher or two teachers in place all day in one space. Then the space is there to help provide whatever the student needs. If they need food we will feed them. If

they need transportation we will bus them. If they need a break they can take a walk, whatever it is. But all of that again is based on the relationship of having enough trust to know (S5).

What Does Not Work When Teaching Indigenous Students

After reflecting on how schools could be supportive the administrators were then asked, “What does not work when teaching Indigenous students?” The major themes reflected upon included teacher inexperience, racist behaviour, deficit thinking and lack of cultural understanding.

Teacher Inexperience

The following administrator offered a possible reason for the inability for some inexperienced teachers to build positive teacher/student relationships, commenting that inexperienced teachers tend to focus on control and classroom management rather than building relationships. This failure to build relationships may contribute to students being unsuccessful:

. . . it depends what stage of your career you are at. I think when you are a fairly beginning teacher and unfortunately I think we still put a lot of value maybe too much sometimes on classroom management. Can you manage that class? . . . I think young beginning teachers feel a bit of that pressure (S6).

Racism

This administrator reflected the reciprocal behaviour of some Indigenous students when they encountered racism:

And I think another thing that gets in the way is just racism in general. I think that anybody who thinks racism doesn't exist in today's society has their head in the sand and you know isn't in touch with reality. So I think for a lot of the Aboriginal kids they just, they really believe that you know, I have had dealings with say white people before and they haven't been positive so why would they be positive now (S2).

The administrator continued to explain that marginalized people often perceive aggressive behaviour as racism:

I have had parents come to school and say you know my kid's being treated racist by this teacher or by a another kid. When we deal with the behaviors and the issues at hand you know . . . I would say 99 times out of a hundred, racism had nothing to do with it. But that was the perception and I think that one thing that we have to remember particularly with youth or particularly with people that feel they are being marginalized is perception is reality (S2).

Color blindness, lack of cultural identity and trying to teach everyone the same did not work when teaching Indigenous students:

I encounter this perspective from teachers, a bully effect. Well I teach everyone the same, I am not going to play favorites right. So I have got you know 20 kids or 25 kids in my class and I have got these eight Aboriginal kids and there is always you know, I am color blind, they are all the same So I guess I really believe that those eight Aboriginal students you need to don't see them as special needs or go create some kind of alternate kind of deal for them. The really critical things is understanding them as Aboriginal students because they are coming from different experiences and perspectives [with]their families and histories and that means something and to really honor that you need to put in the work and time to understand what that is (S1).

Deficit Theorizing

Deficit theorizing is captured in this administrator's statement, referring to some educators who think that Indigenous students need modified programs to succeed:

An attitude that somehow they are not able to learn for whatever reason. I don't like that attitude at all. There is nothing different about First Nation or Métis students than any other student in the world and I think that, that sometimes hold them back. We need to water down curriculum, what for? We have got some of the best curriculums here and our Aboriginal students rise to all the expectations and sometimes beyond and above (S1).

The administrator continued to add that a watered down curriculum may not work, but the present lecturing method does not work either. Interaction and holistic methodology is part of the Indigenous traditional teachings and current classroom practise is not working:

Yeah, sitting individually at their desk writing notes and just listening to a lecture does not work, doesn't work for anybody Indigenous students like to be in community, they like to be in contact, they like to tell a story. It's really a part of all our histories and that way of engaging is But the old style of teaching where you just come in and you read something by yourself and then write down the answers and take notes off the board, not engaging for anyone. Particularly when [Indigenous] students haven't always been successful in school that is never going to get them engaged (S1).

Anger and Frustration

Lack of patience and tolerance will often lead to anger and frustration; that does not work for Indigenous students, "Like yelling does not get me to do anything any better and it will not work with kids I am talking about when you are yelling at people in frustration and anger. That does not work"(S4).

Making judgements and breakdown of communication out of anger does not work for Indigenous students, ". . . if you're judgmental and I think if you put baggage on them that may or may not be there I think you are making it pretty tough for those kids to engage" (S6).

Lack of Cultural Understanding

Lack of cultural understanding and using humor can quickly turn to humiliation does not work for Indigenous students: . . . *being impersonal I think being rigid, showing just a European model in terms of the content and not showing a variety of perspectives' including aboriginal perspectives is really important I think . . . Using humiliation or you know even sometimes the way that we try to joke with students but you know sometimes that trips us up (S5).*

What Do Good Teachers Do

Moving the reflections from what does not work for Indigenous students the administrators were asked what is it that good teacher do? The administrators highlighted the importance of humor and it being a part of Indigenous culture, sharing the power of learning, the importance of relationships, a commitment to the student and being flexible and accommodating.

Humour

Humor is a part of culture for Indigenous students; humor can turn into humiliation if not introduced respectfully:

. . . you have to have a sense of humor, God, you gotta have to have a sense of humor. You know like it's a way that you give kids heck. It's all in how you talk to them . . . If you don't want them to do something then either you tell them in a joking way or in another way that they will understand But it's all in the way you speak to them (S3).

Sharing power and being active with the students is reflected in this administrator reflection, "good teachers aren't at their desk . . . good teachers aren't talking too much Good teachers are engaged all over the classroom, good teachers share, share power I guess is one way to put it" (S1). Students are attracted to teachers that are knowledgeable and open to learning as this administrator identified, "I think good teachers are, like people wanna learn from them. They tell good stories and they know their material but they, they do lots of things in those non teachable moments and you know I think it's that relationship right" (S6).

Understanding the learning needs of the students and supporting cultural awareness is what good teachers do according to this administrator:

. . . a teacher that is really tuned in to the individual needs of the students is essential and seeing the students as all capable and all able to learn, same as anyone else and then addressing and adjusting the curriculum to fit the needs of the students and to make sure that they are engaged through things that are important for all students (S1).

This administrator further indicated that good teachers are student centered:

. . . good teachers' respond to individual student and plan for individual students and are flexible in that planning so that they can respond to the strengths of their students, the needs of their students. So it becomes student centered rather than, subject centered. Are approachable, they will build good relationship, are passionate about their teaching also I think that's really important. If the teacher is not interested in it then students won't be interested in either. Yeah, friendly, passionate, organized, still provide structure (S5).

Relationships continued to be a focus on building student success as this administrator stated, *"I think good teachers form a relationship with the kid. Find out a little bit about who they are and what makes them tick and they try to help them be successful"* (S6). Teacher commitment and wrap-around supports add to the development of successful relationships as this administrator shared:

. . . every second Monday morning we have what we call a Monday morning meeting, that starts at 7:30 am, and student services and administration talk about our kids that are in crisis. We bring our lists and we talk how we can problem solve to give support or what's happening in these kid's lives (S2).

This administrator also referred to the process that good teachers do in wrapping around the student:

I think we are at the end of the old school scenario where it is I am here to teach you math and that is all I am going to teach you. You leave your issues at home that is not my problem. You deal with that after school, please and thank you. You do not see that anymore that just cannot be how it is You want to teach a child then we have to be willing to teach what needs to be taught and deal with what needs to be dealt with properly (S4).

Commitment to the Student

When good teachers create the connections with the students, the classroom then becomes a place where students want to be:

I always think those are the connections you see with the staff along with the fact that the kids want to be in that classroom with that person and want to learn from that person. So they find that they are an exciting teacher who makes learning fun and makes learning that you want to be there (S4).

Students are attracted to teachers that are knowledgeable and open to learning, as this administrator identified, *"I think good teachers are, like people wanna learn from them. They tell good stories and they know their material but they, they do lots of things in those non teachable moments and you know I think that's, it's that relationship right"* (S6). Another administrator added, the teachers that are successful with students are *"well organized and know what they are doing"* (S3).

Flexibility

Empathy is further addressed in actions of good teachers being flexible to support the student; *“They will be able to give you that extra day or two days or even after the class is done. They will give you an extra week to finish and then they will mark you, that’s easy. But to me that’s an understanding teacher”* (S3). The administrator summed up the main ingredient of what makes a good teacher:

. . . They are able to make unit plans and lesson plans and stuff. But there is nothing there about the hard stuff, the love stuff. You know that, that caring for your kid . . . They have what they call classroom management. What is classroom management? You won’t have no problems in your class if you love those kids . . . That’s just the bottom line you know. So if you love those kids, man that’s, that’s the key (S3).

Conclusion: School Administrators

One administrator captured the need for change; *“ . . . what do we believe a student of a FNIM background... can accomplish? What do we believe a student from a non-FNIM background can accomplish? Our entire school division probably our whole province needs to do some work there”* (S6).

Another administrator continued this thinking, when commenting regarding the TTFM survey process,

This school is not about the teachers it’s about the kids. A lot of schools . . . survey kids, who completes the surveys? Mostly the motivated kids. You never hear from the kids with the least voice and like I said before you try and give power to the person with the least amount of power in the situation. You advocate for them, you don’t try and give them power, but you advocate for them (S2).

Following Their Voices: What We Learned

Setting the Context

In May 2013, Dr. Mere Berryman and Te Arani Barrett, University of Waikato, visited Saskatchewan to share the experience of the Te Kotahitanga program and its success in improving learning outcomes for Maori youth attending New Zealand secondary schools. Key Saskatchewan educators were already aware of the work by Russell Bishop and Mere Berryman in developing Te Kotahitanga and its contribution to Maori secondary student learning. The opportunity to spend time with Mere and Te Arani was enthusiastically received in well attended meetings in Saskatoon and Regina.

Mere's visit reinforced existing discussions regarding Indigenous education in Saskatchewan and potential future directions. Her influence was catalytic and led to a decision to explore the relevance of their work within the Saskatchewan context. Mere was clear that a Saskatchewan model needed not to adopt Te Kotahitanga practices slavishly but rather should be set within a local educational and cultural setting. As a result, one of the initiatives that arose from her visit was the decision to conduct a major research project that, like Te Kotahitanga in New Zealand, focused upon Saskatchewan high schools attended by Indigenous students. And like Te Kotahitanga, focus groups were conducted with groups of engaged and non-engaged Indigenous students, teachers, and parents. In addition, separate interviews were conducted with school administrators. The focus of the research was to be on the voices of these participants.

Future program development was then to be based upon the messages left by their voices. This commitment has guided the overall process related to the actual research and subsequent program development outcomes. This report provides an initial summary of the messages left by the voices. It may be viewed as the first substantial statement of the messages from the participant voices. It is unlikely to be the last. We expect that the voices, as the participant feedback has come to be termed, will continue to shape future program and policy direction over the coming months.

Early in the process, the need for a thorough literature review that would set context to the Seeking Their Voices research was emphasized. The result was a decision to initiate a comprehensive review of the literature regarding Indigenous student learning. In addition, a series of 18 individual interviews with prominent academics, school administrators and policy people in Canada, the United States and New Zealand was also undertaken. These individuals, from Saskatchewan, Newfoundland, Alaska, Hawaii, Wyoming, Utah, Arizona and New Zealand, brought a unique perspective to the discussion. Of the entire group, 11 came from Indigenous backgrounds while seven were non-Indigenous. Almost all brought a lifetime of working in education with Indigenous children. Their perspectives, and those provided by the literature review, paralleled the conclusions drawn from the Seeking Their Voices research.

The research conclusions include issues such as teacher knowledge of the students' cultural assets, effective instructional practice, and the importance of a knowledgeable, caring

relationship between teacher and student. Other issues are a focus on success, on the importance of language and culture, on the impact of racism and colonization, and the need to see the importance of relationship within a broader context that transcends the student and teacher within the classroom. Perhaps the most telling description of the research results was captured by one of the students,

You come to school and you bring your life with you so it's good to know who you're working with. I find that here at this school a lot because [of] my personal relationships with my teachers, they know why I'm late for school. So I feel comfortable with them. It's almost like they are friends, good friends or even uncles or brothers like a family and that's I think how school should be . . . I think teaching is one of the most important jobs in the world. I think you should know who you are teaching. (Engaged Student)

Another critical outcome that emerged from the research project relates to the need to understand that Western worldviews have historically dominated Indigenous cultural perspectives, both educationally and within the larger society. A critical aspect of the success to date on this project has been the awareness that a new way of working together was necessary. In a practical sense this meant an often difficult, yet collaborative, process that sought to respect what Willie Ermine (2007, preface) described as the “ethical space of engagement”. He indicated that “The ‘ethical space’ is formed when two societies, with disparate worldviews, are poised to engage each other The new partnership model of the ethical space, in a cooperative spirit between Indigenous peoples and Western institutions, will create new currents of thought . . . and overrun the archaic ways of interaction” (pp.193-194).

A second Saskatchewan Indigenous scholar, Neal McLeod (2007) in his book, *Cree Narrative Memory*, provided another metaphor from which to view this work. He stated that “Cree narrative imagination is . . . a visionary process of imagining another state of affairs. This does not imply that one is seeking Utopia; one is simply seeking a different possibility, trying to conceive of a different way in which people might live together” (p. 98). McLeod further stated that “Great stories challenge the status quo. They challenge the social space around us, and the way society structures the world. Great stories urge us to rethink that social space” (p. 99). We are hopeful that the research and voices contained within this report will encourage us all to re-imagine our stories, challenge our current social space and rethink the ways in which we may envision a new way of teaching and learning within the province’s schools. Our children deserve no less – if we are to honour the “voices” of the students, and others captured within this study, we must continue on our path of meaningful engagement. Only by doing so will we successfully re-imagine a better future for our youth; only then can we “conceive of a better way in which people might live together” (McLeod, 2007, p. 98). It is our profound hope that this research will encourage a better way of living together that will support the legitimate learning expectations of Indigenous youth within Saskatchewan.

The Research Findings

This research is based on the findings from the focus groups and interviews of students, parents, teachers and school administrators in six Saskatchewan high schools. The findings are summarized below.

Hearing the Voices: What They Said

Consistent with the initial research conducted by Bishop and Berryman (2010), the decision to conduct similar research in Saskatchewan to ground the work within a more local context was taken. The result was the Seeking Their Voices research project.

This section of the report outlines the thematic analyses of the five groups drawn from the six Saskatchewan high schools that participated in the research. These five groups included students, both engaged and non-engaged, parents, teachers and school administrators. With the exception of the school administrators, who were interviewed, all of the remaining groups participated within a focus group setting.

Student Voices: Engaged and Non-Engaged.

Students' School Experiences

Students' responses to the question regarding their school experiences did not point to clear-cut themes across all schools for either the non-engaged or engaged students. What was common to both groups was that these students attended more than one school. In both groups students reported positive and negative experiences with their past and current schools. If we were to make a distinction, however, non-engaged students reported more negative experiences than engaged students. Negative experiences for non-engaged students revolved around stereotyping, racism and/or classism, bullying and intimidation among a large school population. Engaged students spoke positively about their school experiences; however they did have suggestions for improvement.

What Helps Students in Learning and What Good Teachers Should Do

What helped non-engaged students with their learning were when they found learning relevant. Teachers who took the time to help students, who developed personal, caring relationships with students, and who were pleasant to be around reflected what supported these students' learning and what they perceived as "good" teachers. Non-engaged students also talked about teachers "*lightening up.*" Humor was one of the most common descriptions of what good teachers do. Teachers with a sense of humor were reported to inspire students to "*want to go to class more.*"

Engaged students perceived that good teachers were genuinely concerned that students not only understand the material, but have opportunities to "*utilize [their] skills*". Many students reported that teachers who explain lessons clearly, seek alternative ways to explain concepts,

and who are willing to spend “one-on-one time” with them to ensure they can be successful in their classes. Similar to the perception of the non-engaged students, students in the engaged groups discussed a personal connection with teachers as a positive factor that supported their learning.

One student suggested teachers should, “*make more like a friend relationship with you—personal relationship. Like, actually get to know you and your background.*”

What Holds Students Back from Learning and What Teachers Should Stop Doing

Non-engaged students believed that being treated poorly by teachers and also dealing with teachers who have “favorites” detracted from their learning. Students in most of the schools reported disrespectful behaviour such as yelling, commenting that “*If they want respect, they should give us respect back.*” The issue of teacher favorites also generated comment; one student commented “*Some of them are her favorites. On her good days she likes me . . . other days, she is not so crazy about me.*” The effect on student commitment to learning was very real and detrimental.

Both engaged and non-engaged students referenced family circumstances and home influences as a factor that held them back from their learning. One student commented that “*It’s tough to . . . put yourself out there for school when you are just trying to survive . . .*”. For some, hard times and the absence of school success in families motivated them to be the first in the family to graduate and to set a positive example for others. Others saw these expectations as putting additional pressure on themselves to succeed.

In addition to family life getting in the way of these engaged students’ learning, teachers’ disengagement from the class was frequently raised. This statement captures this theme well: “*[Teacher] quickly gives you the work and just sits at his desk He doesn’t really communicate with you.*” Students frequently mentioned teachers who presented a lesson then retreated to their desks and became preoccupied by their computers, or were “*always on their phones*”. Teachers who appeared to these students as disengaged did not provide the kind of academic support these students required.

The topic of Indigenous culture in schools was also mentioned. For example, one student critiqued a course for emphasizing European perspectives: “*They are just focusing on the European part of you, and they never taught us about residential schools or anything.*” A different student extended her critique to the school environment, “*This school barely has anything to do with Aboriginal students at all.*”

Parent Voices

As indicated in the methods section of this report, parents either volunteered or were asked by their child to participate in the focus groups. Many parents strongly expressed concerns about Indigenous people being “researched to death” and that as Indigenous people they would once

again be sharing their stories and experiences at the risk of being ignored.

Parent's Own School Experience

Parents openly and honestly shared positive and negative educational experiences. The themes that arose in response to this question included: positive supports for learning; knowledge of the value and utility of education; absence of supports; and abuse, bullying, stereotyping and racism.

Statements that supported this theme included reference to the teacher's disposition and desire to be instructive, ". . . *but it was all about the teachers that kept me going back.*" and "*I excelled with professors or instructors that were very supportive. And they wanted you to learn what they were teaching you.*" In considering support inside this parent referenced the importance of safety and warmth. "*He warmed me up to high school.*" Support outside the classroom such as involvement in sports, parental involvement, and peer groups were identified as determining factors in their school experience.

Several parents shared painful school experiences that identified bullying and abuse as factors contributing to their own school disengagement. For example, parents spoke about the presence of abuse in their schooling experience: "*I had my Grade 3 teacher . . . I remember doing my work and I went and asked for help and she would use that stick and hit me, "Get it right, get it right". That was how we were taught.*" This parent went on to say, "*So we were attending high school. We became the bullies of the bullies. We even mistreated our teachers, that's how we were bullied we became the bullies.*"

What Engages and Helps Their Child in Learning

Topics that arose within this theme included: knowing purpose of schooling, Indigenous sensibility and presence, parental and family support, and school programming. Several parents felt their child was motivated in their schooling if they were able to recognize the utility of education for their future. Other parents identified the worth of a school environment with an Indigenous sensibility: One parent stated, "*he really likes the school because the school is so involved with our traditional ways of knowing and he's involved in with a social justice group in the school.*"

Many parents referenced the importance of parent and family support as a determining factor in school success; "*I think what they [students] need are more supports . . . the more successful students in our school are those [with] parents that really support their kids.*" Others identified the role of school programs that assist in ensuring that the school environment is conducive to helping their child with learning. Parent identified a range of different program initiatives that were helpful, including flexible scheduling, the block system and, practical and applied arts.

What Holds Their Child Back from Learning: What Teachers Should Stop Doing

Parents identified a number of things holding their children back: teacher disengagement, detrimental teacher behaviours, racism in the school environment, teacher's low expectations, Indigenous culture gaps, home dynamics and negative peer influences. As parents identified issues and concerns they were quick to offer solutions to support not only the students, but also the teachers and school. With respect to teacher disengagement, one parent demonstrated insight into the interrelationship between teacher disengagement, teacher's low expectations and stereotyping, “*Oh the teacher doesn't expect, doesn't expect us to do much'. I said, 'I do'. I did say I expect him to do better.*” Parents also commented on detrimental teacher behaviours; one parent focus group provided the following guidance to teachers.

Stop yelling. Parent 8: Stop being a bully. Parent 3: Stop being bullying to the kids, try to teach them not bully them. Parent 5: Don't have favouritism . . . Parent 6: Don't put them aside. Parent 7: Don't send them home. Parent 1: And don't put them at the, in a corner you know. Parent 8: Work with them.

One parent recommended,

I think beginning teachers need lots of PD. They need lots of help. I say they should be more understanding and knowledgeable about First Nations people but they are not and they need that PD. They need that training and they need to be given some direction on what to do. I think we need to go back to the communities and pull out some resource people, some mentors to come in and help the teachers because they are struggling because they don't know what to do. It's the plain truth they don't know what to do.

Parents talked about racism and bullying; one parent articulated the power of racism in contaminating the learning experience for children, “*Like bullying, racism and stuff like that could stop your child from wanting to go to school or their learning.*” Parents further discussed the lack of cultural understanding on the part of the school.

Sometimes teachers or EA's that are not familiar with like culture and will touch his braid and say “Oh, I love your hair” and he will get offended so now he wears his braid inside his shirt. So that's like, that's kind of like he is not very proud to do that but he has to. He has no other choice.

Stressful family dynamics at home emerged as theme in factors that hindered their child's learning. Many times throughout the interviews, parents were quite hard on themselves or each other for their children's struggles, anger and lack of success. In connecting parenting with schooling, one comment referenced the need to reinforce Indigenous traditional values in childrearing,

We should be more respectful to older people but we lost that. And somehow we need to

bring that back and I think that is where we really lack with some of our kids. They have absolutely no respect for teachers . . . It is really shocking but that is the reality you know. It happens every single day, every single day. That is what these teachers have to put up with.

What Good Teachers Do and Should Keep Doing

Parents referenced the importance of effective teacher/parent relationships and communication, indicating that *“Communication is a big thing”* and *“If something comes up [teacher] will text me . . . lets me know when things are going on with him and we just keep an open dialogue when it comes to his education.”* It was acknowledged that effective communication between teachers and parents requires parental involvement; *“The principal and counsellors know that I am very proactive about my children’s education and sports activities. When they see that my kids aren’t doing the work, I receive calls about their class performance.”*

Parents also believed teachers that cared about their students were perceived as effective teachers. One parent had this to say, *“They [the school] didn’t pay me to say this. But with the kids in the classes I really see the care and what the teachers put into it”*. Another parent in the school commented on teachers who do not give up on their students, *“They never gave up on her. And if we had that in every one of these schools I think we would have a huge success story for children in school.”*

A Conclusion: Inside and Outside the Classroom

In concluding this section, several parent statements demonstrated the importance of caring both inside and *outside* the classroom: *“Anyways I think I want the teachers to I guess to step into our children’s shoes for a while and to see where that child is coming from.”* and *“They care about your home life. They care if you are coming to school.”*

Voices of the Teachers

Four major themes were identified from the teachers’ voices. However, clear differences were noted among teachers and between schools. Two schools seemed more focused on locating problems within the students’ culture and home circumstances. Teacher voices maintained a strong deficit tone and were focused on the problems of dysfunctional students and families who they held responsible for continuing student failure.

Teacher voices from two other schools adopted a different perspective, being far less deficit oriented. These teachers expressed the need to establish relationships, to focus on success and “responsive” teaching, being flexible and relevant, and finding ways to engage students. However, many of the proposed solutions tended to be of a remedial nature.

Teaching Approaches and Responses to Students’ Needs and Improving Student Engagement with Learning

Two sub-themes were identified: responses that focused on teacher or system needs and those that focused on student needs. The first sub-theme came from teachers who were commented on system needs; *“If that is your situation with 20 students in your classroom, you are trying to help them with Math, you can’t help all. . . . We don’t have enough support in our school from the government. We need more people.”*

The second sub-theme came from teachers focused on what could be done to address student problems.

Sometimes trying to listen to or figure out what’s a priority for the learner in the moment and if you can address that and support that then you seem to be able to go to the English work they don’t care so much for. Sometimes it’s getting something to eat. Sometimes it’s filling in an application form or finishing up a resume because they want a job. It goes like seriously all over the map.

Teachers’ voices from four schools also focused on making the learning relevant for Indigenous students and discussed how this increased student engagement. Teachers stressed the need for classroom learning that was culturally relevant,

Our . . . students want current and up to date lessons that they are into and actually are relevant and that they see . . . how is this going to play a role in my life, how is this going to carry over? So they want relevant in the sense that they are going to be able to use what they are learning in school in their day to day lives or in their future lives. But also I think culturally relevant lessons are important for our . . . students I think it helps engage students.

Relationships: The Importance of Knowing and Understanding Your Students

Teachers stressed the importance of establishing relationships with Indigenous students before any learning could commence. These were generally not expressed as power sharing relationships where teachers and students were equal partners; rather the relationships were based on the concept of “getting to know” students so that that they could be coaxed through the learning process. Relationships were often seen as needing to be relaxed and informal,

I think one of the biggest engagement focuses that . . . students have said to me, the one thing I like about this school is that we can call you by your first name. And to them that’s a real big thing and, and we can laugh and joke about simple things with each other and that really breaks down a lot of barriers, for a lot of these kids I think we are a little more relaxed here and that allows kids to relax a little more too and know that they are not being managed too much.

Getting to know students’ abilities was also seen as important; *“You have to understand where the kids are coming from and what their abilities are. I know what the kids can and what they can’t do and what they can’t do I try and make more easier for them to understand.”* One

teacher expressed the importance of maintaining connections with students when they didn't come to school,

We have a lot of students with some serious attendance concerns. Often times in the past I kind of ignored that [and] thought "Nothing I can do about that". What I have started to do is starting to say "Tell your friend we missed them" and so that's actually that we have acknowledged that they have been missing from class and then they get it's a welcome place and we want them here. I hope it's a good thing that teachers do.

Impact of Home Life and Socio-Economic Conditions

Narratives from this theme fell into two broad areas: a focus on the negative impacts, and an acknowledgement of the negative impacts but a focus on what schools and teachers can do to mitigate those impacts. Teachers in two schools focused on the problems of Indigenous children and their home communities, locating the blame with these families; *"They don't know what it is like to live in a home and have a constant adult who is there for life."*

Other teachers acknowledged the negative impacts that community and family issues could have on Indigenous student success, indicating that *"All the problems surrounding poverty, like housing, transportation, food and then parenting . . . racism; these are external problems but the effects are internal. Those are all barriers that we have and a lot of our FN students are dealing with."* Many teachers expressed a sympathetic attitude towards the issues faced by Indigenous students and their families and did not locate blame with those families.

Teacher voices tended to focus on the negative impacts of socio-economic circumstances. Some teachers blamed Indigenous students and their families, while others saw these students and their families as victims. In all cases the solutions offered across all schools were of a remedial nature. One comment was different; this teacher spoke of students' resilience in their efforts to succeed in school in spite of the barriers they faced, stating that *"We have had lots of discussions in this building about resiliency and I argue that our students are resilient because they do show up again. They drop off the radar for an entire semester and they show up again and they try it again, our students are resilient."*

Expectations for Student Academic Success

Teachers' voices regarding expectations for student academic success fell into two broad areas: low expectations of student achievement by teachers due to perceived student deficits and high expectations of student success. Teachers typically talked about the low academic levels of Indigenous students when they started school which made it difficult for students to "catch up"; *"I think the challenge for us is we get them in Grade 9 or 10 and a lot of times there's so much that is lacking at that point that it's hard to deal with it. It's so late in their schooling to try and fix the gaps."* Some teachers also considered the lack of academic success as a problem located with the Indigenous students, stating *"There is a lot of dysfunction, alcoholism, a lot of abuse, a lot of in and out of rehab. It will take them seven years to get high school because of a lot of the issues."*

While one teacher spoke positively about the ability of Indigenous students, the expectation expressed was that there was a mismatch between what the system wanted and the students wanted, with the implication being that the students needed to change.

We have so many kids that are really, really, really bright kids but they just don't know how to apply that intelligence in the way the school wants it and the way its structured. The kids want to be successful and I think they understand that education is important in abstract terms. They get it from their parents, they hear it everywhere, but to translate that into how can I be successful at school, is where I see a lot of the struggle.

Only a few teachers expressed the benefit of having high expectations of Indigenous students' success, believing that every student would be successful,

Good teachers search out success. They go looking for success in student's work. Somewhere there is something that they did that was good and it's so important to look for that first and then deal with the rest later. I think that really builds confidence and then future success.

A Conclusion: Differences and Similarities

There were often clear differences among teachers and between schools. Teachers in some schools adopted a deficiency tone, seeming more focused on locating problems within the students' culture and home circumstances. Teachers from other schools adopted a different perspective, focussing on what could be done to help students. Even here the focus seemed to be on remedial activities rather than extending or helping students see their potential.

School Administrator Voices

Six principals and one vice-principal shared their reflections in the following themes: what is insisted upon to build and achieve success, what gets in the way or holds students back from learning, what does not work when teaching Indigenous students and what is it that good teachers do.

What Is Insisted Upon To Build and Achieve Success

Administrators reflected upon their understanding of what is insisted upon to build success for Indigenous students. The common themes discussed in this section include promoting success, a sense of belonging, relationships and engagement. With respect to success, one administrator commented that,

They want to succeed in school. I guess one of the things that I have observed or learned over the years that clearly dispels the myth that I think often exists that school is just not a priority for Aboriginal kids . . . and that attendance is kind of so-so and all that and that's just simply not true. And that comes through in different data, for

example TTFM data which actually indicates that the desire to succeed and the expectation to succeed in school, in high school and post-secondary exceeds that of the general Canadian high school population.

Administrators reflected on the need for the student to have a sense of belonging in their school environment where students experience value and respect; “. . . *students need, a very warm environment . . . [and] making sure kids have to feel like they belong and that they matter. If they do not belong or have a sense of belonging and a self of mattering then [even] I would not want to be there.*”

Another administrator referenced the significance of the need for relationships among Indigenous students; “*They want that relationship with an adult that respects them as Individuals . . . and as Aboriginal students. So a good relationship is really, a really critical piece.*”

What Gets In the Way or Holds Indigenous Students Back

Administrators discussed their experiences in what holds students back which included the following themes: school structure and policies; societal issues; and the value of support systems that assist in areas such as poverty, hunger, homelessness, drugs and alcohol issues, lack of transportation, and learning gaps. For example, one administrator expressed the lack of compassion within school structures when trying to accommodate individual Indigenous student truancy,

Sometimes there is lots of family issues that kind of intertwine with not wanting to come to school because sometimes they feel that there is going to be issues with other students so there is a safety factor in regards to issues that happened say on the weekend There are those factors that keep kids away for two to three days in the week you know.

With respect to societal issues, another administrator stated that “*I didn’t realize how much homelessness there was,*” and further provided an example of concern, “. . . *it was winter time. We found out that . . . there were 16 kids and 5 adults in one house . . . the house was just so congested and nothing was happening for anybody.*” Administrators further commented that relationships were important as a focus for student support. They also shared some of their school initiatives that helped students find success, citing sports, practical and applied arts, arts education, technology, credit recovery programs, and transportation as examples.

What Does Not Work When Teaching Indigenous Students

Major themes identified by administrators included teacher inexperience, racist behaviour, deficit thinking, and lack of cultural understanding. One administrator suggested that inexperienced teachers tend to focus on control and classroom management rather than building relationships. This failure to build relationships may contribute to students being unsuccessful,

. . . it depends what stage of your career you are at. I think when you are a fairly beginning teacher and unfortunately I think we still put a lot of value maybe too much sometimes on classroom management. Can you manage that class? . . . I think young beginning teachers feel a bit of that pressure.

Racism was another issue that was discussed,

And I think another thing that gets in the way is just racism in general. I think that anybody who thinks racism doesn't exist in today's society has their head in the sand and you know isn't in touch with reality. So I think for a lot of the Aboriginal kids they just, they really believe that you know, I have had dealings with say white people before and they haven't been positive so why would they be positive now.

Deficit theorizing is captured in this administrator's statement, referring to some educators who think that Indigenous students need modified programs to succeed,

An attitude that somehow they are not able to learn for whatever reason. I don't like that attitude at all. There is nothing different about First Nation or Métis students than any other student in the world and I think that, that sometimes hold them back. We need to water down curriculum, what for? We have got some of the best curriculums here and our Aboriginal students rise to all the expectations and sometimes beyond and above.

Administrators suggested a lack of patience and tolerance will often lead to anger and frustration; that does not work for Indigenous students, *"Like yelling does not get me to do anything any better and it will not work with kids I am talking about when you are yelling at people in frustration and anger. That does not work."*

What Is It That Good Teachers Do

Administrators highlighted the importance of humor and it being a part of Indigenous culture, sharing the power of learning, the importance of relationships, a commitment to the student, and being flexible and accommodating. They commented that humor is a part of culture for Indigenous students; however humor can turn into humiliation if not introduced respectfully,

. . . you have to have a sense of humor, God, you gotta have to have a sense of humor. You know like it's a way that you give kids heck. It's all in how you talk to them If you don't want them to do something then either you tell them in a joking way or in another way that they will understand But it's all in the way you speak to them.

Sharing power and being active with the students is reflected in this administrator reflection, *"good teachers aren't at their desk good teachers aren't talking too much Good teachers are engaged all over the classroom, good teachers share, share power I guess is one way to put it."* Students are attracted to teachers that are knowledgeable and open to learning,

“I think good teachers are, like people wanna learn from them. They tell good stories and they know their material but they, they do lots of things in those non teachable moments and you know I think it’s that relationship right.”

Relationships continued to be a focus on building student success as this administrator stated, *“I think good teachers form a relationship with the kid. Find out a little bit about who they are and what makes them tick and they try to help them be successful”*. When good teachers create connections with the students, *“they find that they are an exciting teacher who makes learning fun and makes learning that you want to be there.”*

One administrator summed up the main ingredient of what makes a good teacher,

They . . . are able to make unit plans and lesson plans and stuff. But there is nothing there about the hard stuff, the love stuff. You know that, that caring for your kid They have what they call classroom management. What is classroom management? You won’t have no problems in your class if you love those kids That’s just the bottom line you know. So if you love those kids, man that’s, that’s the key.

Conclusion: School Administrators

The essence of the interviews was captured by one administrator, when commenting regarding the TTFM survey process,

This school is not about the teachers it’s about the kids. A lot of schools . . . survey kids, who completes the surveys? Mostly the motivated kids. You never hear from the kids with the least voice and like I said before you try and give power to the person with the least amount of power in the situation. You advocate for them, you don’t try and give them power, but you advocate for them.

Recommendations

As the findings suggest, the policy direction required for improved learning outcomes for Indigenous youth seems clear. What is necessary is attention to these research findings. One of the interview participants, Dan, a retired senior provincial official, referenced this issue, *“ . . . there is no more significant issue for the province and the country than getting more progress than we’ve made . . . whatever we seem to have done has not made the difference that we ought to make.”* He further commented that *“If society saw the importance of getting it right, of doing it well for the benefit of individual children in the province, the country, we would get it right.”*

These comments capture the issue well; if change is to occur, it will not happen solely within the educational community. Working with the broader Saskatchewan community will be vital if deep seated attitudes are to change. Other interviewees commented that, although challenges exist, this positive change is beginning.

As a Province:

- Continue to build working relationships with Indigenous communities in practical ways that promote truth, understanding, and reconciliation of Western and Indigenous cultural worldviews. Consider what Willie Ermine (2007, preface) described as the “ethical space of engagement”. A critical aspect of the success of the Seeking Their Voices project has been an increasing awareness that a more collaborative, respectful way of working together was necessary. This is necessary for progress on improving Indigenous student learning outcomes.
- Jointly develop, with Indigenous communities, initiatives to target poverty, racism and assimilative practices within schools and the wider society. While uncomfortable to acknowledge, these unfortunate attitudes exist within schools and the wider society, often in ways of which we are unaware.
- Prioritize the development of programs by and with, Indigenous peoples that focus on improving Indigenous student learning within Saskatchewan schools.
- When renewing curriculum, utilize collaborative practices in the development and delivery of relationship based, culturally affirming curricula for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth. Prioritize the opportunities posed by Treaty Education and related initiatives to influence curriculum renewal.
- Work with Indigenous communities and consider best practice research findings to explore the development of a school/community engagement model that is based upon a philosophy of “ethical space”.
- Prioritize to the development of culturally relevant assessment practices that provides meaningful information for use by teachers, schools, school systems and the province in improved classroom instruction, student learning and more generally, system planning and improvement. Base this work on proven evidence based decision making models.
- Engage and collaborate with Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Indigenous people to provide a foundation of Indigenous knowledge and understanding.
- Support educational partnership initiatives that focus on improved Indigenous student learning. Initiatives may be requested of teacher education institutions, provincial school jurisdictions, and other educational partners.

For Universities/Teacher Education Programs:

- Give priority to the further development of Indigenization initiatives within existing structures and programs, both within educational and broader university faculties. Foster closer relationships between Indigenous and broader program areas.
- Enhance the role of Indigenous teacher education programs such as SUNTEP, ITEP, NORTEP and FNUniv when engaging in Indigenous education program development.
- Explore credit/non-credit programming that supports the development of new and experienced teachers in their efforts to improve professional practice and learning outcomes with Indigenous students. Prioritize programming intended to provide undergraduate/graduate students with:

- a greater sense of the value of a caring, supportive relationship between students and teacher;
- Indigenous cultural awareness to build relationship instructional strategies to actively support Indigenous student learning;
- effective use of evidence based decision making strategies;
- the importance of agentic, rather than deficit thinking; and
- an understanding of the effects of racism and colonialism.

For Schools/School Jurisdictions:

- Provide meaningful support to teachers who are asked to improve the learning prospects of Indigenous youth. Recognize that changing professional practice is a challenging process and requires ongoing, sustained support.
- Support strategic provincial initiatives intended to improve Indigenous student outcomes, whether at the classroom, school, or system level.
- Actively foster programming to address the legitimate view among Indigenous people that schools often operate as agents of dominant western colonial values.
- Support local initiatives that focus on improving Indigenous student learning and consider local community needs and priorities.
- Recognize that there is a local community of Indigenous experts, such as Elders, story tellers, and cultural carriers, who should have a strong and permanent presence within the school.

For Teachers:

- Prioritize the development of strong, meaningful, and caring relationships with Indigenous students.
- Become more culturally responsive through the understanding of cultural background, world view and values of Indigenous students. Spend time getting to know the students' family and community.
- Continue to improve professional practice, including:
 - the need for caring and effective relationships;
 - strategies for effective classroom instruction;
 - the use of evidence based decision making; and
 - the need for increased cultural responsiveness and awareness.
- Expect the best of Indigenous students; a culture of supportive, high expectation is critical for student success. Avoid deficit thinking that encourages a remedial approach that accepts poor quality work. Recognize the importance of personal agency – teachers can make a difference.

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Appendix I

STUDENT- INFORMATION LEAFLET FOR STUDENT PARTICIPATION

Seeking Their Voices

Focus Group Interview Information

Our school is beginning an exciting research and development project. This project is being set up to find out how we can raise the success levels of Aboriginal students. The project is a partnership between your local school division, the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan and is called “Seeking Their Voices”. If this project is to support Aboriginal students, we need your help. Some questions you might have are:

1. Why are you doing this project?

The goal of the project is to support schools so they can provide the best possible learning environment for Aboriginal students.

2. What is the process you will use to ask me questions?

You will be part of a group discussion (approximately 1 hour). Two researchers will conduct the focus groups and take notes. If all students agree, the focus group discussion will be tape-recorded. You can ask to stop recording at any time.

3. Where will the group discussions be held?

The school has offered to provide us with a room where we can meet to discuss a series of five or six questions. The interviews will be at an agreed time during the school day.

4. What questions will you ask me?

The two interviewers will ask you:

1. Tell us about your school experiences.
2. What do you want to get from your school experiences?
3. What helps you with your learning?
4. What kinds of things get in the way or hold you back from learning?
5. Describe to us what it is that good teachers do.
6. If you were given the power and authority to tell teachers what they should be doing to be awesome teachers what would you tell them?
 - a. What would you tell them to stop doing?

5. If I am sitting in the group discussion and want to leave can I leave at any time?

Yes, you will be able to leave the interview at any time. If you choose to leave the

group discussion before the interview is over, you will not be penalized in any way. Your participation is voluntary.

6. What will you do with the information from the group interviews?

The research team will analyse what is said during the interviews and this will be in the project report and in subsequent publications. The results of the project may also be used in scholarly publications, reports and presentations.

7. How will you protect my privacy?

The researchers will not share any information from the focus groups with others, and will ask all participants to do the same. We cannot guarantee privacy, however, because focus groups involve many people. In our reporting, no one will be able to identify any students, teachers, parents, schools or communities because we will not use real names or any information that would reveal this.

8. Can I be interviewed or participate in the group without my parent or guardian's consent?

No, the research team will need your consent and your parent's consent before the group interviews begin.

Yes, you will not need your parent or guardian's consent if you are 18 years of age or older OR if you are currently living independently of your parents or guardians.

When the researchers meet with each group, they will explain again what is involved.

9. Who has approved this study?

Your school division, the Principal of your school, as well as The University of Saskatchewan and The University of Regina (Research Ethics Board) has approved this study. If you have any questions, you may contact them at (306) 585-4775 or by e-mail: research.ethics@uregina.ca.

Please indicate if you agree to participate in the group interviews by completing the details on the attached consent or assent form.

Appendix II

PARENT - INFORMATION LEAFLET FOR PARENT PARTICIPATION

Seeking Their Voices

Focus Group Interview Information

Our school is beginning an exciting research and development project. This project is being set up to find out how we can raise the success levels of Aboriginal students. The project is a partnership between your local school division, the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan and is called "Seeking Their Voices". If this project is to support Aboriginal students, we need your help. Some questions you might have are:

1. Why are you doing this project?

The goal of the project is to support schools so they can provide the best possible learning environment for Aboriginal students.

2. What is the process you will use to ask me questions?

You will be part of a group discussion (approximately 1 hour). Two researchers will conduct the focus groups and take notes. If everyone agrees, the focus group discussion will be tape-recorded. You can ask to stop the recording at any time.

3. Where will the group discussions be held?

The school has offered to provide us with a room where we can meet to discuss a series of five or six questions. The interviews will be at an agreed time during the school day.

4. What questions will you ask me?

The two interviewers will ask the group of PARENTS:

1. Tell us about your school experiences.
 - a. What engaged you in school?
2. What do you think would engage your child?
3. What do you think helps your child with their learning?
4. What kinds of things do you think get in the way or holds your child back from learning?
5. Describe to us what it is that good teachers do.
6. If you were given the power and authority to tell teachers what they should be doing to be awesome teachers what would you tell them?
 - a. What would you tell them to stop doing?

5. If I am sitting in the group discussion and want to leave can I leave at any time?

Yes, you will be able to leave the interview at any time. If you choose to leave the group discussion before the interview is over, you will not be penalized in any way. Your participation is voluntary.

6. What will you do with the information from the group interviews?

The research team will analyse what is said during the interviews and this will be in the project report and in subsequent publications. The results of the project may also be used in scholarly publications, reports and presentations.

7. How will you protect my privacy?

The identity of students, their teachers, parents and caregivers will not be revealed in any report. No one's names or any information that can identify you, or your child, their school or teachers will be used in the project report, publications or presentations.

8. Can I be interviewed or participate in the group without signing a consent form?

No, the research team will need your consent to demonstrate that you are aware of the study, what is involved and what your role is as a voluntary participant before the group interviews begin.

When the researchers meet with each group, they will explain again what is involved.

9. Who has approved this study?

Your school division, the Principal of your school, as well as The University of Saskatchewan and The University of Regina (Research Ethics Board) has approved this study. If you have any questions, you may contact them at (306) 585-4775 or by e-mail: research.ethics@uregina.ca.

Please indicate if you give permission for you to participate in the group interviews by completing the details on the attached consent form.

Appendix III

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

Seeking their Voices

1. From your experience can you tell me what you think your Aboriginal students want to get from their school experiences?
2. From your experience what do you think engages Aboriginal students?
3. From your experience what sorts of things do you think support or help Aboriginal students with their learning?
4. From your experience what kinds of things do you think get in the way or holds Aboriginal students back from learning?
5. In your experience can you tell me what you think good teachers do? OR Can you describe what it is that good teachers do?
6. From your experience can you tell me what does not work when teaching Aboriginal students?

Other Prompts

Can you give me some examples?

Tell me some more about?

What did you mean by that?

I don't understand

Can you say that again?

Contact information: Brenda Merasty: bmerasty@gmail.com or 306.371.7889

Appendix IV

TEACHER - INFORMATION LEAFLET

FOR TEACHER PARTICIPATION

Seeking Their Voices

Focus Group Interview Information

Our school is beginning an exciting research and development project. This project is being set up to find out how we can raise the success levels of Aboriginal students. The project is a partnership between your local school division, the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan and is called "Seeking Their Voices". If this project is to support Aboriginal students, we need your help. Some questions you might have are:

1. Why are you doing this project?

The goal of the project is to support schools so they can provide the best possible learning environment for Aboriginal students.

2. What is the process you will use to ask me questions?

You will be part of a group discussion (approximately 1 hour). Two researchers will conduct the focus groups and take notes. If all participants agree, the focus group discussion will be tape-recorded. All participants have the right to request the recording be stopped at any point.

3. Where will the group discussions be held?

The school has offered to provide us with a room where we can meet to discuss a series of five or six questions. The interviews will be at an agreed time during the school day.

4. What questions will you ask me?

The two interviewers will ask the group of TEACHERS:

1. From your experience can you tell me what you think your Aboriginal students want to get from their school experiences?
2. From your experience what do you think engages Aboriginal students?
3. From your experience what sorts of things do you think support or help Aboriginal students with their learning?
4. From your experience what kinds of things do you think get in the way or holds Aboriginal students back from learning?

5. Describe what good teachers do.

6. From your experience tell us what does not work when teaching Aboriginal students?

5. If I am sitting in the group discussion and want to leave can I leave at any time?

Yes, you will be able to leave the interview at any time. If you choose to leave the group discussion before the interview is over, you will not be penalized in any way. Your participation is voluntary.

6. What will you do with the information from the group interviews?

The research team will analyse what is said during the interviews and this will be in the project report and in subsequent publications. The results of the project may also be used in scholarly publications, reports and presentations.

7. How will you protect my privacy?

The researchers will not share any information from the focus groups with others, and will ask all participants to do the same. We cannot guarantee privacy, however, because focus groups are public in nature. In our reporting, no one will be able to identify any students, teachers, parents, schools or communities because we will use pseudonyms.

8. Can I be interviewed or participate in the group without signing a consent form?

No, the research team will need your consent to demonstrate that you are aware of the study, what is involved and what your role is as a voluntary participant before the group interviews begin.

When the researchers meet with each group, they will explain again what is involved.

9. Who has approved this study?

Your school division, the Principal of your school, as well as The University of Saskatchewan and The University of Regina (Research Ethics Board) has approved this study. If you have any questions, you may contact them at (306) 585-4775 or by e-mail: research.ethics@uregina.ca.

Please indicate your agreement to participate in the group interviews by completing the details on the attached consent form.

Appendix V

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

[Your department letterhead]

Participant Consent Form

Project Title: Seeking their Voices – Improving Indigenous Student Learning Outcomes

Researcher(s):

- Dr. Larry Steeves (Principal Investigator): (306) 585-4798; E-mail: Larry.Steeves@uregina.ca
- Dr. Sheila Carr-Stewart (Co-Investigator) (306) 966-7611; E-mail: Sheila.Carr-Stewart@usask.ca
- Brenda Merasty(Project Director): (306) 371-7889; E-mail: bmerasty@gmail.com
- Dr. Margaret Kovach (Project Consultant): (306) 251-1960; E-mail: M.Kovach@usask.ca
- Dr. Bonnie Stelmach (Project Consultant): (780) 691-0607; E-mail: Bonnie.Stelmach@usask.ca
- Dr. Mere Berryman (Project Consultant), University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand: E-mail: Mere@waikato.ac.nz

Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:

- This research project will focus on improving student learning for Saskatchewan Indigenous high school students.

Procedures:

- Students/parents/teachers/principals/ are invited to participate in one focus group that will be held at a convenient location.
- Focus groups will be scheduled for 1 hour but will continue as long as participants agree.

Funded by: Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, University of Regina, and University of Saskatchewan

Potential Risks:

- There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.

Potential Benefits:

- This study may position you to contribute to improved school experiences for your and other Aboriginal children/youth.

Confidentiality:

- The researcher will undertake to safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion, but cannot guarantee that other members of the group will do so. Please respect the confidentiality of the other members of the group by not disclosing the contents of this discussion outside the group, and be aware that others may not respect your confidentiality.
- The data from this research project will be published and presented at conferences; however, your identity will be kept confidential. Although we will report direct quotations from the interview, you will be given a false name, and all identifying information (e.g. name of school, community, teachers, principal) will be removed from our report.
- All interview transcripts and audio files will be stored on a password protected computer.
- Consent forms will be stored separately from interview transcripts.
- The list of participants will be destroyed after data collection is completed.
- All data will be destroyed after 5 years.

Right to Withdraw:

- Your participation is voluntary and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with.
- You may withdraw from the research project without explanation or penalty of any sort.
- Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until December 31, 2013. After this point, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

Follow up:

- To obtain results from the study, please contact Dr. Larry Steeves.

Questions or Concerns:

- Contact the researcher(s) using the information at the top of page 1;
- This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the U of R and U of S Research Ethics Boards on October 31, 2013. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the committee at (585-4775 or research.ethics@uregina.ca). Out of town participants may call collect. OR

Consent:

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

Name of Participant _____
Signature _____
Date

Researcher's Signature _____
Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.