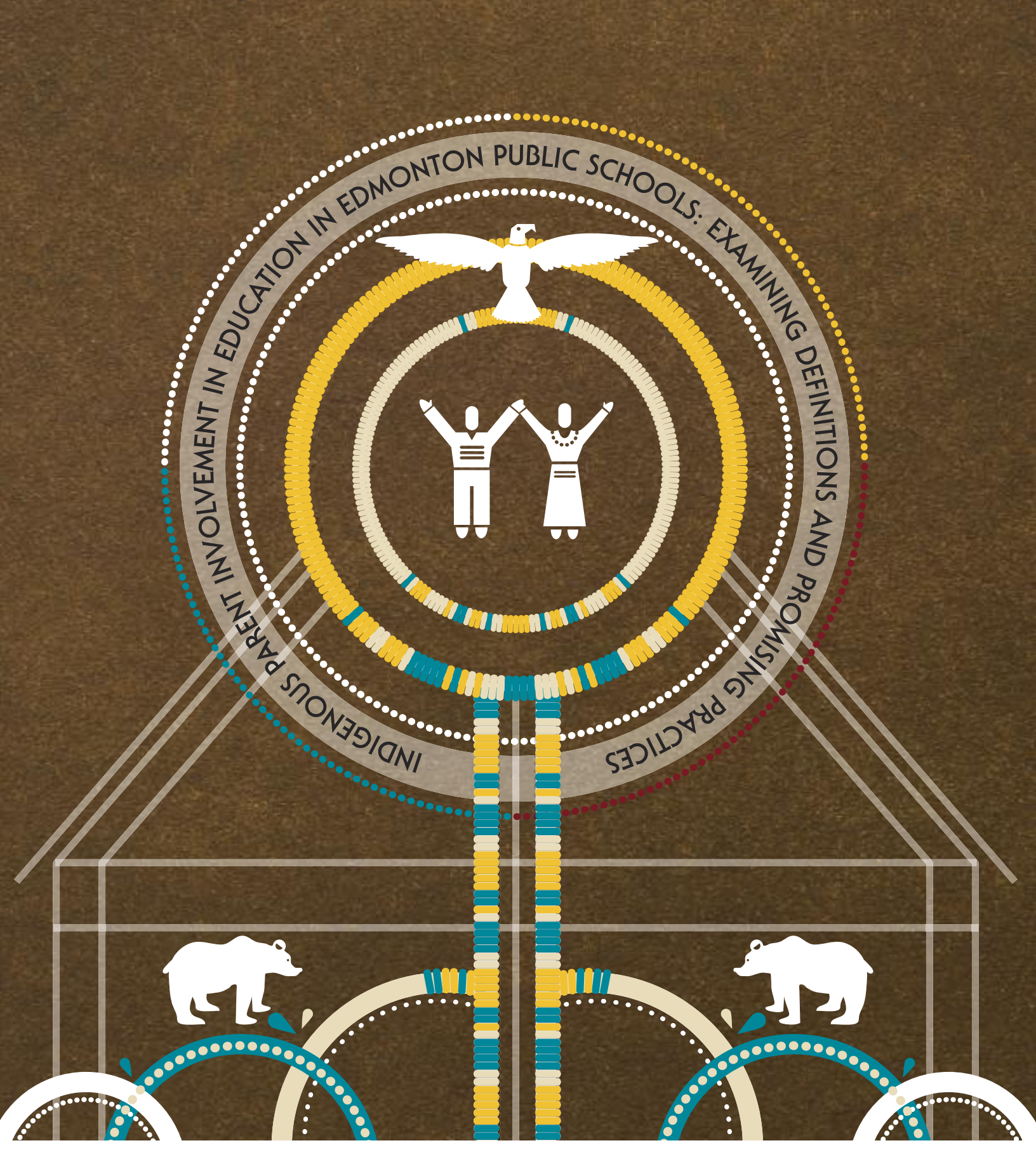

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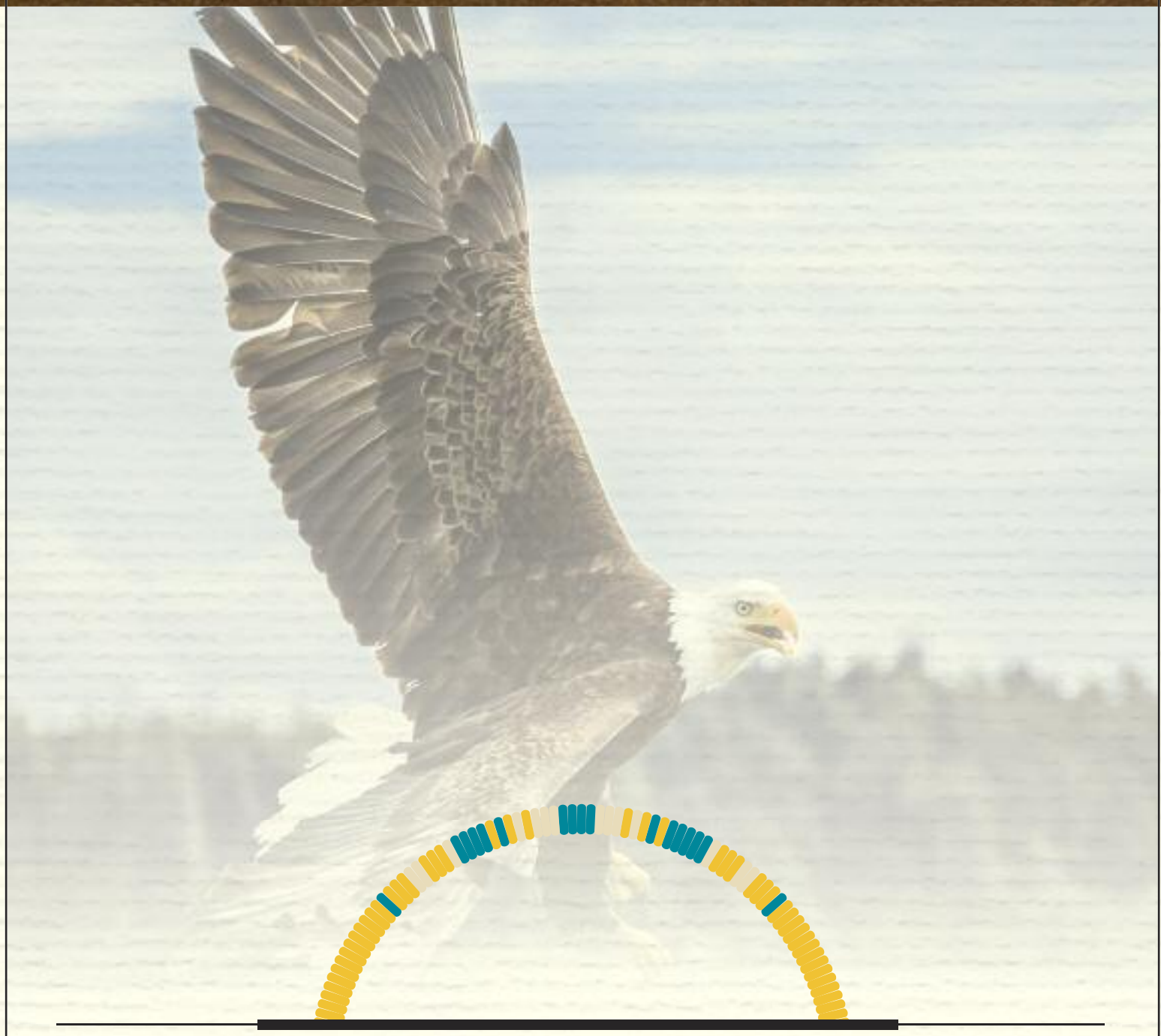

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Executive Summary

In 2019–2020, Emily Milne and research partners with Edmonton Public Schools (the Division) conducted a study to further the understanding of how to support Indigenous students. This report is focused on findings related to Indigenous parent involvement, while an accompanying report is focused on the findings associated with Indigenous student success. This report addresses two questions: **(a) How is parent involvement in education defined and understood through the lens of Indigenous parents and students?** and **(b) What are promising practices to support Indigenous parent involvement in education?** This study drew on the perspectives of 85 students who self-identified as Indigenous and parents and educators of students who self-identified as Indigenous. In this study, participants predominantly associated parent and family involvement with parents' feeling that their voice was being heard at their children's school and that they were working alongside educators to support their children's education. The most significant promising practice identified by participants was having a full-time self-identified Indigenous person at individual schools (e.g., Indigenous liaison) to foster meaningful connections and relationships between the parents/families and educators/schools. Findings generated from this study can inform educational programs and practices as well as educator professional learning and development.

Introduction

This project explored the perspectives of Indigenous[2] students and family members in the Division regarding Indigenous parent involvement in education. Parent involvement has long been associated with children's educational success (Englund et al., 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001; Kim & Hill, 2015; Lareau, 2011; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). In Alberta, parents are considered essential to student learning. Parent involvement was identified as an accountability measure for Alberta Education (2018d), and "families as partners" was a priority identified in the Division's 2018–2022 strategic plan (Edmonton Public Schools [Division], 2018, p. 2). Also, in Alberta, three professional practice standards included "fostering effective relationships" as a competency, with indicators for teachers, principals and school jurisdiction leaders, and superintendents that apply to all educators and administrators in the province (Alberta Education, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). The Alberta Education Act (2012, p. 38) also listed several parent responsibilities, including being a "partner in education" and assuming "an active role" in children's education.

Specific to Indigenous students, parent, family, and community involvement in education was identified as a key strategy to support student success (Government of Alberta, 2012; Alberta Education, 2019) and, according to the *First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Family Guide to Edmonton Public Schools* report, "one of the most important factors to student success" (Division, 2015, p. 1). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017) also reported the importance of "engaging families" and establishing mutually respectful relationships with families as a priority to supporting Indigenous students.

In Canada, schooling policies and practices, including residential schools, have had damaging and intergenerational consequences for Indigenous peoples, families, and communities (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015). This broader context is significant, as experiences of residential schooling and other negative school experiences have contributed to a disconnection between home and school environments for many Indigenous families (Battiste, 2002; Milne, 2016; Milne & Wotherspoon, 2019; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; TRC, 2015). The calls to action that accompanied the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada report highlighted the need for action to facilitate the full participation of Indigenous parents in the education of their children. Calls were made to enable "parental and community responsibility, control, and accountability" in education (call 10.vi.) and enable "parents to fully participate in the education of their children" (call 10.vii.). This project created an opportunity to further understand how to foster meaningful parent engagement in the Division.

To advance the understanding of how to support Indigenous students, this report first examines how parent involvement is defined by Indigenous parents and students and, second, identifies promising practices to foster meaningful parent involvement. The following sections of the report detail the research design, the research findings related to definitions of parent involvement and associated promising practices, and the significance of these findings for educational practice.

Methods

Focus groups were conducted with parents[3] and educators[4] of Indigenous children as well as Indigenous students in the Division to explore individual experiences and perspectives related to Indigenous parent involvement in education. Several Indigenous Elders/Knowledge Keepers who held parent/caregiver roles also attended focus groups.[5] The purpose of the focus groups was to hear the voices of parents of Indigenous students and the voices of Indigenous students.

Administrators and educators were also invited to participate and to facilitate respectful dialogue. This project was approved by the MacEwan University Research Ethics Board as well as the Division's Research and Innovation for Student Learning office. All participants signed information and consent forms, and all identifying information was removed from research materials.

Ten focus groups (four student focus groups and six parent focus groups) were conducted at eight Division school sites between November 2019 and March 2020. There were 85 focus group participants, including Elders/Knowledge Keepers, educators, parents, and Indigenous students. Among the 85 who participated, 16 participated in more than one focus group and 87 percent self-identified as Indigenous.[6]

See Figure 1 for a participant breakdown.
Focus groups were semi-structured and used open-ended questions. Focus groups were audio recorded with participant approval, and audio recordings were transcribed. Participants at two separate student focus groups preferred not to use the audio recorder, and notes were taken instead. NVivo software (QSR International, 2018) was used to organize qualitative data. The analysis involved coding strategies based on focus group questions and participant roles, as well as strategies based on refining, recoding, and synthesizing codes to identify themes and patterns (Saldaña, 2013).

It was important to ensure that research activities were meaningful, appropriate, and culturally responsive. To do this, Elders were consulted about cultural protocols, offering protocol, sharing a meal, and gifting. Following guidance given by Elders, tobacco was offered to one or more Elders present at the focus group meetings and the meetings were opened with a smudge ceremony and blessing by the Elders. A meal and beverages were provided prior to and during focus group sessions, and extra food and beverages were sent home with participants. Sharing a meal together was particularly important to encourage relationship building among participants and a sense of community. In appreciation for their participation, participants were gifted with a book selected by an Elder. Childcare was provided during parent focus groups, and bus tickets were gifted to participants to cover transportation to and from the meeting.

Definitions and Understandings of Parent Involvement in Education

DISCONNECTION BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL

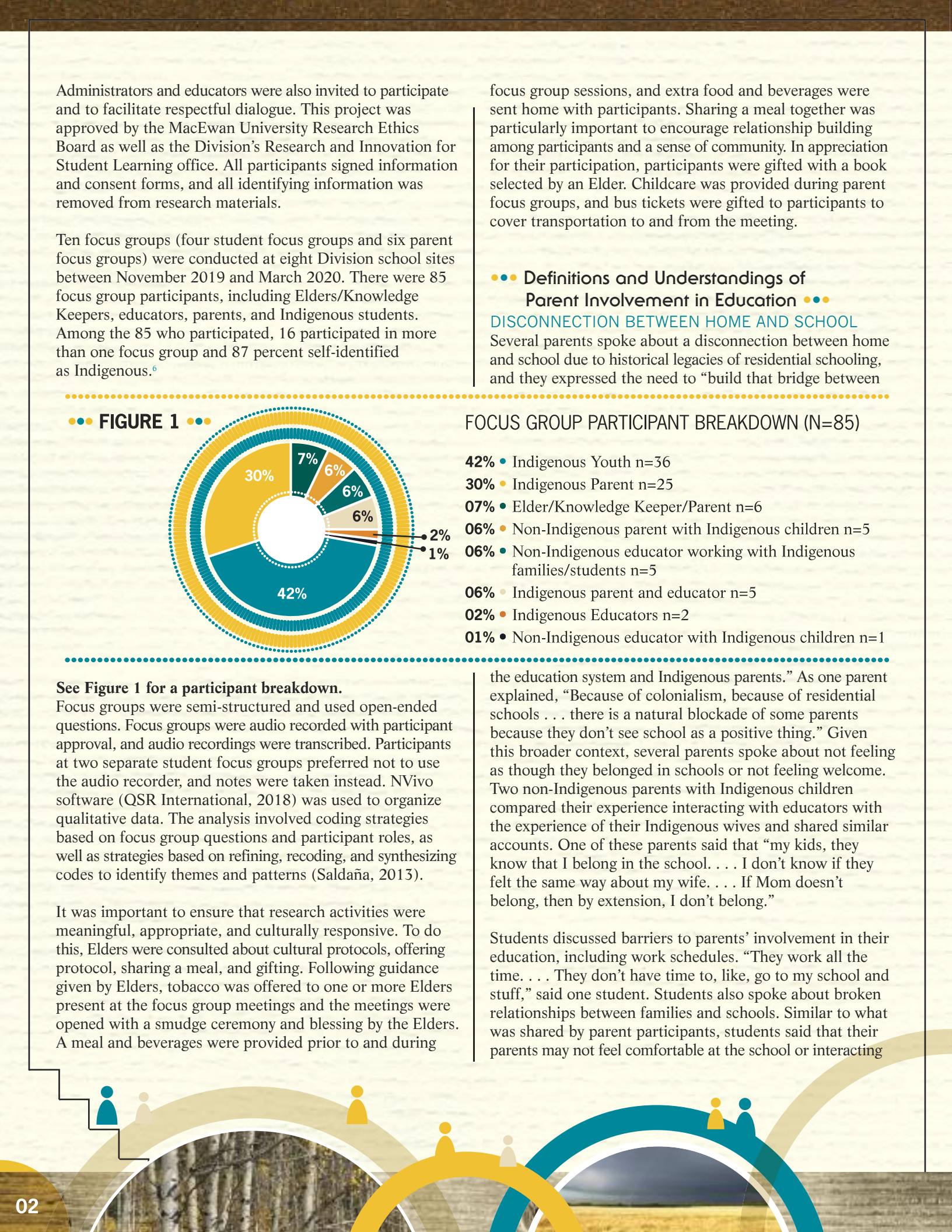
Several parents spoke about a disconnection between home and school due to historical legacies of residential schooling, and they expressed the need to "build that bridge between the education system and Indigenous parents." As one parent explained, "Because of colonialism, because of residential schools . . . there is a natural blockade of some parents because they don't see school as a positive thing." Given this broader context, several parents spoke about not feeling as though they belonged in schools or not feeling welcome. Two non-Indigenous parents with Indigenous children compared their experience interacting with educators with the experience of their Indigenous wives and shared similar accounts. One of these parents said that "my kids, they know that I belong in the school. . . . I don't know if they felt the same way about my wife. . . . If Mom doesn't belong, then by extension, I don't belong."

Students discussed barriers to parents' involvement in their education, including work schedules. "They work all the time. . . . They don't have time to, like, go to my school and stuff," said one student. Students also spoke about broken relationships between families and schools. Similar to what was shared by parent participants, students said that their parents may not feel comfortable at the school or interacting

FIGURE 1

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT BREAKDOWN (N=85)

- **42%** Indigenous Youth n=36
- **30%** Indigenous Parent n=25
- **07%** Elder/Knowledge Keeper/Parent n=6
- **06%** Non-Indigenous parent with Indigenous children n=5
- **06%** Non-Indigenous educator working with Indigenous families/students n=5
- **06%** Indigenous parent and educator n=5
- **02%** Indigenous Educators n=2
- **01%** Non-Indigenous educator with Indigenous children n=1



with educators. "They can feel out of place," said one student, and another said, "There's sort of a lack of trust with school. . . . Like, 100 percent." A different student also shared, "I think that's where a lot of intergenerational trauma can affect parents too, because they're scared to do stuff like that—scared to come in and, like, speak out and speak about different issues."

CONNECTING PARENTS' SCHOOLING EXPERIENCE AND THEIR ROLE IN THEIR CHILDREN'S SCHOOLING

Several students described their parents as feeling welcome and comfortable at the school and spoke about instances when their parents helped them with their homework. However, this was not always the case. During one focus group with 20 Indigenous high school students, the question was asked, "Are your parents or caregivers involved in your education?" to which all of the 20 students either said "no" or shook their head to indicate "no." A student said, "Not mine," and another said, "No, they're all busy with other stuff. . . . They don't ask me, 'How's school going?'"

This group of students was also asked a follow-up question: "Did your parents have good experiences with school?" Again, the unanimous response was "no." Students associated the role that their parents had in their education with the issues their parents had experienced when they had attended school. This included their parents' having experienced racism and not feeling as though they "fit in" or were welcome at school. One student shared, "I don't think any, like, Native peoples' parents did [have a positive experience]." Another student said, "I don't think any parent really had a good experience [with school]. Even when my mom went off the reserve for schooling, she faced a lot of racism."

A few students said that their parents preferred not to communicate with the school unless there was a problem: "Parents don't talk until their kid is in trouble." Several students also expressed that they would like their parents to be more engaged and take a greater interest in their schooling. For example, speaking about when her report card grades were released, one student said, "I have to tell my mom, like, a week later, and I have to beg her, 'Mom, please, I just want you to see my grades.'"

RESPONSIVENESS OF SCHOOLS AND EDUCATORS

Most parents did express wanting to have an active and supportive role in their child's education, and being able to fulfill this role was directly related to the responsiveness of their children's educators. For most parents, parent involvement was associated with feeling that their voice was heard at their children's school; that they were working together with educators, cooperating and collaborating to support their children's education; and that they had a shared understanding about what and how their children were doing in school.

Many parents also spoke about not knowing how to approach educators with concerns about their child and finding that when they did, in the parents' eyes, the outcomes of these conversations were not always successful. Some parents felt that they "[got] shot down" when they tried to approach educators to discuss concerns, which could lead them to feel discouraged. One parent shared his experience at a parent–teacher meeting for his Grade 1 daughter, which "turned into a very big deal very quickly" as he tried to explain the "struggles" his daughter had as a result of trauma she had experienced. He explained, "I was trying to tell [the educator], 'Look, she can't do this. . . . I'm not going to make her do it.'" This parent left this interaction feeling frustrated, like his concerns had not been taken seriously by the educator, and he felt helpless in terms of how to help his child.

Parents expressed the desire for a more collaborative relationship with the school, where they were consulted with and included in decisions that affected their children. For example, one parent shared an incident where her 14-year-old son broke his foot at school and was sent to the hospital in a taxi without accompaniment by a staff member and without communication between the school and the hospital about how the injury had happened. This parent said, "I was so upset. . . . My son was sitting there in emergency by himself with meth heads sitting around all high." When this parent arrived at the hospital to be with her son, at one point she and her son were separated. "They had to question my son to see if it happened at home and if he was getting abused." This parent was upset about what had happened and did express her frustration to the school administrators. In the end, she was disappointed with the support she had received from the school and felt that she had a different understanding than the school about how incidents involving her son should be handled.

PARENTS QUESTIONING HOW TO ENGAGE

Most parents spoke about challenges to being actively involved with supporting their children's education. Several parents expressed feeling unaware of what was happening at school and how to approach educators with issues or questions. These parents believed that increased engagement would be best accomplished by way of more communication and transparency. For instance, in schools that did not assign homework, children were not regularly bringing home their work; therefore, parents felt disconnected and

less able to engage in conversations about their children's school work and less able to support and build onto that learning outside of school. As one parent stated, "This school doesn't give homework, and I don't like that because I like helping with homework."

Several parents also expressed feeling uninformed and unprepared to assist their children with navigating their educational journeys. This included, for example, feeling unsure how to support children who needed to upgrade or were transitioning from high school to post-secondary. One parent said, "The way the system was originally set up, it was a residential school. . . . But how many people attended residential school and went on to university? They didn't." A different parent explained that "a lot of Native parents" went back to school as adult learners and did not "go from high school straight into university," and, therefore, "we don't know what it's like." Parents felt that families would benefit from more information being shared about the path from elementary to junior high, from junior high to high school, and from high school to post-secondary; what programs, supports, and resources were available at each stage; and how and when to access them.

Promising Practices for Supporting Indigenous Parent Involvement in Education

COMMUNICATION

Parents spoke about the benefits of meeting parents "where they are," and this included educators communicating with families in a way that families could access and that worked for them. Some parents preferred to communicate with educators by phone or in person during pickup and drop-off, since these methods were "more personal," and others preferred to communicate by sending and receiving materials via book bags. Some families did not have reliable Internet access or devices, or parents were not comfortable navigating technology; as one parent said, "I don't even go on, like, the school Google stuff. Like, please just send me a report card."

Several students spoke about the benefits of educators making personal phone calls to parents, because emails and flyers were often not seen. One student said, "They would appreciate, like, a personal phone call—like, not, like, an email," while another student said, "You can't send something home and expect the parents to see it." Students also explained that it would be beneficial for educators to personally invite parents to school events and to call parents to share positive news, because parents often associated a phone call from the school with receiving information about a problem with their child. One student said if an educator called with good news, "They'd be so surprised; I feel like that would be great."

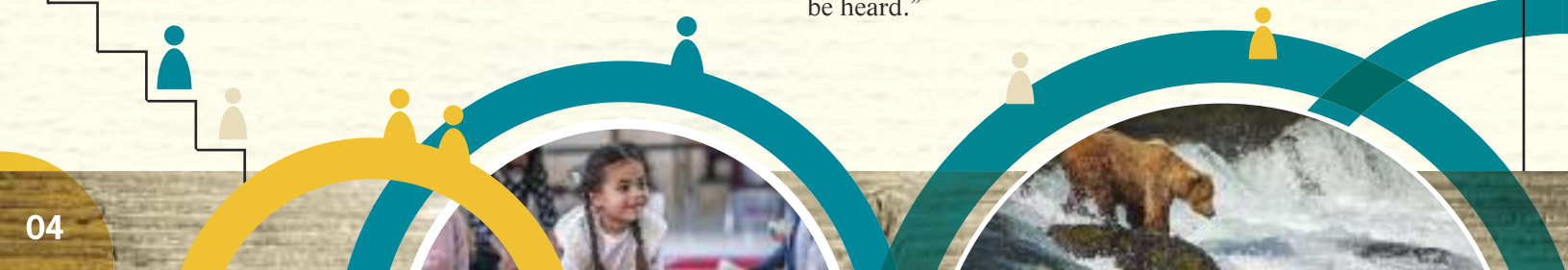
Some parents greatly appreciated when educators adopted online communication platforms such as Seesaw (https://web.seesaw.me/), ClassDojo (https://www.classdojo.com/), or Classtag (https://home.classtag.com/) to communicate with parents and share student work. Speaking about her daughter's Grade 2 class, one parent said, "There's Classtag; I love it because I know what's going on and [my daughter], like, really wants us to be involved. It's a really good tool." Another parent spoke about her son's kindergarten educator using Seesaw and said, "I see what he's done in school," which made it easier to talk to her son about his day: "They take pictures, and they send us messages, and so we're really engaged in his life outside of us, and I love that."

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

Many parents, including the parent quoted next, spoke about the benefits of actively and intentionally creating opportunities to engage and welcome Indigenous parents into the school:

> *One of the things I did today at [my child's school] was the principal came forward and gave me tobacco and said, "Can you smudge our offices so the teachers will have a better understanding?" . . . Those are one of the things that make changes, when you ask what parents can do and our teachers can do to help parents, and that helps them have a better understanding.*

To engage parents, several parents suggested that schools create spaces and opportunities for parents to work collaboratively with educators, where parents could discuss ways to work together to support their children's schooling, share knowledge and perspectives, and feel that their voice was heard and their contributions were recognized and valued at the school. One parent suggested to "have teachers outreach to parents more to let them know that they are welcome." Parents recommended organizing monthly events at the school, where parents and educators could have positive interaction beyond parent–teacher interviews, since, as a parent said, "that's just one meeting, and you're out the door in 15 minutes, and it's not enough time." "The hope is to start a conversation about parent voices, to have some space where people feel comfortable to come and share voice," said one parent, while another stated that it was important for parents to "be given that opportunity to be heard."



Parents and students also spoke about the benefits of offering after-school or weekend school programs that parents and students could participate in together. This might include programming that aims to support family mental health and well-being and support parents' ability to support their children's learning (e.g., literacy and math nights). Importantly, several parents and students, including the parent quoted below, spoke about the benefits of offering cultural programming that the entire family could participate in, such as Cree language and beading classes:

When you look at the history of residential schools, and you have all these generations of parents that are lacking that sense of culture, it helps to bring it to them too so that it's immersive for the family. . . . We also have to fix some of the things that happened in the past, and that means bring the parents in.

To promote parent involvement, several students also suggested providing food and hosting school events on weekends rather than during the week, which could conflict with parents' busy workweek schedules.

INDIGENOUS LIAISONS

Nearly all parents and students spoke about the promising practice of hiring Indigenous liaisons to work full-time at schools to foster meaningful connections and relationships between the parents/families and educators/schools. Parents commonly shared the sentiment that all schools would benefit from having an Indigenous liaison. As shared by one parent, "What's most important is that there'd be someone at the school that has a relationship with the parent; there's a genuine relationship." Sharing a similar perspective, the parent quoted below spoke about the relationship she had with the Indigenous liaison at her child's school:

[They] invite me to these things. . . . [They] encourage me to be more involved in my daughter's education. . . . If it wasn't for the support of the schools, I probably wouldn't be involved. . . . [They] contact me, and you have built a relationship.

Parents also spoke about the significance of the mediator role that Indigenous liaisons often filled. They appreciated "being able to call someone" working in the school, someone who they trusted and was "one of us," who could attend school meetings with parents and students, offer support, and help to mediate and facilitate conversations with educators or administrators. One parent spoke about hiring Indigenous liaisons as a way for schools to show a commitment to supporting Indigenous students, involving Indigenous parents, and including Indigenous content in schooling: "You have to make a commitment, and that's where it begins."

Significance of Findings for Educational Practice

Drawing on the perspectives of parents and educators of Indigenous students and of Indigenous students themselves, this project explored definitions of Indigenous parent involvement in education in the Division. Information gathered through this project can inform educational programs and practices as well as educator professional learning/development to improve bonds between Indigenous families and schools.

For participants, parent involvement was associated with parents feeling that their voice was being heard at their children's school and that they were working collaboratively with educators to support their children's education. Participant experiences also reflected a continuum of parent involvement, spanning from active engagement to non-interference. Students shared instances when their parents were involved in their education, and several parents believed that positive relationships between parents and educators and active parent engagement in their children's education were important to student success. Participants also identified barriers to parent involvement, including broken relationships between families and schools, and discussed the value of dedicating time and resources to building trusting relationships between parents/families and educators/schools.

Promising practices specific to the Division that are associated with supporting Indigenous parent involvement are also highlighted in this study, which include efforts to actively engage and welcome Indigenous parents into the school, and programs at schools for families to participate in together. Importantly, the promising practice that emerged as most significant to supporting parent involvement is having a full-time self-identified Indigenous person at individual school sites (e.g., Indigenous liaison, Indigenous adviser, Elder, Knowledge Keeper) to foster meaningful relationships between families and schools and to facilitate conversations with educators or administrators.

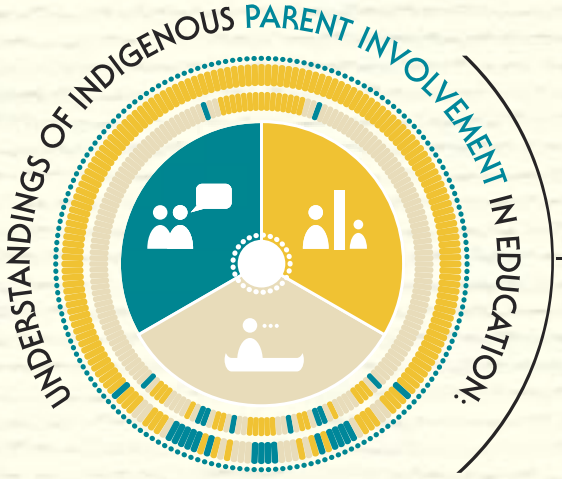
The significance of schools actively fostering communication and collaboration between parents/students/families and teachers/schools is also woven throughout the findings and links to the importance of community learning within traditional practices. Schools may benefit from consulting

with parents and students about the modes of communication that work best to connect with parents and families in general and to facilitate communication between students and parents about schooling.

This study reveals differences in how "parent involvement" is defined by parents and students and by education systems. Participants discussed barriers to parent involvement, including past negative experiences with schooling among some parents and families, which had led to disconnections between families and schools. As a result, parents may struggle to align with the education system definition of "parent involvement in education," which includes being a "partner in education"; "tak[ing] an active role in the child's educational success"; and "encourage[ing], foster[ing] and advance[ing] collaborative, positive and respectful relationships with teachers, principals, [and] other school staff" (Education Act, p. 38). It would be beneficial for schools and educators to consider meeting parents where they are along the continuum of parent involvement, as well as for schools to actively seek out and foster opportunities to engage and welcome parents into the schools and to validate and recognize parents' unique contributions and knowledge.

TIP SHEET

In 2019–2020, Emily Milne and research partners with Edmonton Public Schools conducted a study to further the understanding of how to support Indigenous students within the Division.



Parent involvement is associated with parents' feeling that their voice is being heard at their children's school; parents working alongside educators to support their children's education; and parents having a shared understanding about what and how their children are doing in school.

Participants described broken relationships between families and schools due to historical legacies of residential schooling and negative schooling experiences, and they recognized this broader context as a potential barrier to parent involvement.

Challenges for parents in being actively involved with supporting their children's education include parents feeling unaware of what is happening at school, unsure of how to approach educators with concerns or questions, and unsure of how to help their children navigate their educational journeys.

TIP SHEET

This report is focused on findings related to Indigenous parent involvement, while an accompanying report is focused on the findings associated with Indigenous student success. This report addresses two questions: (a) How is parent involvement in education defined and understood through the lens of Indigenous parents and students? and (b) What are promising practices to support Indigenous parent involvement in education? The study drew on the perspectives of 85 students who self-identified as Indigenous and parents and educators of students who self-identified as Indigenous. Key findings generated from this study have been summarized below.

having a full-time self-identified Indigenous person at individual school sites (e.g., Indigenous liaison, Indigenous adviser, Elder, Knowledge Keeper) to actively foster relationships between families and schools and to facilitate conversations with educators or administrators;

actively seeking out and fostering opportunities to engage and welcome parents into the schools and to validate and recognize parents' unique contributions and knowledge (e.g., hosting school meetings with Indigenous parents and educators to promote coming together during positive conditions and to share experiences, perspectives, knowledge, and input to support family–school relationships and the educational experiences of Indigenous students);

actively fostering communication and collaboration between parents/students/families and teachers/schools through culturally responsive communication practices (phone calls in the evenings and on weekends) and welcoming events at school sites;

establishing programs at schools for families to participate in together (e.g., Cree language and beading classes); and

sharing more information with parents about the path from elementary to junior high, from junior high to high school, and from high school to post-secondary; what programs, supports, and resources are available at each stage; and how and when to access them.

Footnotes

1 Contact Emily Milne at milnee4@macewan.ca for more information about this project.

2 "Indigenous" is used to refer to descendants of the original inhabitants of North America.

3 "Parents" refers to biological parents as well as caregivers, guardians, and extended family members caring for students.

4 "Educators" refers to school administrators, staff in student-liaison-like roles, and classroom educators.

5 "Elders/Knowledge Keepers" refers to Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers who also held a parent or caregiver role.

6 Among those who participated, 74 (87 percent) self-identified as Indigenous (Elders/Knowledge Keepers, parents, educators, youth), 6 were non-Indigenous but had children who self-identified as Indigenous, and 5 were non-Indigenous educators.

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The report design was inspired by the following comment made by a teacher:

"The notion of Indigenous knowledge always being connected to a greater whole and the circularity of knowing, as opposed to the hierarchical ordering within Western epistemology. Connected to this is the way the two 'traditions' present knowledge. Western presentations of knowledge tend to be linear, teleological, and hierarchical. Indigenous knowledge is best conceptualized by demonstrating the interconnection and circularity that animates its holistic spirit."

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS