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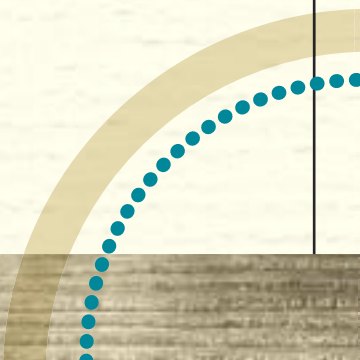
EMILY MILNE, PHD,
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY, MACEWAN UNIVERSITY¹

RESEARCH PARTNERS: Edmonton Public Schools' Research unit and the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education unit, both of which were part of the Research and Innovation for Student Learning Research unit.

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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 student success, and an accompanying report is focused on findings associated with Indigenous parent involvement. This report addresses two questions:

(a) How is student success defined and understood through the lens of Indigenous parents and students? and **(b) What are promising practices to support Indigenous student success?** 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. With reference to the first question, participants in this study predominantly associated student success with a holistic vision of success that included students’ spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional well-being; cultural learning and connections; a strong cultural identity; and a sense of belonging and fulfillment. Regarding the second question, the most significant promising practice emerging from this project was having a full-time self-identified Indigenous person (e.g., Indigenous liaison) and a dedicated Indigenous space at individual schools (e.g., for cultural programming, student gathering). 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 Indigenous² students and family members in the Division regarding student success. Examining student success is relevant for the Division and for Alberta school communities more generally. The Division’s vision was “success, one student at a time,” and the 2018–2022 Division priorities included “foster[ing] growth and success for every student” (Edmonton Public Schools [Division], 2020). The Division strategic plan identified fostering student success as a priority, with accompanying goals associated with excellence upon entering Grade 1, success demonstrating literacy and numeracy learning outcomes, and success during transitions to post-secondary and employment (2018a). Similarly, the Alberta Education mission included the commitment to ensure that “inclusive learning opportunities enable students to achieve success” (2019b, p. 3).

The Government of Alberta identified specific outcomes and accompanying performance measures used to gauge success in achieving stated outcomes (Alberta Education, 2018a, 2018b). Reinforcing the relevance of the current study, Outcome 1 stated, “Alberta’s students are successful,”

and Outcome 2 stated, “Alberta’s education system support[s] First Nations, Métis and Inuit students’ success” (Alberta Education, 2018b, p. 54). Eliminating the achievement gap between Indigenous students and all other students was identified as a priority for the Division (2018b) and Alberta Education (2019a).

The calls to action that accompanied the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) report also drew attention to student success. The TRC identified the need for action to “improve education attainment levels and success rates” for Indigenous children and youth (call 10.ii.) and to eliminate the educational “gap” between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians (call 7). There have long existed certain disparities between students who self-identify as Indigenous and other students with reference to measures of student learning opportunities and achievement and the rate of high school completion not only at the Division and in Alberta, but also across Canada (Alberta Education, 2019a; Division, 2018b; Statistics Canada, 2015; OECD, 2017; Uppal, 2017).

Many complex and intersecting factors shape student experiences, achievement, and outcomes. In Canada, schooling policies and practices—including residential schools, which have been described as a system of cultural genocide—have had devastating and intergenerational consequences for Indigenous peoples, families, and communities (TRC, 2015). This broader context is significant when considering the educational experiences of Indigenous students.

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

••• Methods •••

Focus groups were conducted with parents³ and educators⁴ of Indigenous children as well as Indigenous students in the Division to explore individual experiences and perspectives related to student success. Several Indigenous Elders/Knowledge Keepers who held parent/caregiver roles also attended focus groups. The purpose of the focus groups⁵ 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 reviewed and 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.

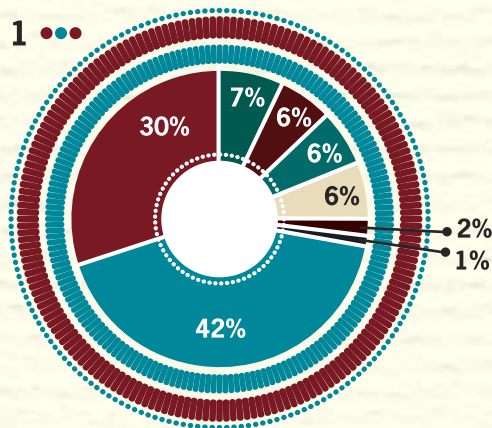
and beverages were sent home with participants. Sharing a meal together was particularly important to encourage relationship building among participants and a sense of community. In appreciation for their participation, participants were gifted with a book selected by an Elder. Childcare was provided during parent focus groups, and bus tickets were gifted to participants to cover transportation to and from the meeting.

Definitions and Understandings of Student Success

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS

Among parents, there were a few mentions of grades, high school completion, and post-secondary attendance, noting, for example, as one parent did, that “you do need to have a

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

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

high school education and probably university or some form of post-secondary.” Most parents believed that academic achievements placed second to other forms of success: “A sense of belonging, I think that’s more important, and then grades.” Referring to her son, another parent said, “We’re not worried about math. We’re not worried about science. . . . We’re worrying about whether he feels safe, whether he’s engaged and interested. . . . Those things are successful.”

Students discussed academic accomplishments in relation to success more than parents did, as many emphasized the importance of high grades and high school graduation as well as the role of education for future employment and financial independence. Students also spoke about classes that they enjoyed (e.g., gym) and classes that were preparing them for the job market (e.g., math). As expressed by one student, “If you don’t read and do math, it’s hard to even get a job. So it’s better to go to school so that you can be successful when you’re older.” Beyond succeeding in school for the purpose of employment, several students spoke about the desire to achieve academically to “break the cycle”

and accomplish what their family members or previous generations had not. “Graduate in high school, that’s like the main thing. . . . Because my uncles, my mom, even my grandfather, they never fully made it there,” said one student.

PERSONAL GOALS VS. STANDARD ASSESSMENTS

Many parents and students considered the individual and personal nature of “success,” leading participants to question the value of standardized assessments. “Success is going to be different for every single child. . . . We can’t have a specific outcome for success for a group of children because it’s going to be different,” said one parent. When asked to define student success, many parents and students were quick to point out differences between their own definitions and those held by schools. For example, one parent said, “Our definitions of success are not the same ones that the schools have, or the school system has.” Referring to the way that student success was typically defined using measures of academic achievement, one parent mentioned, “This is the rigid way of thinking—and if you don’t think this way, then you’re not right. . . . So, yeah, absolutely change that.”

Several parents also spoke about the individualistic and competitive nature of schooling, including pursuing individual achievements such as high test scores, and how this orientation did not align with collectivist and relational orientations held by many Indigenous peoples. As one parent said, “The success that the white world has is not the success that Indigenous peoples look at as success; it’s conquer and divide, and we don’t raise our people up like that.”

Some students voiced frustration about what they saw as their personal value being assessed daily by standardized and impersonal measures. “There’s a disconnect there between personal success and seeing that you have a certain percentage in the class,” said one student. Another student said, “Certain teachers have their definition of ‘success,’ and if you don’t have that kind of mindset, they don’t think you’re that successful.” Students stated that instead of aligning their goals and actions with a standardized path set by educators, they found it beneficial to identify personal goals that they were motivated to achieve, which allowed them to create a path for their own success and led to more purpose and meaning in their schooling experience.

HOLISTIC VISION

Most parents and students spoke about a holistic vision of success. Belonging, inclusion, acceptance, and fulfillment were frequently mentioned, along with students being happy, having a strong cultural identity, and being comfortable and proud of who they were as people. On many occasions,

student success was discussed in terms of students’ spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Personal qualities were also part of success, including being humble, trusting, respectful, self-confident, and resilient. The Elder quoted below shared their vision of student success:

We have to look at success in different eyes. . . . If I can walk with myself with balance, spiritual balance. . . . And we can walk with mother earth that way, and we can walk with the creator that way. That’s success. . . . Knowing yourself, believing in yourself, and knowing yourself spiritually. . . . Walking strong and in their identity. You follow the seven sacred teachings, and you know your calling. That’s what our success is.

Parents and students spoke about education as personal fulfillment and development as well as the intrinsic value of experiences and knowledge gained through schooling. Parents frequently agreed that “success” was not an appropriate word and, instead, suggested “balance” or “fulfillment” be used in its place. Several students also expressed a preference for the word “fulfillment” over the word “success.” “I think success doesn’t come from marks. . . . ‘Fulfillment’ is a more accurate word,” said one student. Another said, “‘Fulfilled’ is a more holistic word. It’s not about how well I’m doing on a test or what my marks are in classes; it’s how I feel. So ‘fulfillment’ is more personal, I think, than ‘success.’”

WELL-BEING

Several parents spoke about high grades and high school graduation as less of a goal and more of a by-product or as an outcome and indication of students’ general well-being. For example, a few parents shared the perspective that the confidence that came with students being empowered to believe in themselves and know that they were valued and cared for and had a voice would positively impact their academic achievement. “When their self-esteem is going . . . then you see their grades start picking up. It’s automatic,” said one parent, while another said, “It’s a self-reflection of what’s going on inside. Self-confidence and self-esteem, you could see it by their grades.” Happiness and well-being were also mentioned by students and discussed as a precursor for academic success. One student said, “I thought I had to do better in school so I could go get a better job, and I realized that, no, as long as I’m happy along the way, that’s what counts.”



Many students spoke about struggling with personal challenges related to mental health, including depression, home circumstances and responsibilities, and the need for a support system to depend on. Students also expressed feeling anxiety and stress related to meeting goals and standards set by the education system and reinforced by family members. For example, students said that they felt pressure “to be at 80s, . . . go to school everyday, . . . ace that diploma,” which could lead students to “want to get out of here.” One student said, “Success for my family, it means grades or, like, actually just graduating. But to me it just means, like, waking up on time, being there, like, each class . . . instead of just sitting in class and doing nothing.” Another explained,

A lot of people told me I have to work like I was a train. I had to keep pushing. I had to race and finish everything. . . . But at some point, you'll wear yourself down and you put yourself in a position where you can't catch up. . . . I'm so worn down to this point.

Several students echoed comments made by parents, emphasizing a shift from a competitive or comparative model of success to one that was focused on self-concept, self-efficacy, relationships, and connections and contributions in the broader community.

●●● Promising Practices for Supporting Indigenous Student Success ●●●

HOLISTIC APPROACH

As discussed earlier, parents believed that academic achievements were an outcome and indication of students' balance and well-being and, therefore, advocated for a more holistic approach to teaching and learning, as well as schooling environments that supported students' spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional well-being. As one parent explained,

We're all growing up with all of these issues and broken homes and broken families. . . . How about, like, holistic, mental health, your feelings, and your emotional understanding as part of the school curriculum? . . . That holistic approach for kids, from little to big, and supporting the whole child.

In line with a holistic approach, parents encouraged schools to adopt or further implement a holistic program of supports that draws on various schooling and community organizations and offers support for both students and families. Several parents expressed that schools were central and convenient locations for families to access, whereas essential community supports and services (e.g., the Food Bank, mental health services) were spread out geographically across Edmonton and therefore difficult to access, especially without a personal vehicle. One parent said, “It would be better to have [the supports] in the school.” Another parent said, “If we are going to have people truly belong here, [schools] have to be able to address student needs, and the parents needs need to be addressed as well.” A different parent explained that students were experiencing trauma, contemplating suicide, which was why “we need to have experts in the building . . . to provide that support and build those relationships with families as a community.” Students also expressed the need for access to mental health supports at schools, since “there's a lot of depressed students going through rough times” and “not being able to tell somebody is one of the hardest things you can go through.”

A FULL-TIME INDIGENOUS PERSON AND A DEDICATED SPACE

The majority of parents and students also spoke about the promising practice of having a full-time self-identified Indigenous person (e.g., Indigenous liaison, success coach, Elder, Knowledge Keeper) and a dedicated Indigenous space at schools (e.g., for cultural programming, ceremonies, gathering). Indigenous liaisons or staff in similar roles could not only connect with and offer personal support to students, but also support students' cultural learning and the authentic inclusion in classrooms of content about Indigenous peoples' perspectives, histories, cultures, and experiences. Having an Indigenous person dedicated to fostering personal relationships with students could encourage students to feel connected to their schools and feel a sense of inclusion and belonging.

Speaking about the Indigenous liaison in her child's school, one parent said, “[They're] genuine, supportive, and genuinely care about the students; and I think that in the perfect world, you'd have somebody like [them] in every school.” Another parent shared the following:

My concern is that my son who is in Grade 11 right now and [the school] doesn't have an Indigenous worker this year; this is the first year they don't have one. I had two older kids that went to [that school], and both had the

Indigenous worker programs there, and they had a place to go and hang out. And my son—and it's very sad—he doesn't know where to go. He doesn't have a place to go.

Students also expressed that having an Indigenous liaison and a cultural space made them feel more connected, included, and comfortable at school. “I didn't feel so alone when I started [at this school],” said one student, while another said, “Having the culture and the space, I think it's been the most significant.” A different student spoke about the Indigenous space at their school and said that when they are there, “I don't feel, like, judged, or I don't feel, like, all these things that I feel when I walk into a different classroom. . . . I just don't have to worry about nothing.”

Students also spoke about other schools that did not have these supports, including schools they had attended in the past, and expressed, “Honestly, I'd feel like dropping out,” and “Me too. I'd drop out of school and not come.” Another student said, referring to the Indigenous liaison and cultural space at his school, “Without it, you're cutting off a bunch of kids', like, way of success and motivation. . . . I feel lots of kids, this is, like, their lifeline.”

CULTURAL LEARNING AND CONNECTIONS

The significance of cultural knowledge and understanding as well as a sense of identity were discussed by many. One parent spoke about success as a cultural connection: “Success is that cultural connection, like a cultural bond. . . . My priority isn't the math test. It's that my child is able to meet with their Elders and attend this ceremony.” Many parents shared the belief that “schools play a role” in fostering students' cultural identity and pride and do so by providing students with access to learning about culture and language at school. Several parents wanted students to be learning out on the land, saying that “land-based learning would be a huge increment to student success” and “land-based and learning medicines . . . if you know that, that is a success.” Speaking to the importance of providing students with cultural connections at school, one parent explained,

Connection is really important, especially in the Indigenous community, where so many kids have lost that primary connection. . . . At some point in their lives, they're going to realize that they've lost something. And if we're serving these kids in a way when they're too young to know the difference, they never know that they weren't connected. . . .

School's one more place that we can find them connection and find them fulfillment.

Sharing this perspective, students expressed, “I wouldn't go to a school that didn't have learning about culture and language.” Students said that learning about culture and language at school made them feel “happy,” “alive,” and “connected to my ancestors,” and they emphasized the importance of this learning at school because “we don't know much about ourselves.” Another student said that at school, “we learn about our ancestors and a bunch of stories and how to talk Cree” and went on to say that “my kokum and my grandparents and ancestors speak Cree, and I want to be like them.” One student explained that learning about his culture made him feel connected to others, part of “a group that I belong to,” and secure in his identity: “It's always good to learn more about yourself and where you're from” because “it gives you more pride and it makes you feel better to be who you are.”

AWARENESS AMONG STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS

Many parents and students believed that more awareness about Indigenous peoples' cultures, histories, experiences, and ways of knowing and doing would benefit non-Indigenous students and educators, helping to prevent discrimination and misunderstandings and, therefore, contributing to more positive schooling experiences for Indigenous students. Parents spoke about the benefit of educators and students learning about trauma and intergenerational trauma, spending time listening to and learning from Elders and Knowledge Keepers, and participating in cultural camps and land-based teachings.

Students commonly spoke about instances where they had been supporting learning about Indigenous peoples among their peers and experienced “push back” when they tried to address misunderstandings. One student said it was “so hard” to bring these issues to educators' attention because “it's just going to bring problems for me.” “I had classes where, like, students would just say everything when the teacher wasn't around,” said one student. A different student explained, “A lot of my friends, I've had to educate them. . . . But then you don't want to go into how bad it was, because then they're like, ‘You're whining again.’”

Parents and students both spoke about diverse student populations at their schools and brought up instances where Indigenous students were called derogatory names. For example, one parent spoke about an incident involving her child that led to a physical altercation at school. She said, “My child came home and was very upset about what she found out, what she was being called in another language. . . .



... The fight occurred because that's what was being said and she didn't like it." In the end, everyone involved with this incident was suspended. The parent believed this was a missed opportunity for the school to work with the students involved, utilize restorative practices, discuss the deeper harm caused by this incident, and facilitate deeper and mutual understanding and respect among students. This incident showed that much work was needed to facilitate deeper awareness, understanding, and respect among students regarding diversity in general and Indigenous peoples more specifically.

●●● Significance of Findings for Educational Practice ●●●

The purpose of this study was to advance the understanding, from the perspectives of Division stakeholders, of factors that support Indigenous student success. Information gathered through this project can inform educational programs and practices as well as educator professional learning/development to improve educational experiences of Indigenous students.

While findings reveal that understandings of student success include academic achievements, more often parent and student participants associate student success with a holistic vision of success that includes students' spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional well-being; cultural learning and connections; a strong cultural identity; and a sense of belonging, fulfillment, and self-efficacy. This study reveals differences in how "student success" is defined by parents and students and by education systems. It would be beneficial for education systems to consider broader criteria in conceptualizing student success, which would include mental, spiritual, emotional, social, and cultural dynamics. At the same time, there also seems to be a desire for less emphasis on the spirit of competitiveness, which parents and Elders/Knowledge Keepers feel is not part of their cultural values, and instead more emphasis on finding the value in every child.

This study highlights promising practices specific to the Division that are associated with supporting Indigenous student success, which include holistic approaches to teaching, learning, and programs of support; support for Indigenous students' cultural knowledge and understanding; and greater awareness among non-Indigenous students and educators about Indigenous peoples' experiences, cultures, and histories. The promising practice to support student success that emerged as most significant is having a full-time self-identified Indigenous person (e.g., Indigenous liaison, Indigenous adviser, Elder, Knowledge Keeper) and a

dedicated Indigenous space at individual schools (e.g., for gathering, cultural programming). Staff in Indigenous-liaison roles can offer students personal and emotional support, support students' cultural learning, and facilitate understanding and awareness among all students, educators, and school staff about Indigenous peoples' experiences, perspectives, cultures, and histories. Similarly, a space in schools dedicated to cultural programming and student gathering was described by participants as fostering a sense among students of inclusion, belonging, and connection to schools.

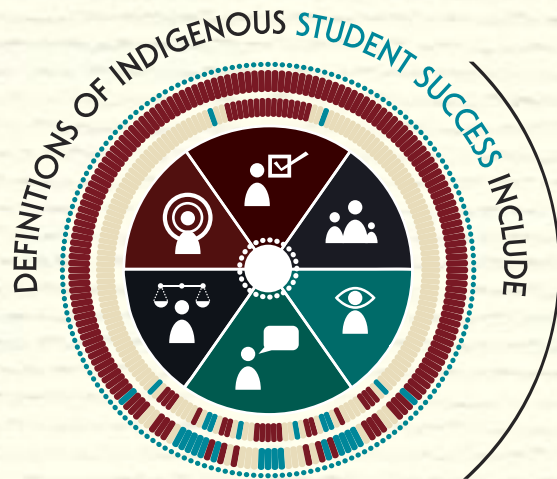
The term "success" is central in education discourses and linked to formally stated outcomes, goals, priorities, and mission and vision statements. The Division's vision was "success, one student at a time," and its 2018–2022 Division priorities included to "foster growth and success for every student" (2020). The term "success" is also ambiguous and vague. Through further collaboration and dialogue with education stakeholders, including parents and students, it may be beneficial to clarify the meaning of "success" at the school level and the Division level and clarify goals, strategies, and concrete action items to achieve this vision of success. Schools may benefit from collaborating with parents and students to define "student success" and identify concrete steps and actions that reflect the needs and priorities of their individual school community in an effort to achieve this vision of success.





●● 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. This report is focused on findings related to Indigenous student success, and an accompanying report is focused on findings associated with Indigenous parent involvement.


This report addresses two questions: (a) How is student success defined and understood through the lens of Indigenous parents and students? and (b) What are promising practices to support Indigenous student success? 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.





 a holistic vision of success that includes students' spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional well-being; *"It's spiritually, mentally, of course...but I know in schools, typically it's all academic-related, but what about the spirit?"* • parent

 personal goals and values; *"I think it's just like creating a goal and just achieving more broadly."* • student


 cultural learning and connections; *"Getting the cultural teachings, language being super important."* • parent


 a strong cultural identity; *"Schools to help foster identity within kids, we need that."* • parent


 belonging and fulfillment; and *"I think, to me, the most important is like a sense of belonging."* • parent


 academic achievements (e.g., high grades, high school graduation). *"When you get good grades it makes me feel successful."* • student





 a full-time self-identified Indigenous person at individual schools (e.g., Indigenous liaison, Indigenous adviser, Elder, Knowledge Keeper);

 a dedicated Indigenous space at individual schools (e.g., for cultural programming, student and family gathering);

 holistic approaches to teaching, learning, and programs of support;

 support for Indigenous students' cultural knowledge and understanding;

 increased awareness about Indigenous peoples' cultures, histories, and experiences among students and educators; and

 collaboration with education stakeholders, including parents and students, to define "student success" at the school level and identify goals, strategies, and concrete action items to achieve this vision of success.



●●● 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.”



