



# SIDRU

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

University  
of Regina

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Seeking their Voices:  
Improving Indigenous Student Learning Outcomes

for

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## Seeking their Voices: 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 world views – 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 contained three separate initiatives focused on improving Saskatchewan Indigenous student learning outcomes: the heart of the research based on the voices of students, parents, teachers and school administrators in six Saskatchewan high schools, a literature review, and perspectives from national and international academics, school administrators and policy leaders. Not surprisingly, the messages from each of these research processes are consistent.

#### **Literature Review: Improving Indigenous Student Learning Outcomes.**

The review of literature confirmed consistent research direction regarding the improvement of Indigenous student learning outcomes. The research further confirmed a failure to implement these findings, suggesting that the underlying reason related to a perspective by the

dominant western society that the best solution for Indigenous people was assimilation. Historically this meant residential schools and concurrent initiatives based on attitudes of assimilation and colonization. In addition to indifferent Indigenous student learning outcomes, achievement, the effects of poverty, racism, and, more broadly, attitudes of colonization have been tragically unfortunate.

The key factors are outlined below; it should be noted that a limitation of this literature review relates to the absence of research related to funding issues:

- **Language and Cultural Programming:** focused on the need for awareness by teachers of their student's cultural background and the importance of relationship.
- **Parent and Community Engagement:** meant a different relationship that took into account the history of the school as an agent of assimilation.
- **Student Engagement and Retention:** included the importance of meaningful student/teacher relationship and recognition that the school reflected dominant Western values.
- **Effective Schools:** meant schools that, in addition to the typical factors, included meaningful cultural and instructional practices aimed at improving learning outcomes.
- **The Role of Assessment:** was focused on evidence based decision making that reflected culturally relevant assessment and avoided American models based on No Child Left Behind assessment practices.
- **Classrooms and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy:** focused on effective instructional practices, high expectations, appropriate assessment models, and the need for close student/teacher relationships.
- **Retention/Support to Teachers/Administrators:** recognized the link between the length of teacher/administrator tenure and student achievement and the need to support teachers through strategies such as security of tenure, fair compensation and fringe benefits, effective induction, and ongoing professional development.
- **Governance and Leadership:** supported the relationship between effective governance/leadership and improved student outcomes, as well as stronger governance relationships between provincial and federal/First Nations educational authorities.

### **Voices from Others: Thoughtful Perspectives.**

The results of 18 individual interviews with prominent academics, school administrators and policy leaders in Canada, the United States and New Zealand are outlined below. Their perspectives, captured as four major themes, parallel the conclusions drawn from the literature review and the Seeking their Voices research:

- **The Role of Success:** Many stories of success, at the system, student, and family level were shared. Some questioned the very definition of success, suggesting that success must also include a knowledge and respect for traditional culture and values.
- **The Role of Relationship:** The vital role that relationship plays in supporting improved student learning, whether dealing with student/teacher or teacher/parent and community relationships was reinforced. Comments regarding the disconnect of the school from community also occurred.

- **Teaching and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy:** Culturally responsive pedagogy, as well as the value of effective teaching strategies, high expectations and student support, place based education, and appropriate assessment practices were repeatedly referenced.
- **Language, Culture, and Colonization:** The impact of poverty, racism, assimilation, and colonization of Indigenous people and the negative legacy within the schooling process received much comment. The importance of cultural knowledge and awareness was repeatedly discussed.

### **Hearing the 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 behaviours, racism in the school environment, teacher's 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 focussed 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 focussed on the teacher, system, or student needs to improve engagement and learning. Teacher responses focussed 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 behaviour, 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 world views. 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.
- Priorize 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. Priorize 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”.
- Priorize 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 SUNTEP, ITEP, NORTEP, and FNUUniv 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. Priorize 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
  - 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.**

- Priorize 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
  - 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 of Saskatchewan, the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, the Saskatchewan Teacher’s 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 focussing on Indigenous education typically follow a familiar pattern. They begin with a statement of the problem, usually focussing 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 endeavour 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 focussing 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 focussed 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 world views has been sometimes challenging. Whether bringing together university research traditions with current accountability frameworks or reconciling Western and

Indigenous world views, this work has often been complex. The good news is that all involved in the work have paid close attention to the voices, that 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 endeavoured 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).

## **Literature Review: Improving Indigenous Student Learning Outcomes**

### **A Need for Action**

On a winter day in March, 2010, one of the authors of this study and the Executive Director of one of Saskatchewan's pre K-12 partners sat listening to a presentation by Helen Raham, former Research Director for the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education (SAEE), regarding best educational practices for Indigenous people. As the presentation developed, both of us commented over the similarity of research findings between Raham's work and those of a similar study conducted in 2009 by the Saskatchewan Instructional Development and Research Unit (SIDRU) at the University of Regina for the then Minister's Advisory Panel on Student Achievement. We commented that this was encouraging – there appeared to be clear research direction as regards future policy development concerning Indigenous educational programming. We further concluded that, once research identified appropriate policy direction, effective programming would follow.

Since that time, more recent research findings have only reinforced these conclusions. It is increasingly clear that progress regarding improving learning outcomes for Indigenous youth require certain actions. The research findings contained within the document that follows reinforce the need for action in specific policy areas. These findings build on work conducted by earlier research, such as Demmert (2001), Demmert and Towner (2003), and Raham (2009, 2010) and Steeves (2009). More current research extends these conclusions and provides opportunities to consider issues that earlier received rather less attention.

There is little question that learning outcomes for Indigenous youth in Saskatchewan, in Canada, and within the international community are woefully inadequate. This comment begs the question – if we are and have been aware of what constitutes appropriate policy and program action, why has more not been done to address this issue? Yet unfortunate results continue and, in some cases, are actually declining. Why is this the case?

This research will first explore current research regarding Indigenous factors affecting improved learning outcomes, and then report on the findings of 18 interviews with nationally and internationally respected academics, administrators, and policy advisors from Canada, the United States, and New Zealand. As part of the initial exploration, a key question will be raised – if we know what needs to be done to address this tragic issue, why has more not been done to address it? It will be argued that the underlying reason for this failure relates to a perspective by the dominant Western society that the best solution for Indigenous people was assimilation within the dominant society. This led to the evils of the residential school system and, even today, colours attitudes within the educational community and the broader society. It will be further argued that these attitudes of assimilation and, as it is typically referred to in the literature, colonization, has created damage beyond just the more narrow focus on improved Indigenous student achievement. Research related to Emile Durkheim's work will suggest that assimilationist attitudes of colonization have resulted in dramatically higher rates of suicide among Indigenous youth and adults. In conclusion, attention to research findings and what thoughtful voices, both within and external to the Indigenous community, are saying will potentially clarify the need for a clear path moving forward.

## The Problem

There is widespread recognition of persistently low levels of educational attainment, income and income among Indigenous people. The *Final Report of the Joint Task Force on Improving Education and Employment Outcomes for First Nations and Métis People* (Merasty, Bouvier, & Hoium, 2013) indicated

Disproportionate numbers of First Nations and Métis people are subject to economic exclusion such as labour market segregation, unequal access to employment, employment discrimination, vulnerability to unemployment and underemployment, income inequality, increased criminalization, poor health outcomes and dependence on social programming. (p. 26)

More specific information within the Saskatchewan context, Table 1, shown below, indicates that Indigenous residents have demonstrated consistently lower rates of educational attainment.

**Table 1: Educational Attainment**

Educational Attainment	Saskatchewan		Aboriginal Identity		Percentage Point Difference
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	
Total Population 15 years and over:	766,235		91,295		
No certificate, diploma or degree	231,730	30.2	45,135	49.4	19.2
High school certificate or equivalent	205,495	26.8	20,055	22.0	(4.9)
Apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma	86,310	11.3	8,910	9.8	(1.5)
College, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma	111,770	14.6	9,055	9.9	(4.7)
University certificate or diploma below the bachelor level	32,180	4.2	2,850	3.1	(1.1)

University certificate, diploma or degree at or above bachelor level	98,755	12.9	5,285	5.8	(7.1)
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Source: Statistics Canada. 2007. 2006 Community Profiles. 2006 Census. Statistics Canada. 2008. Aboriginal Population Profile. 2006.

Similarly, Saskatchewan labor force characteristics provide comparable findings. Table 2 illustrates that the unemployment rate is 3.25 times higher for Indigenous citizens.

**Table 2: Labour Force Characteristics**

Labour Force Characteristics	Saskatchewan	Aboriginal
Population 15 years and over	766,235	91,295
Number in the Labour Force	524,305	51,480
Participation Rate (%)	68.4%	56.4%
Number Employed	494,901	42,095
Employment Rate (%)	64.6%	46.1%
Number Unemployed	29,361	9,390
Unemployment Rate (%)	5.6%	18.2%

Source: Statistics Canada. 2008. Labour force indicators by age groups for both sexes, 2006 counts – labour force, for Canada, provinces and territories – 20% sample data (table).

Table 3, shown below, suggests similar outcomes with respect to average and median incomes levels. Saskatchewan Indigenous income levels are substantially less than the overall provincial population.

**Table 3: Income Levels**

15 Years and Over	Non-Aboriginal	Aboriginal	Percentage
Number With Income	646,405	82,560	NA
Average Income \$	33,108	19,939	60.2
Median Income \$	25,234	13,843	54.9

Source: Statistics Canada 2007, 2006 Census of Population, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 97-563-XCB2006008.

Regarding Saskatchewan high school completion rates, Steeves, Carr-Stewart, and Marshall (2011) indicated that “approximately 25-30% of Aboriginal and Northern students complete high school whereas 70-80% of non-Aboriginal students complete grade 12” (p. 25). These types of low achievement levels persist in spite of a desire by Indigenous people to move out of this situation. Deyhle (2009), an American researcher who spent 40 years working with the Navajo community in southeast Utah, spoke of family members urging their children to complete high school and go on to post-secondary training. Similarly, research conducted for the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation (2005) indicates that, in a recent survey of on-reserve First Nations people, “70% of those between the ages of 16 and 24 hope to complete some form of post-secondary education and almost 80% of parents hope their children will do so” (p.2).

Parents and children have good reason to aspire to post-secondary educational completion. Howe (2011), in a study of educational completion rates of Indigenous residents of Saskatchewan, found that a Métis male who completed a Bachelor’s level or higher would have a life-time earning of \$1,666,032 versus \$1,577,505 for a non-Indigenous resident. Similarly, a Métis woman who completed a Bachelor’s degree or higher would earn \$1,516,473 versus \$1,453,503 for a non-Indigenous female resident. Similar, although slightly lower, earning results were reported for First Nations’ residents - \$1,469,756 for First Nations men and \$1,382,858 for First Nations women. These results are clear – further education makes a huge difference.

In addition to individual economic benefit, there is also the impact upon community. Spence, White, and Maxim (2007), in a study of the educational attainment of First Nations communities using 1996 Census and 1995/1996 INAC (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada) data, found that:

Instituting social policy that can foster the development of human capital in the Aboriginal population is a key starting point to economic development and the well-being of communities. Thus, improving the rates of educational success of Aboriginal students in the educational system is paramount. (p. 162)

Spence, White, and Maxim (2007) further commented that decisions “are always made within a given social context. If that social context is not supportive or conducive to staying in school, then we can expect poor educational attainment outcomes” (p. 162). Frenette (2011) investigated the issue of school completion rates for Canadian Indigenous students, concluding that “most (90 percent) of the university attendance gap among high school graduates is associated with differences in relevant academic and socio-economic characteristics” (p. 4). While this may not be surprising, the fact that the “largest contributing factor among these is academic performance (especially differences in performance on scholastic, as opposed to standardized tests)” (p. 4), may be more surprising.

Most would agree that these findings are not unexpected. The fact that Indigenous people attain lower educational, employment and income levels will also not surprise. Similarly, poorer

academic performance as a key predictor of university attendance is equally unsurprising. However, given the importance of post-secondary training for both individual income levels and future community development, it is clear that this situation needs to change. How are we to frame this issue, as a means of understanding what an appropriate policy course of action might be?

One conceptual framework that has received wide spread attention is the work by Ogbu (1978), an American academic. Ogbu and Simons' (1998) classification of North American Indians as involuntary (non-immigrant) minorities may serve as a means of conceptualizing the issue of presently lower educational, income, and employment rates. Ogbu and Simon suggested that the two primary descriptors of involuntary minorities are that "(1) they did not chose but were forced against their will to become part of the United States, and (2) they themselves usually interpret their presence in the United States as forced on them by white people" (p. 165). Ogbu and Simon argued that involuntary minorities are "less economically successful than voluntary minorities, usually experience greater and more persistent cultural and language difficulties, and do less well in school" (p. 166). This also seems to be an apt assessment of the treatment of First Nations people in Canada. Research and interviews that will be referenced in this study further reinforce the view of Indigenous people as a conquered group that were removed from their lands, suffering from economic and social injustice.

Yet Howe's (2011) research provided an optimistic note to these conclusions. If Indigenous youth choose to participate within the western economy, and researchers such as Deyhle (2009) suggested that for cultural reasons many may not, successful completion of high school and post-secondary training will provide favourable future earning opportunities, with consequent opportunities to enhance both their life and that of their communities. This means that serious consideration of the factors that will enhance these life opportunities is necessary.

### **Solutions – A Consistent Message**

The March presentation by Raham (2010) referenced earlier contained an excellent framework of key practises necessary for improved learning by Indigenous students that yet been identified. In the paper, she outlined the following connections between policy and research:

- Literacy and Language Programs
- Culturally-Based Curriculum
- Engagement and Retention of Students
- Home and School Partnerships
- Teacher Supply, Quality and Support
- School Leadership
- School Programming
- Assessment, Monitoring and Reporting

The degree of similarity between Raham's work and other contemporary research is evidenced by the key priorities for First Nations and Métis pre K-12 education identified by Steeves (2009), in SIDRU research conducted for the then Minister's Advisory Panel on Student Achievement:

- Strong Leadership and Governance Structures
- Language and Cultural Programs
- Teachers, Instruction, and Curriculum
- Effective Schools
- Community and Parental Influences
- Student Characteristics
- Assessment Linked to Instruction and Planning
- Appropriate Levels of Funding

The degree of consistency between the frameworks outlined by Raham (2010) and Steeves (2009) is evident. Subsequent research has essentially validated and broadened these conclusions. A representative sample of this research is outlined below.

Walton, Favaro, and Goddard (2009, pp.13-14) in an interview based study exploring educational success for Mi'kmaq learners on Prince Edward Island summarized their findings in the following way: the need for a comprehensive action plan; integration of Mi'kmaq culture and language into curriculum; professional development for educators; role of parents and community members in educating children; strengthening communication between parents, First Nations communities, and learning institutions, the Department of Education, the Mi'kmaq Confederacy, and the Native Council; and additional supports for students, teachers, and parents.

Inuit Ttapirit Kanatami, for The National Committee on Inuit Education, produced *First Canadians, Canadians First: National Strategy on Inuit Education* (2011). In it they recommended 10 areas of core investment: mobilizing parents; developing leaders; increased bilingual education; early years investment; investment in Inuit-centred curriculum and language resources; improved services to students requiring additional support; increased post-secondary success; a university in Inuit Nunangat; a standardized Inuit writing system; and measuring/assessing success.

*Nurturing the Learning Spirit of the First Nation Students: The Report of the National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education* (2012, pp. 43-44) proposed seven key areas of attention: increased attendance rates; well run schools; good student-teacher relationships; good student relationships; daily reading; sports, art and music; and trades training programs. These recommendations were proposed within three core principles: the child's right to their culture, language and identity; the need for reconciliation between First Nations, the Government of Canada, and provincial/territorial governments; and a commitment to mutual accountability for roles/responsibilities and financial inputs and educational outcomes.(Executive Summary, p. viii)

In Australia, Silburn, Nutton, McKenzie, and Landrigan (2011) conducted a systematic review of Australian and international literature regarding early years English language acquisition and instructional approaches for Aboriginal students with home languages other than English for the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training. They indicated that "The Department of Education and Training should support NT schools and educators in developing and implementing a framework for culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous students" (Executive Summary, p. ix).

Helme and Lamb (2011, pp. 1-2) provided another Australian document that helpfully identified “what works”:

- A school culture and leadership that acknowledges and supports Indigenous students and families, including
  - a shared vision for the school community
  - high expectations of success for both staff and students
  - A learning environment that is responsive to individual needs
  - A drive for continuous achievement
  - Involvement of the Indigenous community in planning and providing education
- School-wide strategies that work to maintain student engagement and improve learning outcomes, including
  - Broad curriculum provision
  - Quality vocational education and training option
  - School absenteeism and attendance programs
  - Quality career education
- Student-focused strategies that directly meet the needs of students at risk of low achievement or early learning including
  - Targeted skill development
  - Mentoring
  - School engagement programs
  - Welfare support
  - Intensive case management

Helme and Lamb (2011, p. 2) also outlined “what doesn’t work”:

- A “one size fits all” approach that either treats Indigenous students the same as non-Indigenous students or assumes that all Indigenous students are all the same.
- Short-term, piecemeal interventions that are not adequately funded or implemented for long enough to make a significant impact.
- Interventions that are adopted without considering local needs and collaborating with Indigenous communities.
- Attempting to solve the problem of leaving school early without dealing with its underlying causes and providing sustained institutional support. An example is raising the school leaving age without putting programs in place to retain students at school.

This sampling of related research confirms the essential strategies that are required for successful school experiences for Indigenous students. It seems clear that a consistent message regarding the actions required improving school success for Indigenous students exists. More current research affirms the essential conclusions reached by Raham (2010) and Steeves (2009). In effect, as the author and the Executive Director of the key Saskatchewan stakeholder group concluded in March, 2010, the actions necessary to improve Indigenous learning outcomes are increasingly clear.

It might also be mentioned that these conclusions have existed for some time. For example, McCarty (2002, p. 48) and Reyhner and Eder (2004, pp. 207-208) referenced the

*Meriam Report*, published in 1928 at the request of the United States Secretary of the Interior, and its condemnation of the handling of American Indian issues, including education. As regards education, the care of Indian children in boarding schools, the failure to properly prepare and support teachers for work with Indian children, and the need for improved curriculum were some of the issues identified. More recently, the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (1996, V. 5, pp. 219-231) also referenced the very issues referred to in the research cited earlier. Examples include curricula that reflected Aboriginal culture and community realities, prioritizing Aboriginal languages in educational systems, and encouraging the involvement of parents, elders, and communities in the school.

Given the clear existence of research based policy direction regarding enhancing the learning success of Indigenous children, the question asked earlier remains. Why are learning outcomes for Indigenous youth in Saskatchewan, in Canada, and within the international community, so woefully inadequate? Why is this case? And what can be done to remedy this tragic situation?

Perhaps the most trenchant concluding comment is provided by Castagno and Brayboy (2008):

What much of the previous discussion boils down to is that students will learn better and be more engaged in schooling when they make connections to it. This is certainly neither new nor revolutionary. But the fact that in 2008 we are still making this same argument and trying to convince educators of the need to provide a more culturally responsive pedagogy for Indigenous students indicates the pervasiveness and prevalence of the problem. Why is it that scholars are still making similar arguments today that were being made in the 1980's and even earlier in the *Meriam Report*? (p. 981)

### **If We Know What to Do, Why Aren't We Doing It?**

The issue that Castagno and Brayboy raised (2008) reflected the essential question that underlies this research: If we know what to do, why aren't we doing it? Ogbu and Simons (1998) characterization of American Indians as an involuntary minority serves as an excellent starting point for this discussion. As noted earlier, Ogbu (1978) described American Indians as unwilling participants in the United States, who were forced to do so by white people. He further noted that they typically were less economically successful than either white populations or other minorities who made a voluntary decision to migrate to the United States. Deyhle (2009) framed Ogbu's work with a reference to the American view of manifest destiny:

Manifest destiny, an ideology which exerted an entitlement to lands and fortune based on white supremacy, resulted in catastrophic deaths of millions of American Indians from massacres, diseases, and confinement to reservations. This history still saturates the social, political, economic and physical landscape. (pp. xix-xx)

McLeod (2007) provided a more Canadian and Saskatchewan based perspective. He makes a distinction between the American and British experience stating that, "In contrast to the American policy of conquest, the British had a long tradition of negotiating with Indian people with regard to economic and political activity" (p. 37). In a discussion of the local situation prior

to white settlement, McLeod characterized the relationship between the Cree and the British from 1670 to the 1870's as one of mutual advantage. He wrote that, "During this period, the Cree benefited greatly from commercial interaction with the newcomers and grew in both territory and prestige" (p. 37). The Cree served as middle men for trade between the British and other Indigenous peoples, developing in the process a "long-established relationship with the British" (p. 37). However, with the increasing incursion of white settlers in traditional Cree territory, these circumstances began to change. McLeod referenced the encouragement by Christian missionaries to take up farming, indicating that "It is interesting to note that farming and Christianity go hand in hand and that both signal a radical shift of worldview" (p. 39).

McLeod (2007) further suggested that the departure of the buffalo was significant in forcing a radical change. He stated that "As long as there were buffalo, there was hope for those who wanted to hold on to the traditional way of life...the Cree became increasingly aware that they were at a crossroads, and that they would have to adapt to changing circumstances" (p. 42). British and Canadian officials encouraged this thinking particularly as both the Crown and Britain/Canada and First Nations utilized treaties to set out a new pathway. The Royal Proclamation of 1763 enacted by Britain and today has the force of a statute in Canada has been referred to as the Charter of Indian Rights (Cumming & Mickenberg, 1970, p. 24). Through the Proclamation, the British required that

upon the transference of the territories in question...the claims of the Indian tribes to compensation for lands required for purposes of settlement will be considered and settled in conformity with the equitable principles which have uniformly governed the British Crown in its dealings with the aborigines. (p. 148)

Thus while both Britain/Canada and First Nations have from time to time focused on treaties from two divergent points, nevertheless, the treaties support First Nations as equal partners and set out both written and oral documentation in relation to the treaties. The treaties from 1781 to the conclusion of the Numbered Treaties in 1921 provide "formal mechanisms for detailing Aboriginal peoples-Crown relations" (Maaka & Fleras, 2000, p. 216). The British/Canadian treaties with First Nations were a commitment that provided reserves, annuities, homes, agricultural training, education, livestock, grain, and a variety of services in exchange for the ceding of First Nations lands to the Crown. These commitments including education were for as long as the sun shone and the rivers flowed (Carr-Stewart, 2001; Morris, 1990/1881). Thus while we may lament the lack of the historic funding to support First Nations schools, the tragedy of residential schools, and the legal means of destroying language and cultural, nevertheless, treaties are a "way forward" to ensure the Crown (whether through court cases or effective policy) to lives up to its obligation to ensure that First Nations receive western education as additional to their own education, that western education does not "deter" from Indigenous language, and that First Nations children receive western education "equal to the whites" (Morris, 1990/1881) and as stated by the National Indian Brotherhood in 1972 First Nations children have the "happiness and satisfaction come from "pride in one's self, understanding one's fellowmen, and, living in harmony" (p. 1) and to "reinforce their Indian identity...[and] provide the training necessary for making a good living in modern society" (p. 3). The Minister of Indian Affairs in 1988 assured the First Nations that administering education "will not effect the Treaty Rights to the Tribe. Secondly, the administrative take-over does not

relieve the Minister of his ultimate responsibilities for education” of the Nation (Ministerial letter to the Nation, February 5, 1988). Though Treaties in part are historical data, they nevertheless are present with us today as agreements that “create obligations and the presence of mutually binding obligations” (Isaac & Annis, 2010, p. 2) and are “constitutionally entrenched and so cannot be repealed by a simple parliamentary majority. The enforcement of federal treaty obligations is particularly important in advancing Aboriginal rights” to education (Maaka & Fleras, 2000, p. 216). The treaty right to education calls for the best education possible in order for First Nations people to know who they are and to achieve a quality education.

### **The Role of Poverty.**

One of the unfortunate legacies of Indigenous people’s status as involuntary minorities and, with respect to First Nations people, the failure to honour treaties is the curse of poverty. The *Final Report of the Joint Task Force on Improving Education and Employment Outcomes for First Nations and Métis People* (Merasty, Bouvier, & Hoium, 2013) referenced issues of poverty reduction and the prevalence of racism as critical lenses that framed their work. Gary Merasty, Chair of the Task Force, and one of the individuals interviewed as part of this study commented that:

The baggage unfortunately many of our First Nations/Métis, many of them have is the culture of poverty and that people confuse the culture of poverty with the culture of our people. Poverty doesn’t discriminate. So the poverty you see in some of our communities, the inner city of Saskatoon, or wherever, is the same poverty that is in Los Angeles, in the Bronx...or LA, in Compton, Chicago, right. So it doesn’t discriminate. (personal communication, November, 2013)

Saskatchewan based research by Lemstra and Neudorf (2008) supported these comments. In research regarding health disparities conducted for the Saskatoon Health Region, they concluded that “If the main determinants of health responsible for health disparities are variables like income status and educational status, a comprehensive and coordinated set of policy options will be required to reduce extensive health disparity in Saskatoon” (pp. 3-4).

An important aspect of their research related to the Indigenous community in Saskatoon. Lemstra and Neudorf (2008) found that, after controlling for variables such as socio-economic status, Indigenous status “no longer has a statistically significant association with low self report health, diabetes prevalence, heart disease prevalence, lower child immunization rates and depressed mood” (p. 7). Based on their research findings, Lemstra and Neudorf (2008) proposed an anti-poverty initiative, arguing that a coordinated approach was required:

Some policy options are to address immediate needs, while others are long term strategies that address macro level social structures. For example, short term income and housing stability measures are intended to provide the necessary support and stability to allow education and employment initiatives to have a realistic chance of success. (p. 340)

Steeves (2009) commented on this recommendation, indicating that:

The implication of this and other research findings is clear – if the Saskatoon Health Region is to improve overall health, attention to a broad number of health-related indices is necessary. More specifically, from the perspective of this study, issues such as poor educational achievement rates need to be viewed within a larger context. If issues such as poverty are not meaningfully addressed, it will be difficult to show progress on increasing overall First Nations and Métis student achievement. (p. 41)

Another of the individuals interviewed for this study, Ron Crowe, considered the role of poverty in terms of its impact on schooling for individual students:

Poverty has a lot to do with it as well. There are barriers involved there that challenges a student's success. Wanting to join the band class is unattainable because you can't afford the trumpet or drums or whatever that becomes a barrier. A challenge that becomes quite difficult for some of the families to deal. There are ways to get around that but no kid wants to go to school and try to join something where they feel inferior. (personal communication, September, 2013)

To conclude, poverty is an inescapable reality when considering the current status of Indigenous students and how their learning might be supported. As Lemstra and Neudorf (2008) indicated, it will be difficult to meaningfully improve student learning and achievement in the absence of concrete action to address the issue of poverty in Indigenous families and communities.

### **Racism – A Difficult Reality.**

Racism is a difficult topic. One of the authors, while serving as a senior administrator within the Saskatchewan public service, vividly recalls a briefing session that focused on a report detailing the prevalence of racist attitudes within the provincial Justice system. It was a difficult experience for the author, and a subsequent conversation with a senior Justice official confirmed that others had experienced similar reactions. However, the point made by the official was that conclusive evidence regarding the prevalence of racist attitudes existed, and that action to address the existence of systemic racism was necessary. Dr. Shauneen Pete, Executive Lead, Indigenization, University of Regina, further referenced this issue.

If you want to answer the question – why has the gap not been closed for Aboriginal learners, you have to examine the practices of those in power: the predominantly white teaching workforce. I believe that many of teachers fall back on the common excuses “I need more resources and workshops” when what they are hiding is the fact that their racial bias means they actually don't feel any measure of responsibility for closing the gap at all. (personal communication, June, 2014)

Marie Battiste (2013) provided a compelling statement regarding the existence of racism within our contemporary society.

Race has long been debunked as a constructed category that justifies dominance and privilege and other forms of oppression. Yet, radicalization is well known to all those targeted under the imaginary line of social justice. Whiteness and privilege are less evident to those who swim in the sea of whiteness and dominance. Confronting racism,

then, is confronting racial superiority and its legacy, not only in history but also in contemporary experience. (p. 125)

We should not assume that Battiste's comments excluded the pre K-12 educational system. Deyhle (1995), reflecting on her findings from extensive research over decades within the Navajo community of southeastern Utah, indicated that "political and economic power remains in the hands of local communities who maintain a 'limited' space for Navajo's. This discrimination is basic to Navajo's attitudes towards schools" (p. 407). Werito (2013), also referencing research based on nine Navajo youth, commented that "it becomes evident to students of color that they are marginalized because of their connections to specific cultural and linguistic identities or a cultural heritage that is different from the dominant or mainstream American culture" (p. 61).

Another study by Hare and Pidgeon (2011) that involved 39 First Nations youth from communities in northern Ontario indicated that "Overwhelmingly, the youth reported their experiences with racism and discrimination while attending public schools. ...The types of experiences they discussed were negative attitudes and stereotypes directed toward them by non-Aboriginal peers and teachers and an unwelcoming school environment" (pp. 99-100). In a related study involving 15 successful Native American students, Jackson, Smith, and Hill (2003) shared findings that discuss both passive and active racism. They reported that passive racism "was experienced as being either being ignored or being singled out as a representative of their race or culture. This led to feelings of isolation or social pressure" (p. 556). As regards active racism, it "was typically experienced in classes or other discussions about historic or cultural issues. Students reported that they felt marginalized and offended in these interactions" (p. 557).

Lest anyone assume that the Saskatchewan situation within the educational system is different, a personal anecdote may suffice. Several years ago, while attending a provincial conference addressing Indigenous educational issues, one of the speakers, who had experienced schools in rural Saskatchewan as an Indigenous student referred to the "line of sight" rule. By this he meant that while on the playground as an Indigenous student, he was always careful to ensure that he remained within the line of sight of the teacher supervising during the recess break. A failure to do so sometimes meant that "bad" things might occur. Upon turning to another colleague, also an Indigenous educator who attended provincial schools, the author was told that this was a shared experience. While these are dated experiences, the existence of racist attitudes on school playgrounds within Saskatchewan seems apparent.

### **Colonization.**

It seems clear that schooling experiences for Indigenous youth within the pre K-12 educational system can be difficult. Issues of isolation, racism and poverty can be debilitating for students trying to achieve success within a schooling experience that seems biased against them. Battiste (2013) argued that these experiences are symptomatic of a colonial, assimilative system of education that requires substantive reform. She suggested that for over a century, "Indigenous students have been part of a forced assimilation plan – their heritage and knowledge rejected and suppressed, and ignored by the education system" (p. 23). She further stated that "They are thrust into a society that does not want them to show too much success or too much Indian identity, losing their connections to their land, family, and community. Assimilation." (p. 23). In place of

a traditional Indigenous worldview that, according to Oscar Kawakley (2006), a highly respected Alaskan academic of Yupik ancestry, emphasized “harmony and integration with all life” (p. 1), the “Western educational system has attempted to instill a mechanistic and linear worldview in Indigenous cultural contexts” (p. 1). The results have been highly destructive.

Brown, Rodger and Fraehlich (2009) reinforced these comments when reporting on the experiences of 54 Aboriginal youth and 10 key informants from inner city Winnipeg. They concluded that “The most powerful contributors to negative school experiences have their origins in colonization; families had lost trust in touch with formal education because the Westernized approach has had such a pervasive and negative impact on their lives” (p. 76).

In a detailed, qualitative study of two pre-school Hawaiian families, Kaomea (2012) referred to a Canadian study by Mackay and Myles (as cited in Kaomea, 2012), commenting that Indigenous families are typically blamed for high drop-out rates, “failing at parenting and blamed for their children’s school failure with virtually no recognition of the deep, colonial history that Indigenous families have faced, and continue to face” (p. 1). She went on to reference statistics documenting the failure of Hawaiian families, despite the successful and literate society that existed in Hawaiian prior to American occupation. She suggested that,

What these statistics neglect to explain is that, sandwiched between these contrasting social portraits, is a history of invasion and colonialism; a story of theft, exploitation, and oppression that, when coupled with the forces imposition of devastating colonial policies, has enduring implications for contemporary Hawaiian home-school relations. (p. 1)

Perhaps the most compelling example of the assimilative, colonial practices is the residential school. Like so many others, Battiste (2013) documented the destructive legacy of the residential school system. She indicated that “Residential schooling was intended to root out and destroy Indigenous knowledge, languages, and relationships with the natural family to replace them with Eurocentric values, identities, and beliefs that ultimately aimed at destroying children’s self esteem, self concept, and healthy relationships.” (p. 56).

Similar practises existed within the United States. Reyhner and Eder (2004) indicated that residential schools, termed boarding schools within the United States, were underfunded, with the result that “the care of Indian children in boarding schools were shockingly inadequate” (p. 208) leading to malnutrition and disease. They also referenced inappropriate curriculum and harsh disciplinary practices (pp. 182-189) and “incompetent teachers and deplorable facilities” (p. 94).

Perhaps the most damning indictment is provided within the *Meriam Report* (1928), which Reyhner and Eder (2004) quoted

The philosophy underlying the establishment of Indian boarding schools, that the way to ‘civilize’ the Indian is to take Indian children, even very young children, as completely as possible away from their home and family life, is at variance with modern views of education and social work, which regard the home and family as essential social institutions from which it is generally undesirable to uproot children. (p. 403)

The message is clear – the eradication of Indigenous cultural values and the replacement by superior Western cultural mores was a project that doomed Indigenous people to lives of failure within Western schooling institutions.

In many situations, the current objectives of schools have not changed, whether deliberate or not. Berger, Epp and Moller (2006), while conducting research regarding improved practice within Nunavut schools, commented that schools were not neutral institutions; “For some they must remain highly visible symbols of culture loss, reminders of the dominance of others and the ongoing pressure to complete the process of assimilation of Qallunaat culture” (p. 196).

If this situation is to be addressed substantial changes are necessary. In another study of educational practices in Nunavut, McGregor (2013) stated that:

The process of decolonizing schools is not achieved solely through the integration of Indigenous content, but through examining the power relationships that determine questions (and answers) regarding school structures, policy and decision-making, curriculum and pedagogy, teacher-student-community relationships, access to and assessment of student success. (p. 107)

It should not be assumed that the negative effects of a policy of forced assimilation and colonization only impact on the schooling experience. The *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (1996, V.5) stated that “Aboriginal peoples have preserved their identities under adverse conditions. They have safeguarded their traditions during many decades when non-Aboriginal officials attempted to regulate every aspect of their lives” (p. 1). Despite this assessment of the situation by RCAP, it should not be assumed that all is well. Battiste (2013) indicated that “many First Nations educators and authors have reported the devastating consequences of language loss to their identities, their development of self-esteem and self-confidence” (p. 146) as outcomes of the process of colonization.

Others share Battiste’s assessment. A number of researchers have used the work of Emile Durkheim (1952), a pioneering French sociologist who explored potential causes for suicide, as a basis for research related to the destructive impact of policies of forced assimilation and colonization. These researchers have typically referenced Durkheim’s discussion of suicide, in particular egoistic suicide, as a conceptual framework to help explain and guide research related to social disintegration, and consequently high levels of suicide within the Indigenous communities subjected to forced colonization. Tomasi (2000) indicated that Durkheim “considered suicide above all to be a signal of crisis in a society driven by constant and excessively rapid change, a phenomenon that threatened the existence not only of society but also the individual” (p.12). Breault (1994) elaborated, stating that

Durkheim argues that the lack or loss of social integration in modern society causes some vulnerable people to commit suicide. Despite difficulties some interpreters have had with social integration, Durkheim plainly means the degree to which people are attached, bonded or connected to each other. Durkheim is talking about social and emotional ties and the amount and intensity of such bonds. (p. 13)

Based upon the official attempts by Western governments to disrupt traditional Indigenous culture, worldviews and family structures, the use of Durkheim as a conceptual framework to guide research seems a logical outcome. For example, May and Van Winkle (1994) discussing what they termed the process of modernization on American Indian tribes in the southwest of the United States reference the value of an “understanding of the social forces which influence individuals in suicide and... related behaviors. Many of these behaviors, while seeming to be quite unique, individual, and isolated, are heavily influenced by common and rather universal social and cultural forces” (p. 314). May and Van Winkle (1994) were not alone in their claim that ‘social forces’, such as colonization and forced assimilation can have detrimental effects on the individual. Duran and Duran (1995), while discussing their work in psychotherapy with Native Americans, referenced post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a means of dealing with individual dysfunctions experienced by many Native Americans.

Posttraumatic stress disorder can manifest in primary or secondary symptoms. Primary symptoms are those acquired through firsthand account or experience of the trauma. Secondary PTSD is a normal reaction and can be acquired by having family and friends who have been acutely traumatized. These reactive behaviors are passed on and learned and become the norm for subsequent generations. (p. 40)

Given the destructive impacts of starvation, forced relocation and assimilation practises such as the Canadian residential school system, Duran and Duran’s (1995) characterization of secondary PTSD as a means of describing generational trauma seems tragically accurate.

More recently, a number of studies have utilized Durkheim’s work as a conceptual basis for research with Indigenous people, in particular youth in Alaska and northern Canadian communities. Noting the relative lack of research linking neo-colonialism to health disparities in Indigenous communities, Wexler (2009), in a paper based upon both quantitative and qualitative data generated by a Participatory Action Research project in northwest Alaska, commented

Linking colonialism – both historical and ongoing – to the health disparities experienced by Indigenous peoples is an important step in understanding how to begin to promote health and wellness in Native communities....Highlighting the link between colonialism and self-destruction among Inupiaq young people challenges the common characterization of suicide as mainly a biomedical issue and repositions it as a political problem stemming from colonization. (p. 1)

Similarly, Tester and McNicoll (2004), in a thoughtful paper utilizing historical document analysis related to the Nunavut Territory, considered the impacts of Inuit suicide. They concluded that a background of “ colonial relations of ruling has much to do with the current problem...Low *Inuit inuusittiaqarniq* (self-esteem) is an important factor in Inuit suicide, but rather than a psychological problem, has its roots in a history of colonialism, paternalism and historical events” ( p. 2625). Finally, Kral (2012), adopting a community based participatory model involving two Inuit communities in Arctic Canada over four years, discussed the government era of the 1950’s and 1960’s and the impact that rapid change had on Inuit society. He indicated that “The effects of government intervention dramatically affected kin relations, roles, and responsibilities and affinal/romantic relationships. Suicide is embedded in these relationships” (Abstract, p. 306). Given these findings, it is not surprising that the Government of

Nunavut (2007) proposed a suicide and prevention strategy that identified six objectives, including the following as the number one; “Culturally relevant and effective GN programs and services based on the Nunavut experience and ‘best practices’ from other jurisdictions such as Greenland and Australia” (p. 2).

Perhaps the most poignant description of the impact of forced assimilation and colonization is provided by a Cree Kokum (Grandmother) from southern Saskatchewan.

I have heard Elders say...if we don't teach our children our traditions and our cultural activities, what are they going to know in the future? We are going to lose everything. We are going to lose our treaties. We are going to be just nothing. We are going to be lost. Our kids are going to be lost. (personal communication, November 2011)

If positive change is to occur, a change in attitude regarding assimilation and colonization is necessary. For example, rather than simply focusing on the tragedy of residential schools, increased attention must be given to the underlying social and economic attitudes that created these schools. Accompanying this increased attention must be an acceptance that similar attitudes remain in mainstream society. As a colleague, who assisted with the analysis of data resulting from the 18 interviews conducted as part of this study, suggested, “That wherever the British Empire went, colonization accompanied it” (personal communication, May, 2014). The British, European, North American, and Asians who colonized other countries, and usually Aboriginal people, must assist in changing the “hang-on” effects of colonization and change the policies and programs that effect education today. As stated earlier, only by attending to the “why” can there be success in addressing the seemingly intractable problem of improving Indigenous student learning outcomes. To reference Battiste (2013), “Canadian administrators and educators need to respectfully blend Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy with Euro-Canadian epistemology and pedagogy to create an innovative ethical, trans-systemic Canadian educational system” (p. 168). Once again, it must be stated: we know what to do – it is our responsibility to do it.

### **Learning Outcomes: Research Convergence**

The literature demonstrates increasing convergence regarding research findings. As evidenced earlier, research consistently references key practices and policy directions in relation to future direction. While a conceptual framework will be outlined here, it must be noted that this represents the authors’ “sense making” of these research findings. It should not be assumed that it necessarily precludes the recommendations of other current research findings and literature reviews. Given the importance of “co-construction” in thinking through these issues, interested readers are encouraged to consult key literature sources that will help inform their thinking. Potential sources for this individual sense making have been referenced earlier and will be reviewed below.

Notwithstanding these comments, the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy and language and culture in relation to Indigenous student success cannot be under-estimated. This is particularly true if one considers these factors in relation to other variables such as teacher/student relationships, Indigenous knowledge, instructional strategies, or other critical

issues. Dr. Marie Battiste (2013) provided one example of the importance of these issues, referencing language and culture in relation to fundamental human rights and the inherent right of a child to their “cultural identity, language and values” as essential for Aboriginal students (pp. 29-30). Similarly, the *Report of the National Panel on First Nations Elementary and Secondary Education for Students on Reserve* (2012) argued reform “must be based on a child’s right to their culture, language and identity, and to a quality education that is appropriate to their needs” (Executive Summary, p. vii). Others argued that “available research on the influences of Native language and cultural programs on academic performance is growing in both volume and importance” (Demmert, 2001, p. 8). Hermes (2007, Abstract, p. 54) reflected on seven years of ethnographic research at Ojibwe schools in Minnesota and Wisconsin and suggested a shift from culture based curriculum to teaching culture through the Ojibwe language. Walton, Favaro, and Goddard (2009) reported on feedback from Prince Edward Island Mi’kmaq parents. These researchers found that “The inclusion of Mi’kmaq culture and language was the most frequent suggestion made by parents” (p. 55). The increase and importance of research on language, culture and values for Aboriginal students is, in part, a result of the issues that have faced Indigenous peoples: residential schools, poorly funded schools; legal prohibition of their language and cultural practices; and the failure to provide quality education with their own culture, language, and being.

In the twenty-first century, there must be an on-going commitment to foster Indigenous students’ right to be in a school which recognizes their language, cultural, and values. Research increasingly documents the relationship between these goals and improved student learning outcomes. This paper and the research contained within it support this claim. The literature review that supported the research cited in this paper is international in scope, with particular emphasis in New Zealand, America, and Canada. Demmert (2001) in *Improving Academic Performance among Native American Students: A Review of the Research Literature* brought these claims to the forefront. In Saskatchewan, Canada, Merasty, Bouvier, and Hoium (2013) prepared *The Joint Task Force on Improving Education and Employment Outcomes in Saskatchewan* following their involvement in meetings and presentations around the province. Their conclusions also reinforced the importance of attention to language and cultural issues if students are to experience success in school. Other researchers such as Perso (2012), Raham (2009; 2010), Silburn, Nutton, McKenzie, and Landrigan (2011) provided an enhanced sense of the literature related to Indigenous education and improving student learning outcomes. Research in these, and other works, demonstrated findings that consistently identify effective practices and policy directions for improved Indigenous student learning outcomes.

## **A Conceptual Framework**

Conceptual frameworks provide a sense from which to construct a reality. The framework outlined below represents the authors’ perceptions regarding key policy issues related to addressing opportunities for improved Indigenous student learning outcomes:

- Language and Cultural Programming
- Parent and Community Engagement
- Student Engagement and Retention
- Effective Schools

- Role of Assessment
- Classrooms and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy
- Retention of and Support for Teachers/Administrators
- Governance and Leadership

The research findings and best practice along with the conceptual framework give focus to the issue of Indigenous student learning. It should be noted that research related to funding was not addressed within this review of the literature.

### **Language and Cultural Programming.**

Goulet (2001) in a study of two teachers in northern Saskatchewan Indigenous communities commented that they “incorporated culture and language and Aboriginal and community norms and values into their teaching. They did so in a way that developed more equitable power relationships and dealt with the impact of colonization” (p. 79). Reflecting on Goulet’s findings, Steeves (2009) commented that her “research makes explicit the relationship between ethnocentric curriculum, assimilation and colonization, and the need for a greater focus on Aboriginal language and culture” (p. 46). Other research focused directly on improved student learning outcomes. Guevremont and Kohen (2012), using data from the *2001 Canadian Aboriginal Peoples Survey* indicated that “One of the intriguing findings of the current study was that even after controlling for child and family factors, speaking an Aboriginal language was associated with positive school outcomes for young children” (p. 15). Similarly, in a presentation at the *Improving the Educational Outcomes of Aboriginal People Living Off-Reserve*, held in Saskatoon, Bernard (2010), Executive Director, Mi’kmaw School Division, reported that their early findings suggested that students in their immersion program performed “at par or above when compared to students who were not speakers of the Mi’kmaw language” ( p. 45).

Not all research findings support claims of improved learning outcomes. Brade, Duncan and Sokal (2003), working with a sample of 636 individuals, ages 30 to 49, drawn from the *1991 Aboriginal People’s Survey*, concluded that cultural involvement and Aboriginal teachers as role models were not related to improved educational achievement. They found that “ with the exception of liking what was taught about Aboriginal people in school, number of schools attended, and facility with an Aboriginal language, the factors hypothesized related to level of education were not supported” (p. 246). Similarly, Takayama (2008) found inclusive results when exploring non-traditional school types such as charter schools and Hawaiian language and culture based schools. This “preliminary research shows that, in general, there are no academic losses in Hawaiian-focused charters and Hawaiian language immersion schools for students of Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian ethnicities” (p. 271). Nevertheless, part of the issue surrounding the complexity and inconsistency of the literature relates to the differing objectives that characterize this body of literature. Demmert (2001) provided some clarity regarding this diversity in a major review of literature related to Indigenous student achievement. He identified one of the key factors affecting student learning, suggesting that the research focused on two interrelated issues: “ (1) the struggles of a growing number of Native American communities to maintain or strengthen their traditional languages and cultural heritages and (2) the relationship between

strengthening traditional Native identities and improving educational outcomes for Native children” (pp. 8-9).

Demmert’s (2001) research first identified the destructive impact of forced assimilations and colonization upon Indigenous peoples and the compelling need for North American Indigenous communities to engage in an enhanced focus on language and culture. Secondly, a greater consideration of his second priority, the relationship between traditional Native identities and the improvement of student learning outcomes shows that these factors are clearly interrelated.

There is further research that supports language and culture as a means of supporting Indigenous student learning outcomes. Dr. Willard Sakiestewa Gilbert, then President of the National Indian Education Association, spoke to the importance of cultural education when addressing a 2008 hearing of the United States Congress House of Representatives, Committee on Education and Labor, Congressional Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education; “Current research demonstrates that cultural education can be successfully integrated in the classroom in a manner that would provide Native students with instruction in the core subject areas based on cultural values and beliefs” (p. 13). Sakiestewa Gilbert also referenced research conducted at Northern Arizona University regarding increased integration of native language, culture and traditions in Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) elementary schools. This research “revealed increased student mastery of science and math concepts, deeper levels of student engagement in science and math and increased student achievement in math and science” (p. 13).

In a study in Canada, Gunn, Pomahac, Good Striker, and Tailfeathers (2010), reviewed 16 selected projects from the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS). They concluded that “nearly half of the projects placed an emphasis on *cultural awareness*. By educating teachers, staff, and non-Aboriginal students about FNMI cultures, history, and language, it was reported that FNMI (First Nations, Métis, Inuit) students received better instruction as well as experienced an enhanced sense of belonging” (p. 335).

Rosier and Holm (1980) conducted a study with Navajo students in a full-time Navajo language school. The study explored the effect of bilingual instruction with Rock Point Community School students who learned to read in Navajo and who were then introduced to English in grade two. Their results on standardized achievement tests were compared to other students from Rock Point and other Navajo schools who learned to read using English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Navajo students who had been initially taught to read in Navajo seem, by the third grade, to read better in English than Navajo students who had been taught to read in English only... Navajo students who had been initially taught arithmetic in Navajo seem, by the fourth grade, to [be] better in arithmetic...despite the slower pace of arithmetic instruction in the bilingual program. (p. 28)

Stiles (1997) found similar results in a comparison of four Indigenous language programs including the Cree Way in Quebec, the Hualapai in Arizona, Te Kohanga (Maori) in New Zealand, and the Punana Leo (Hawaiian) in Hawaii. He identified a number of positive outcomes

including decreased drop-out rates, increased sense of culture and identity, and improved assessment. The value of early years' programming, as well as the importance of home and community support, was also demonstrated. Similar results regarding the role of Indigenous culture outside the school setting were found in other studies. A study of 196 fifth grade American Indian children located in the Midwest, conducted by Whitbeck, Hoyt, Stubben, and LaFromboise (2001) showed that traditional culture in the home positively influenced student achievement. Similarly, Coggins, Williams, and Radin (1996), in research with 19 northern Michigan Ojibwa families, found that mothers' American Indian values had a positive effect on their children's school academic and social performance.

Louis and Taylor (2001) studied an Inuit village in northern Quebec whose students were Inuktitut speakers. Their "findings point to the importance of baseline Inuktitut proficiency as a foundation for the critical transition to second-language education" (p. 133). Another study by Wright, Taylor, and Macarthur (2000) found similar results. Children, who initially entered English or French instruction, rather than Inuktitut, suffered a slower rate of second-language acquisition. Wright and Taylor (1995) also identified a relationship between early Indigenous language instruction and personal and collective self-esteem.

An important dimension of any discussion of language and cultural programming relates to the development and use of cultural competencies. Alaska has invested significant resources in the development and implementation of standards for culturally relevant schools intended for use by state educational jurisdictions (Ray Barnhardt, personal communication, June, 2013). Similarly, the Department of Dine Education, Navajo Nation, recently adopted a set of Dine Cultural Standards that are intended for use within schools within their territory (Andrew Tah, personal communication, January, 2014). Closer to home, the Saskatoon Public School Division (2008) conducted a major initiative to develop a culturally responsive school division. The school division's Final Report provided an overview of the research and implementation work conducted by this school system. In summary, it is clear that language and culture play an important role in supporting improved educational success of Indigenous students. As Demmert (2001) indicated "congruency between the school environment and the language and culture of the community is critical to the success of formal learning" (p. 9).

### **Parent and Community Engagement.**

Based on this research and the writers' experiences as teachers and administrators, maintaining effective parental and community engagement is always challenging. For example, a First Nations school administrator shared a story regarding the establishment of their band controlled school, indicating that when the school was first operating in a series of smaller buildings located within the community, excellent parent and community involvement existed. However, following the establishment of a new attractive school building, located on the edge of the community, this strong sense of support dissipated. The First Nations school administrator speculated the potential reasons for the change but had no clear answer. What was clear was that a barrier between the school and the parents and community had emerged.

One reason might be the previous experiences of Indigenous peoples with schooling. Steeves, Furata, Carr-Stewart, and Ingleton (in press) stated that

As regards educational services, Canada followed a policy of assimilation, using children's education as a vital component of this strategy. Children were removed from their homes and put in residential schools to destroy a culture, language and way of life that was considered inferior. In an age of Empire, and the accompanying racism that characterized this era, First Nations people were to become like Europeans, leaving their previous way of life behind. Children would be key to ensuring this better future; therefore it was necessary to break the link between parents, community and children. Despite attempts by First Nations communities to resist, the Canadian government had set a clear direction of assimilation and control. (p. 5)

First Nations negotiated Treaties with the British Crown in order to secure benefits from the Crown for the use of their land. Skills for adult training (post secondary) and elementary/secondary education were included in the Treaty negotiations. Steeves, Carr-Stewart, and Pinay (2013) suggested "The Chiefs and Headmen in agreeing to treat with the Crown sought to share their lands with the newcomers in exchange for services which would enable them to maintain their own ways and learn the skills of the newcomers" (p. 5). Demmert (2001) argued that the need for congruency between the school environment and the language and culture of the community is a means of encouraging student learning outcomes and highlights a key priority for effective Indigenous schools.

Some suggested that schools continue to be instruments of assimilation and control. Freidel (1999), reporting on parent frustration with administrative/parent relations in an elementary school in Edmonton, Alberta, commented that "Perhaps low levels of parental involvement are a response to the cultural occupation that exists in public schools today" (p. 153). In research related to Inuit parental engagement in one Nunavut community, Berger (2009) identified frustrations from both parents and schools regarding the level and type of parental engagement. He concluded that if "people feel that the schools are lacking something, and especially if the lack results in a devaluing, ignoring, and assaulting of Inuit identity and culture, it should be expected that community support will not be optimal" (p. 89). Deyhle's (2009) work with Navajo parents and students in southeastern Utah reinforce these findings. She found that the schools attended by Navajo students were dominated by a perspective that she termed "manifest manners", a metaphor for dominance by the white Mormon community. One example relates to the importance of family. Notwithstanding its importance in Navajo culture, "choosing to be with one's families over careers was described as a tragic flaw and laziness" (Preface, p. xii).

Research also identified schools that managed to surmount these concerns. In case study research related to ten successful Aboriginal schools in Canada, entitled *Sharing Our Success: Ten Case Studies in Aboriginal Schooling*, Bell et al. (2004) indicated that strong educational partnerships with parents were important for reinforcing "a sense of community ownership and pride in the school and the encouragement of solid learning expectations" (Steeves, 2009, p. 51). Similarly, Leveque (1994), in a study of Native American students in Barstow, California, found that parent involvement was an important element influencing improved student learning. Melnechnko and Horsman (1998) also found similar outcomes: "Several times students talked about the support and encouragement their immediate and extended families gave them that helped influence their success at school" (pp. 9-10).

Kushman and Barnhardt's (2001) research in relation to community and parental influences involved a cross-case analysis of seven rural Alaska Native communities. The abstract of their research findings serves as an excellent summary of how effective parent/community/school relations are constructed:

First, reform efforts in small communities require an inside-out approach in which educators must first develop trusting relationships with community members, and then work with the community to design educational programs around the local place, language, and culture. Second, parents and teachers need to expand their conceptions of parent roles beyond the notion of parents supporting the school to include roles in which parents are active participants in school life and decisions. Third, school and district leaders must move from top-down to shared leadership so that the ownership for school reform is embedded in the community rather than with school personnel who constantly come and go. Finally, educators and educational reformers must recognize that education in rural Alaska has a larger purpose than teaching academic skills and knowledge. (Kushman & Barnhardt, 2001, p. 1)

### **Student Engagement and Retention.**

Raham (2010) argued the need to improve Indigenous secondary school graduation rates in Canada, indicating that the "high school graduation rate for the Aboriginal lags 28% below the national average" (p. 4). Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, and Teddy (2009) referenced the New Zealand experience and stated "the overall academic achievement level of Maori students is low; their rate of suspension from school is three times higher; they are over-represented in special education programmes for behavioural issues" (p. 734) as examples of the issues faced within New Zealand.

Indigenous educators have referenced their personal schooling experience and the need to "park themselves at the door" when they entered the school. They experienced schooling as a negative, assimilative process that, whether deliberate or not, rejected their traditional values and culture. Battiste (2013) shared her experience, commenting that "I tried to stay under the radar of the teacher, not to be noticed or labeled dumb. Little is there I care to remember" (p. 17). Deyhle (2009) reported on Navajo youth who "adopted strategies of resistance against school officials who demanded Indian youth judge themselves against their white peers; to act differently, look different, or have different life goals were signs of failure, of being a 'blanket' Indian" (Preface, p. xii). Deyhle indicated that one strategy for resistance was simply dropping out of school; in some cases, Navajo students actively resisted the pressure to conform and found themselves identified as problem students. Kirkness (2013), a Western Canadian Indigenous educator, commented on this tendency when discussing the implications on being a non-status Indian, which included being unable to attend a residential school; "I know that I would have been one of the push-outs who dared to speak her mind, which was not tolerated in those schools" (p. 17).

Yet research supports the importance of language and culture in supporting student engagement. Deyhle (1995), based on decades of research with Navajo youth, concluded that students who were grounded in their traditional tribal culture were also more academically successful. Similarly, Okagaki, Helling and Bingham (2009) questioned 67 American Indian undergraduate students concerning educational and ethnic beliefs, as well as familial support for

education. They found that “Belief in one’s bicultural efficacy was positively correlated with American Indian students’ ratings of academic identity and belief in the instrumental importance of school” (Abstract, p. 157).

Some research has explored the conflicting pressures that parents and community placed on students. Deyhle (2009) for example, documented the importance placed on successful school completion, both at the secondary and post-secondary. However, she also observed that the desire of community to see students achieve success in the white, western world while simultaneously expecting adherence to traditional tribal values placed conflicting expectations on students. Similarly, Jackson and Smith (2001), while examining post-secondary transition experiences of 22 Navajo students, found that family connections, both positive and negative, had an important influence on their post-secondary transition experiences. Jackson, Smith, and Hill (2003) commented that despite support from family and community, “Native Americans raised on a reservation often face the difficulty of leaving a place of spiritual and cultural significance. Making a commitment to pursue a college degree can be seen as selling out to a different culture and way of life” (p. 560). Raham (2009) also referenced this issue, commenting that “The evidence is conflicted on the degree to which family expectations and culture influence Aboriginal children’s perseverance and success in school” (p. 29). Steeves (2009) indicated that “These influences ranged from positive support and encouragement to family pressure to stay close to home. Clear messages of home support were considered helpful; mixed messages were not” (p. 52).

Raham (2009) indicated that social and economic factors, poverty and health related issues, high mobility in urban areas, and long distances and seasonal activities in rural areas are contributing factors to poor graduation rates. Grissmer and Flanagan (2006) documented the role that poverty has on student learning outcomes. Similarly, the research findings of Lemstra and Neudorf (2008) conducted for the Saskatoon Health Region, reinforce the role of poverty. Steeves (2009) concluded that “There can be little doubt that the debilitating effects of poverty weigh hugely on Indigenous student achievement” (p. 53). Steeves referenced Demmert’s (2001) research indicating that it “outlines the important role played by language and culture, as well as poverty, resiliency, identity, sense of self and self-esteem, goal-setting and student motivation, communication styles, and language and cognitive skills as important characteristics that affect Native American student achievement” (p. 53). Raham (2009, p. 30-31) identified a number of within school factors that impact on student retention: lack of supportive relationships; increasing skills gap; poor instructional and support services; perceived irrelevance of school; truancy, conflict, and poor behaviour; and uninvolved parents.

Given these findings, what strategies exist to help address this unfortunate state of affairs? Raham (2009, p. 29) began her discussion of student engagement and retention with a reference to Royal and Rossi (1997) emphasizing the importance of relationship and community to student academic success and retention. Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, and Teddy (2009) commenced research regarding the challenges faced by Maori secondary school students “by talking with them (and other participants in their education: families, principals and teachers) of what is involved in limiting and/or improving Maori students’ educational achievement” (p. 735). They found that “the most common discursive positions taken by Maori students, their families and their school principals was that which placed classroom caring and learning

relationships at the centre of educational achievement” (pp. 735-736). The importance of school relationships was also referenced by John Hattie (2009) who referred to Bishop’s work as an excellent example of using relationship to build success with Indigenous students.

Gwen Keith, founding Executive Director of the Mother Teresa Middle School, Regina, Saskatchewan, also prioritized the importance of caring relationships. She shared an anecdote of a parent at the recent Grade 8 graduation thanking the teachers for the amount of personal time that teachers and mentors spent with her child. Keith also identified a faith based school culture, high academic expectations, small class sizes, mentorship, close family relationships, extended learning time, teacher support, and evidence based decision making involving both students and staff as other important factors in supporting student success at Mother Teresa. (personal communication, June, 2014). Keith further indicated that in-school supports, such as monitoring attendance, introducing native language and culture, personalized learning, homework and tutoring clubs, buddy systems, the presence of Aboriginal staff, elder programs, and home outreach all had positive effects on student outcomes. (personal communication, June, 2014).

In summary, it appears that a number of strategies exist that can actively support improved student engagement and retention. But, from an educator’s perspective, it is not surprising that the importance of relationship, caring, and connection was dominant in the literature. As a colleague recently commented, good teaching has always meant meeting the needs of kids, including a caring relationship and whatever else students require to experience success.

### **Effective Schools.**

Over the past year, the authors were fortunate to spend time interviewing school administrators in a number of exemplar schools located on or near the Navajo Nation. Three were secondary schools and two were elementary; additionally, one was a charter school, two were Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) grant schools, and two were public schools (public school divisions operate on Navajo territory). Despite the nature of the schools, a consistent pattern emerged of an effective school; this included high academic expectations, close working relationships with students, a focus on strong teaching staff, attention to cultural and language programming, and an emphasis on evidence based decision. One individual, Donna Manuelito, a principal of a large secondary school in a major community, was also interviewed for this study. While Donna is committed to the issues referred to above, her initial comment was,

I really think that it comes to understanding the kids. Where they are coming from? I grew up here. I am from this community. I have background—when I got my first Masters it was in cultural bilingual education. My second Masters was in educational leadership. Our current enrollment – we have 99 percent Native Americans, so we have to look at that background. (personal communication, February, 2014)

These conclusions were reinforced in other studies of effective schools. Munns, O’Rourke and Bodkin-Andrews (2013) investigated the conditions for success of Aboriginal students of four schools, using a mixed methods approach. Their research identified the following themes as critical for success: strong community relationship; Aboriginal cultural

spaces; Aboriginal people involved in the work of schools; Aboriginal perspectives and values prioritized and embedded in school and classroom curriculum; focus on quality teaching from an Aboriginal perspective; a shift from a wellbeing community mindset to one focused on a learning community mindset; targeted support for Aboriginal students; and relationships between teachers and students work. Munns, O'Rourke and Bodkin-Andrews acknowledged that "conditions of school success for Aboriginal learners are complex equations", further stating that "schools can make a difference for Aboriginal students and the article offers future directions for school communities to consider as they work on their own approaches to enhance social and academic outcomes" (p. 10).

A local example of an exemplar school is St Mary High School, Prince Albert Separate Catholic School Division. Stelmach (2010) in her research identified two major themes: "*We recognize in every child the face of Christ*" and "*It's a kick in policy, not a kick out policy*" (p. 33). With respect to the first major theme, three key reasons for Indigenous student success in St. Mary were identified: an affirming school culture; a supportive and responsive school environment; and the on-going establishment of meaningful relationships with students and parents. The "kick in" policy was also manifested in three ways: expecting high achievement for all students; balanced structure and flexibility; and managing barriers through academic and non-academic support.

Raham's (2009, pp. 45-46) research supported these results, including the identification of a secure and welcoming school climate, curriculum and programs grounded in Aboriginal culture, involvement of parents and community, multiple programs and supports for students and families, high expectations for students and staff, and the linking of assessment to instructional and planning decisions as key to school success. A number of other studies spoke to the challenges involved in creating successful school environments. Raham also commented on the critical role of the principal, suggesting that "The role of the principal is highly complex, requiring a blend of leadership and management skills, a deep knowledge of curriculum and instruction, and a commitment to educational success for all students" (p. 44). Hohepa and Robson (2008) also referenced the principal's role, particularly from the perspective of Maori leadership, suggesting that "Maori principals...have additional duties and accountabilities linked to educational achievement and well-being of their Maori students enjoying success as Maori" (p. 36).

Others explored the complexities involved in ensuring successful school programs. McNaughton and Mei Kuin Lai (2009) referenced a three stage model of school change, while Fenimore-Smith (2009), reported on the development of a reserve based charter school, indicating that the research findings "foregrounds the complexity of factors affecting both the development of a culturally grounded charter school and the achievement of students attending the school" (Abstract, p. 1). She further commented that, given the situation of the school within the reserve, "it would seem that development of a culturally relevant academic program would be relatively easy. This proved not to be the case. That is not to say there were no successes; however, a number of factors conspired to confound the process" (p. 5).

Similar experiences are reported by Baydala et al. (2009) who found minimal gains in student outcomes in a newly founded Alberta charter school. Goddard and Foster (2002) discussed the experiences of two First Nations schools in northern Alberta that chose to join the provincial system. In both cases, “there was a tendency in both schools to support the status quo ... We found a striking dissonance between this experience and that which might be considered useful and appropriate in a northern community” (p. 16). In short, some schools have experienced success in supporting Indigenous student learning outcomes. But this is a highly complex endeavour, with no guarantee of success; dedication, leadership, and a whole range of critical interventions are necessary for success.

### **The Role of Assessment.**

In a recent meeting, Dr. Shauneen Pete, Executive Lead, Indigenization, University of Regina was questioned regarding her opinion of the role for assessment within schools. Her answer encapsulated the current research; while she indicated a concern regarding the inappropriate use of standardized and culturally inappropriate assessment measures, she was equally clear that an important role existed for the appropriate use of assessment information. (personal communication, May, 2014). Dr. Pete is not alone in her comments. Over the years, the writers have heard numerous educators address the issue of assessment in similar ways. In one case, an Indigenous Director of Education for a Saskatchewan tribal council stated that assessment information was vital if the system was to be able to respond effectively to the need to improve student learning outcomes (Don Pinay, personal communication, 2006). In another, Bishop, Berryman, Wearmouth, Peter, and Clapham (2012) made clear the commitment to an evidence based approach in their description of the Te Kotahitanga program. Recently, Gwen Keith reinforced the importance of using data and evidence based decision making to guide their work within the school (personal communication, June, 2014).

From a similar perspective, Richards, Hove, and Afolabi (2008), while discussing the Kelowna Accord, commented that “‘Governments pursue goals that are measured’ is an old maxim of public policy” (p. 2). They referenced another public sector maxim, “what gets measured gets done”. Raham (2009) captured this sentiment when she stated that “improving schools and systems gather performance information and use it to assist in gap analysis, improvement planning, and resource allocation” (p. 9). Other Canadian research supports these conclusions. In case study research involving 20 exemplar Indigenous schools across Canada, Bell et al. (2004) and Fulford, Daigle, Stevenson, Tolley, and Wade (2007) both found assessment practices were used for a variety of purposes. Bell et al. (2004) also found that “some schools utilized the data collected to set annual improvement goals, to set budgets, allocate resources, and determine staffing requirements...assessment data was utilized as the basis for strategic planning, designed to improve long-term success” (p. 310). Bell et al. commented that “The availability of standardized data is an invaluable tool for schools in communicating their specific needs to educational authorities, governing bodies, parents and the public” (p. 310).

Both Bell et al. (2004) and Fulford et al. (2007) supported the appropriate use of assessment practices. However, recognizing the need for culturally appropriate measures, Bell et al. also recommended the development of “holistic measures appropriate to Aboriginal programs; and that this data similarly be publicly available and incorporated into annual growth plans” (p. 324). Bell’s (Bell et al., 2004) final comments regarding “holistic measures

appropriate to Aboriginal Programs” speaks to the second issue raised by both Dr. Pete and the research literature – concerns about the inappropriate use of standardized and culturally inappropriate assessment measures. For example, the Canadian Council of Learning (CCL) (2007) suggested the need for a more holistic approach to Indigenous assessment, commenting that, “there is no broadly accepted framework for measuring how First Nations, Inuit and Métis learners are doing across the full spectrum of lifelong learning” (p. 29). In 2009, the CCL published research addressing this concern, with the Holistic Lifelong Learning Measurement Framework based on the “underlying structure of the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Models that were first published in 2007 by the Canadian Council of Learning (CCL)” (p. 4).

Issues related to inappropriate use of standardized and culturally inappropriate measures received widespread attention within the published research literature. McCarty (2009) commented that

Evidence from Native American contexts shows little or no post-NCLB gap reduction and/or illusory gains. These studies also suggest that high-stakes testing can lead to score manipulation, test administration improprieties, teaching to the test, the de-skilling of students and teachers through prescriptive reading routines, and the elimination of low-stakes subject matter, including Native language and culture instruction. (p. 20)

Nelson-Barber and Trumbull (2007), referencing recent federal American government initiatives such as NCLB, indicated “there is little evidence that these promises of higher standards of effectiveness in the classroom and greater teacher accountability are translating into more equitable opportunities for Indigenous children” (p. 132). They further suggested that a likely outcome of NCLB may be a move by educators “further away from culturally congruent curriculum, instruction, and assessment rather than increasing their use – despite all the evidence of their value” (p. 134).

Another issue reported in the literature relates to culturally inappropriate assessment measures. Nelson-Barber and Trumbull (2007) indicated that “it *is* clear that research on new approaches to assessment design and use that consider the role of culture in learning and assessment are needed” (p. 142). From an Australian perspective, Klenowiski (2009), while acknowledging that differences in performance may be not be due to test bias alone but also “because of Indigenous students’ differing access to learning, different social, cultural contexts or real differences in their attainment” (p. 85), went on to state that the “intention of culture-fair assessment is to design assessments so that no one particular culture has an advantage over another” (p. 85).

In closing, it seems appropriate to reference Dr. Pete’s initial comments regarding assessment. While an important role exists for the assessment information, it must be balanced by concern regarding the inappropriate use of standardized and culturally inappropriate assessment measures. Clearly, more work remains to be done.

## **Classrooms and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.**

During presentations to the Canadian Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples in 2010 and 2014, Steeves reinforced the critical role of teachers working in classrooms with students. Reflecting on his comments during the 2010 presentation, Steeves (Parliament of Canada, 2014) stated that

Fundamentally, what can we do to provide stability for that action to occur successfully? Nothing has changed from my point of view. We're currently doing this in Saskatchewan with New Zealanders who have identified Te Kotahitanga, probably the only large-scale reform we have been able to find that actually produces student learning gains. It is all about that issue. Culture and language are very important, but in the end it is about the teacher working with students in classrooms, and teachers understanding and appreciating culture and language is part of that; it is critical to success. (p. 2)

These comments capture the essence of the most important aspect of improving Indigenous student learning: the nature of the relationship between teachers and students within the classroom. Chell, Steeves, and Sackney (2009, pp. 17-23) discussed the important role that effective schools had on student achievement, further suggesting that “researchers have shown that teachers can have a powerful impact on students even if the school doesn’t” (p. 23). They delineated research supporting this comment (Brophy & Good, 1986; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris & Hopkins, 2006; Marzano, 2001, 2007; Mitchell & Sackney, 2009; Nye, Konstantopoulos & Hedges, 2004; Wright, Horn & Sanders, 1997), outlining some of the key factors related to classroom instruction that improved student achievement. Most readers will be very aware of the research surrounding effective instruction. Suffice it to say that these issues are vital if improved student learning is to occur. However, the body of research related to effective instruction is insufficient. If Indigenous students are to be effectively served, the research needs to expand to include a focus on culturally responsive pedagogy. For example, Perso (2012) commented that while “classroom teachers cannot be expected to attend to every strategy that works” (p. 84), nevertheless, “educators must become more *bi-cultural*, that is, we must better understand the belief systems and values of the primary culture of each of our students” (p. 84).

Demmert and Towner (2003, pp. 9-10) indicated that culturally based programs have six critical elements:

- Recognition and use of Native languages;
- Pedagogy that stresses traditional cultural characteristics and adult-child interactions;
- Teaching strategies that are congruent with traditional culture and contemporary ways of knowing and learning (opportunities to observe, practice and demonstrate skills);
- Curriculum based on traditional culture that recognizes the importance of Native spirituality and uses visual arts, legends, oral histories of the community;
- Strong Native community participation, including parents, elders and others in the planning and operation of the school; and,
- Knowledge and use of the social and political mores of the community.

Reinforcing these conclusions, Raham (2009, pp. 28-29) suggested that a synthesis of the literature indentified the following common elements: appropriate curriculum and resources; First Nation language programs and teaching resources; a positive school culture, emphasizing respect and relationships; Elder programs, traditional celebrations, and cultural enrichment provided through affiliations with Aboriginal cultural centres and organizations; employment of Aboriginal staff; professional development for teachers related to cultural proficiency; effective strategies for communication with parents and dealing with attendance/lateness; formal and informal structures for Aboriginal involvement in decision making; and varied assessment practices.

Notwithstanding these comments regarding successful practices related to culturally based pedagogy, Raham (2009) also referenced research by August, Goldenburg, and Ruela (2006) “ who conclude[d] the majority of CBE studies, while furnishing plausible claims for success, lack the ability to prove direct causality for achievement” (p. 27). One typical example is Kanu (2007). While reporting optimistic findings regarding the integration of Indigenous perspectives and improved Indigenous student achievement in a western Canadian high school, she stated that “microlevel classroom variables such as culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy alone cannot provide a functional and effective agenda in reversing achievement trends among Aboriginal students” (p. 38). Kanu went on to reference issues such as improving attendance, emphasizing the need to “explore the relationships between micro- and macrolevel variables affecting schooling and the realization that meaningful and lasting intervention requires a systematic, holistic, and comprehensive approach” (p. 38).

As will be apparent from earlier references in this paper, one factor that consistently appeared related to relationship. For example, Freed and Samson (2004, p. 42), studying rural schools in western Alaska, reported on the importance of effective school/student and school/community relationships. Lipka et al. (2005), conducting ethnographic research with Yup’ik communities in Alaska, stated that they “identified several possible factors common to successful teachers and students. First and foremost was the long-term positive relationship between teachers and students that contributed to a classroom environment in which trust and mutuality were constructed over time” (p. 382). Lewthwaite and McMillan (2010) investigating learning success among Nunavut Inuit middle years students, referenced cultural contributors, and also that students “placed importance on teachers who cared not only for them as people, but also for their performance as learners” (Abstract, p. 140).

MacIver (2012), reporting on data collected from 10 at risk youth in a Canadian urban centre, indicated that “9 out of 10 study participants identified various aspects of building relationships with their teachers as a significant influence in remaining engaged in school” (p. 159). She stated that “One participant spoke of ‘bonding with her teacher’ ” while another “perceived that building a relationship between a teacher and student was important as it governed their ongoing working relationship and consequently the student’s success” (p. 159). Perhaps the best example of the successful utilization of a culturally based pedagogy relates to a New Zealand secondary program, Te Kotahitanga, which is based on a culturally responsive pedagogy of relationship (Bishop, Berryman, Wearmouth, Peter, & Clapham, 2012). As evidenced earlier, Hattie (2009, p. 118) referred to Bishop’s work with Te Kotahitanga as an

excellent example of encouraging improved student learning by building effective relationship within an appropriate cultural setting. Bishop and Berryman (2010) further indicated that,

Te Kotahitanga is a research and professional development project that aims to support teachers to raise the achievement of New Zealand's indigenous Maori students in public/mainstream classrooms. An Effective Teaching Profile, developed from the voices of Maori students, their families, principals and some of their teachers, provides direction and focus for both the classroom pedagogy and the professional development. (p. 173)

Bishop, Berryman, Wearmouth, Peter and Clapham (2012), reporting on the findings from focus group interviews conducted with engaged and non-engaged Maori secondary students, parents, teachers and school administrators, stated that,

The students unanimously identified that it was the quality of in-class relationships and interactions they had with their teachers that were the main determinants of their educational achievement. In their narratives, students went on to suggest ways that teachers could create a context for learning in which Maori students' educational achievement could improve by changing the ways teachers relate to and interacted with Maori students in their classrooms. In other words, according to Maori students, what was needed to improve Maori students' achievement was for teachers to develop and adopt a relationship-based pedagogy in their classrooms. It was apparent to them that teachers must relate to and interact with Maori students in a manner different from the common practice if a change in Maori students' achievement was to occur. (p. 696).

Bishop, Berryman, Wearmouth, Peter, and Clapham (2012), further reported that while teachers had positive intentions, most "identified what they saw as Maori students' deficiencies as being the main reason for their low achievement" (pp. 695-696). This was in contrast to the views of students, parents, school administrators, and a minority of teachers. The findings of the focus group and interview research led the development of the Te Kotahitanga program, which emphasized a culturally responsive pedagogy of relationship. Te Kotahitanga reinforced the importance of what were termed "agentic positioning" by teachers and the need to reject "deficit theorizing", in effect the belief by teachers and others that, due to social and economic pressures, Maori students were unable to experience academic success. In effect, teachers and others effectively concluded that there was no point in trying to engage Maori students – their efforts would be in vain. Based on research by Steeves, Furuta, Carr-Stewart and Ingleton (in press), it would appear that these assumptions, whether by teachers or others, are incorrect. Deficit theorizing only provides a rationale for failure to support students in their learning; it does not build towards success. Te Kotahitanga appeared to be the only large scale reform effort with Indigenous students that actually demonstrated improved student learning outcomes (Bishop et al., 2009; Bishop et al., 2012).

In summarizing the impact of Te Kotahitanga, a statement by Ray Barnhardt (personal communication, June, 2013), an Alaska academic, seemed to capture the reasons for Te Kotahitanga's success; "You know it has taken 40 years but it is all these pieces. The cultural standard, the models, the school curriculum that is different, the process for assessing teacher performance; those things all go together." Te Kotahitanga shows evidence of accomplishing this

herculean task. It provides a “road map” to others who are seeking ways to address the challenge of improving Indigenous student learning outcomes.

### **Retention of and Support for Teachers/Administrators.**

A principal from the Northern Lights School Division (NLSD) captured the essence of the need for teacher retention and engagement.

I think, when you have teachers, particularly in the North, who have built relationships with their students, with their parents, with their communities, I think you have a much better learning environment for students. There is an element of trust. Students probably, may not get involved in behaviors that will challenge the authority of those teachers and of course if you have teachers who are in a continual process of improvement, then over a course of several numbers of years they are going to continually improve their instruction and as such improve achievement in their classrooms. (personal communication, August, 2012)

This comment, drawn from a focus group/interview study of teacher retention and support conducted for the NLSD by Steeves, Carr-Stewart, and Furuta (2013), was reinforced by another statement from a young teacher.

You leave and then the next year another person is there that doesn't really fully know what they are doing and then the next year someone else is there. I think that it reflects on their behavior, their level of trust and their defiance as well. It is really important to kind of have reasons or ways to make us want to stay for longer. (personal communication, November, 2012)

Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins (2006) stated that “classroom factors explain more than one-third of the variation in pupil achievement” (p. 4). Wright, Horn and Sanders (1997) indicated that “The most important factor affecting student learning is the teacher ... Effective teachers appear to be effective with students of all achievement levels, regardless of the level of heterogeneity in their classrooms” (p. 63).

An Alaskan study (Adams, 2010), that investigated the benefits of mentoring programs for new teachers working in isolated Alaskan Indigenous communities, made clear the importance of both support to new teachers and the relationship between student achievement and teacher experience. Adams (2010) indicated that

Results show that although mentoring new teachers did not bring the students' standardized scores of new teachers up to the same level as students in veteran classes, they are much closer than expected based on past research...Thus, mentoring shows promising results to start closing the achievement gap typically seen between the students of new and veteran teachers. (Abstract, p. 1)

This claim is supported by NLSD school administrators. For example, one principal commented that “It takes you about 3 years after they graduate to get a teacher that is proficient—that is classroom proficient... Oft times when they get proficient they want to move”

(personal communication, August, 2012). Another administrator summed up the issue with the statement “That is part of recruitment too I think. Keeping the people there. There is more growth in our literacy and numeracy goals when we retain them” (personal communication, August, 2012). Steeves, Carr-Stewart, and Furuta (2013) stated that “These comments reinforce research findings regarding the relationship between length of teacher tenure and student achievement. It will be difficult, if not impossible, to meaningfully improve student achievement in the absence of well trained, experienced teachers” (p. 8).

Raham (2009, pp. 40-44) reinforced the importance of initial teacher preparation, teacher induction and mentoring, professional development and supports and resources. Teachers and administrators from the NLSA (Steeves, Carr-Stewart, & Furuta, 2013, pp. 13-22) also referenced these issues, suggesting the need for recruitment from culturally similar institutions, from local programs and universities, and for improved orientation, mentoring and support programs for new teachers. For example, one individual stated that:

I think they need to know a lot about community. They need some strong orientation in terms of—just basic understandings about Aboriginal people for instance. The social, historical, economic things. They don’t have that proper history. They are coming in with a different world view, a different set of expectations...They need to have some sense of the languages to be able to communicate with elders and community people for example. If they are just sticking around in their teacherages doing nothing after school you are not really actively interested in the community in which you are working. (personal communication, August, 2012, p. 19)

Another teacher who emphasized the need for culturally appropriate instructional strategies stated that

Something that struck me I think what would have been nice if there had been some mandatory PD in terms of how to teach in different context. Teaching First Nations students, A; and B just the different life up here and how that works. I think it would make us more successful in the classroom and make learning more successful for the students. (Steeves, Carr-Stewart, & Futura, 2013, pp. 20-21)

When interviewed for this study, Dr. Joe Martin, a former school superintendent from Northern Arizona University, also emphasized these factors, commenting that “I tried to keep my salary scale the same or better than any other school district. I tried to provide some other kinds of incentives like free cable TV, free internet access, a very nice carport, a nice backyard with grass as a way to attract quality teachers” (personal communication, November, 2013).

Based upon the literature and focus group/interview results, Steeves, Carr-Stewart, and Furuta (2013, pp. 21-25) provided a number of recommendations. Some of the most critical are outlined below:

- Consider issues related to recruitment and retention within the context of improved student achievement.
- Explore a variety of “hygiene” issues related to teacher recruitment and retention.

- Lobby provincial government agencies to increase the number of NORTEP [Northern Teacher Education Program] – and more generally TEP [Teacher Education Program] seats – and provide funding for the training of high school teachers.
- Consider a variety of strategies to improve the recruitment of teachers.
- Consider strategies to improve induction/orientation programs.
- Consider the development of more substantial teacher induction programs that provide university credit.

Given the critical contribution that teachers make to student learning, the incremental investment required to encourage an optimal learning environment for Indigenous students is a wise investment. If teachers are to demonstrate the technical skills, cultural knowledge, and student relationships required for the successful improvement of Indigenous student learning outcomes, then consideration of improved teacher retention and engagement strategies is necessary.

### **Governance and Leadership.**

Much has been written regarding the need for strong leadership and governance. Typical findings are characterized by Maguire (2003) who considered four consistently improving Alberta school districts. Steeves (2009) summarized Maguire’s conclusions by stating that that they typically displayed the following characteristics: “widely understood vision statements clearly focused on students’ learning; a culture of joint planning and decision making that was proudly shared by teachers and school administrators; the effective use of assessment data; and schools consistently attempting to measure themselves against system-level expectations” (pp. 43-44).

Steeves (2009) also concluded that existing research supported similar conclusions within Indigenous schools. He cited two major studies, the Sharing Our Success (Bell et al., 2004; Fulford et al., 2007) SAEF research projects, which used case study methodology to study 20 successful Indigenous Canadian schools. These studies consistently identified strong governance and leadership structures as an important dimension of successful Aboriginal schools. Bell et al. (2004) summed up their findings as follows:

All schools possessed highly effective governance structures, particularly important for band-operated schools. Stable leadership, long-term planning, and strategic alignment of available resources towards the goals they set marked these schools. Two band-operated schools had developed innovative hybrid governance systems beyond the capacity of the band’s infrastructure. Most principals had been at the school for some years. While their leadership styles varied widely, their role in promoting and sustaining a common vision, focus and energy was a dominant factor in their school’s success. Models of decision-making within the schools ranged from consultation to full power-sharing by staff students and community, all of whom have the right to veto a proposal. (p. 13)

More recently, the Alberta School Boards Association, in *Ensuring First Nations, Métis and Inuit Student Success Leadership through Governance* (2011), argued that “the success of an organization can be directly linked to the leadership of its governance board” (p. 17) and within

that context, organizational success means “improvement to student learning outcomes” (p. 17). Other research also supports this argument:

The OECD (2008) in reviewing school systems in 22 countries found “that leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning”.

The American Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (2006) “found a statistically significant relationship between district leadership and student achievement”.

C.D. Howe (2008) in a study of British Columbia provincial school districts “found that Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal performance gaps were either positively or negatively impacted by district leadership and governance practices”.

Thus for researchers, governance practices matter and school boards “by employing effective governance practices and focusing on student learning, can overcome many of the historical and socio-economic factors that negatively affect Aboriginal student performance” (p. 17). The Alberta School Boards Association focused on good governance practices to “raise the student achievement bar and close the student achievement gap” (p. 17).

Using good leadership and good governance to address the gap between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students has been the center of a variety of research. Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000 and Fullan (2002) referencing the art of leadership stated that it is the “spiritual domain” and by Dantley and Rogers (2001) as “the spiritual voice. Your relationship with others is critical” (English, 2008, p. 1). Similarly, the Canadian Institute of Governance (IOG) identified that governance is “the art of steering an organization... whereby strategic goals are set, key relationships are maintained, the health of the organization is safeguarded and an account is rendered for the organizational performance” (<http://www.iog.ca/>). Thus “governance is about leadership, relationships and goals, with good governance characterized by strong leadership, positive relationships and shared goals” (ASBA, 2011, p. 17). The IOG created four principles as a core to good governance.

**Legitimacy and voice:** Within education the importance of meaningful engagement of the Aboriginal community and its involvement in, and ownership of, decisions that affect the education of Aboriginal children (ASBA, 2011, p. 18).

**Direction:** The importance of an organization’s strategic vision, to the importance of having a broad and long-term strategic education plan that details purpose, goals and measures and a sense of what is needed for the accomplishment of school jurisdiction goals and exhibit the focus and discipline to stay the course (ASBA, 2011, p. 22-23).

**Performance:** The performance principle is anchored in the notion of producing results that meet needs while making the best of resources and which would within this context affect Aboriginal student learning. The inclusion of “Aboriginal staff in the decision-making process at both a classroom and the leadership level ... ensures that a shared ownership and responsibility for developing a positive and holistic school culture is fostered” (Warren & Quine, 2013, p. 19). The focus for ASBA was to:

- Understanding local barriers to and strategies for success

- Individual student supports
- High standards
- Ensure the right people and capacity building are within the school division
- Relationships and partnerships – a holistic view of the family, community and school
- Accountability for the provision of quality educational services through the policies, structures and resources that they put in place
- Defining success and tracking progress (ASBA, 2011, p. 27-33)

Fairness: Grounded in transparency and equity and in operation “fairness is not about identical treatment for all but rather addressing needs” and includes inclusiveness, innovation, learner centered, responsive and collaborative, and results oriented (ASBA, 2011, p. 36-37).

Fullan (2002) argued that future educational “leaders are those that can create a fundamental transformation in the learning cultures...Transforming school cultures is a very broad sweep of the educational environment” (p. 19). If we are to facilitate the changing educational opportunities for Aboriginal students, we must review and renew the governance and leadership parameters we currently faced with.

These comments capture much of the research regarding leadership and governance within schools, in particular, Indigenous Canadian schools. These research conclusions are relatively consistent and clear: effective leadership and governance systems are crucial if Indigenous student learning outcomes are to occur. However, within the Canadian context, another critical dimension requires exploration. This concerns the nature of governance systems as they relate to Indigenous youth. Given the research focus of this report, the fact that two schooling structures, the provincial and federal systems, as managed by First Nations, come into play must be recognized. The Ministry of Education in Saskatchewan has responsibility for all provincial operated schools within the province while the Federal Government of Canada has the legislative power for all educational funding and processes for individuals living on reserve in Saskatchewan. The federal department responsible for all matters relating to Indigenous affairs has changed since its establishment in 1869, today Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) is the federal department responsible for administering all matters related to “Indians, and lands reserved for Indians” (Constitution Act, 1982). This division of powers for education within Saskatchewan (as in all other provinces) was established by the British North America Act in 1867 and continues today.

The Saskatchewan and the federal governments for the most part remain alone in administering education within their sphere, and demonstrate the two individual educational groups are for the most part stand-alone as is the case in other provinces and the federal government. The two educational entities may have varying degrees of contact but however the two are independent from each other and operate within their own legal and administrative jurisdiction. Furthermore, they are both detached from Indigenous Peoples’ legal and administrative jurisdiction and their worldview about their children’s right to a self-determining education. They thus have little interactive relationship on education. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education sets the policy and procedures for education and individual school boards deliver education at the local level. Students who live on-reserve and wish to attend a provincial school are accommodated through a provincial tuition agreement between the First Nation

community, the provincial school board, and the federal government. For students who live on-reserve and wish to be educated on reserve, attending a First Nation managed on-reserve school funding is received through an agreement (various annual agreements) with the federal government.

In effect, the two systems of educational governance largely exist in separate “silo’s”, which can have unfortunate consequences for students who may move between the two systems. In addition, the conflicted relationship between those responsible for governance in First Nations communities and the federal AANDC, and its often Western perspective regarding the delivery of education, has added further complexity to this discussion.

The issue of effective relationship has often emerged within the literature and the research findings contained within this research study. Just as Willie Ermine (2007) argued for the establishment of ethical space to deal with conflicted perspectives within other aspects of Indigenous and Western world views, so too does this metaphor appear relevant to the need to encourage practical and improved working relationships between provincial and federal governance structures, and Indigenous governance structures. In effect, a renewed emphasis on Ermine’s ethical space is critical if the necessary relationships between provincial, federal, and Indigenous governance systems are to develop. In the absence of effective governance relationships, school and system based leadership cannot meaningfully accomplish its primary goal – better lives for Indigenous youth in Saskatchewan.

### **A Concluding Note to the Literature Review.**

Attempting to ensure a positive future for youth has long been an important goal for Indigenous communities. Documents relating to the negotiations of the Numbered Treaties (1871-1921) indicated that much time was spent on discussing education (as well as other issues). In reference to education it was clear from both the Crown representatives and the First Nations Chiefs and Headmen that western education was not intended to supplant traditional Indigenous educational practices. Education of First Nations students would ensure they received the knowledge of their parents and communities, as well as western education to enable them to grow and prosper (Morris, 1990/1881). In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood demanded that First Nations children be able to survive and have:

Pride [which] encourages us to recognize and use our talents, as well as to master the skills needed to make a living.

Understanding to our fellowmen will enable us to meet other Canadians on an equal footing, respecting cultural differences while pooling resources for the common good.

Living in harmony with nature will insure preservation of the balance between man and his environment which is necessary for the future of our planet, as well as for fostering the climate in which Indian Wisdom has always flourished. (NIB, 1972, p. 1)

For the National Indian Brotherhood this would ensure that First Nations students had the “preparation for total living” and “as a means of enabling us to participate fully in our own social, economic, political and educational advancement” (p. 3). Research supports these aspirations. If Indigenous students, and their communities, are to build towards a positive future, attention must be paid to traditional culture, language and values. As the factors identified within

this conceptual framework suggest, attention to best practices within both Western and traditional Indigenous models of education are required if Indigenous students are to experience success. And like every child, this success is not only deserved but vitally important for the future of the broader society. A failure to consider the clear direction provided by this research will not only impair the future of young Indigenous students but will also diminish the broader society in which these young people reside. A moral and practical commitment to ensuring these young people are treated equitably will enhance both their futures and that of the wider society. Fairness and practicality demands no less.

### **Voices from Others: Thoughtful Perspectives**

As part of the decision to conduct an updated literature review regarding Indigenous student learning and set context to the Seeking their Voices research, it was also decided to conduct an investigation among respected academics, educational administrators, and key policy leaders. The outcome of this decision was a series of 18 individual interviews with prominent academics, school administrators, and policy people in Canada, the United States, and New Zealand. Their perspectives essentially parallel the conclusions drawn from the literature review and the Seeking their Voices research. Issues such as the importance of knowledgeable and supportive relationships among students, teachers, family and school, effective teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy including issues such as instructional practice, teacher knowledge of the student's cultural assets, well designed teacher pre-service and professional development, and a focus on language and culture were reinforced in all aspects of the research.

Four overriding themes were identified: success, relationships, teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy, and language, culture, and colonization. It should be noted that limitations of space make a full reporting of the thematic analyses conducted with these interviews impossible. Future research will provide a more complete opportunity to share participant perspectives emerging from the interviews. Finally a statement of thanks to the interview participants is necessary – these are active individuals who generously found time within demanding schedules to share their knowledge. It was greatly appreciated.

### **Research Methodology**

This study was conducted based on an extension of research ethics approval provided in 2013 for the Kokum Connection: Leadership for Improving Student Learning in a First Nations School (File # 37R1011). The approval was based on an expressed intention to extend the original research to include a focus on Indigenous teaching learning models and pre-service education in Alaska, Arizona, Hawaii, and New Zealand, indicating that it was our intention to conduct interviews with prominent Canadian and international academics and educators. As is often the case, the research findings evolved in slightly different ways, with a greater focus on Indigenous teaching and improved student learning and a lesser emphasis on teacher pre-service issues.

It was our intention to interview a broad cross-section of academics, educational administrators, and key policy leaders. This meant that 18 individuals from Canada, New Zealand, and the United States were eventually interviewed. Participants from Canada included

six from Saskatchewan and one from Newfoundland; representation from the United States included two participants from Alaska, four from Arizona, and one from Hawaii, Utah, and Wyoming. Two New Zealand academics were included as participants in the study. Of the group, 11 came from Indigenous backgrounds while seven were non-Indigenous. Eight of the interviewees were female and 11 were male. All were individuals who would be considered prominent within their field; with one possible exception, all brought a lifetime of involvement with Indigenous issues, in particular education.

The study utilized interviews as a strategy for data collection, reflecting work by Kovach (2010) which suggested a semi-structured conversational approach that allowed participants enhanced flexibility to share their knowledge. Two research questions were posed to the interviewees: What are some of the key factors that affect Indigenous student learning outcomes; and What can be done to address, or enhance, strategies to address these factors? Flexibility regarding the nature and direction of the conversation was provided. Interviews typically lasted one hour, but there were exceptions; some were shorter and several lasted longer, perhaps 90 minutes. The location of the interviews varied widely, including participant offices, homes, hotel rooms, and on one occasion, a vehicle. The primary researcher was responsible for conducting all the interviews.

The transcription of the interviews was conducted by two experienced educators with varying degrees of experience working within Indigenous education. The subsequent analysis of interview data was also conducted by two individuals, as well as the utilization of thematic analysis as a vehicle for analysis. Each individual conducted a separate analysis; the primary researcher, who was one of the two, then conducted a subsequent cycle of analysis to establish the final thematic structure of the interview data. Given the connections between the responses from the two research questions posed within the interview, the results were collapsed and analyzed as one set of data. This meant the themes were assessed according to the frequency that they were stated across interviewees without reference as to whether they are primarily an issue or a solution. Charmaz (2006) provided guidance regarding the conduct of these analyses.

It should be noted that, while 18 interviews from three countries reflects a broad perspective, it is still relatively limited in scope. As such, the results reported here should be viewed with a degree of caution. Hopefully, they will provide further perspective regarding the findings from the literature review and, most importantly, the thematic analysis of the “voices”.

## **Analysis of Themes**

### **The Role of Success.**

When setting the context for this research, the Foreword emphasized the need to avoid the all too typical deficiency narrative, focussing rather on a more hopeful narrative. This research was intended to identify a path forward; rejecting a deficiency narrative and instead focussing upon concrete strategies to support learning for Saskatchewan Indigenous youth. Given this intent, it was difficult to avoid interviewee comments regarding the definition and importance of success. For example, one interviewee emphasized what he termed the “Why”, in effect what a successful educated Indigenous person should look like. The issue of success was

thought provoking, and as such, was influential in shaping the subsequent construction of the key issues addressed within the literature review and this research.

It should be noted that this is not intended to suggest that all is well; it is not. For example, Dan, a recently retired senior provincial civil servant, commented that *“someone comes from the United Nations to visit and we are shocked about how they are going to comment about our relationship with indigenous peoples. So why should we be shocked? It is still the one dark place for Canada”* (personal communication, August, 2013). Despite this reality, many stories of success are occurring. For these reason, the analyses reported here commence with a discussion of success, both at the system and individual level.

### **System Success.**

Gary, a First Nations leader, commented on the success of Indigenous controlled schools; *“my main point ... is non Aboriginal Canada has run Aboriginal education for 150 years with a lot less numbers of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal schools on average are probably even younger than 30 years old ...I’d say let’s find ways to build on the successes that are there, because in less than 30 years on average there has been some great, great strides”* (personal communication, November, 2013). Ray, an Alaskan academic, provided an example of successful curriculum innovation.

*The focal point of most of the resources that we developed has been to help students see the connection between what they are expected to do in school and what their life is like out of school. That there is a link there that helps students relate to what they are being expected to perform in a school context. The general headings for all that are culturally based approaches, where you leave students with the cultural context that they live in, that their families are part of. (personal communication, June, 2013)*

Others talked more specifically about student success within schools. Donna, a Navajo principal, talked about improving graduation rates, stating that *“Here is the graduation rate for 2009 – it was 69%. For 2010 it was 66% and for 2011... they were 65% and then for 2012, they were at 71% and then this past year it was 80%. And then the dropout summary for Window Rock – in 2011 it was 6.9, 2012 it was 8.1 and then in 2013 it was 6.5. So we went down considerably considering what we had”* (personal communication, February, 2014). Lori, a First Nations director, discussed the importance of accessing resources and the consequent impact on student success, suggesting that *“I am optimistic. I hope things are changing. I think they are. You look at the results that our Tribal Council has been able to achieve in one year given the resources that we finally got. We are able to demonstrate that 88% of our kids are showing growth”* (personal communication, October, 2013).

Similarly, Joe, a Navajo educator and academic, stated that *“One of my philosophies is failure is not an option”*, with these accompanying comments.

*Some of my mentors talked about at risk kids. Some of them come from backgrounds that are permissive and that is there in Navajo culture and a lot of Indian cultures. It is tolerated and encouraged in a lot of ways, so kids test the system. A little more structure around that can guide that student sometimes; that is when the human quality comes out,*

*when the student senses that the teacher brings some understanding of who they are, they can see that the teacher really cares about me enough to want to have expectations. One of the things we instituted in Kayenta, I wanted the kids to feel that they were being paid attention to, so we set up this mentoring system with freshman in high school and all the way to the senior level. I had one teacher to work with at least five students; the teacher met on a daily basis or 2-3 times a week so the kids get the message that they are being monitored. (personal communication, November, 2013)*

Ron, a First Nations executive administrator, commented regarding the changes that have occurred in schools since he graduated.

*I would say that today's school environment has a far more welcoming atmosphere. I walked into my daughter's high school last year. She has since graduated. One of my girls. And they have a number of languages welcoming me into the school. That is something that would not have been thought of or even welcomed back in the late 70's, early 80's when I was going through high school. (personal communication, September, 2013)*

Edwina, a retired Mi'kmaq school administrator, commented on the positive change that has happened during her career;

*What we have now out there in the community 20 years later are parents with a high school education, parents who can help their children read and write, parents who can go down to the school and talk to the teacher, who aren't afraid of the teachers anymore. (personal communication, September, 2013)*

Clearly, encouraging change is occurring at the school and system level. What are the implications of these changes for students – and what does success mean for them as individuals?

### ***Student Success.***

Eomailani, a Hawaiian academic, referenced the importance of competency in both Western and Hawaiian cultures as key to success for her children; *“I would like my children to be grounded first in their own Hawaiian language and culture before they are immersed in Western culture and language, so that they are able to view Western knowledge through a Hawaiian worldview ... But I would say that I am looking for both kinds of success when they get bigger”* (personal communication, January, 2014). Lori, a First Nations director, defined success in a similar fashion, stating *“For me it would be from a holistic perspective.... I will use my own child as an example. I would say he would be successful if he knew who he was. If he understood where he came from. If he knows where he is going. And if he is able to walk in two worlds”* (personal communication, October, 2013). Donna, a Navajo principal, discussed what success meant for her students, suggesting that,

*I want them to be treated like young adults and when we talk about success, to be successful in life. That doesn't mean they are all going to go to college. All of them are going to get jobs. All of them are going to make this amount of money. For me student success is they are happy. Yes, I want them to graduate but sometimes—we have a*

*student who was here—she got pregnant and she didn't graduate last year. But she came back this year and she graduated in December ... Being able to see her happy. To me that is success. (personal communication, February, 2014).*

Joe, a Navajo educator and academic, raised the issue of what he termed the “why” question. He talked about his Grandfather, who asked the question, “*what does an educated Indian person look like*”, going on to state “*that if you work backwards from that, there may be a lot of things that could help shed light on the things that we are talking about*”. Joe went on to say that “*The first thing that comes to my mind is ... someone who does not live in just two worlds but the best of three – four worlds, know the language and participate in cultural, but be able to get out of that for the purpose of performing your work with non-Indians because that is what we have to do anyway*” (personal communication, November, 2013). Joe further explained these comments by stating that

*If you are someone who can exemplify that by not just living in two worlds but three or four and do it smoothly, that is where you get the respect. That goes back to what I was sharing earlier - if you are able to exemplify that you still have your culture, that you participate in cultural events and also go from there and perform non-Indian related professions and go forth, you are someone who has been able to internalize the teachings of your grandparents and your culture and you have that intact. (personal communication, November, 2013)*

Joe further discussed the “why” question, indicating that “*The most important thing for me is that I want them to think through the “why” part. About being a change agent and about being able to go into a community and help bring the school and community closer together*” (personal communication, November, 2013). He commented that

*I think that in the larger cultural setting, the talk is about preservation language and teaching and culture and that fits into that language we have about self-determination and making sure that we all have a role in protecting sovereignty. So I think that if kids can understand why it is important to have an education ... It helps the student understand that it is important so that they can make decisions about themselves and their future and apply themselves appropriately – if they don't understand “Why”, they are just going through the motions. (personal communication, November, 2013)*

Jon, a colleague of Joe's at Northern Arizona University, recalled a previous conversation with Joe regarding the relative success of the Navajo in language and cultural retention.

*He was saying that Navajos are one tribe that has grown in population and what was in the Navajo culture that allowed it to thrive in poverty while other groups did not hold their own. He said what the strengths are in Navajo culture, that self sufficiency was a value. He was asking why you do things in terms of being a Navajo versus doing things to get a job. (personal communication, November, 2013)*

Barbara, an Alaskan researcher, further elaborated on these themes by stating that

*I feel like the internal motivation a lot of times is built into Native society and it is different in different places but has the same idea of being able to contribute to your*

*group and that is what builds your self esteem—that you contribute to your group ... you know people accept that you are a contributor to your group and I feel that in education we are able to build that in even in K-12. We are going to teach you how to become a contributor to your group and what we do here today is something you can take back and you can benefit your family with, your friends with, your extended family, your community as opposed to you are just learning this because later in life you are going to have to do your cheque book, which I think is our motivation that we tell kids. (personal communication, July, 2013)*

Donna, a well known American academic who has conducted longitudinal studies with Navajo youth from southeastern Utah for over forty years, commented on the tendency to require students to reject their traditional values,

*I think so and that gets back to my point about how are we defining success in an anthropology class that I am teaching. We are reading ethnographies of minoritized communities, you get a lot of people talking about book learning being only one kind of learning ... schools too often require you to sever yourself from your community and be an individual; don't do cooperative things it requires it for academic success – Carlisle Boarding school. It was a way you could break tribal connections and I think that schools are still viewed as mechanisms to separate Indian students from their communities. (personal communication, November, 2013)*

Donna further commented on what constitutes success,

*I think that the fact that someone drops out and someone else graduates in my early work, we would say one person succeeded and one person failed. But if we look 20 years out, what are those doing? They are succeeding because of community connections. Young people leave. I have followed about 1600 - they leave and they all go back as adults. There is a sense of stability; people talk about reservations as places of violence, of alcohol problems. Yes it is there but more so they are places of homeland, of healing, of support - all those positive things. You can leave because it is your diaspora ...I looked at failure so much in the beginning and now my research looks at and for success. ... So when I was looking at failure, I was missing the young who fail than succeed. So what kinds of things are helping them succeed? That is what I keep coming back to that whole resilience and sense of knowing who you are, having your Navajo umbilical cord. ... the three women I talk about in my book are the three most beautiful women. But if you use criterion of how much money they make or if they own their own house, they will score poorly on that. But when you look at their lived lives and what they are able to pass down, there is a huge amount of cultural wealth there and resources. (personal communication, November, 2013)*

The role of the family in shaping success was mentioned by several participants. Ron, an experienced First Nations executive administrator, referenced the role of his Mother.

*I think it starts at home and the attitudes at home about how important education is. I am very fortunate that I come from a family where my late Mom was an educator. One of two First Nation people in Teachers' college back in the 60's. And very much committed to*

*and dedicated to insuring that both I and my brother were successful in school. (personal communication, September, 2013)*

Similarly, Gary, a First Nations leader, discussed the role of his family in shaping attitudes leading to success.

*I think that just in my experience in different roles over the years whether it has been as working as a classroom teacher, or an administrator, or the political role, being involved in that for quite a bit, and then corporate, is expectations. I think back to my own upbringing, family always said you will work, you will do it well. And nothing less is acceptable. (personal communication, November, 2013)*

It seems clear from their comments that that the role of the family in shaping success is vital. It also seems clear that success requires a broader definition than the traditional focus on academic success and a well paid career. Attention to one's family and community are demonstrably important, as is the ability to function successfully within "two worlds". Joe's comments regarding the why and what constitutes an educated Indian person help clarify the issue of success. If we in the pre K-12 school system are to experience enhanced success with Indigenous youth, there must be a greater understanding of the critical nature of these factors. This will sometimes be hard work for teachers, administrators, and others within the educational system. Once again, reference to Willie Ermine's (2007) concept of the "ethical space of engagement" seems relevant. Students, parents and others within the Indigenous community must work hard to actualize the concept of two worlds; similarly Western schools must work equally hard to understand the differing cultural expectations and needs of Indigenous youth. Success in finding this ethical space of engagement will mean success for Saskatchewan Indigenous youth.

### **The Role of Relationship.**

The word "relationship" appeared repeatedly within the literature review; the interviews reported upon here are no exception. Whether discussing the importance of relationship between teacher and student, between school and family, or school and community, the prevalence of this word within the eighteen interviews ensured recognition as a major theme.

### ***Student/Teacher Relationships.***

The importance of a caring, respectful relationship between students and teachers was emphasized, as was the value of teachers really "knowing" their students. Linda, a Saskatchewan academic, emphasized the importance of effective teacher relationships, about "*building trusting relationships*" and "*re-jigging the program so these kids could succeed*". She discussed one teacher suggesting that "*He was coaching the kids after school...He would go to the reserve and drive the kids so that the First Nations kids knew that he cared about their families, their success*". She described this as an "*inter-dynamic relational way of being with one another*" (personal communication, July, 2013). Jon, an academic from Northern Arizona University, reinforced these comments, indicating that "*we need to work on ... the idea of what happens when we think that the teacher does not care; teachers need to be interested and they need to care*" (personal communication, November, 2013).

Gary, a First Nations leader and former teacher, emphasized the importance of relationship for effective teaching; *“It is being a good teacher. The kids, in my experience with students. I have met some great teachers. The best teachers I ever met were the ones that established a connection with students. Because it is about relationships. For me teaching is about relationships”* (personal communication, November, 2013). Joe, a Navajo educator, discussed this within the context of teacher expectations, suggesting that *“when the student senses that the teacher brings some understanding of who they are, they can see that the teacher really cares about me enough to want to have expectations”* (personal communication, November, 2013).

Donna, an American academic, tied relationship and caring for the student to awareness of their background.

*I decided is that, in talking to the Navajo students, caring is not enough. It has to be respect, you can care about someone but know nothing about them – you can say “I care about that little boy” but know nothing about when he leaves your classroom, what he is going back to in his home community or home. So you have to know people to respect them and that is what we are missing – and caring and going to the window and waving to him but not knowing anything about him. (personal communication, November, 2013)*

Donna, a Navajo principal, found it helpful having a common background with her students, suggesting that *“I really think that it comes to understanding the kids. Where they are coming from. I grew up here. I am from this community. I have background”* (personal communication, February, 2014). Joe stated that this relationship could be achieved without being from the community, providing a helpful perspective for both teachers and teacher preparation programs.

*I think that it, the relationship that it has to start ... on the local people’s terms. The relationship ... for someone to come from the outside, to use that as a way of learning some new stuff that they are not accustomed to learning ... so relationship would be one key element in all of that. Also when you build the relationship you realize no one taught me how to do this in our teacher training institutions; so you begin to explore other ways of teaching Indian kids that was not in the text books or method discussions. It is incumbent upon those teachers to do this and to never stop learning. These are the qualities that I see good teachers exemplify and, in some ways, teacher training institutions need to have these things in some way. (personal communication, November, 2013)*

Richard, a New Zealand academic, referenced the importance of non-Indigenous teachers being culturally grounded, stating that *“Do they as teachers know who they are in terms of their own ethnicity, their own cultural assumptions, their own cultural locativeness and what that might mean when they are interacting with children from other ethnic or cultural backgrounds”* (personal communication, September, 2013)? In effect, teachers need to understand how their own cultural background can, in a way that is not immediately apparent, contribute to colonized models of teaching within Indigenous classrooms.

Clearly opportunities to enhance teacher/student relationships on both the part of teachers and teacher preparation programs exist and will enhance the learning outcomes for Indigenous students.

### ***Teacher/Parent and Community Relationships.***

Two sub-themes were identified regarding this relationship issue: the involvement of teachers with parents and within the community; and the engagement of parents and Elders within the school and classroom. Richard, a New Zealand academic, commented regarding “*teachers out there who don’t work in partnership with families, with the community*”. He further addressed the need for teachers to have a solid understanding of their students, families and the community in which they teach.

*I have seen too many teachers who commute in and out of schools without knowing anything about the communities they purport to serve. They know nothing about the history of the land that the school is built upon. They know little about the children they teach, their families. For example, I witnessed a lesson being taught about a famous Maori Chief from the textbook when the living descendants of the leader, the famous Chieftain, were sitting in front of the teacher concerned. And the teacher just did not know who her students were. (personal communication, September, 2013)*

Lynne, a New Zealand academic, indicated that “*I would expect the ... the teachers in ... the school to be aware of this and also engage with the community, whether it is in the city or a rural school. I would expect that the teachers and the principal would have ways of engaging with the local Maori community ... Maybe they need to meet out of the classroom ... and make opportunities to meet with families*” (personal communication, September, 2013). Joe, a Navajo educator and former Superintendent, commented that “*I look for teachers that are willing to learn that are willing to adjust and to project themselves; particularly in a reservation school who are willing to project themselves into the community*” (personal communication, November, 2013).

Barbara, an Alaskan researcher, suggested that “*Some of the first things are about connecting with community, like being visible and attending things even though you are uncomfortable*” (personal communication, July, 2013), commenting on Alaskan work with mentoring programs to support new teachers so “*they will feel very comfortable going to potlatches, going to whatever kind of tribal meeting that is happening or when you are invited in a certain sense to come to someone’s place. They feel very comfortable and confident in doing that*” (personal communication, July, 2013). Barbara also identified barriers that non-Indigenous teachers can demonstrate: “*There are some American words like ‘Oh no; I don’t want to trouble you. No thank you.’ You have just put up a wall now where you think you are being polite but you are actually being very rude*” (personal communication, July, 2013).

Donna, an American academic, referenced some of the systemic issues that mitigate against this family and community connection.

*And ... in the case of the Northern Navajo Nation the teachers are in a compound and when they leave their classrooms they walk a few steps and they are in a gated*

*community. I say that but it is with quotes around it and it is the government housing so they are physically isolated and feel that there is no support for them moving into the community to get to know what their students home life is like. (personal communication, November, 2013)*

Donna went on to suggest that “*the only time we often send the school out to the homes of these kids is when there is a problem. So you see a car coming and you are going to hide from it*”, concluding that “*Oh God, wouldn't it be wonderful if we said to teachers going into a northern community, or whatever, to say the first 3-4 days is to be having coffee with the parents*” (personal communication, November, 2013).

In response to common perceptions that Indigenous parents are not engaged with the school, many of the interviewees, not surprisingly, referenced the impact of residential schooling. However, several also referred to a less than welcoming attitude from the school. For example, Tim, a Wyoming academic who spent much of his career working with Indigenous communities, commented that,

*My sense of the families of the children I worked with for 30 years is that families get a bad rap. They like to encourage the children and want to be more involved but they are intimidated by the schools. If you observe the behaviour of the school people to the families you would understand it is disrespect. It is a lack of knowledge about tribal values and culture and customs. It is not a negative for 12 people in a family to be living in the same household. It is not a negative for children to be raised by their grandparents or at least to spend a lot of time with them as well as aunts and uncles. We used to do that as white kids. I did that when I grew up in the 1940's. People often lived within 4-5 blocks of their grandparents and in the same square miles of all their cousins. That is an advantage that Aboriginal kids have now. (personal communication, November, 2013)*

Andrew, a retired Navajo chief superintendent, provided an encouraging comment. He also addressed the value of parental engagement, indicating that “*The other piece is if you actually utilize the parents' skills ... Then they will own—they will know what it going on in the schools. They are able to come in and understand their part of the curriculum. If that is missing, they are not going to come in*” (personal communication, February, 2014).

### ***School/Community Relationships.***

The vital role that strong school/community relationships can play in supporting student learning was consistently reinforced by interview participants. Andrew, a retired Navajo chief superintendent, discussed the need for integrated community service models, saying that “*We need to use some of the community services that we have in the community*”. He further indicated that “*what I tried to do with my job was to coordinate all of these different services and when a student has certain issues, when the family has issues, we can really ... these resources can impact instead of our own silos. If we can concentrate them and meet the needs of the family ... of the students*” (personal communication, February, 2014).

Andrew's comments were echoed by Don, a First Nations director/principal, who talked about the need for more integrated service delivery within the school. Don also discussed the

limitations of the western curriculum within the school and the important role that grandparents/elders, the Mushum and Kokum, can play. Don referred to this approach as the “Kokum Connection”.

*When we look at how we should be serving our younger people ... the Mushum and Kokum become the driver of the total circle and language and culture cannot be given, cannot be. The school cannot be expected to be the provider of language and culture. It must be a facilitator and allow those things to happen in the school. But where I see the strongest, most powerful, most comforting teachings were certainly not in schools that I attended but where my Mushum and Kokum taught me to be like them. So when you are looking at language and culture it must be initiated-- strongly delivered, it must be initiated outside the school and brought into the school as a support and as part to a certain extent, of the academic program but not the school being considered the sole provider of language and culture. I see the school as a very strong agent in preparing our children with reading, writing, math, technology that teaches the children to be like that person my grandfather pointed out. So Mushum and Kokum and what they provide becomes a very integral agent in providing those children with an environment with which they can successfully accommodate the expectations of learning. (personal communication, October, 2013)*

Others reinforced the importance of elder involvement in the school. Eomailani, a Hawaiian academic, commented that “Right now my son’s school doesn’t have any kūpuna, no Elders that work within the school. There used to be. One that was a native speaker that worked with the children. Right now there is no one like that. I would like to see the presence of Elders” (personal communication, January, 2014). Lori, a First Nations director, talked about the role of Elders in teaching not just Indigenous students, but also pre-service teachers.

*They should come out to a First Nations community or they should have student exchange programs. Or they could come to a school and maybe to talk to the community. Maybe it would be a treaty exchange or a treaty information day or something like that. And they have the Elders come out and have them say this is what it is like. Can you imagine how powerful that would be? If you had a group of students who took one day a month or whatever and went out to Carry the Kettle and talked to the Elders. (personal communication, October, 2013)*

Lori also discussed the use the community as a classroom.

*One of the things we are doing this year is we are taking Treaty Education and we starting to implement that. What we have done is that instead of coming out with Treaty teachers and provincial government and that curriculum, we are saying that we are going to turn it around and we are going to base it on the oral histories of a community and put it in context. We are not going to take it from a textbook. We are going to take it from the Elders. We are going to take it from the parents. We are going to have the kids go out and do interviews. They are going to learn about their communities and the history of teaching and treaties. (personal communication, October, 2013)*

Others talked about the challenges in encouraging a close school/community relationship. Tim, a Wyoming academic, talked about teachers living outside the community who come “to school at 7:45 in the morning and then they leave for town in a caravan at 3:30” (personal communication, November, 2013). Donna, an American academic, suggested that the school was often disconnected from the community in profound ways.

*I think if I look at it at the school, the school treats the community as a border and you see that where the teacher faculty are. You see the school and then you see a big fence around it and it is sitting right in the middle of the Navajo community. That is just I mean talk about red flags, that is just when you come here you keep everything that you are out and that's so it creates a negative education context. Why would you not want, why would you accept an educational regime that tells you that your parents are a deficit because they are not like the white community. (personal communication, November, 2013)*

Yet others provide a more encouraging perspective. Ray, an Alaskan academic whose career has focused on Indigenous education, talked about community reaction while developing the curriculum for a charter school.

*It was amazing when we put this together and it was a rough draft form and we started having meetings with people in town to see if they would be interested in starting up this school. They had no problem understanding. They would look at that and say “oh yeah, that would be great”. I think it had to do with how it was framed. This is alive. It is growing and expanding. In one place you can see all the pieces and it can be changed at any time. (personal communication, June, 2013)*

It would appear that meaningful school/community engagement is possible. However, schools must become more sensitive to Indigenous values, in effect re-considering the role of western colonial models of education. This will be difficult but not impossible – examples exist where this has successfully occurred. The importance of developing differing and more engaged relationships with students, families, and community is vital for this to successfully occur.

### ***Improved System Relationships.***

Ron, a First Nations executive administrator, talked about partnerships, suggesting that “Partnerships are important. Partnerships are key to any meaningful policy design, policy implementation” (personal communication, September, 2013). He reinforced the need for partnerships and improved understanding.

*Sometimes the solutions are right in front of us and we just can't grasp them ... What can be done—partnerships and better understanding. Viewing conversations between officials in government and First Nations officials ... a tendency to talk past each other. Not being able to have a real true understanding of what the challenges are ... They are still talking at each other, instead of with each other. I think that of lot of that has to do with the fact that both sides are cynical of each other. A lack of trust and a stronger desire to prove the other one wrong. And that happens on both sides. (personal communication, September, 2013)*

Dan, a recently retired senior provincial civil servant, stated that “*of late, there has not been the support for the infrastructure of bands*” suggesting there has been “*lots of complaining about how bands are run - but if you really want to fix it, there are solutions*” (personal communication, August, 2013). He further commented regarding potential action to work with First Nations authorities to support improved governance.

*You could really commit to a program that would facilitate well run bands, and that would mean both for chief and council. There is very little done for the elected officials, by the way, but there is more done for what I will call their equivalent public service and those other governments than there is for FN. So if you want I'd start there so you could demonstrate a serious commitment to the administration and in that sense, you know, and then think about the services and the expectations and the services that they are to deliver or not directly negotiate other service delivery models. You know I think in that sense it is the clearest in education. (personal communication, August, 2013)*

Ron, a First Nations executive administrator, emphasized the value of publicizing successes, indicating “*I think what Saskatchewan needs to do is publicize those successes. Saskatchewan and the First Nations need to publicize those successes and where results are taking place and be quite honest about what is not being done*”(personal communication, September, 2013).

Gary, a First Nations leader, talked about the community of Pinehouse and the work that they have done to encourage success.

*They established a vision for the community of success and they were very clear about it .... We say the school is the centre of the community but sometimes we treat it as an island onto itself and that there is no interagency cooperation between Health and Child and Family Services and other programs, the sports and rec programs or even the businesses. Whereas Pine House said no, we are going to succeed. Everybody is going to work together and we are going to build and see these kids through their success to the highest level with the highest expectations. With good marks. Not just pass but have good marks. And they were very clear and upfront with that. To their parents, to their teachers, to the whole community. (personal communication, November, 2013).*

It seems clear that improved partnerships and working relationships can result in a dramatic effect in Indigenous communities and, by extension, positively affecting the lives of Saskatchewan Indigenous youth. As these interviewees indicate, it is important that this process occur in a meaningful way.

### **Teaching Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.**

Not surprisingly, the role of teaching and culturally responsive pedagogy generated a good deal of discussion during the interviews. Within the overall theme, three sub-themes emerged: teaching strategies, expectations and support, issues related to culturally relevant pedagogy, and assessment related concerns.

### ***Teaching Strategies, Expectations, and Support.***

The importance of meeting the individual learning needs of students was an important issue. Jon, an Arizona academic, suggested that we should *“Find out what the kids are interested in and build on it – that motivation and engagement. The most common reason for drop outs is boredom; kids who are motivated by their parents have it easier but those who don’t will get bored and drop out. So what are you interested in and let’s find books about your interest”* (personal communication, November, 2013). Barbara, an Alaskan researcher, concurred regarding the need to engage individual students, referencing issues such as *“the disconnect between teachers and students culturally”*. She further indicated that,

*I think lots of teachers ... will say they are student focused because everything they do is about how they are going to support students, but I think of it more as recognizing no matter how big or small your class is you have a set of individuals and although you are teaching to a collective, you also have to support individually what each of these student is. Somehow it seems more extreme in Alaska. (personal communication, July, 2013)*

Edwina, a retired Mi’kmaq school administrator, also concurred, stating that it was important to *“stop boxing kids in”*. She further suggested that we should *“get past saying that children need to accomplish this much in this amount of time ... maybe he only gets half of grade seven, and so next year don’t go back and repeat what he has already done ...pick up where he left off ...more individualized”* (personal communication, September, 2013).

Joe, a Navajo educator, referred to the importance of understanding that Indigenous children have a particular learning style; *“most Indian kids have a certain learning style where they observe first, they think about it, and then they take action. In the non-Indian world it is reversed ... You need to know that as a teacher and be able to adjust the strategies to accommodate that”* (personal communication, November, 2013). Joe also went on to comment that,

*We are not allowing the students to take center stage and let the discourse come from the students. That is how you get at that teaching style that favors Indian students, because there are some cultural beliefs about being singled out and standing out as an individual, and that some of that ... is not normally accepted in the Indian culture, so kids shy away from that. ... So the response that might have worked would have been ... meeting individual needs of those kids and knowing what it is that turns the kid on. If I know that better than I can adjust my cues better to meet those needs. (personal communication, November, 2013)*

Dan, a senior Saskatchewan civil servant, considered the possibility of less structured, western ways of viewing education, while still emphasizing the need for skill development; *“Or good writing, numeracy, literacy; they are all critical to your success. You can’t replace those, you know, and the more the demanding on the job you are in you may need very sophisticated numeracy skills you will be judged on those in the workplace”* (personal communication, August, 2013).

Gary, a First Nations leader and former teacher, outlined some of the challenges facing Indigenous people and then emphasized the importance of setting expectations for youth. He indicated that *“But it doesn’t give the teachers or the school or the child the excuse not to achieve. We just take them from they are at, set high expectations, and we help them get there. So setting expectations I think, is critical. Setting them and supporting them”*. Gary went on to reference the need for support; *“I think it comes with supporting them. The best example ... is if you have the money and you have good marks, decent marks. As long as you have the money you can get in to Harvard or any Ivy League school. They will make sure you pass no matter how much you struggle. They will make sure you pass”* (personal communication, November, 2013). He concluded by stating,

*When I look at the ITEP, SUNTEP, NORTEP, the Native Law program, the Edward School of Business, where they are doing the Aboriginal programming. They take those principles and apply them to their program. Lower teacher to student ratio. A lot of one on one. You still set high expectations. If you want to be a lawyer, you have to be a good lawyer; you have people’s lives in your hands. As a teacher you have the same as – any of those professions. They set up the situation so they can succeed. So they employ some of those strategies. A lot of one on one support. The ratio is addressed. And flexibility.* (personal communication, November, 2013)

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.**

Culturally responsive pedagogy emerged as an important priority among the interview participants. Perhaps the clearest statement of need was provided by Linda, a Saskatchewan academic; *“In my research I looked at what really helped me to see what we are trying to use is a Western model that has been a tool of colonization and we wonder why people aren’t embracing it”*. She went on to say that *“it is the education system deficit in meeting the needs of culturally different students”* (personal communication, July 2013). Linda continued by saying that *“As I get deeper into Indigenous education, I see how embedded we are in those Euro-centric ways of knowing and being and the rejection of other ways of looking at things”* (personal communication, July, 2013).

Eomailani, an Hawaiian academic, provided a concrete example of Linda’s comments referring to her son’s Hawaiian immersion school; *“one of the critiques I have also had is one of the homework textbooks that they translated for use in my son’s classroom has pictures of chipmunks, pictures of beavers, and then they translate those words into Hawaiian”* (personal communication, January, 2014). She went on to describe her own doctoral research in relation to culturally relevant pedagogy.

*I think that part of my research challenges the colonial, the Eurocentric mess of mathematics. I think people need to see that. I think the people making those curricula decisions need to see that. ... We have been colonized to think those things or are we going to re-examine?... My goal is to see a paradigm shift. I think my second goal is a collaborative team to be producing and to pilot stuff and then sharing those successes with other people. The group of teachers that I interviewed are so creative. So intelligent. I would also say they also trained in mathematics in a Western way so they are looking at the universe through a Western mathematics lens. ... When you board a sailing canoe*

*there is the mathematics involved in that. They are not necessarily looking at we have a base 4 counting system. (personal communication, January, 2014)*

Andrew, a retired chief superintendent for the Navajo Nations concurred with these comments, suggesting that,

*All the 240 some schools that are serving the Nation. All of them are Western curriculum. We don't have our way of teaching. That is always what I go back to. The cultural teaching. From when the student gets up until they go to bed. All of that is the teaching within the culture. And they may start until--going over to catch the bus. It stops there and then the Western culture gets in, until the student gets home and then the television takes over. That's why I am saying it is not our curriculum or our teaching style. (personal communication, February, 2013)*

A number of interviewees discussed place based education in relation to culturally relevant pedagogy. Jon, an Arizona academic, stated that “*my tendency is to see more promise in the research on place and community based education. Students need to see that what they are learning applies to their lives and their location*” (personal communication, November, 2013). Ray, an Alaskan academic, also referred to place based education, indicating that

*The focal point of most of the resources that we developed has been to help students see the connection between what they are expected to do in school and what their life is like out of school. ... The general headings for all that are culturally based approaches, where you leave students with the culture context that they live in, that their families are part of. The knowledge base that is associated with that and then place space which those two go together. Place space is focusing on the connection to the community, to the physical environment. The knowledge base that people develop ... Who I am today. That would encompass much of what Oscar did-- the whole Native ways of knowing. Present material in ways that relate to how learning is accomplished in the community. The kind of knowledge base that they bring so they don't have to check that, their local knowledge, at the door when dealing with what the school expects of them. (personal communication, June, 2013)*

Richard, a New Zealand academic, also emphasized the value of place based education suggesting that “*I am a strong advocate of place based education and the critical pedagogies of place. I have seen too many teachers who commute in and out of schools without knowing anything about the communities they purport to serve*” (personal communication, September, 2013). Richard concluded his interview with the comment that,

*You can't separate the past from the present or the future. You need to understand the special factors. That one Maori community is not the same as the next. There is not a one size fits all Maori. There is no silver bullet that I can see. What we need though is teachers who are flexible, who are life- long learners and are willing to give up the steering wheel and to move over and allow the community to be actively engaged in determining what the curriculum looks like, how we deliver it. How we assess it. How we evaluate it. (personal communication, September, 2013)*

Lynne, another New Zealand academic, provided a personal perspective that is, in the end, the reason for this discussion; *“I am a well educated Maori mother and whether the children – my own children and grandchildren, I would expect the teachers to be constantly developing, professionally to become more culturally aware, culturally responsive to the needs of my children and possible grandchildren”* (personal communication, September, 2013).

### ***The Impact of Assessment.***

The role of assessment within Indigenous education generated significant comment, in particular among American interviewees. Two issues dominated the discussions: concerns created within American Indigenous education by current assessment practices and the need for culturally relevant assessment instruments.

Comments by Barbara, an Alaskan researcher and expert in applied mathematics and statistics, begin the discussion here regarding the flaws within the current American assessment system. She commented that *“The worst generalization I have come to think about lately is how we actually apply a normal curve to things that may not be normal”*, stating that *“Our schools aren’t normally distributed”*. Barbara expressed deep reservations with current American practice.

*We are forcing people to be not good by using something that was never meant to be used on them. That doesn’t follow the same natural properties for which it should be used. You know what I am saying? It has been a choice. It is a choice and it is a choice because it is easy to import statistics and procedures. But is it the right choice? Are we messing things up by making that choice?* (personal communication, July, 2013)

Jon, an Arizona academic, continued the discussion. He expressed deep concern regarding the inappropriate utilization of assessment within education, in particular Indigenous education; *“we passed the 2001 NCLB and then Obama’s Race to the Top ... They were supposed to lessen the achievement gap using those methods and they have not; the gap is still there. Both groups, the mainstream and the Native American have gone up a little but the gap has, if anything, widened”* (personal communication, November, 2013).

Similar reservations were expressed by Ray, a well known Alaskan educator, referencing his original Math teaching area by discussing math questions on common assessment instruments used within Alaska; *“Almost everyone is framed in a way that puts Native students, students from villages, in a disadvantage. It is not linked. It puts them at a disadvantage”*. He continued, commenting that *“The whole US assessment system is totally top down. It is imposing core curriculum, it is imposing assessment requirements in ways that detract from implementing the things here”* (personal communication, June, 2013).

The second assessment issue identified related to the need for culturally appropriate assessment instruments. Both Canadians and American interview participants addressed this concern. Donna, an American academic located in Utah, discussed the use of professional standardized assessments to help determine teacher certification; *“And I think our system is moving even more into accountability and testing credentials so that we are going to block our more and more non-traditional teachers”* (personal communication, November, 2013). By non-

traditional teachers, Donna referenced Indigenous teachers – other experiences by the writer suggest that this is a common occurrence in many American states. Indigenous teachers often find it difficult to successfully complete assessments normed on mainstream population.

Lori, a First Nations director with experience as an educational psychologist, indicated that *“we have to be careful when we do assessments of vulnerable children and populations. And First Nations and Métis kids are vulnerable”* (personal communication, October, 2013).

Not all comments regarding assessment were negative. Andrew, a retired chief superintendent for the Navajo Nation, provided an excellent example of culturally appropriate assessment.

*We always say certain stories are certain seasons. Right now there is a coyote story. There is the beginning of the coyote and a crest and it rests on different activities and so when you are small and your Elders tell you about the story. It may just begin –maybe only one phase. And then several nights later you will be asked like an assessment, tell me the story. And then you start telling the story and then you are gauged on what you have missed and then within those what is the teaching? What is the main concept of these stories? What are you not supposed to do? Why did the coyote do this? Why is the result this?* (personal communication, February, 2014).

Lori, a First Nations director, implicitly accepted the need for appropriate assessment, expressing frustration that inadequate funding hampered her system’s assessment work.

*Because we are not funded adequately by the way. Our second level budget accounts for one percent of my total education budget. What we really need is a connection to the province in terms of assessment.... I would like them to say—if they would like to give us anything—give us an assessment coordinator. We don’t have the personnel to be able to sit at those tables. We are underfunded. We can’t be ten places at once. We struggle to keep up in terms of assessment.* (personal communication, October, 2013)

### **Language, Culture, and Colonization.**

Issues surrounding language, culture, and the impact of colonization generated the greatest numbers of interviewee comments for any theme. There was a broad consensus regarding the importance of language and culture in the lives of students and the pernicious impact of western colonization. For example, Ron, a First Nations executive administrator, commented on the importance of language; *“Emphasis on language would be ideal. The importance of language diversity in the First Nations community is key to any cultural self identity initiative that you want to achieve”* (personal communication, September, 2013).

Jon, an Arizona academic who has written extensively regarding the history of American Indian education, addressed the issue of colonization.

*I have been looking more and more at identity issues and how kids see themselves and their history; and that schools have consistently disallowed the Native American culture, insisting that everything be English and Christianity was pushed aggressively. So schools in one study, were a place to “become white”, and even if you became white*

*culturally you still had that brown skin. For many years the racism attached to not being white was pervasive and so you get “oppositional identity.” If school is a place where you learn to become white and I am an Indian, then school is not a place for me. (personal communication, November, 2013)*

Donna, a Navajo principal, referenced these issues from the context of American Indian boarding schools; *“The other thing that really affects our students is that most of the parents, the grandparents have gone to boarding schools. With that we have to kind of let the parents know that they are responsible for their children’s education” (personal communication, February, 2014).*

Lori, a First Nations director, discussed these issues in relation to Canadian residential schools.

*I think the first thing ... is the history of residential schools. Many of our students, many of our parents, many of our families many of our nations, still experience the effects ... and it has only been recently that the residential schools have actually been shut down. We still have lots of intergenerational survivors who were attending. We still deal with attitudes. We still deal with learned behaviors when it comes to education so that affects student achievement. (personal communication, October, 2013)*

She also talked about the impact of residential schools, commenting that *“We do still feel the effects of them. We have high rates of sexual abuse in our schools. That is the whole mental health area”*. Lori did strike a hopeful note, indicating that *“I think it will get better as residential schools no longer exist and parents are actually educated, are helping to assist in educating their children. They are looking after their kids now. They are starting to re-establish the parent-child relationship” (personal communication, October, 2013).*

Edwina, a retired director/principal from Newfoundland, talked about the benefits of establishing their own school in Conne River; *“We took over in 1986, in the 1984-85 school year we had anywhere from 13 to 18 kids drop out and that was normal for a year. There were 200 kids in the school the year that we took over; 86-87 we had zero drop outs”*. She indicated that they *“wanted to put Mi’Kmaq language and culture out there front and centre”*. Edwina also discussed the impact on student self image; *“now they have a better sense of who they are and are not ashamed to stand up and say “I’m Mi’kmaq.” I have students in St. John’s who work with the native friendship center; they would not have done that before because now there is a sense of pride that wasn’t there before” (personal communication, September, 2013).*

Donna, an American academic who worked over 40 years with Navajo students from southeastern Utah, referenced the impact of colonizing schools on some students who fought back against these practices; *“Why would you accept an educational regime that tells you that your parents are a deficit because they are not like the white community. You would be crazy to accept that; and for the record we were talking about studies where the argument is that dropping out of school is a healthy thing when you are being daily assaulted, being made fun of by peers or by teachers” (personal communication, November, 2013).* She went on to provide a concrete example, based on her own research,

*It is subtle things in one of the papers I have written; here you have a teacher who is saying to a group of students you'd better do well in here because I don't want to see you on welfare. The students say "Why he is saying that, we are not all on welfare". He says that in front of the white kids and it just reinforces for them about Navajo kids that they are all on welfare and just leaches on the government. How insulting! I would walk out and slam the door on them as some of those kids do. (personal communication, November 2013)*

Several participants highlighted the affect that poverty has on student self image and success. Gary, a First Nations leader, discussed this issue, commenting regarding the potential for confusing Indigenous culture with the culture of poverty.

*The baggage unfortunately many of our First Nations/Métis, many of them have is the cultural of poverty and that people confuse the cultural of poverty with the culture of our people. Poverty doesn't discriminate. So the poverty you see in some of our communities, the inner city of Saskatoon, or wherever is the same poverty that is in Los Angeles, in the Bronx, or sorry New York in the Bronx, or LA in Compton, Chicago, right. So it doesn't discriminate. (personal communication, November, 2013)*

Tim, an academic with extensive connections to Wyoming Indian communities, also referenced the impact of poverty.

*The children often come to school not having eaten. ... There is a high percentage of them who could eat at home but because it is available at school, they eat it there. But another portion are not ready for school because they are hungry. In America there was some research referenced, by Richard Allington, a reading specialist two or three years ago that indicated 1/3 of American school children are hungry enough that it interferes with their ability to learn at school, and another third have so much tooth decay that it affects their ability to learn. I see that a lot in schools among the children in the Wind River reservation where the rate of poverty is high and unemployment is high and it's not fair. We don't treat our poor children very well in this country. (personal communication, November, 2013)*

Linda, a Saskatchewan academic, made a direct connection between western education and colonialism. She stated that when "you look at First Nations schools and rather than saying we see the result of residential schools, the results of colonization which are much broader". Linda also commented that "in Indigenous education, culture, language, land; that whole loss takes away those things that European settlers, that whole society, that whole process has weakened and destroyed a lot of Indigenous cultures" (personal communication, July, 2013). With respect to the impact of European colonialism, she referenced research by her husband as an example; "When Keith talks about concepts in Cree, a lot of those concepts have been translated into English and then an English concept to that concept" (personal communication, July, 2013) is substituted, in effect taking a Cree concept and effectively losing its original meaning through the translation process. Traditional Cree concepts are subsumed by their English translation and assumed to be culturally Cree.

Eomailani, a Hawaiian academic, shared a similar experience. While clearly stating that she was not opposed to the use of translated materials within the classroom, she did express concern, stating that *“It is not enough to just have language present in the classroom. Let’s look within that language. It is just translations. We have entire dictionaries that are just translated English terms”* (personal communication, January, 2014). She also provided a telling example of the pernicious effects of European colonization, referencing the introduction of Christianity and the need to ensure that the Sabbath was observed within the Gregorian calendar.

*I will give you an example. The Hawaiians use the lunar calendar which –they are not the only ones. Each moon phase was named after a different god. They were in ten po mahinas .When it is getting bigger it is big and when it is getting smaller—what do they call it anahulu In some of the early primers they are giving kids the Ten Commandments and one of the things there is that you must observe the Sabbath. So subsequent newspaper articles are talking about the shift from the Hawaiian calendar with the moon phases to a shift to the Western calendar to accommodate the seventh day—the Sabbath. That seems pretty basic. What is hard is that when you see calendars used in immersion settings today they are just translated versions of the Gregorian calendar rather than teaching students about the moon phases. (personal communication, January, 2014)*

Despite these distressing examples of western cultural dominance, there are also hopeful stories. One example is the valuable work that has been conducted regarding the issue of improved cultural competencies. Andrew outlined work within the Navajo Nation regarding the development of five key cultural standards for use within Navajo schools.

*So the Navajo teachers and some other Native teachers, they have been working on—the schools. They have been coming in on the weekends and sometimes during the week to come up with five different sets of standards. Language, culture, history, government, and character standards. And so these standards are ready and available for the schools to begin to implement partially within the curriculum. After that, they are drafting now the assessment for these standards. (personal communication, February, 2014)*

Ray, an Alaskan academic, also discussed Alaskan work on developing and implementing cultural competencies.

*This document was developed by Native educators building on Alaskan cultural standards to provide guidance and examples, rubrics for schools to look at their operation, their staffing. Teachers to look at practices they are using. For Districts to look at how they are –there is a process that is straightforward and simple to follow. Takes the original standards and work your way through them where you identify the level of proficiency, the level of performance that is going on with, by teachers in implementing a cultural standard. (personal communication, June, 2014)*

This work, which has been replicated by at least one school division within Saskatchewan, seems critical if schools are to move away from western colonial models of education and towards more culturally and linguistically affirming practices.

## **Summing Up: The Path Forward**

The perspectives provided by the interview participants provide an enormous reservoir of experience, knowledge, and even wisdom regarding the issue of improving Indigenous learning outcomes. While limitations of space prevent a full discussion of the issues raised in the interviews, the messages appear clear. A focus on success is important, as is the critical role of relationship. Similarly, the importance of effective instructional practices and attention to culturally responsive pedagogy were also highlighted. Finally, the dramatic impact of language and culture on student learning, and the devastation wrought by colonial attitudes towards Indigenous people, most particularly in the area of education, was addressed.

If meaningful change is to occur, the messages from 18 participants must be considered. Put briefly, it is insufficient to assume that Indigenous children, the inheritors of a tragic history of western assimilationalist models of education, will be successful in the current system. Attention to the issues identified by the interview participants is a prerequisite for success. A failure to meaningfully address these matters will only serve to prolong a system of education that has failed Indigenous children – this will ultimately be dysfunctional to both Indigenous people but also the broader society. By contrast, a willingness to consider meaningful dialogue, as proposed by Ermine (2007), in an effort to move to an agenda focussed on success and positive student learning outcomes can help create a more hopeful future.

## **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:

- 1 rural provincial school with significant Indigenous student population
- 1 rural First Nations school
- 1 urban provincial school identified as an Indigenous “lighthouse” school
- 3 urban provincial schools with moderate to significant (25 – 50%) 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 Nations 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 Nations community. Two schools were from Catholic school divisions. Table 4 summarizes the demographics of the participating schools, using September 30, 2013 enrolment and staffing levels.

**Table 4: Demographics of Participating Schools**

School	Grades	Jurisdiction	Student Enrolment <sup>a</sup>	Staff Population <sup>b</sup>
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)

<sup>a</sup> September 30 2013 student enrolment with self identified Indigenous students in parentheses.

<sup>b</sup> 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 *SI*.

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 A). 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 B). Thirty-five parents participated, 8 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 C 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 D). 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 5-8 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 C, teacher 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)
- 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**

### **Student Voices: Engaged and Non-engaged**

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 interview 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 interview 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 ways....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 better, 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 Sauteaux 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 off 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.

### **Parent 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 6 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 ten 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 three 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 twelve 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 nine 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 percent 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 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 peoples 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 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 fifty percent 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 Nations 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 five 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 of 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 kid 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.

### **Teacher 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 focussed 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 12 pages) focussed 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 focussed 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 focussed 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 focussed 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 focussed 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:

- Teaching approaches and responses to students’ needs and improving student engagement with learning
- Relationships: The importance of knowing and understanding your students
- Impact of home life and socio economic conditions
- 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 focussed on theme 1, improving student engagement with learning, fell into two sub themes:

- (a) responses that focussed on teacher or system needs and
- (b) responses that focussed 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 focussed 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 focussed 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 focussed 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 focussed 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 sixteen 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;
- (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 focussed 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 focussed 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 focussed 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;
- (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 focussed 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 focussed on "responsive" teaching and finding ways to engage students. However, they also focussed 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 Administrator 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 twelve 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 ten 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 focussed 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 5 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 three reading level or a grade two or three 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....when 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 twenty kids or twenty-five 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.

### ***Humor.***

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 relationships, 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, focussed 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 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)*

Another critical outcome that emerged from the research project relates to the need to understand that Western world views 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**

The Seeking their Voices research contained three separate initiatives. While the heart of the research is based on the findings from the focus groups and interviews of students, parents, teachers and school administrators in six Saskatchewan high schools, it was also decided that a thorough literature review of research related to the learning needs of Indigenous youth was necessary. In addition, the need to obtain perspectives from national and international academics, school administrators and policy leaders was also identified. Not surprisingly, the messages from each of these research initiatives were consistent; these findings are summarized below.

### **Literature Review: Improving Indigenous Student Learning Outcomes**

The review of literature confirmed the presence of consistent research direction regarding the improvement of Indigenous student learning outcomes. It is increasingly clear that progress regarding improving learning outcomes for Indigenous youth require certain actions. The findings from the literature review reinforce earlier research conclusions, such as those reached by Demmert (2001), Demmert and Towner (2003), Steeves (2009) and Raham (2009, 2010). There is little question that learning outcomes for Indigenous youth in Saskatchewan, in Canada, and within the international community are inadequate. This comment begs the question – if we are and have been aware of what constitutes appropriate policy and program action, why has more not been done to address this issue? Yet unfortunate results continue and, in some cases, are actually declining. Why is this the case?

The key question is this – if we know what needs to be done to address this tragic issue, why has more not been done to address it? Research suggests that the underlying reason for this failure relates to a perspective by the dominant western society that the best solution for Indigenous people was their assimilation. This led to the evils of the residential school system and, even today, colours attitudes within the educational community and the broader society. It appears that these attitudes of assimilation and, as it is typically referred to in the literature, colonization, have created damage beyond that of a more narrow focus on improved Indigenous student achievement. For example, research based upon Emile Durkheim's work related to suicide suggested that assimilationist attitudes have resulted in dramatically higher rates of suicide among Indigenous youth and adults. The impact of poverty, racism, and, more broadly, attitudes of colonization have been pernicious.

Research clearly identifies a path forward, one that attends to the processes identified earlier by Ermine (2007) and McLeod (2007). In addition to the need for a more collaborative,

inclusive approach to the work, the literature review also identified eight factors that are consistently highlighted as areas where specific action is necessary. Finally, the literature also suggests that, amid many stories of limited success and even failure, the work of Te Kotahitanga and its success in improving the academic success of Maori youth in New Zealand is an excellent example of a large scale reform that has produced improved student learning outcomes.

The literature consistently identified similar factors, from a pre K-12 perspective, that must be addressed if Indigenous student learning outcomes are to improve. It should be noted that one factor, the adequacy of funding, is not addressed within this literature review. This is not to suggest that the matter of adequacy of funding is not a very real and challenging issue. Put simply, limitations related to research capacity and the complexity of the issue ultimately meant that this factor was not considered within this report.

The key factors accompanied by a brief summary of research findings are outlined below:

- **Language and Cultural Programming:** Research (Demmert & Towner, 2003; Deyhle, 1995; Stiles, 1997) tended to support the relationship between a student’s awareness of their cultural background and learning outcomes. In addition to the value of language and cultural programming, the value of teacher knowledge and awareness of their student’s cultural background was also important (Bishop et al., 2012; Deyhle, 2009). Finally the construction of “cultural competencies” in locations such as Alaska (Barnhardt, personal communication, June, 2013), the Navajo Nation (Tah, personal communication, February, 2014), and Saskatoon Public School Division (2008) was also identified as potential tools upon which to base professional and curriculum development.
- **Parent and Community Engagement:** Effective school engagement at this level was shown to be important for student success (Bell et al., 2004; Kushman & Barnhardt, 2001; Leveque, 1994; Melnechno & Horsman, 1998). However, given the history of schools as agents of assimilation (Berger, 2009; Carr-Stewart, 2001; Friedel, 1999), Indigenous parents are often deeply conflicted regarding the role of the school: A different relationship will be necessary.
- **Student Engagement and Retention:** The role of schools as assimilationist institutions was reinforced. Anecdotal stories were told of Indigenous students, who were academically successful, of “parking themselves at the door” of the school. The importance of caring and knowledgeable teacher/student relationships was reinforced (Bishop et al., 2012; Keith, personal communication, June, 2014).
- **Effective Schools:** Although the literature clearly indicated that establishing effective schools was a “complex equation” without simplistic solutions, the importance of welcoming/inclusive school climates, programs grounded in Indigenous culture, meaningful parent/community involvement, high academic expectations, and the linking of assessment to instructional and planning processes were consistently identified (Keith, personal communication, June, 2014; Raham, 2009; Stelmach, 2010) .

- **The Role of Assessment:** While American research consistently highlighted the dysfunctional outcomes of initiatives emanating from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, the importance of evidence based decision making models to guide classroom, school, and system planning was prioritized, particularly within the Canadian research literature (Bell et al., 2004; Bishop et al., 2012; Fulford et al., 2007; Raham, 2009). Both American and Canadian research highlighted the need to ensure assessment that is culturally appropriate.
- **Classrooms and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy:** While some questioned the relationship between culturally responsive pedagogy and student success (August, Goldenburg, & Ruela, 2006), the preponderance of research supported this relationship. A critical variable that was consistently reinforced concerned the importance of effective teacher/student relationships (Bishop et al., 2012; Hattie, 2009).
- **Retention/Support to Teachers/Administrators:** Increasingly, research supports the relationship between the length of teacher tenure and improved student achievement outcomes (Adams, 2010; Raham, 2009). Given this reality, the need to reduce teacher and school administrator turnover through strategies such as security of tenure, fair compensation and fringe benefits, effective induction and ongoing professional development, and coaching/mentoring programs for new teachers was highlighted (Adams, 2010; Steeves, Furuta, & Carr –Stewart, 2013).
- **Governance and Leadership:** Research strongly supported the relationship between effective governance/leadership and improved student outcomes (ASBA, 2011; Bell et al., 2004; Fullan, 2002; Maguire, 2003). In addition, the importance of encouraging stronger governance relationships between provincial and federal/First Nations educational authorities was reinforced (Carr-Stewart, 2001).

As this conceptual framework suggests, attention to best practices within both Western and traditional Indigenous models of education are required for Indigenous student success. And like every child, this success is not only deserved but vitally important for the future of the broader society.

### **Voices from Others: Thoughtful Perspectives**

As part of the decision to conduct an updated literature review, it was decided that an investigation among respected academics, educational administrators, and key policy leaders would be helpful. The outcome was a series of 18 individual interviews with prominent academics, school administrators and policy people in Canada, the United States and New Zealand. Based upon a thematic analysis of these interviews, four overriding themes were identified.

### **The Role of Success.**

Too often research focussing on Indigenous issues essentially adopts a deficiency narrative; it was our intent that a more hopeful tone focussed on success within Indigenous education would be a critical piece of our work. This intent was realised by many of the 18 individuals interviewed for this segment of the project. Many of the interviews focussed on stories of success, at the system, student, and family level. While challenges remain, it was apparent that many positive elements also exist.

At the system level, stories of successful curriculum innovation in Alaska were shared, improved graduation rates in a school within the Navajo Nation discussed, examples of more inclusive schools in Saskatchewan provided, and Mi'kmaq parents from Newfoundland with enhanced self confidence resulting from their own educational experiences were described. Educator and parent interviewees talked of their desire to see children learn to “walk in both worlds”. Others discussed the strengths of Indigenous culture and the internal motivation that is built into traditional Native culture. The role of the family in this process was referenced by several individuals.

Several other interviewees questioned the very definition of success, suggesting that a narrow western viewpoint is insufficient. For many Indigenous people, success must also include a knowledge and respect for traditional culture and values. A failure to consider these issues simply recognises the impact of assimilation and colonization. In effect, these value and the desire to “walk in two worlds” speaks to Willie Ermine’s (2007) desire to identify “ethical space” that can guide not just those of us in the larger society but also individual Indigenous youth who are attempting to navigate these two worlds in order to find a personal definition of success.

### **The Role of Relationship.**

The importance of relationship appeared repeatedly. No other theme was as consistently mentioned as the important role that relationship plays in supporting improved student learning. For example, the issue of strong student/teacher relationships was a recurring theme that needed to be genuine, knowledgeable, respectful, and, as one interviewee commented, needed to start on local people’s terms – not a relationship imposed from outside.

Similarly, the importance of teacher/parent and community relationships was also discussed. Teachers need to get to know that families and communities that they serve. One American respondent commented that native families often get a “bad rap” – they want to support but are intimidated by the school. Others mentioned the vital role of strong school/community relationships, discussing improved system relationships such as improved shared services models, and, more broadly, the value of enhanced inter-system cooperation, both at the educational and broader public sector levels. Others discussed the impact that Elders can have within the school, the use of the community as a classroom, and the value of community consultation in school planning.

On a less positive note, a number of respondents also referenced the disconnect of the school from community. For example, two individuals talked about teachers living outside the

community, either in compounds or by commuting into the community for only the teaching day with no meaningful connection to the community.

### **Teaching and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.**

Teaching and culturally responsive pedagogy received a great deal of attention. For example, the value of effective teaching strategies, high expectations, and student support was consistently reinforced. The importance of place based models of education was also reinforced, typically in reference to the importance of incorporating local cultural values and ways of knowing into the curriculum.

Assessment was another area that prompted comment. While American practitioners referenced the importance of culturally relevant assessment models, their primary focus was on difficulties posed by their countries' standardized assessment culture and the negative impact on Native students and teachers. By comparison, Canadian respondents spent less time addressing this issue, discussing the need for culturally relevant assessment and the challenges posed by inadequate funding when attempting to address the need for appropriate assessment systems within their jurisdiction. With respect to the need for culturally appropriate assessment, one of the respondents from the Navajo Nation provided an excellent example of how local culture can be used to construct appropriate assessment devices.

With respect to culturally responsive pedagogy, reference was to the use of education as an agent of colonization/assimilation and the deeply imbedded assumptions of Euro-centric models in Indigenous education. Two interviewees provided concrete examples within the classroom; Indigenous educational materials are often simply translated versions of European concepts applied within an Indigenous program setting. In effect, they described colonial models of education occurring even within overtly Indigenous education. Other respondents also discussed the challenges of navigating a western, colonial system of education and the destructive effects of this system upon Indigenous students.

### **Language, Culture, and Colonization.**

Respondents repeatedly talked about the impact of racism, assimilation, and colonization on Indigenous people and the negative legacy within the schooling process. The impact of boarding schools within the United States and residential schools within Canada was referenced. One American individual discussed the historical emphasis on English and Christianity, indicating that schools were places to become "white". Another interviewee also addressed this issue, commenting that the denigration of Navajo values and culture were regular occurrences in schools in southeastern Utah.

The importance of cultural knowledge and awareness was repeatedly discussed. Two respondents described the relationship between western education and colonization. One of these two provided a concrete example, referring to the traditional Hawaiian lunar calendar and its demise in response to the need for the Gregorian calendar to ensure that the Christian Sabbath would be honoured. Another individual outlined the work in Alaska on cultural competencies, suggesting that, once completed, they served a vital role in supporting further curriculum and in-service work within the school and classroom.

Finally several people referenced the impact of poverty and the tendency to confuse the culture of poverty with traditional Indigenous cultural values. These individuals discussed the role of poverty within the context of the importance of meaningful family support within traditional cultural values, suggesting that the culture of poverty has often been confused with Indigenous culture.

### **Summing Up: The Path Forward.**

The perspectives provided by the 18 interview participants provide an enormous reservoir of experience and knowledge regarding the issue of improving Indigenous learning outcomes. If meaningful change is to occur, their messages must be considered.

### **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 three 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 focussed on locating problems within the students’ culture and home circumstances. Teacher voices maintained a strong deficit tone and were focussed 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 focussed on teacher or system needs and those that focussed 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 focussed 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 focussed 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 focussed 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 7 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 focussed 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 world views. 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
  - 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
  - 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?

**6. 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.

**7. 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.

**8. 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.

**9. 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.

**10. 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](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto: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*

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