

Parent/Guardian Voice and Perspectives for Improvement of
Engagement and Social Connectedness within the Multicultural Fabric and Culture of Schools
Final Report

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We respectfully acknowledge that our research was conducted on Treaty 6 territory, a traditional gathering place for diverse Indigenous peoples including the Cree, Blackfoot, Métis, Nakota, Sioux, Iroquois, Dene, Ojibway, Sauteaux, Anishinaabe, Inuit, and many others whose histories, languages, and cultures continue to influence our vibrant community.

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to provide insights towards improving the engagement of parents/guardians in parent/guardian-teacher interviews and strengthening social connectedness with the school community. Our data suggested that improved parent-teacher engagement, coupled with healthy and robust social connectedness within school communities, can positively contribute toward addressing student, parent, and community diversity and improve student academic outcomes and well-being.

This research was conducted in two culturally diverse school contexts in Edmonton, Alberta - a public charter school and a public community school. As part of the community-based participatory approach of this research, we established a Community Advisory Board (CAB) in each school setting. The CAB was comprised of parents, school staff, and other community stakeholders, and had the purpose of both promoting and supporting a participatory approach and an accountable governance process for the tenure of the project.

We collected data through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, where we explored the experiences and perspectives of parents/guardians from the schools on parental engagement processes. The audio-recorded discussions were transcribed verbatim and managed using NVivo 12. Data were analyzed thematically. Six parents/guardians from a public charter school setting and five parents/guardians from the public community school participated.

Our study found: (1) a shared motivation for parent-teacher engagement (invested in child's success); 2) enhancers for parent/guardian-teacher/school engagement including building meaningful relationships that trusted and equipped teachers; and, 3) enhancers for parent/guardian-teacher interviews (time, quality of report) impacted the parental/guardian engagement process. These insights provide multiple areas for discussion and action in schools with multicultural student populations to enhance social connectedness and communication between parents/guardians and the school community.

Keywords: parent/guardian-teacher interviews, multicultural, social connectedness, Community Advisory Board (CAB), engagement

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Section 1: Introduction

Rationale for the research

Educational research literature consistently demonstrates the significant impacts that the nature of interactions between families and schools have on students' learning and well-being and the school community as a whole (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Muscott et al., 2008). Improved parent/guardian-teacher engagement, coupled with a strong connectedness within school communities, can enhance student well-being and academic outcomes. Additionally, educators are becoming increasingly cognizant of the important role parents/guardians play in the education process (Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin, & de Pedro, 2011).

The challenge, however, is to empower parent/guardian voice and input to assist in the identification and implementation of strategies and/or processes whereby schools can engage with parents/guardians in a more meaningful, mutually beneficial and sustainable manner. Moreover, our literature reviews identified a lack of current published educational research investigating past and current parent/guardian-teacher interview processes involving diverse multicultural and Indigenous school contexts. Thus, the purpose of this research was to contribute insights towards improving the engagement of parents/guardians in parent/guardian-teacher interview approaches towards strengthening social connectedness with the diverse school community.

Project background

Relationship building, engagement, and communication between teachers, parent(s)/guardian(s), and students are key processes that contribute to effective learning. The parent/guardian-teacher interview process is a long-held tradition in public education, yet there exists a relative vacuum of current published research that probes into parent/guardian

perspectives and lived experiences in this important process. Moreover, the lack of current research on this topic is exacerbated by the complexities of working and building effective relationships and engagements in growing diverse multicultural and Indigenous teaching and learning contexts with educators who may not have training and/or experience with the cultures and traditions of the students and parents/guardians with whom they work.

This research project explored the lived experiences and perspectives of parents/guardians about their engagement, parent/guardian-teacher interview processes, and social connectedness within diverse multicultural and Indigenous school contexts. The research team that co-generated this project in consultation with multiple school stakeholders included Dr. Malcolm Steinberg, Principal Investigator, Simon Fraser University; Dr. Paul Wozny, Key Research Team Contact and Co-researcher, and Deputy Superintendent, Aurora Academic Charter School; Dr. Owen Livermore, Co-researcher, Edmonton Public Schools; Dr. Paul Veugelers, Co-researcher; and Dr. Nicole Ofosu, funded graduate co-researcher, University of Alberta.

In particular, this project focused on the impact of parent/guardian-teacher engagement through the lens of parents/guardians about the school-based parent/guardian-teacher interview experience and related processes within two multicultural school contexts. One school context (a public charter school) has a significant multicultural population of students and parents/guardians that includes a relatively high proportion of English Language Learners (ELL) where the first language spoken at home is not English. The second school context in this study is a public community school with a high percentage of Indigenous students. A fundamental tenet in this research is predicated on healthy and robust social connectedness within school

communities contributing toward healthy and thriving student, parent/guardian, staff, and community diversity as well as improvement of student outcomes and well-being.

Prior research that informs our work

A great deal of prior research and educational thinking informed our work. In this section of our report, that prior work will be shared in two parts. Part one includes a research synthesis outlining a number of major researchers and thinkers in the general area of parental involvement in schools. Part one is written in an essay-like format, which focused on creating a synthesis of the work in the areas. As a note, in part one, the term *parents* is used broadly to include parents/guardians. Part two focuses on sharing work in the area of parental involvement within a uniquely Canadian context that highlights the work of Dr. Angela Snowshoe, who worked at the University of Western Ontario. Her collected works greatly informed our research project.

Part One: The Importance and Practice of Parental Engagement in Schools: A Literature Synthesis**Introduction**

Although schools exist globally as the formal agency that educates children, the importance of parental engagement in the education of children has been known and respected for a long time. In fact, John Locke's treatise *Some Thoughts Concerning Education: The Harvard Classics* notes, "The well educating of their children is so much the duty and concern of parents, and the welfare and prosperity of the nation so much depends on it (Locke, 1693).

And, Locke isn't alone in that belief. In fact, over the past two decades, a number of researchers have engaged their work in the study of how parental involvement can and does impact schoolings and teaching and learning therein. This section of the report will review some of that

research and work to create a synthesis of some of the findings that research suggests to schools and educators who wish to engage in the practical education of their children.

Defining Parental Involvement

In this short review of literature, parental involvement is defined to include all the activities that parents engage in to help their children succeed both at home and at school. In addition, an assumption of this review is that parental engagement is a crucial aspect of all children's education because parents and guardians are the first teachers their children have.

Generally speaking, most parents are naturally involved in educational activities with their children before they attend school. Obviously, most parents teach their children language activities of speaking and listening. As well, many parents read with their children at home. Furthermore, most parents – especially in the early grades – attend school events and confer with teachers about their children's school learning and achievement.

Sadly, such school engagement by parents is not universally true and it tends to become less pervasive over time. Extant research (Epstein & Sheldon, 2004; Henderson & Berla, 1995; Hill & Tyson, 2009) suggests that (a) early parent involvement is critical for the success of children's education; (b) continued parent involvement in school across the elementary school years is important for children's achievement and motivation to succeed in school; and, (c) parent involvement, student motivation, and school achievement is a cyclic process that builds upon one another from preschool throughout grade school. In general, studies show that students whose parents are engaged have better school attendance, higher self-esteem, and higher graduation rates. Obviously, all these effects contribute to success both in school and later in life.

However, this same research shows that there are attendant issues. First, partnerships between parents and schools tend to decline across grades as children increase in grade and age. Second, there are socio-economic differences: for example, affluent families tend to have more positive attitudes towards parental involvement. Third, schools in more economically-challenged communities make more contacts with families about the problems and difficulties their children are having than about their children's successes. And fourth, fathers, single-parent families, and parents who are employed full-time are less likely to be involved in schools.

In the next few sections of this literature synthesis, the work of a small number of key researchers in the area of parental involvement will be reviewed. Finally, near the end of this review a number of recommendations will be made that work to pull together the insights from this short literature synthesis.

James Comer's Work

James Comer's (2010) work was grounded on his classic belief that the purpose of school was not to raise test scores, but to prepare our children to be successful in life. To make this happen, Comer believed that educating children for success included involving homes and families as early as possible.

Working in a cultural context of racial tension and change, as early as 1968, Comer established the Comer School Development Program, an institute that promoted collaboration between parents, teachers, and communities as a way to improve the academic success of children. Comer grounded his work upon a foundation of developmental science, psychiatry, and public health because he believed that social determinants caused by a lack of academic

achievement could be mediated by strong families who worked to prepare their children for school success.

As an educator of color, Comer's (2010) classic research worked to both understand and identify developmental factors that correlated to academic ability. Key among those was his identification of the importance of strong, nurturing families on the development of children, especially families whose lives were impacted by poverty. For more than 50 years, Comer (who was named The Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at the Yale Child Study Center) argued that academic learning was inextricably linked to development of the whole child – emotionally, psychologically, and ethically. He also argued that success in academics was tied to a child's emotional, psychological, and social development.

Comer came to believe that parent engagement highly impacted student academic success and noted that, although all parents hoped to provide for their families, a number of conditions prevented that provision from fully occurring. These conditions especially impacted families of lower socioeconomic status, where poverty, a lack of transportation, difficulties in communication, and a lack of free time resulted in lower than needed involvement. His work offered a number of ideas for improving the school-family alliances, identifying effective components of parent engagement programming, and both validating and building stronger relationships between parents and schools.

Susan Auerbach's Work

Susan Auerbach's (2010 & 2012) research focused on parent and family engagement in education, school-community partnerships, and the social context of urban education. Her work, in its totality, focused on the ways effective schools might help engage families in their children's education.

Auerbach's key findings included the insight that (a) effective school leaders believed that parental engagement was highly valuable and that schools should be proactive in working to achieve such engagement; (b) school leaders who were most likely to successfully engage parents worked actively to initiate, plan, and implement activities with families rather than being figureheads who only showed up at events or delegated the organization of such events to others; and (c) leaders who effectively involved parents in the school were motivated by an ethical desire to foster social justice.

Similar to Comer (2010), Auerbach grew to believe that school leaders should encourage and pursue meaningful partnerships with both communities and families; however, also like Comer, she found that cultural and economic barriers often militated against such alliances. As well, the skills, tools, and resources to foster these alliances were absent. Her work focused on research that would help school leadership engage in effective practices that could build collaborative practices between schools and families.

In her 2010 article, "Beyond Coffee With the Principal: Toward Leadership for Authentic School-Family Partnerships," Auerbach outlined four types of leadership and family partnerships that worked to increase or decrease family engagement. She believed that, when leaders

distrusted or saw little value in family partnerships, relationships became closed and families felt pushed away from building relationships with schools and teachers.

She also believed that school leaders sometimes viewed parents and families from a deficit perspective, where they were not seen as assets within the school community or even for their children. Such fixed mindsets created both distance and dissonance between families and the school. These mindsets included (a) the inherent belief that the school knew best and that parents should comply with school actions and values, (b) the belief that parents were inferior to teachers in their insights about their children, and (c) the conclusion that parents should be involved but in limited and controlled ways.

Models that closed communication included “come if we call” and “we have an open door policy” (Auerbach, 2010, p. 734). Although, on the face of it, an “open door” policy seems quite fair, deep within its meaning is the belief that the onus is upon parents to initiate contact with schools and teachers. Auerbach believed that, if schools ever hoped parents would become involved, school leadership must proactively go to the parents and help them realize their presence was desired and valued.

Auerbach believed the effects of such traditional school-first beliefs on parent engagement was one of compliance, where partnerships were nominal and leaders only encouraged parental involvement within school-based parameters. When this occurred, parents felt they had little say in the workings of the school but were “allowed” to support the school when it solicited their help. Such actions basically kept parents in “their place” and reminded

them that the main focus of the school was student achievement and that parental involvement should be focused upon only the academic initiatives of the school.

In other words, parent-school relationships were and should remain “traditional,” where any two-way communication was centered upon the school’s needs and desires. Thus, parents were treated like “clients” of the school and not full partners in their children’s education.

On the other hand, Auerbach’s research found that some school leadership had more efficacious and positive effects on parent engagement; and, in fact, such leadership actively helped build trust between the school and parents. Specifically, such relationships were built upon foundations of trust. Only where school leadership trusted parents would mutual partnerships flourish between school leaders and families. When schools trusted parents to be true players and advocates in the education of their children, parents tended to respond by more fully trusting the school’s ability to involve and collaborate with them.

However, in most contexts, changing traditional culture and historical beliefs can be difficult for schools and parents alike. Not having experienced being trusted with having contributions for their own children’s education, having a say can be new for parents. Teachers and schools are the professionals, after all. Furthermore, when school leaders work to build authentic partnerships and parents are invited to “co-construct” the school, feeling confident can be difficult. As a result, it takes work to change the prevailing culture.

In addition, although parents are seen to have important contributions to share with schools, that doesn’t mean that parents can’t benefit from education about schools’ goals, values, principles, and policies. In fact, Auerbach believed being transparent about school goals and

activities was essential to parental involvement. And, as school leaders worked to build mutually-respectful alliances, these alliances should be based upon "broader goals such as social justice, democratic participation, and cultural responsiveness" (Auerbach, 2010, p. 735).

Auerbach believed leaders who worked to build authentic partnerships created more than trust with their school families; they created alliances. These leaders saw families as assets and created active spaces where parents could share their visions, dreams, desires, and values with and within the entire school community. Such leadership created a community that involved both the school and the neighborhood surrounding it. The key was for leaders to actively create space where the ideas of parents and the collaboration of families could be recognized and normalized. In fact, the grounding ethos within such schools was that children would never be successful if families were not a large part of the school community.

Auerbach came to believe that "Administrators should try to give parents the support they need to help their families and find ways to empower them to participate in the school and the broader community" (Auerbach, 2009, p.16). She outlined three strategies effective school leaders could use to help empower parents and increase family engagement.

These strategies included what she came to call (a) community uplift, (b) parent advocacy; and, (c) culturally responsive parental engagement.

Strategy 1: Community uplift included parental regular school or home meetings that helped parents become involved in advisory councils, monthly community service projects, and activities such as a family leadership institute where parents and school leaders collaborated

together to discuss important issues. In short, some of these activities engaged parents as advocates and recognized that they were already leaders within the family and community. Auerbach believed parents could be educated for advocacy and that parental education was “a vehicle for them to learn how to be advocates, to know what to ask for” (Auerbach, 2010, p. 743).

Strategy 2: Parent advocacy included nurturing parent-teacher relationships and often emphasized school leadership’s active outreach that worked to actively develop collaborative and interpersonal relationships with families.

Strategy 3: Culturally responsive parental engagement included what Auerbach named “co-powerment relationships” between administrators, teachers, and parents. For Auerbach, “The essential core of family engagement is furthering the communication and relationship between teachers and parents” (Auerbach, 2009, p.19).

Joyce Epstein’s Work

Joyce Epstein, a research professor of education and sociology at Johns Hopkins University, outlined the relationship between children and their schools:

The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children’s families. If educators view children simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools. If educators view students as children, they are

likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children's education and development. (Epstein, retrieved from https://www.corwin.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/6799_epstein_ch_1.pdf)

Epstein's research (2004) focused on the effects of school leadership and school programming on family and community involvement and corresponding academic achievement. Perhaps Epstein's most noted contribution has been her oft-cited framework that explicated six types of parent involvement. These six types include:

Type One: Parenting, which includes supporting the home environment and strengthening families as they work to support their children at school. The job of parenting is to help all families establish home environments to support children as students.

Some activities that fit under "parenting" include (a) parent education and other training for parents (e.g. college credit, family literacy); (b) family support programs to assist families with health, nutrition, and other services; and, (c) home visits at transition points to make entrance into elementary, middle, and high school easier.

Type Two: Communicating, which works to create effective modes of school-to-home and home-to-school communication about school programs and children's social and academic progress. Some of the activities listed under communicating included: (a) conferencing with every parent at least once a year; (b) providing language translators who could assist families as

needed; and (c) the regular scheduling of notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters, and other communications.

Type Three: Volunteering, which works to recruit parents to actively help and support school activities. Some of the activities named volunteering included (a) building school and classroom volunteer programs that help teachers, administrators, students, and parents; (b) creating a parent room or family center for volunteer work, meetings, and resources for families; or (c) creating regular feedback that would help identify the available talents, times, and locations of volunteers.

Type Four: Learning at Home, which focuses on sharing information about ideas for learning at home, as well as what is happening in schools that supported family-school alignment regarding educational activities. This information included offering ideas about helping families learn to help their children at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning. These activities might also include such things as (a) providing information for families about the skills students need if they are to be successful in all subjects at each grade and (b) providing information about homework policies and how parents might monitor and discuss schoolwork at home.

Type Five: Decision-making, which works to empower parents to become leaders who involve themselves in school decision-making. The goal of such parent involvement includes helping families become participants in school decisions and developing parent leaders and representatives. These activities include such things as (a) creating and utilizing parent advisory

councils or committees that would embrace parental leadership and participation and (b) creating district-level advisory councils and committees.

Type Six: Collaborating with community, which works to identify and integrate resources and services from the community to help strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development. The goal of this type of parental involvement includes coordinating resources and services from the community for families, students, and the school. It also includes providing services to the community. Some activities included in collaborating with the community included (a) providing information for students and families about community health, cultural, recreational, social support, and other programs or services and (b) providing information about community activities that linked to learning skills and talents, including summer programs for students.

Similar to Comer and others, Epstein believed that parents wanted to participate in their children's school lives, but faced barriers to such participation that include (a) attitudes, (b) logistics, (c) system barriers, and (d) a lack of skills.

Specifically, one attitude that limited participation was the belief that school and family inhabited separate spheres of influence. Such attitudes could be felt in comment often heard from schools that, "If the family would just do its job, we (teachers) could do our job" or often heard from parents that, "I raised my children; now it's your job (the school's) to educate them."

However, such divisive attitudes should be replaced with the more-generative attitude that the family and the school shared overlapping spheres of influence and that neither could

educate children without each other's help. That belief can be seen in statements by teachers that "We cannot do our jobs without help of our students' families and the support of this community" or the belief expressed by parents that "We need to know what's happening in school if we are to help our children at home." Such statements indicate that children do not learn or grow in one context; instead, they share and must flourish in both.

For Epstein, supporting parental involvement was broad, practical, and relational work. It might include parents becoming teachers' assistants where they were valued as an extra pairs of hands or eyes; or, it might expand to actively inviting parents to engage in more equal partnerships and decision-making about school policies. Epstein believed such relationships were key because, as she found in her research (2001), over 70% of parents never participated in any activities at their children's schools and only 4% of the parents were highly active at their children's schools.

Epstein offered a number of practical tips that might help overcome the challenges of a lack of parental participation. For example, she suggested working to (a) train parents, (b) incorporate activities into the family schedule, (c) design interactive homework, and (d) allow easy access of materials and resources. In summary, Epstein's model for parental involvement was grounded on the belief that children's learning was enhanced by school and home partnerships where parents and educators came together to share their ideas and views, solve problems, and work towards building a shared vision that contributed to both school goals and student learning.

Within such partnerships, parents also became educational leaders who were eager to help schools because they knew their help impacted their children's success. Schools were happy to involve parents by working together to build sustained partnerships. In response, students, as they became more successful, desired that their families become more knowledgeable about school life. In general, in Epstein's model, the relationships between schools and families moved from separate spheres of influence to overlapping spheres of influence where both came to share a single goal – the growing success of children's learning.

In Epstein's beliefs, the goals of home-based learning included enhancing, reinforcing, supporting, and strengthening learning that had been introduced and shared at school. In response, the school's job was to enhance, reinforce, support, and strengthen what children had learned at home. For that partnership to work, it required building two-way communications that engendered give-and-take conversations that helped establish common goals, shared information, followed-up interactions between home-school, and minimized confusion and misunderstandings by building sustainable and trustworthy communication networks.

Nancy Hill's Work

Nancy Hill was a developmental psychologist whose research focused on the ways race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status affected parents' beliefs and behaviors across different racial and ethnic groups. Specifically, her research (2004 & 2009) identified ways in which parent practices based upon demographic differences had different impacts on children's mental health and behavior.

Hill & Tyson's (2009) meta-analysis examined strategies that best promoted academic achievement among middle schoolers, who historically showed lower engagement and declines in academic performance. Their key findings showed that, across 50 studies, parental involvement was positively associated with academic achievement (the only exception being parental help with homework) and that parental involvement that focused on academic socialization had the strongest positive association with achievement.

Hill defined academic socialization as parents' actions to communicate their expectations for education and its value and utility, linking school-work to current events, fostering educational and vocational aspirations, discussing learning strategies with their children, and helping their children prepare and plan for their futures.

Hill believed in a more positive focus when talking with children about how education impacted their futures. She believed educational policies in the United States (her work was done within the context of the "No Child Left Behind" political agenda) talked about parental involvement in terms of communication and accountability. However, she also believed that, too often, teacher-parent communication was problem-driven and based upon what children were not doing well both behaviourally and academically.

Instead of such negative talk, she came to believe that, if parents received more information about their children's strengths and about curriculum content, they would be better equipped to offer effective advice and guidance to their children and, by doing so, to reinforce how classroom learning became incarnate in real-world contexts.

William Jeynes's Work

During his academic career, William Jeynes published over 100 academic articles over a broad range of topics; however, he particularly focused on parental engagement. Jeynes meta-analyses (2012 & 2017) synthesized empirical studies about the efficacy of school-based parent-involvement programs and evaluated the effectiveness of such programs, suggesting components of those programs that proved most effective at increasing student achievement.

Jeynes (2012) meta-analysis of 51 studies examined the relationship between various kinds of parental involvement programs and the academic achievement of pre-kindergarten through 12th-grade school children. He found that a significant relationship existed between parental involvement programs and overall academic achievement, both for younger (pre-elementary and elementary school) and older (secondary school) students.

When looking at what specifically enhanced school-based parental involvement programs and parental engagement, Jeynes (2012) found that one variable clearly stood out as encouraging success: that was an emphasis on partnerships between parents and teachers. His findings suggested that both parental engagement and parental involvement programs were needed. Similar to Epstein, Auerbach, and others, although voluntary parental involvement and school-based family involvement programs had a degree of efficacy independent of one another, proactive cooperation and coordination between the home and the school enhanced the impact of both.

Jeynes (2012) recommended that school leaders and teachers could enhance the efficacy of parental involvement by offering advice to parents about the most vital components of

voluntary expressions of family engagement, such as setting high expectations and adopting parenting styles associated with positive student outcomes. This guidance was especially important because many parents do not realize how powerful and effective their guidance can be in promoting positive student outcomes. Second, Jeynes came to believe school should take a more active role by encouraging parental engagement in areas such as checking homework and shared reading activities, because school-based guidance was found to increase the efficacy of those behaviors.

Jeynes (2017) meta-analysis of 28 studies examined the relationship between parental involvement and the academic achievement and school behavior of Latino pre-kindergarten-university-aged children. His analysis found that a significant relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement was present on the overall outcomes, except for school behavior. This relationship between involvement and academics held true both for younger (grades K-5) and older (secondary school and college freshman) students. Specifically, parental involvement, in general, was associated with better school outcomes and was specifically associated with higher student achievement.

Of the different components within parent engagement programming studied in the meta-analysis, the components that proved most effective at improving student academic achievement were programs that involved teacher-parent partnerships, teacher-parent communication, checking homework, and shared reading. Similar to other researchers, Jeynes also came to believe that parents should share the high educational aspirations they had for their children with them.

Karen Mapp's Work

Karen L. Mapp became interested in the area of parental involvement when she was Deputy Superintendent for Family and Community Engagement for schools in Boston, Massachusetts, and researched how schools could partner with families (Mapp, 1997; Thiers, 2017). She came to believe schools should engage family caregivers in students' learning in new ways that were founded on emphasizing active engagement, not just "parent involvement." Her main thesis was that the key ingredient in creating a true partnership between families and school personnel was that all family-related activity be linked to specific overall goals for student learning. Where such links existed, they helped create and strengthen family, community, and school partnerships and, by doing so, increase student achievement.

Mapp's key findings were that increased family engagement in schools was strongly related to (a) faster rates of literacy acquisition among children, (b) increased rates of attending secondary schools, (c) increased attendance rates among students, and (d) decreased rates of school dropouts. Mapp found that, when schools made home visits, children showed a 20% decline in absences and were more likely to read at or above grade level than their peers without home visits.

Mapp's research found that what families do matters because family engagement showed positive correlations with indicators like enjoying school, college access, good attendance, and academic success. Her work identified five key factors (links) between strong family-school partnerships:

Link One: School initiatives should be *linked to learning* and must be aligned with school and district achievement goals that bridged parents to the teaching and learning goals of their students.

Link Two: School initiatives should be *relational* and a major focus of school initiatives should be on building respectful and trusting relationships between families, teachers, and schools.

Link Three: School initiatives should be *developmental*, which means that initiatives should focus on providing a service and on building the intellectual, social, and human capital of everyone engaged in the program.

Link Four: School initiatives should be *collective/collaborative*, which means that learning should be conducted in groups instead of only individual settings. Furthermore, it should be focused on building strong networks and learning communities.

Link Five: School initiatives should be *interactive*, which means that participants should have opportunities to test, practice, and apply new skills.

Mapp's work was grounded on four core beliefs.

Core Belief One: All parents have dreams for their children and want the best for them.

Core Belief Two: All parents have the capacity to support their children's learning.

Core Belief Three: Parents and school staff should be equal partners in children's learning.

Core Belief Four: The responsibility for building partnerships between school and home rests primarily with school leadership.

Similar to other researchers and educators, Mapp found a convincingly positive relationship between family involvement and benefits for students, including improved academic achievement. In general, the research found that this relationship holds true across families of all economic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds, and among students of all ages.

Mapp and colleagues found that home-school partnerships worked best when parents and school staff worked together to support learning. The results of such working partnerships were that students (a) had higher achievement, (b) enrolled in higher-level programs, (c) were promoted more and earned more credits, (d) adapted better to school and attended school regularly, (e) had better social skills and behavior, and (f) graduated and moved to higher education.

In general, Mapp found that the types of programs that best achieved positive student outcomes were programs that helped families support their children's learning at home. She also found that family involvement at home had a great effect on student achievement and that family involvement had a protective effect in that the more families can do to support their children's progress, the better their children do in school and the longer they stayed in school.

Summary

This literature synthesis attempted to detail the work of a small number of researchers and educational leaders who have, over the years, engaged in the study of how parent engagement in schools could best support and guide school leaders who believed in establishing strong alliances – building bridges – with parents and families within their communities. Although it is not specifically focused on parent/guardian-teacher conferences, the general findings obviously support the existence of such conferences and suggest some of the philosophies that should ground such conferences.

In general, the work of these researchers and educational thinkers suggested what school leaders might consider as they work to build effective alliances between parents and schools that improve students' academic and social learning. In general, there is consensus that student achievement is directly and positively impacted by parental involvement in their children's education. Parental involvement has also been repeatedly correlated to both higher social and emotional wellbeing and academic achievement: even small things such as parental involvement with homework and shared reading works to improve students' overall academic achievement. These findings typically hold true for families from all cultural backgrounds, education, and income levels.

As well, there is also consensus that children's learning is improved when parents encourage their children, talk more with them about school, actively help them plan for further education, and work to help them remain focused on learning. In fact, all families can, and regularly do, have positive effects on their children's learning. However, it was suggested that sometimes parents need help learning how to do so.

The research and educational thinking of these committed educators found that the foundational component of effective partnerships was trusting relationships, where partners had equal status but felt obligated to others within that relationship.

The keys to building partnerships included (a) a focus on building trusting, sustaining, and respectful relationships between school staff, families, and community members; (b) a working belief that schools should engage families in a philosophy of partnership; (c) a belief that the responsibility for children's education was shared, collaborative work; (d) a belief that parent-involvement programs should proactively invite families and community to involvement in ways that helped them feel welcomed and that addressed specific parental and community needs; and, (e) parent-involvement programs should honor, respect, validate, and affirm the abilities of both the family and schools to impact children's learning.

To sum up recommendations from the literature in a word, that word might be "attitude." The researchers and educational thinkers who engaged the successful building of parental involvement focused on changing the ways schools thought of parents and that parents thought of schools.

A helpful summary of the work of those who engaged parental involvement can be found in the work of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Engaging Diverse Families Project, (n.d.) who listed six principles for successful parental engagement. These included:

Principle 1: Where parental engagement is successful, programs invite families to participate in decision making and goal setting for their children.

Principle 2: Where parental engagement is successful, teachers and programs engage families in two-way communication.

Principle 3: Where parental engagement is successful, programs and teachers engage families in ways that are truly reciprocal.

Principle 4: Where parental engagement is successful, programs provide learning activities for the home and in the community.

Principle 5: Where parental engagement is successful, programs invite families to participate in program-level decisions and wider advocacy efforts.

Principle 6: Where parental engagement is successful, programs implement a comprehensive program-level system.

In general, after engaging in a synthesis of the historical work in the area of parental engagement, there is overwhelming evidence that school leadership should work to encourage and build working alliances and partnerships between parents and their schools.

Part Two: Research from Within the Canadian Perspective

Within the Canadian context, this research was largely informed by the collected works of Angela Snowshoe's research team. Their research spans several years of community-based participatory research with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) community partners and their local school board. Their work highlighted the concepts of connectedness, community-based research partnerships and the use of strengths-based approaches (Crooks, Snowshoe, Chiodo, &

Brunette-Debassige, 2013; Snowshoe, 2015; Snowshoe, Crooks, Tremblay, Craig, & Hinson, 2015).

The findings of Snowshoe's research team showed that cultural connectedness in Indigenous youth was positively associated with outcomes such as self-efficacy, sense of self (present and future), school connectedness, and life satisfaction. Furthermore, in some cases, cultural connectedness predicted mental health above and beyond other established social determinants of mental health (Snowshoe, 2015). They also described community-based partnerships as a model for doing research in a way that was equitable, respectful, honoured, and ultimately benefited the Indigenous community (Crooks et al., 2013). Their work demonstrated that partnership building was a process that occurred over a span of years, wherein the success of each joint project further strengthens that partnership relationship.

The team's research also advocated for the use of a strengths-based approach to evaluation, because that approach builds competencies that lead to increased well-being of the participants (Snowshoe, 2015). Snowshoe's work inspired the use of a participatory approach in this research project, wherein we sought to establish a community advisory board (CAB) in each participating school. The purpose of the CAB was to guide the research project in a manner that worked well within the specific school community and to ensure accountability to that school community. The researchers in this project also endeavoured to incorporate a strengths-based approach in the analysis and reporting of findings.

Snowshoe's research team's work also informed the choice of focusing this research project on enhancing social connectedness in the school community, specifically using the parent/guardian-teacher interview as a pivot for enhancing connectedness between families and

the school community. Connectedness is a critical area that impacts on student health and wellbeing (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002).

Despite the range of conceptualizations of the term connectedness, two basic elements of connectedness consistently stand out in the literature: these elements are (1) relatedness and (2) autonomy (Barber & Schluterman, 2008). Relatedness describes a relational component (i.e. a connection or bond with the socializing agent – ranging from individuals to institutions). Autonomy involves the degree to which a person feels that their individuality is validated or supported by their socialization agents.

Research increasingly recognizes the value that positive social experiences with individuals and with institutions adds to the school environment (Barber & Schluterman, 2008). Such benefits include good mental health and positive self-esteem (Bond et al., 2007; Foster et al., 2017), enhancement of protective factors for positive educational outcomes, and lower rates of health-risk behaviours (Bond et al., 2007). Furthermore, connectedness between parent/guardians, students, and the school community has been shown to contribute to students' senses of connectedness to the school community and ultimately their achievement and wellbeing (Waters, Cross & Runions, 2009). Connectedness has also been associated with an enhanced sense of belonging, a sizeable social network (potentially addressing social isolation and building social capital), and active student engagement in their community (Foster et al., 2017). The solid consistency of these associations endorses continued efforts to enhance connectedness within the school community.

This research is also informed by the broader research on parent/guardian engagement in schools, which recognizes the significant role that parental/guardian involvement has in student

achievement and well-being. Such research includes *The Evidence Grows* (Henderson, 1981), *the Evidence Continues to Grow* (Henderson, 1987) and, in the 1990s, *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family Is Critical to Student Achievement* (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Research evidence has demonstrated the beneficial impacts of parental/guardian involvement in children's education. For instance, in the fourth edition of the Evidence publication, a systematic review of 51 quantitative and qualitative studies on parents' engagement in education, from early childhood to high school found positive associations with outcomes such as academic achievement, higher graduation rates, improved attendance, better social skills and adaptation to school, and improved behaviour (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Other meta-analyses have determined the impact of parent/guardian involvement on educational outcomes of middle and secondary school children and have found similar positive associations (Jeynes, 2012; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Parent/guardian involvement was linked with academic achievement regardless of racial/ethnic and educational backgrounds for students at all ages. Overall, the education literature shows consensus on the importance of parent/guardian involvement in their child's education. However, the gaps and areas for further research necessitate identifying improved ways to engage parents/guardians with their child's teacher(s) within their particular school context.

There is a continuum of processes and roles in which parents/guardians engage with schools from passive, involved, to engaged (Wong, 2015). A passive role includes receiving information from the school via various media – letters, newsletters, emails, students' agenda books, etc. An involved role includes attending meetings, events, and supporting school programs. An engagement role includes providing input and participating in decision-making

processes at the school level such as school policies and practices that may impact their child's and other students learning dynamics.

Other authors have described parent/guardian involvement along the lines of: (a) activities that strengthen the entire school population and indirectly helps their own child, such as volunteering in the classroom and participating on school council and (b) activities that directly affect the child but have little or indirect effect on the rest of the school, such as parent/guardian-teacher interviews/conferences and helping with homework (Brock & Edmunds, 2010). In reality, parents/guardians move in and out of these roles as best suits their situations because having multiple options for engagement gives them opportunities to make the choices that work for them and their children.

Ultimately, educators aim their parental/guardian engagement efforts at: a) encouraging increased communication between the home and school and b) encouraging parents/guardians to pursue behaviours at home that encourage learning (Brock & Edmunds, 2010). Programs and special efforts to engage families that have been identified as more impactful are teacher-led initiatives to reach out to families in ways that are linked to improving their child's learning. For instance, several studies in Henderson and Mapp's (2002) review demonstrated that teacher outreach to parents/guardians via face-to-face meetings, sending materials home, and keeping in touch about progress was linked to strong and consistent improvements in student performance in both reading and math.

Despite the diverse avenues for parental/guardian involvement in schools, studies show that the level of involvement might differ by factors such as culture, language, and socio-economic status. Wong (2015), for example, explored the engagement experiences of parents and teachers within the context of the Ontario Ministry of Education's 2010 Parent Engagement

Policy for Ontario Schools. The results revealed that the actual and desired levels of engagement were different between new immigrants and the established or non-immigrant families.

Henderson and Mapp (2002) found that, although families of all income and education levels and from all ethnic and cultural groups were engaged in supporting their children's learning at home, white middle-class families tended to be more involved at school. This finding led to the recommendation that there is a need to support more involvement at school from all parents across multiple socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds as a strategy to bridge student achievement gaps. Similarly, a study on Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents/guardians' relationships with schools found differences along categories in relation to perceived socioeconomic status. In contrast, middle to higher socioeconomic status parents interacted with schools in ways that educators expected and valued, while parents in lower socioeconomic situations interacted with schools in ways that educators viewed as unhelpful or disengaged from school interactions altogether (Milne, 2016). These socioeconomic perception differences were in addition to challenges many Indigenous parents might have faced with school engagement because of past negative experiences with education in a colonial, parochial and/or residential school context.

The parent/guardian-teacher conference (also interview or meeting) is the most common form of direct communication between parent/guardian and teachers. It serves the purpose of creating opportunities for a teacher and a parent/guardian to address particular issues related to the child, such as academic progress and behavior (Lemmer, 2012). It also provides an opportunity for a teacher to leverage family resources to support the student's education process (Khasnabis, Goldin, & Ronfeldt, 2018). However, the relevance of parent/guardian-teacher

interviews/conferences today is being questioned. There are concerns that these are viewed as more ritual than substantial (Lemmer, 2012; McKibben, 2016).

Issues such as poor attendance have led to suggestions to eliminate the traditional parent-teacher conferences altogether in favour of on-demand conferences and other engagement initiatives (McKibben, 2016). Because time constraints have been a consistent challenge for such engagements, there are questions about whether technology could be used to achieve the same purpose, rather than face-to-face meetings (Nitza & Roman, 2016). Although on-demand conferences might sound ideal, there is still the possibility that some parents/guardians may never take the initiative to request a conference with teachers. Moreover, it could also be argued that, although the use of technology (e.g. emails, video calls, phone calls) could assist in the process, taking away the personal touch of an in-person meeting at least once during the school year might be detrimental to the expected relationship development that needs to happen between parents/guardians and teachers.

Attempts to modify parent/guardian-teacher interviews will require a detailed evaluation of current processes and protocols to identify strengths and weaknesses, as well as determine efficient and effective ways to enhance the engagement process. McKibben (2016) described a need to think about what parent/guardian-teacher conferences should look like rather than what they are. In this regard, our research was aimed at contributing knowledge to the on-going discussion about the relevance of these interviews. Specifically, we sought to gain understanding about the perspectives of parents/guardians regarding the current interview process and the associated teacher-engagement processes experienced in their child's school context.

Research questions

What are parents'/guardians' perceptions about, and suggestions for:

1. The strengthening of parent/guardian/teacher engagement?
2. The improvement of social connectedness within school communities?

Research sub-questions:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of existing parent/guardian-teacher interview processes?
- How could parent/guardian-teacher interview processes and other parental and family engagements be improved to enhance social connectedness within their pedagogical and social context?

Section 2: Practitioner – Researcher Collaboration**Research partnership**

Overview and summary. This project evolved from the confluence of research relationships both past and present between Aurora Academic Charter School (Aurora School Ltd.), Edmonton Public School Board, University of Alberta and Simon Fraser University. Initial brainstorming on this research project began with informal dialogue between Dr. Malcolm Steinberg (Public Health Practice Program Chair, Simon Fraser University) and Dr. Paul Wozny (Deputy Superintendent, Aurora Academic Charter School). Wozny shared with Steinberg research and resultant publications of a school-based cardiovascular health research project that investigated longitudinal trajectories in blood pressure, arterial compliance, and fitness levels with a large cohort of public school students as they transitioned from elementary to secondary school levels. From this initial dialogue, Steinberg inquired about how the many economic challenges Albertans faced were impacting students, parents, and educators in the public education system.

Discussions included brainstorming the challenges of building social capital between students and parents within their school teaching and learning communities, especially during the challenging times associated with regional economic downturns. This ongoing informal dialogue led to Steinberg's visit to Aurora Academic Charter School and subsequent meeting with the teaching staff and administration for a professional development workshop on qualitative and quantitative research methods in the Autumn of 2017.

Further discussion between Steinberg and Wozny led to a meeting with Aurora stakeholders, including School Council members, Board members, teaching staff, school administration, parents, and students. Steinberg and Wozny shared their interest in the possibility of collaborative research investigating social connectedness/social capital within the Aurora Academic Charter School context. This discussion was well-received by the Aurora stakeholders.

Wozny, in partnership with Steinberg, reached out to a number of external stakeholders including Edmonton Public Schools and the University of Alberta. Wozny met with Dr. Owen Livermore (Edmonton Public Schools Research Unit) on a number of occasions during the Autumn, Winter, and Spring of 2017-18. These meetings included visits to both Edmonton Public Schools Central Office and Aurora Academic Charter Schools.

Further research communication took place in 2017-18 with University of Alberta Professor Dr. Paul Veugelers, Department of Public Health. Both Wozny and Veugelers had worked on a longitudinal student cardiovascular health and physical activity research project "Healthy Hearts Alberta" over a 10-year period with two school jurisdictions, University of Alberta, Department of Medicine (Dr. Richard Lewanczuk, Brian Torrance) and University of Manitoba, Department of Medicine (Dr. Jon McGavock).

Past and current research relationships across multiple universities and school jurisdictions were key to the genesis and evolution of this collaborative research project. Each partner institution had representation on the research team as co-investigators empowered by Principal Investigator Steinberg. Project strategic planning and progress meetings (combination of face-to-face and online) occurred throughout the tenure of this collaborative participatory research process.

The funding for this project was provided by the Alberta Education Research Branch. Moreover, Alberta Education provided a number of valuable research support workshops and meetings with funded research teams throughout Alberta. This process included workshops with the Alberta Research Network (ARN) composed of numerous research stakeholders from both education and advanced education organizations from local to international along with regularly-scheduled research cohort program workshops and webinars. This interactive and collegial process continues to nurture a collaborative culture and ethos of research and evidence to inform policy and practice empowered by regular and purposeful communication and facilitation between education stakeholders in Alberta.

As part of the participatory approach used in this research project, stakeholders in the school community (including parents, students, Indigenous Elders, local community league members, and staff of the participating schools) were given an opportunity to contribute to a mutually established Community Advisory Board (CAB) together with the research team. The purpose of the CAB was to promote a participatory approach and support an accountable governance process. In Aurora Academic Charter School, this process began with the establishment and engagement with the CAB in December 2017, when the ideas behind this project were being collaboratively conceived.

When this project was launched, the Aurora School Council served as the standing CAB. There have been multiple meetings to date with the Aurora CAB. This active engagement process included monthly meetings to present updates on the research and to seek help with research participant recruitment. The CAB has effectively supported recruitment processes for the study and will be involved in future knowledge translation processes and making recommendations to the school based on the findings from this study.

Although this research has included Edmonton Public School Board representation from the onset of the project, the selected Edmonton Public School involvement was more complex because the engagement process needed to go through several levels of approval and dialogue, including with the University of Alberta Cooperative Activities Program, which manages research activities involving the Edmonton Public Schools, including identification and interaction with school(s) considered for participation. Although this was an exploratory study, whereby the insights might inform a future research, we sought to have diversity in participant representation. Thus, we worked with Aurora Academic Charter School, which has a multicultural student population with a high population of ESL and immigrant families, and Edmonton Public Schools with a larger Indigenous student population.

The Edmonton Public School participants and staff who have been involved in this research are currently the de facto CAB for the research in their school. This CAB cohort will be engaged in knowledge translation activities. Additionally, because this project is a first step of a potential wider project to enhance social connectedness and social capital in the greater school community, we intend to build on the relationships established to sustain the collaborative participatory research process.

Coming into the project when it was already initiated, Dr. Nicole Ofosu, the research assistant, was immersed into the participating school contexts to build relationships and trust and to carry out the research. Dr. Wozny worked with Dr. Ofosu to become a familiar face in the academic charter school setting. Dr. Ofosu attended a staff meeting at the charter school during the beginning of the school year in August 2018. She was introduced to the staff, and her role on the project was also highlighted. This was the beginning of building relationships in the school with multiple stakeholders including administration, Board, School Council, parents, students, and teaching staff. Our research team also met with community members in the Aurora Charter School region including Sherbrooke Community League and the City of Edmonton community liaison.

During the course of the research, Dr. Ofosu:

- worked to strengthen the community advisory board (CAB) of parents, staff and other stakeholders;
- attended the monthly school council meetings to provide updates about the project and to seek support for project activities such as participant recruitment;
- worked with parents/guardians for research purposes such as data generation; and,
- worked with staff for research purposes such as preparing materials for the project and information technology (IT) support.

Dr. Ofosu was given the opportunity to participate in a research project presentation with Dr. Wozny at The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools (TAAPCS) annual general meeting, held in Leduc, AB, in October 2018, and again at the Alberta Research Network (ARN) Meeting in November 2018. At the ARN meeting, one of the new contacts Ofosu made was with an Indigenous Elder who had presented at this event.

The Elder provided Ofosu with her contact information as a way to arrange a future meeting. Ofosu accepted the offer and made the arrangements necessary to meet with the Elder. Ofosu honoured and followed the respectful tobacco protocol for the meeting. The Elder and Ofosu discussed the research project within the context of Indigenous people's lived experiences and history in Canada. The Elder shared insights about various activities she and her team were engaged in to support Indigenous families, including within the school setting. As a newcomer to research with Indigenous peoples, Ofosu found the meeting with the Elder to be informative and helpful for her ensuing work on this research project and highlighted for the team the importance of engaging elders when working with Indigenous communities.

Establishing familiarity and relationships in the charter school helped Ofosu reach out for support with participant recruitment. Several discussions took place with the research team and the school council (which served as the charter school CAB) about participant recruitment strategies. The research team and the CAB used various strategies, including sending out information letters to parents, person-to-person contact, and referrals from parents and staff. Ofosu was notified about interested participants and worked to establish contact and build a relationship with each of them. Ofosu had phone and/or email conversations with interested participants to explain the study, the commitments involved, and how they could participate. She remained respectful of parents' time and worked strictly around their schedules for their convenience.

Throughout this process, Ofosu conducted her data generation activities on the school premises, in homes, at the University of Alberta and at workplaces as requested by participants. For the focus group discussion (FGD), interested participants were provided an option of either showing up in-person to the school or joining via the Google Hangouts online conference

facilities. Ofosu worked with the IT specialists in the school to procure the appropriate technology to enable recording of participants' contributions over Google Hangouts. After the data generation and analysis, Ofosu contacted participants with the research findings as part of a member-checking process to validate the findings.

In the second school jurisdiction, it took time to identify a school with a high proportion of Indigenous population that was able to participate in the study. Edmonton Public School's Research Unit worked to identify the participating school and to establish contact. After the school was identified, the research team had an opportunity to visit the school in May 2019, to make contact with school administrators in person, share the experiences of the Charter School, build relationships, and clarify work on the project.

Ofosu was then connected with the Cultural Liaison of the school and another staff member for support to conduct research activities in the school. Given the time constraints presented by the school's academic schedule, Ofosu had limited time to work in the school for data generation or to establish a CAB that mirrored the Charter School, finding it best to work with the Cultural Liaison and the focus group discussion (FGD) participants as the CAB. One key school contact/liaison staff members left the school for another job opportunity in the course of this research project. However, Ofosu maintained contact with him via email for support.

Participant recruitment was primarily carried out by the Cultural Liaison in conjunction with the director of an Indigenous organization in the school. This organization was a non-profit agency that provides support to Indigenous families, including culturally focused education services for preschool children. All initial contact with participants was made by the Cultural Liaison and the Director. Ofosu met participants for the first time when they showed up either for the individual interview or the focus group discussion.

After the data generation process, participants were notified of the research team's interest to continue working with them to support the research process. As such, the possibility of presenting the research findings to them for member-checking was mentioned. Ofosu subsequently reached out to the Cultural Liaison, the Director of the local Indigenous society, and the participants for member-checking. The research team plans to engage in future knowledge translation activities with each participating school.

Celebrations

Over the course of this research project, there have been several accomplishments to celebrate in our research partnership. First, this research has successfully built and supported a strong and effective working research partnership with researchers and practitioners from four diverse and unique institutions: two different school jurisdictions – an academic public charter school and a public school board – and two different post-secondary institutions situated in different provinces. Sustaining this relationship required establishing effective and regular communication between partners. We used technology to maintain regular communication and conduct research activities.

There were also times when the out-of-province research partner made trips to Alberta to support the research process. We believe these established relationships will serve as a platform to engage more schools and jurisdictions in future research to support evidence-based practice, notably our thoughts of moving towards further research studies to strengthen parent/guardian-teacher engagement and complementary strategies to build and strengthen social connectedness within the school community.

Our research team has also shared information and updates about this research project with multiple members of the school communities involved in the research and we have garnered sufficient interest for participation and potential future research collaboration.

Challenges

Time was the biggest challenge in this research project. Because multiple institutions were involved, the research team had to secure ethics approval from the research governing bodies within each of the partner institutions. This took a significant amount of time and impacted particularly on the start time of the research in the two schools. Additionally, researchers had to be respectful of the busy school schedules and work within the allotted time the schools and stakeholders could offer.

The process of establishing relationships for a community-based participatory research process was also challenging because of time constraints, the timespan for the research, and varying and conflicting schedules of parents and other members of the school community. In addition, disseminating information about the research to parents and the school community to generate interest and trust in the research process required a significant amount of time. We managed this reality by using the schools' established communication channels and person-to-person contacts to disseminate the necessary information and optimize ongoing interaction with stakeholders.

The research team also found that establishing a CAB independent of the Aurora school council was a challenge. We therefore chose a more efficient way by working with the existing school council as the CAB. We felt this process would support the sustainability of the CAB role in this project, while meeting the goal of having a participatory collaborative research process.

In the Edmonton Public School setting, a similar challenge was faced; but, given the time constraints, the research team settled on considering the focus group participants and the school Cultural Liaison we worked with as our de facto CAB. The research team intends to use our impending knowledge translation activities in the two school settings as a platform to strengthen the established relationships in the schools and to extend involvement within the CABs as we move forward with future research initiatives.

Finding a suitable time for the interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) coupled with establishing commitment from parents/guardians to participate was challenging. Varying participant schedules and time constraints posed a challenge in scheduling discussions. The research team also had to work within a highly-scheduled school term, so as to avoid putting pressure on participants outside of school time. As researchers, we learned to build trust by working through and building relationships within the school context. By this, the school staff served as a gateway for making connections with the parents/guardians and helped optimize opportunities to engage with parents in the research. We also learned to be flexible with our time and approaches to meetings with parents/guardians and school stakeholders. In addition to face-to-face meetings, we gave opportunities for participants to join via phone or other media (e.g. Google Hangouts). We found that offering diverse opportunities to participate in the research worked well for participants.

Overall, these challenges have reinforced what we know about the time-consuming nature of community-based participatory research approaches. Specifically, these experiences have reinforced our commitment to these approaches to enhance the quality of our research and the potential for the research to inform action. Our research team therefore appreciates the

opportunities we have had to collaborate with different institutions and to build relationships that help support this research project.

Research Partnerships Program Cohort

The Research Partnership Program (RPP) cohort meetings and workshops nurtured a collaborative culture of research knowledge sharing, support, and mobilization across multiple stakeholders from local to international. Moreover, the Alberta Education Research Network segued effectively with the RPP cohorts across research themes to provide ongoing intra-research team support along with inter-research team workshops (across multiple research teams). In particular, our research team appreciated the discussion and learnings shared with Indigenous Elders. Because our research project was situated in multicultural and Indigenous learning environments, the learnings and supports shared by Indigenous Elders were key to the progress and success of our research processes inclusive of our multiple stakeholders in a strengths-based mutual relationship.

Upon the notice of our research team's successful application and receipt of the RPP grant (March, 2018), we were notified of multiple workshops hosted by the Alberta Education Research Branch that included not only successful grant recipients, both past and present, but also a diverse and distinguished group of school jurisdiction and post-secondary university research stakeholders. Within this diverse and dedicated cohort, a valuable and active professional learning community emerged that effectively developed and used research evidence to inform and improve pedagogical policy and practice.

For our research team, this process was a responsive ally to assure communication, planning, reflection and overall research team efficacy. The May 3, 2018, RPP cohort workshop held at Government House (Edmonton) provided an opportunity for research teams to share

descriptions of their particular project(s) in a collegial and supportive context coupled with opportunities for open discussion among workshop attendees. Fortunately, this process (RPP cohort interactions) continued with regularly scheduled face-to-face and online research workshops that kept the momentum and communication moving in positive directions amidst the busy and diverse demands on school jurisdiction personnel across Alberta.

Celebration

Our research team was honoured to present and discuss our project on multiple occasions with the many RPP cohort research teams and Alberta Research Network that included many stakeholders across Alberta's research community. The process of actively and regularly engaging teachers, school/divisional administrators, and university stakeholders in partnership with government and public stakeholders will, we believe, yield continued partnerships.

At the core, the RPP cohort process is about nurturing a sustainable educational research culture and responsive networks where evidence and research are deeply imbued in policy and practice. A fundamental shift from practitioner to research-practitioner was experienced by our research team's lived experience empowered by our RPP cohort and Alberta Research Network (ARN) collaborations and workshops that also informed our knowledge translation and exchange initiatives.

We were especially honoured to provide a research workshop to over 245 educators and administrators in Calgary at the Biennial Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools Conference on October 25, 2019. In addition to sharing the experiences of our research project, our presentation facilitated dialogue about research practice and the generation of research topics across the Charter School environment in Alberta. We are currently analyzing data collected at the conference to distill a research agenda for dissemination to the conference participants.

Challenges

The challenge of engaging with all members of each funded research team within the diverse inter-organizational time demands was ongoing. A challenging and time-sensitive requirement for the RPP cohort research projects included the need for a university-tenured Principal Investigator coupled with a school jurisdiction key research contact/organizer (often a senior administrator), along with multiple school stakeholders, jurisdictions, and universities. The coordination across such a diverse team was challenged by time constraints and administrative demands unique to each stakeholder organization. This project also occurred during a time of significant political change and accompanying legislative and regulatory change that impacted the time demands of our project team members, especially those at the school jurisdictional senior leadership levels.

Our research team would also have benefited from an opportunity to extend its engagement with public health focused tertiary institutions to meet with Alberta's universities/faculties of education to develop potential partnerships with our research. We look forward to pursuing this in our future research endeavors.

Lessons Learned and Suggested Next Steps

Upon reflection, our research team is thankful for the support of the Alberta Research Branch and RPP cohort team for their profound and empowering collaboration, workshops, webinars, and ongoing face-to-face meetings through the tenure of our research project. A strong sense of professional research-practitioner learning emerged through the RPP cohort engagement process and will likely lead to future shared research projects across multiple school jurisdictions and post-secondary research institutions.

A key factor in our engagement with the RPP cohort related to the complexities of working with multiple universities, school jurisdictions, schools, and stakeholders. It would be interesting in the future to invite school trustees, directors, school councils, and school community stakeholders (inclusive of parents/guardians-students) to meet with RPP cohort researchers in a setting optimized for high-level discussions and active engagement that blends research and practice. School Boards have a powerful legislated function in setting policies that impact student learning and the efficacy of teaching and learning systems. Actively engaging School Boards across the breadth and depth of Alberta's school systems with the RPP cohort might prove a rich context to further operationalize research findings so as to inform policy and ensuing administrative regulations and associated systemic practices. One consideration might be to host a conference for this purpose.

Section 3: Research Design

Theoretical Framework and Design

Parent/guardian/student connectedness to the school has been widely associated with improved health outcomes and academic achievement (Figure 1). Waters, Cross, and Runions (2009) present a phased theoretical model explaining the components of school ecology that enhance student connectedness and subsequently to mediate impact on student health, well-being and academic outcomes (Figure 1). The organizational and interpersonal components dynamically and reciprocally interact to develop student connectedness within school contexts by enhancing students' feelings of autonomy, competence and relatedness, as well as helping create a more responsive person-environment fit.

Current literature on connectedness demonstrates that the more connected students are to their schools, the better their health and academic outcomes are at that time and in the future (Barber & Schluterman, 2008; Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009). Similarly, having a strong connection to school has been positively associated with higher academic achievement and enhanced academic motivation (Juvonen, 2007; Niehaus, Rudasill, & Rakes, 2012). Other beneficial impacts of student connectedness include enhanced student mental health and self-esteem (Bond et al., 2007; Foster et al., 2017), reduced risk behaviours (Bond et al., 2007), and enhanced achievement among vulnerable groups of students (Juvonen, 2007).

The interpersonal component of the theoretical model proposed by Waters, Cross, and Runions (2009) highlights the role of relationships between school staff (teachers), students (peers), and parents/guardians (family) in influencing both students' feelings of connection to their school and associated health outcomes. Each of these relationships present areas that are empirically and theoretically supported as having the greatest opportunities for creating a responsive and developmentally appropriate school ecology to enhance school connectedness and improve health and well-being (Waters et al., 2009).

Our study focused on the nature of parental/guardian engagement with the school. We aimed to gain insights to inform action and build sustainable practices that would strengthen parental/guardian engagement as a way to promote social connectedness in the school community.

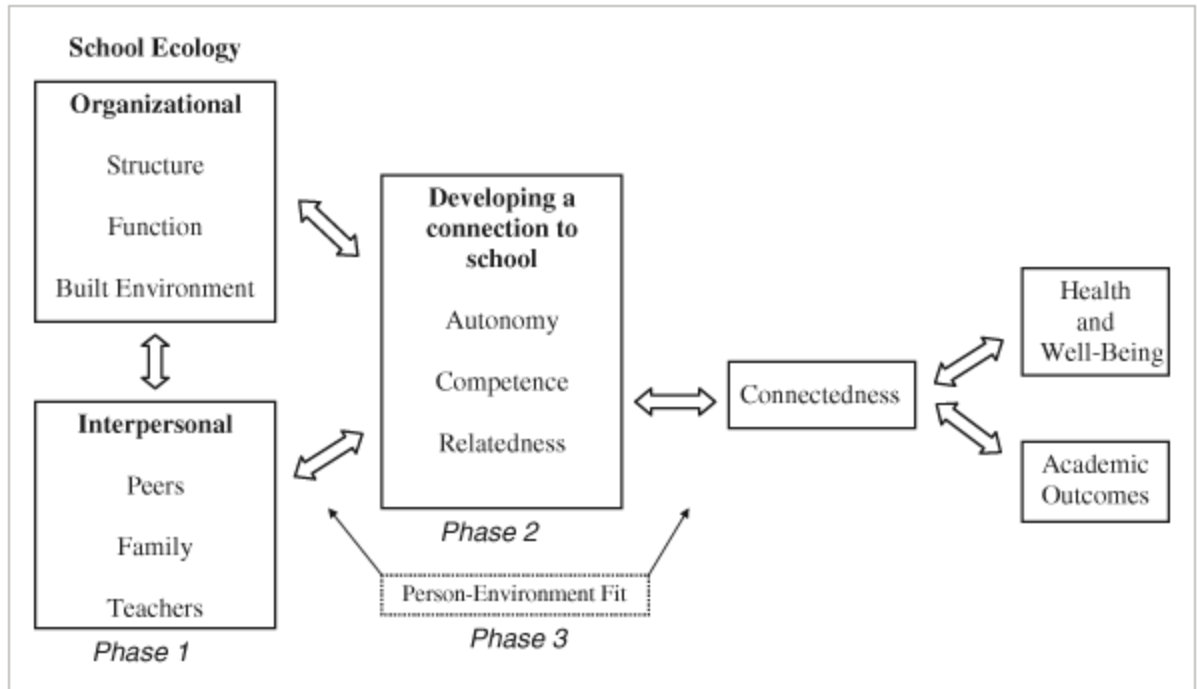


Figure 1. Theoretical model for understanding the social and ecological structures supporting adolescent connectedness to school (Waters et al., 2009).

Research questions

The research question at the core of this study was: What are parents’/guardians’ perceptions about and suggestions for:

- 1) The strengthening of parent/guardian/teacher engagement?
- 2) The improvement of social connectedness within school communities?

Research sub-questions:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of existing parent/guardian-teacher interview processes?

- How could parent-teacher interview processes and other parental and family engagements be improved to enhance social connectedness within their pedagogical and social context?

Study setting

This research involved a partnership between two different school jurisdictions (a charter school and a public community school), and two post-secondary institutions (University of Alberta and Simon-Fraser University). The idea for this research project was conceived in the charter school setting. The partnerships with the different institutions were formed to help build research partnerships across jurisdictions and post-secondary research institutions.

Specifically, a partnership with the Edmonton Public School Board was viewed as an important step to enhance collaboration between multiple school jurisdictions to support research and evidence-based practices. In terms of population dynamics in the two schools, the charter school had a larger population of students from diverse immigrant backgrounds, including first- and second-generation Canadians, and families that were relatively new to Edmonton.

The research team felt it would be beneficial to seek a school from the Edmonton Public School jurisdiction that had a greater proportion of students from Indigenous backgrounds to complement the charter school population dynamic. This would present the opportunity to gain a more diverse and richer perspective from parents/guardians.

Charter school

Charter School jurisdictions in Alberta have existed since 1996 and were a result of legislation passed in 1994 by the Alberta Provincial Government as non-profit autonomous public education systems with high parental involvement and a focus to provide innovative, different or enhanced pedagogical methods to improve student learning, skills, knowledge, and

curricular achievement coupled with an active research and knowledge mobilization. There is therefore an expectation to conduct research and share evidence with school jurisdictions and stakeholders throughout the province. There are 13 Charter School jurisdictions in Alberta, each regulated and legislated by Alberta Education and articulated in the Education Act (2019) and Alberta Charter School Regulation (2019). Public charter schools in Alberta are schools of choice, do not charge tuition, are not allowed to have religious affiliation, and meet the needs of a particular group of students via a particular pedagogical approach.

The charter school jurisdiction participant in this study has been in operation since 1996. It comprises two school sections - an elementary school (Kindergarten to grade four) and a middle school (grade 5 to grade 9), with approximately 860 students in total. Each school section has its own principal, assistant principal, and composite of teaching and support staff. Class sizes are relatively small, varying from 20 to 24 students per class. The student population consists of diverse ethnocultural backgrounds along with a substantial population where English is not the first/primary family language. This particular charter school incorporates school uniforms and a traditional academic pedagogical approach that focuses on direct instruction and mastery learning.

Formal and informal parent/guardian-teacher engagement activities organized by the school include:

- Meet-and-greet with parents/guardians at the beginning of the school year in August;
- New student/parent/guardian orientation in June (before the start of the school year);
- Remembrance Day Ceremony with students, parents/guardians, and staff;
- Annual General Meeting with parents/guardians, staff, administration and Board of Directors held every November to allow opportunity for active engagement and dialogue

with parents/guardians and administration/governance teams in a town hall meeting setting;

- Mother's Day and Father's Day activities with students, parents/guardians and staff;
- Three student awards ceremonies scheduled every year with all parents/guardians invited;
- Two sets of formal Parent/Guardian-Teacher interviews sequenced each third of the way through the school year;
- Construction currently in progress to complete a parent/guardian centre in the school building proximal to administration office that will include:
 - wifi access;
 - opportunities to network with other parents/guardians and stakeholders both informally and formally in a welcoming and accommodating setting with the school facility;
 - washrooms, water, coffee and tea availability for parents/guardians provided by the school;
 - digital media (large screen display) highlighting school activities, schedules, and upcoming events from local to city-wide;
- All the charter school administrators and Deputy Superintendent engage in outside supervision at the start of the school day to meet and greet all students/parents. This process builds face-to-face social connectedness and informal relationship between administration, students, parents/guardians, and community;
- Regular school and community league collaboration and mutual support on a variety of programs from wellness to social connectedness.

Public community school

The public community school that participated in this study is a Kindergarten to grade six public education setting. As a public school, it is under the jurisdiction of the Edmonton Public School Board. In the 2018-19 school year, there were 173 students enrolled at the school with a significant proportion of Indigenous students; about 50% self-identify as First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI). Approximately 30% of the students are English Language Learners, a statistic indicative of the significant number of English language learners in the Division as a whole.

Overall, although some students are enrolled in the regular school program, others take part in either the Division 1 or Division 2 Opportunity program. The Opportunity program supports students with mild cognitive disabilities and significant academic delays to gain skills for future independent living and employment.

The school has established a partnership with an Indigenous organization operating within the school premises that organizes pre-Kindergarten services for Indigenous children. The school has a strong focus on supporting students and their families, many from socio-economically diverse backgrounds. The school is part of the comprehensive school health project – APPLE Schools – which works towards making the school environment a health-promoting environment.

Formal parent/guardian-teacher engagement activities include:

- A barbecue socializing event at the start of the school year in September;
- Goal-setting conferences in October where parents/guardians and their children meet with teachers to set goals for their children;
- Annual Christmas concert;

- Partnership with the Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society to offer programs for Indigenous families and Wichitowin Family evenings.

Community Advisory Board

This research involved a community-based participatory approach inclusive of researchers and other stakeholders (including parents, Indigenous Elders, school staff and other school community stakeholders) who were invited to contribute to a mutually established Community Advisory Board (CAB). The purpose of the CAB was to promote a participatory approach and support an accountable governance process for the tenure of the project. The school council of the charter school operated as the de facto CAB for the research work in the school. The school council process includes a monthly meeting that is an open group in which parents/guardians, school principal and volunteer staff, community stakeholders, and students engage.

The researchers provided regular updates at these meetings. In the community school setting, it was more feasible to have participants of the focus group serve as the CAB along with their engagement in future member checking and knowledge translation.

Our goal was to engage more of the community school stakeholders as we continued to build relationships with the greater school community. We will continue future engagement with the CAB in both school settings to support the knowledge translation processes associated with this research project, including the development of future research.

Participants and data generation

This research project was a qualitative descriptive study in which we conducted in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with a purposeful sample of parents/guardians of Kindergarten to grade 9 students from a public charter school and an Edmonton Public School. Participants had to be primary caregivers of a child in the school. Topics addressed in the

interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) included participant's experiences with the parent-teacher interview process, engagement with the school, and the strengths and challenges of the school engagement processes. All participants voluntarily completed consent forms prior to their engagement in the study (see Appendix E). The interview guide and focus group guide are included (see Appendix F and Appendix G respectively).

Beginning with individual interviews allowed for in-depth discussions that supported sharing of experiences with a focus on cultural safety further supported by a commitment to confidentiality and the de-identification of collected data. The individual interviews also allowed participants to develop confidence and trust in the research process before entering a focus group discussion. The focus group discussions were included to explore group interactions, shared understanding and concerns, and points of difference or interpretation.

Charter school:

Between January and April 2019, information letters about the study were sent out via the schools (emails and letters) to parents and guardians. Parents and guardians who expressed interest in the study were contacted to arrange a convenient time and location for data generation. Seventeen parents/guardians from the public charter school expressed interest in the study. Participants signed the consent forms prior to data generation. Data generation was conducted between February and May 2019, using in-depth interviews with three individuals and a focus group discussion (FGD) with multiple participants recruited from seventeen parents/guardians who showed initial interest after receiving information letters about the study.

Only three individuals attended the single FGD. The low response rate was mainly associated with schedule conflicts for parents, which was explained by some

participants when they expressed their apologies for being no-shows. For one participant, there was difficulty with the technology as he tried to join in the focus groups remotely. Each participant received a \$20 gift card to a local bookstore or café.

Public community school:

The principal recommended that the research team work with the Cultural Liaison for the research process. The Cultural Liaison worked together with the Director of an Indigenous organization located in the school to support this research. Thus, information letters were sent out between April and May 2019 via the Cultural Liaison and the Director to parents and guardians. Fifteen parents/guardians expressed interest in the study. One parent/guardian participated in an interview and later joined four other parents/guardians for a FGD. Again, schedule conflicts could have accounted for the no-shows. Each participant received a \$20 gift card to a local bookstore.

Overall, there were two focus group discussions (one with three and one with four participants) and four interviews with 11 parents/guardians participating in total between the two participant school jurisdictions.

Data management and analysis

The data were uploaded within a secure Google drive folder managed by Aurora Academic Charter School. Only members of the research team had access to the data. After the data were transcribed, the research assistant, Ofosu, de-identified and checked transcripts for accuracy. Participants were assigned pseudonyms. We imported and managed our data using NVivo 12 software, and Microsoft Excel and Word. We analyzed the data thematically; this process involved line-by-line coding, categorizing the data, and reflection to generate themes in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Castelberry & Nolen, 2018).

The research team cross-coded the data, and developed a coding scheme that was refined and applied to the entire data set with new codes developed iteratively when necessary. The coding scheme was kept in Google Sheets, providing members of the research team an opportunity to review and compare the developing codes, categories and themes, thus enhancing the internal validity of the findings. A sample of the coding scheme is presented in Appendix H. In addition, the researcher kept field notes, which provided additional contextual information.

Trustworthiness/Reliability

We used several strategies to ensure trustworthiness and methodological rigour, including investigator responsiveness (e.g. iterative data generation and analysis), and methodological coherence (e.g. congruence between the research question and method) (Morse, Barret, Mayan, Olsen & Spiers, 2002). We conducted member-checks as a validation step to ensure credibility, i.e. that the findings are an accurate representation of the participants' perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Clarifying the researcher's position from the onset of qualitative research enhances the quality of the research results because the researcher becomes more aware of potential biases and beliefs that might impact the way the study was approached (Patton, 2002). Maintaining a reflexive stance was also important to the study. Reflexivity refers to the continuous process of self-reflection that researchers engage in to generate awareness about their position, actions, feelings and perceptions, and how it might impact the research (Darawsheh, 2014, Mayan 2009).

The researcher, who was an outsider to the school system, was primarily engaged in data generation. Because this research involved participants from immigrant backgrounds and Indigenous participants, the researcher's position as an immigrant to Canada, a parent, and an

outsider to the schools taking part in the research helped to diminish power dynamics and establish rapport with participants and empathize with their concerns.

Section 4: Findings

Three major themes and various sub-themes resulted from the analyses: 1) Motivation for parent/guardian-teacher engagement; 2) Enhancers of parent/guardian-teacher/school engagement; and, 3) Enhancers of parent-teacher interview. Figure 2 presents a diagrammatic illustration of the themes and sub-themes. Quotes from participants are included to illustrate the themes and sub-themes.

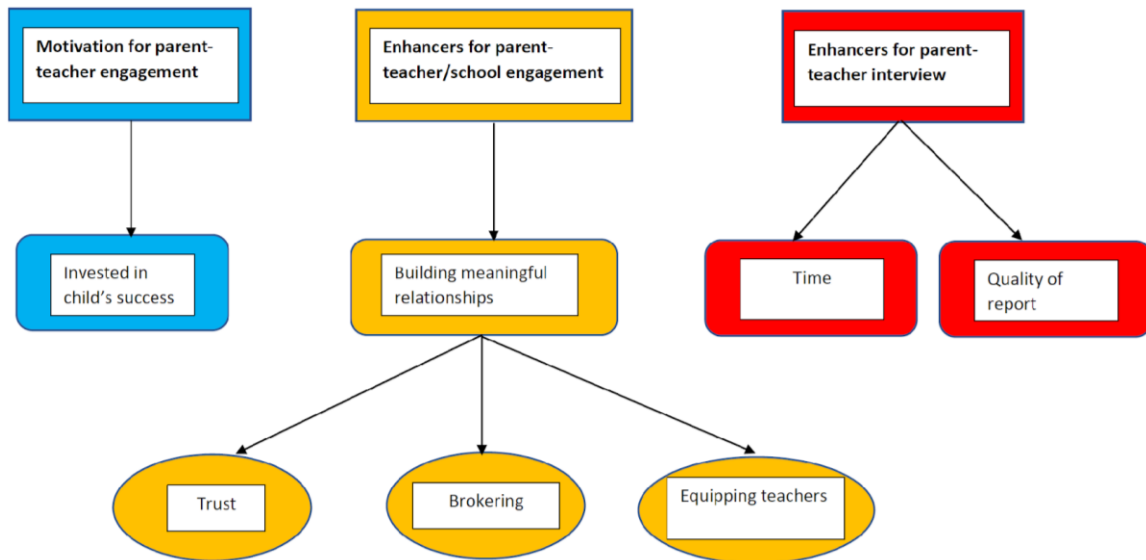


Figure 2. Themes and sub-themes for understanding parents/guardians’ perspective on enhancing social connectedness between parents and teachers.

Motivation for parent/guardian-teacher engagement

Parents and guardian's motivation for parent-teacher engagement provides the context for understanding the diverse ways in which engagement occurs, and the strengths and weaknesses of the engagement processes. We identified "Invested in child's success" as the motivation for parent/guardian-teacher engagement.

Invested in child's success

Participants highlighted that their motivation for seeking any form of engagement with the school community was because they were invested in the success of their child. As one participant explained, "we all want the best for our children" (Sandy, pseudonym). The purpose of their child being in the school was to gain an education that would enable that child to have a good future. For this reason, parents felt a strong need to be involved in their child's schooling as much as is practically possible. As described by another participant, "*I go [for parent-teacher interviews] every time because I am truly invested in him being successful. So, I think how I can do that is to remain engaged with his teachers*" (Eralia, pseudonym).

Engaging with the school provided an opportunity to gain insights into happenings in the school as relates to their child, and to help parents/guardians and their children navigate the education system to achieve their goals. For some participants, insights into the workings of the school helped them to assess whether their child was receiving the holistic education they desired. Participants also shared the values and characteristics of the schools that influenced their choice for their children. Parents/guardians of students in the public charter school selected it for its strong academic focus and its traditional approach to schooling.

One participant described this: "*I liked also the fact that they had an emphasis on education and one of the things that caught me was when they said... and you'll see it in their*

values where it says they take ordinary children and they... so ordinary children can... they believe ordinary children can achieve extraordinary feats through guided education.” (Eralia).

The aspects of the public community school that attracted parents/guardians included the special programs to assist students who required extra support with learning. These included the language programs and the Opportunity Programs. The school’s provision of cultural support and partnership with the on-site Indigenous society providing pre-Kindergarten services for Indigenous children was also an attractive feature. As one participant explained: *“Like the reason why the kids are here is because of the [indigenous-focused head start] program. Because they were really great giving you know... We don't know Cree. So we learn Cree, another language, and being Cree. It's awesome! We do encourage that.”* (Marcela, pseudonym). Ultimately, in both school settings, parents/guardians felt that the attracting factors were salient to their child’s development and success.

Enhancers for parent/guardian-teacher/school engagement

We identified the theme “Building meaningful relationships” as a key enhancer for parent-teacher/school engagement. This theme was associated with sub-themes, which will be highlighted in the subsequent sections.

Building meaningful relationships

A key component in parent/guardian-teacher/school engagement is relationship building. As partners in the child’s education process, there needs to be some relationship that allows parents/guardians and teachers to work together in meaningful ways for the benefit of the child. Participants felt that establishing relationships with their children’s teachers afforded them opportunities to establish open communication, get to know teachers well, and work more effectively on their shared goals for their children’s education. Relationships within the school

community were extended to other parents as well, given that they were also stakeholders in the school community.

As described by one participant, *“I try to build meaningful relationships with teachers of my son for that school year and with other moms who probably share the same outlook on education as myself”* (Eralia).

Additionally, having parent-parent support was beneficial to their experience with the school, because of their shared concerns for the success and well-being of children. Participants noted that relationship-building is not a one-time event, it continues throughout the school year.

As one participant stated, *“You can't build that relationship at that time [during the parent-teacher interview] with the teacher, because there's just no time to say, “Oh how was your weekend? What are you doing this summer? You have to do that throughout the school”* (Sandy, pseudonym).

The school was seen as well-positioned to create avenues for parent-teacher engagements and parent-parent engagements. Informal avenues such as ‘meet-and-greets’ and school barbeques at the beginning of the school year provided safe and friendly spaces for parents to initiate relationships with the teachers and other parents. Participants also identified several factors that impacted building meaningful relationships with teachers and the school. These are highlighted in the following sections.

Trust

Trust forms a basis for building meaningful relationships within the school community. Being able to trust in the school system brings a sense of security and comfort for parents and guardians. For most participants, gaining insights into the workings of the school, being informed, and having “open communication” with teachers helped build trust. This process

created opportunities to know who the teachers were and the kind of influence they were having or could have on their students.

A benefit would be somewhat peace of mind. It's good to get to know the teachers on a personal level just so that you know that they don't have a negative attitude. So, it's comforting, I guess you could say. (Tony, pseudonym)

For Indigenous participants, the issue of trust was expressed on a different level. They described an inherent distrust for schools that arises from the history the residential school system, and subsequent experiences with schooling in Canada. They felt that, although a lot of effort was being made to improve the orientation of the school systems with the Indigenous peoples and their cultures, there still was a long way to go.

Most participants desired moving beyond the prejudices and stereotypes created around Indigenous peoples. They felt that moving on would afford their children opportunities to broaden their horizons and succeed in school. Participants shared that informal engagement opportunities for parent-teacher and parent-parent interactions were more welcoming to them in trying to build trust.

Maybe even at the beginning of the year, have a barbecue so that all the parents can come in... And go from there. Like have a shirt that says I'm grade one teacher, I'm so-and-so. It's kind of, you crack the shell. You start knocking on that shell when you go out to meet people. ...Just explain who you are and say that you really like to see the kids achieve this year. In whatever way, that you're there to help the kids. (Star, pseudonym).

Brokering

Participants felt that a lot of the challenges in parent-teacher/school engagement situations were as a result of misunderstandings. To help promote understanding, the idea of brokering was presented. As described by participants, the idea of brokering included facilitating understanding and engagement with cultural diversity for teachers, and helping parents, particularly those who are new to Canada, to understand the school system. Other brokering roles included support to navigate the school system.

Potential brokers identified were parents, the principal, and a cultural broker such as an Elder. Participants felt that in the relationship between the student and the teacher, the parent/guardian could serve as a broker because the parent/guardian knows their child best and could help the teacher understand how to work with their child and vice-versa.

One participant stated, *“If the teachers took into account... I mean my understanding is that a lot of kids have different methods of learning. If the teachers asked the parents what the child’s strengths are as far as how they absorb knowledge, perhaps any special needs that a child has as far as gaining knowledge, you know ... their learning styles”* (Tony).

As described by another participant, *“I don't know if it means partnering with other parents who are falling through the cracks. Like if you have a parent who is invested and has some time. Can you partner that parent with someone who probably needs some support and help? Maybe somebody is new to Canada and English is a second language and that kind of thing. And you have another parent who is Canadian and who is patient and has the time to support that family”* (Eralia).

The principal was also identified as a potential broker to generate understanding between parents/guardians and teachers. In cases where the two groups are unable to resolve issues, parents/guardians appreciated having the opportunity to reach out to the principal's office for the needed support. Indigenous participants felt that, in addition to these levels of support, cultural brokers might be needed in some situations, particularly given that there is a general sense of distrust and unwillingness to open up to the schools. Participants described the role of a cultural organization in one of the schools that provides pre-Kindergarten services to Indigenous children in their transition to the school system. They felt that recognizing and scaling up the role of such organizations as cultural brokers could help Indigenous families navigate the school system.

Equipping teachers

Participants felt that teachers should be trained and equipped to work with students and parents/guardians of diverse cultures and backgrounds. They provided an example of how foster parents are required to be involved in regular training and support even after they have become foster parents for several years. In the same light, participants felt that teachers could also benefit from continual professional development to equip them to address the issues that arise in engaging with diversity in the school community.

Participants identified that some teachers' attitudes and prejudices (conscious and unconscious) had the potential to negatively impact their interactions with students and their families if they were not addressed. Thus, they felt that the teachers and the school could benefit from such training.

One participant described it in this way, "*We as foster parents also attend seminars and get us educated to be like, to know what Aboriginal is. I think teachers and workers here in every school should have this kind of training too that we attend so they know what's going on with*

[different cultures], so you understand these people and us also, as coloured people.

Understanding different cultures is not only because they [the teachers] grew up here, they stay here and they work here, they understand everything because they're educated. It is not that. I mean they have to deal with those kinds of things also.” (Lillian, pseudonym)

Enhancing the parent-teacher interview

Participants identified issues around time allotment and the nature of dialogue/report received as areas whereby the parent-teacher interview process can be improved.

Time

With regard to the parent-teacher interview, time was the participants' biggest concern. They felt the time allotted was inadequate for parent-teacher interviews. Some participants expressed challenges arising from other parents engaging the teacher beyond the ten minutes and eating into the time of the next parent. They expressed a desire for the teacher to be firm in keeping to the allotted time with each parent, and also for parents to be conscious of and respectful of the time. Participants felt that the current time allotment sometimes made the meeting feel rushed, because parents also need to make sure that they have enough time to transition to the next meeting.

Participants who had more than one child in the school also felt that the current number of days allocated for the parent-teacher interview process in addition to the time allotment with each teacher was particularly challenging. They had to meet with four or five teachers for each child, each for ten minutes in the two days scheduled for the parent-teacher interview process.

As described by one participant,

You know, I have four kids. When I come here for parent teacher interview, it's very tough for me. Yeah! I'm running. Exactly! (Hamda, pseudonym)

Participants felt that the current scheduling of parent-teacher interviews over two days caused teachers to be fatigued because, for each student in their class of approximately twenty-four, the teacher had to prepare and provide a unique and thorough report for each parent/guardian. Teachers also had to attend to all the parents/guardians in a space of two hours over two nights. Participants felt this usually took a toll on the teacher, such that the tiredness was evident in how the last few parent-teacher interviews for the night were conducted. Overall, participants felt there was a need to consider alternative timing, such as spreading parent-teacher interviews over several days. This they felt could allow for more time for parents to meet with teachers and may ease the pressure on the teachers.

In order to have I think enough time, really, for a good interview, they will probably have to do this for a week in the evenings. (Sandy)

Additionally, some participants felt that scheduling parent-teacher interviews twice or more in the school year could be considered as a way to address issues of inadequate time, as well as provide opportunities for parents to follow-up on issues raised during earlier parent-teacher interviews.

Some participants also mentioned other options for conversation with teachers to discuss student learning. These included sending emails, trying to catch the teacher before the start of school or at the close of day (if the teacher had time), and correspondence via the students' agenda. However, not all parents were aware of other avenues for communication. As described in this conversation between participants:

“Participant 2: I just have a question. Do they have more one on one if the kid needs it more? Let's say for example if my child is not performing well but there's not enough time to address all those things [in the parent-teacher interview]. Have they been able to book an interview outside the parent teacher interview?”

Participant 3: Yes.

Interviewer: So, you didn't know that there was opportunity to book?

Participant 2: No, I didn't know that. That's why when she was saying it, I'm like I think it should be ok. I'm just thinking about university like if you don't have time with a lecturer because you're busy, you can always book time on side of the lecture time and actually have more one-on-one.

Participant 3: They'd rather have that. Like the teachers would rather have the parents say hey I want to meet with you. I need a little bit more time. They are more than happy to set time on another day to do that.”

Scheduling other meeting times with the teacher was sometimes difficult because of schedule conflicts between parents and teachers. However, the use of technology for communication was described as a possible alternative. As stated by one participant: “But you know all these avenues that school has provides that opportunity [for communication]. Right? You know I come from a technology background so regular emails, regular chat with parents, will feel more connectedness” (Amir, pseudonym).

Quality of reports

Teacher preparedness for the parent/guardian-teacher interviews impacts on the quality of feedback received. Participants felt that the parent/guardian-teacher interview provided a more

personal touch to the school reports received and a better opportunity to “get the whole picture” (Andrew, pseudonym). Participants therefore appreciated sessions in which the teacher showed preparedness by providing non-generic, well-rounded reports on their children, highlighting growth and development academically and socially.

Additionally, the use of technology and show of artifacts of the child’s work also demonstrated that the teacher had put in effort to prepare for the interview. Another parental expectation of the report or feedback from the teacher was the adoption of a “constructive approach” (identifying strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for empowerment). Being able to provide information on areas for improvement, regardless of the academic level of students, was also regarded as a highlight for parents.

As one parent put it,

When I go to a parent-teacher meeting and he just says it’s green and good, and... Now I know there is always room for improvement. There is always! [If] the teacher cannot identify that room for me, where we can improve, I think the teacher didn’t pay attention. And this interview is not solving this problem that much. (Hamda, pseudonym)

Section 5: Discussion

The core of this research project involved parents/guardians sharing their lived experiences, hopes, and recommendations to improve engagement and social connectedness within these two diverse multicultural school environments. A key link with this core purpose was parent/guardian perspectives on the past and current parent-teacher interview processes and suggestions to improve this long-standing process in current pedagogical culture and practice.

There were commonalities in the insights shared from the two school contexts. For example, parent/guardians investment in their children's success was the motivator for their engagement with teachers and the school. Although all parents shared insights about how to enhance relationships with teachers and the school at large, the sub-themes related to building meaningful relationships (i.e. trust, understanding and equipping teachers) resounded more with the participants from the community school. This response might be expected because participants from this school were members of a larger proportion of families at the school who have historically experienced issues unique to those Indigenous communities have faced within schools. Participants also suggested helping equip teachers to engage meaningfully with the ethnocultural diversity of the schools.

Having meaningful relationships within the school community is key to parents developing a sense of connectedness with the schools. These relations include parent-teacher engagements and parent-parent support systems. Parents/guardians expect the school to provide opportunities for establishing these relationships. Our findings suggest that providing opportunities for engagement could help establish trust in the schools as parents gained a better understanding of the school system. Underwood and Killoran (2012) explored how parents and families perceive their own engagement in schools. They found that parents and families identified relationships with staff, access, and a wide range of programs as critical to their engagement. In our study, participants also suggested that the principal, other parents who may be more conversant with the school system, and Indigenous Elders could help navigate some of the difficulties that might arise in parental engagement. Informal opportunities for interaction between parents and the school community (e.g. Meet-and-greet events) at the start of the school

year were viewed favorably as they offered relaxed environments to get to know the school community.

Specific to the traditional parent-teacher interview process, parents' expectations of the quality of reports received during the meetings could be met by equipping teachers to prepare for these meetings and having some enhanced guidelines for the process. Participants also raised concerns about the inadequacy of duration and frequency of the parent-teacher interview, and the pressure on parents and teachers. We suggest this area as one that schools could assess and modify for a more efficient engagement with parents.

Our findings are in line with the literature about parental engagement in education, particularly the need to understand the relational nature of parental involvement in school, and the barriers and enhancers associated with it. Baker, Wise, Kelley, and Skiba (2016) found that an expectation existed that schools would provide opportunities for involvement, improving communication and welcoming families into the building, to enhance engagement between families and the schools. Additionally, time (i.e. conflicts with other events and conflicts with parent's work schedules) was also identified as a barrier to parental engagement, which was also identified in other studies (McKibben, 2016; Wong, 2015).

Other authors have also highlighted that a gap exists in preparing teachers for the expected and essential aspect of their communication with families (Epstein, 2011; Walker and Legg, 2018). Parental involvement in education is generally recognized as having significant and beneficial effects on children's achievement and wellbeing (Jeynes, 2007; Jeynes, 2012; Markham & Aveyared, 2003). Hornby and Lafaele (2011) and Jordan, Orozco and Averett (2002) highlighted some of the diverse and extensive information available for supporting parental engagement, which includes theoretical models and templates for various activities,

meetings, programs, and workshops. Among these, as noted earlier, Joyce Epstein's framework of six types of family involvement (1995) was frequently cited in research and has also been adapted by many practitioners (Jordan, Orozco & Averett, 2002).

As repeated from Part one of the literature synthesis, Epstein's framework outlined the following six dimensions of parent-school partnerships:

- **Type 1: Parenting** – Assisting families with parenting skills and setting home conditions to support children as students, as well as assisting schools to understand families.
- **Type 2: Communicating** – Conducting effective communications from school-to-home and from home-to-school about school programs and student progress.
- **Type 3: Volunteering** – Organizing volunteers and audiences to support the school and students. Providing volunteer opportunities in various locations and at various times.
- **Type 4: Learning at Home** – Involving families with their children on homework and other curriculum-related activities and decisions.
- **Type 5: Decision Making** – Including families as participants in school decisions and developing parent leaders and representatives.
- **Type 6: Collaborating with the Community** – Coordinating resources and services from the community for families, students, and the school, and providing services to the community.

Jordan, Orozco, and Averett (2002) pointed out that, although cataloging these kinds of activities is a useful step, more work is needed to capture the variety of forms that family-school connections can take and to create a common language in the field. Furthermore, for

practitioners, the lack of clarity around the language and definitions used in the field might lead to difficulty in making judgments about what kinds of activities to implement, how to implement them, and what results to expect from them.

Obviously, more work is needed to explicate how parental engagement processes could become even more effective. For example, we suggest that approaches to parental engagement should not be dependent solely on individual teachers' preferences; rather, school jurisdictions could adapt guidelines that work within their unique contexts so that there is consistency in areas of action. These guidelines should be balanced with participatory approaches that allow creative development and implementation of strategies tailored to the unique contexts of schools.

These findings about parents/guardians' investment in their children's success is corroborated in the literature. Henderson and Mapp's (2002) systematic review found that, regardless of income, education, or cultural background, parents desired to become involved in their children's learning and wanted their children to do well. However, how parents engaged in their children's education might be impacted by different factors including time constraints, lack of resources and socio-economic constraints, lack of knowledge about how to collaborate with the school, and issues around mistrust of the school system. It is important for the school community specifically and education policies in general to identify effective and sustainable ways to support parent engagement with a focus on addressing barriers and challenges experienced by marginalized and isolated families.

Henderson and Mapp's (2002) review highlighted three key practices that schools employed to successfully engage with families from diverse backgrounds:

- A focus on building trusting collaborative relationships among teachers, families and community members;

- Recognizing, respecting, and addressing families' needs and cultural differences in the schools; and,
- Embracing a philosophy of partnership where power and responsibility are shared.

The use of a participatory research approach, such as establishing a CAB, is a strength of our study. It enabled us to work closely with the school community towards practical and sustainable solutions. We believe the role of the CAB could be extended into implementation phases and ongoing monitoring and evaluation activities. However, we are cognizant that time constraints might have impacted the level of engagement of CAB members and participants in the study. For instance, several participants had expressed interest in the focus groups with us, but because of scheduling conflicts, were unable to participate. Future involvement of the CAB will need to explore how to improve opportunities for participation.

Potential scholarly and/or education system benefits

This research provides opportunity for a discourse around parent-teacher/school engagement, which is a foundational pillar in education. It also provides insights into potential areas for action in schools to enhance connectedness between parents/guardians and teachers/school, and to build social capital. One immediate area to consider is the language around parent/guardian-teacher engagement. There is a push for a more expansive view of parental involvement with the schools (Baker et al., 2016; Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). The traditional perspective entails a school-centric involvement whereby the school and teachers direct parental involvement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

We propose a shift in the language of interactions between parents and teachers towards the use of the 'engagement' rather than 'interview' or 'conference'. The term 'engagement'

captures a more level-field interaction, where the idea of a two-way, shared collaborative process links with building relationships. “Engagement” is also broad enough to accommodate different forms of interactions, namely, formal and informal, and home-based and school-based interactions.

This shift is being advocated for by other educational researchers (Baker et al, 2016; Barton et al, 2004). Parental engagement involves viewing multiple constructs of how parents are involved (Baker et al, 2016). Similarly, Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, and George (2004) propose the conceptualization of parental involvement in a way that frames parents/guardians as both authors and agents in schools. They state that parental engagement suggests a process that is “dynamic and interactive, supporting parents to draw on their multiple experiences and resources to define their interactions with schools and among school actors” (Barton et al., 2004, pg. 4). Changing the way parental engagement is perceived could contribute to enhancing parents’ engagement with schools. Shifting towards a concept of engagement also resonates with other sectoral community engagement initiatives, e.g. health promotion, thus opening up learnings from these multiple sectoral experiences.

Implications for practice

Specific to the multicultural context of our schools, our finding on brokering is important. Edmonton has services such as the Multicultural Brokers’ Cooperative, which plays an integral role to support newcomer immigrant and refugee communities in a holistic manner as they settle into the system (Torres, 2013). Literature unpacking the role of brokers in the lives of populations experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage highlight their work in addressing health inequity and social needs (Torres, Spitzer, Labonté, Amaratunga & Andrew, 2013; Torres, Labonté, Spitzer, Andrew, Amarantuga, 2014).

The brokering role has been described as “under-recognized, and therefore underutilized” despite the “promising capacity” of service to vulnerable populations (Najafizada et al., 2015). With regard to education, the role of brokering could be an area to be explored. As described by the study participants, other parents, principals or external parties such as Indigenous Elders could be considered as brokers in the relationship between parents and the school. “Relationship brokers” might be a way to support parents and students in vulnerable situations whereby the power dynamics of parent/guardian-teacher/school engagement is circumvented.

Our theme on equipping teachers is equally in line with the call for brokering activities to support mutual understanding in parent-teacher/school engagement. An area for action would be for schools to consider activities that could celebrate diverse cultures and also build shared understanding of cultural values and practices. These ideas could be discussed in our knowledge translation activities with multiple school stakeholders. We could together reflect on how brokering and activities to equip teachers to work more effectively in a multicultural context could be integrated into the support processes and resources the schools provide to newcomer families, English Language Learner (ELL) families, families in vulnerable positions, and staff.

This research is timely given the recently legislated and implemented (September 1, 2019) Alberta Education Teaching Quality Standard, Leadership Quality Standard and Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Government, 2019). All three quality standards contain a common competency “Fostering Effective Relationships.” The message that regularly resonated with our parents/guardians in this study was the theme of “meaningful relationships” between teacher and parent/guardian. A look further into each standard shares the following similarities:

Teaching Quality Standard (Alberta Government, 2018a):

- providing culturally appropriate and meaningful opportunities for students and for parents/guardians, as partners in education, to support student learning;

Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Government, 2018b):

- creating opportunities for parents/guardians, as partners in education, to take an active role in their children's education;

Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Government, 2018c):

A Superintendent establishes a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment by building positive and productive relationships with members of the school community and the local community. Achievement of this competency is demonstrated by the following indicators:

- collaborating with community and provincial agencies to address the needs of students and their families;
- employing team-building strategies and using solution-focused processes to resolve challenges;
- building and sustaining relationships with First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) parents/guardians, Elders, local leaders and community members.

The theme of building effective relationships with parents resonates across all three quality standards, Teaching, Leadership, and Superintendent. The core themes that resonated with parents in both the interviews and focus group discussions provide a valuable impetus with implications for practice and possible development of novel parent/guardian-teacher engagement processes to enhance effective relationships as partners in education. Although the theory and practice of the traditional parent-teacher interview process has continued for many generations,

this research project has raised valuable insights from parents/guardians about how this process could be enhanced and improved.

Key areas for improvement of the parent/guardian-teacher interview process include:

- increasing the meeting duration and considering alternative/multiple scheduling opportunities during the school year;
- specific learning feedback in relation to the particular student's academic strengths, challenges, and opportunities in specific curricular areas along with targeted learning supports that can actively engage student, parent/guardian, and teacher in a triad of support, communication, and purposeful engagement;
- greater consistency and coherence in the parent/guardian-teacher interview/engagement process from teacher to teacher as perceived and lived by our participants in this study. Considerable variation in the parent/guardian-teacher interview process was experienced by parents/guardians that might provide opportunity for greater supports, professional development, and inclusion of enhanced/novel parent-teaching interview/engagement opportunities;
- novel approaches to inform and empower both parents and teachers before, during, and after the parent-teacher conference process. In reflection of participants' input with this project, our administrative teams have further reflected on current practices with regard to parent/guardian-teacher interview/conference processes.

Suggestions have emerged about the theme of creating user-friendly information accessible to both parents and teachers focused on building systemic clarity and coherence in this important engagement process as partners in student learning and overall success. The Alberta Guide to Education (2019-2020) also highlights

parent/guardian-teacher interactions, but more specifically, parent/guardian-teacher conferences as a communication strategy. However, currently no guidelines exist for these engagements (Alberta Government).

Considering the drive for meaningful engagements between parents and teachers, we suggest that a framework to guide these processes would be useful in ensuring a reasonable level of consistency in approaches that would help with future impact assessments and evaluations. Being a framework, it would allow for school communities to tailor it to their contexts. Our recommendation for future research on this process is described in the subsequent section.

Our study might raise a potential concern about the relatively small sample sizes for our interviews and FGDs at the two schools. As mentioned, at the Charter School we were able to recruit three participants for interviews. Subsequently we received interest from 17 parents to participate in FGDs (including two of the three parents who participated in the interview). Only three participants attended for the single FGD (none of whom were initially interviewed). This process provided six individual participants at the Charter School.

At the public community school, fifteen parents/guardians initially expressed interest in participating in the data collection. One parent/guardian participated in both the one-on-one interview and the FGD with an additional four parents/guardians. Thus, we had five individual participants at the public community school. We have described the challenges of time constraints and competing priorities that prevented parents/guardians that showed interest in the study from participating despite interest to do so.

Despite these challenges, we remained focused on seeking saturation in our data, which is defined as the situation where adding more participants to the study does not result in additional perspectives or information. Data saturation is the key indication for an adequate sample size (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In addition, it is felt that phenomenological studies, such as our own, require smaller sample sizes than ethnography or grounded theory studies.

For phenomenological studies, Creswell (1998) recommends 5 – 25 and Morse (1994) suggests at least six. Despite our final sample sizes, we were pleased to see early and rich saturation in our findings; still, this does not exclude wider variation in the lived experiences of parent/guardian-teacher engagements. However, we believe our findings are rich expressions of these experiences and sufficient to move forward to enhance these important interactions and their potential to strengthen connectedness with the school community.

Section 6: Recommendations for Future Research

Introduction

Findings from this project provide strong motivation for the development, implementation, and evaluation of enhanced parent/guardian-teacher engagements. Our findings suggest there is strong parent/guardian support for the redesign, development, and implementation of more effective engagement processes and related protocols to strengthen the quality and efficacy of this crucial partnership in learning. Our findings also suggest professional development opportunities for educators to enhance the effectiveness and systemic coherence of parent/guardian-teacher engagement processes that are contextually sensitive, adaptive, and responsive.

A theme that resonated with parents/guardians in this study included the appreciation and need for more specific feedback in relation to their child's academic performance along with suggestions to better support the parent/guardian-student-teacher (learning triad) and collaborative efforts in this ongoing process. Concerns about generalizations about student performance from teacher to parent/guardian were a recurrent theme that restricted more focused and student-centered information about progress in relation to specific learning outcomes coupled with a perceived lack of valuable collaborative opportunities for targeted support and ongoing communication and feedback.

Moreover, parents/guardians shared concerns about the lack of coherence in the parent-teacher interview process from teacher to teacher. These concerns raise suggestions for closer collaboration between teachers who instruct the same child as a way to achieve richer consistency and complementarity with respect to information provided to parents/guardians. This change could become a key topic for ongoing supports/professional development processes for educators within the current teacher-parent/guardian engagement zeitgeist.

Based on the key themes emerging from this project, our research team postulated the potential value of developing an enhanced parent/guardian-teacher engagement framework that could include guidelines and tools for both parents/guardians and teachers to draw upon prior, during, and after the specific engagement process. This framework should be sensitive to unique teaching and learning contexts, providing a starting point to build systemic coherence and efficacy for the critically important parent-teacher engagement process.

In association with a framework, a professional development series for educators, parents/guardians, students, administrators, school councils, and boards might be a valuable opportunity to optimize the effectiveness of this time-honoured process in public education and

reshape the traditional parent/guardian-teacher interview paradigm into a more student-centered and focused opportunity for teacher-parent/guardian active engagement and mutual support that also supports stronger social connectedness with the school community.

Time, or lack thereof, is a key factor for engagement and participation that parents shared in their lived experience during parent-teacher interview processes. Many parents felt the parent/guardian-teacher interview was rushed in order to accommodate the tight time frames allocated for this important process. Moreover, even when interviews were scheduled in advance, time overruns by preceding interviews often affected the length of time available for succeeding engagements.

One of the schools in this study is already considering the possibility of extending the parent/guardian-teacher engagement session from 10 minutes to 15 minutes, an addition of 5 minutes to allow for greater in-depth discussion and opportunity for building capacity between the parent/guardian-teacher-student triad, and targeted supports and ongoing communication. Further discussion with a team of school administrators included the possibility of including a tip sheet to both parents and teachers well in advance of the parent-teacher conference/engagement session to better prepare for more targeted and student-centered feedback across the specific knowledge, skills, competencies and other factors in relation to each student. This approach might increase the quality of parent-teacher engagement coupled with potential for greater coherence of this important process across the school or jurisdiction context.

An important process that received considerable positive feedback in this research project was the inclusion of a community advisory board (CAB) to assist and inform this project from early conceptual development stages through to completion. At the core of this process was the active engagement of school stakeholders working with the research team through the conception

and realization of this project from a strengths-based approach rather than the research team simply conducting their investigation “on” the intended population. The CAB consultation phase of the research project introduced the potential for innovative, participatory research procedures and interactions with key informants and other stakeholders, utilizing their experience and expertise to increase engagement and accountability to the school and wider community. Ongoing engagements with CABs could also help respond to ongoing challenges with the study and support creative solutions.

The role of the CAB is also critical during knowledge translation and exchange of findings and the generation of recommendations. These varied roles of the CAB supported a strengths-based approach to our research study. As noted in our introduction, these approaches have been applied in qualitative and quantitative research methods involving First Nations, Métis, and Inuit stakeholders to refine established measures and obtain valuable qualitative feedback (Snowshoe et al., 2015). The community-based participatory experiences from our study provide a basis for future research initiatives where we aim to develop a collaborative, participatory and intentional approach to parental/guardian engagement. An initial logic framework for this future work is presented in Table 1 (Appendix D).

Future Considerations

Considerations from this initial, exploratory study include:

Enhanced Parent/Guardian-Teacher Engagements

The findings of this study highlight the importance of parent/guardian/teacher engagement opportunities that may include discussing, developing, and evaluating engagement processes and related protocols. Engagement opportunity processes could be reviewed to ensure

they are contextually sensitive, adaptive, and responsive so as to potentially strengthen the quality and efficacy of the parent/guardian-teacher partnerships within the parent/teacher/student triad.

Building a Shared Framework

The findings of this study encourage consideration of the development of a shared framework of guidelines and tools that parents/guardians, teachers, and school administration teams may draw upon prior, during, and after beginning specific engagements. This framework could incorporate a more coherent parent/guardian-teacher interview process that may become sharper in focus and child-centered by involving and continually reviewing so as to build on a closer collaboration between teachers who instruct the same children. As researchers, we believe such a framework and guidelines may help to provide a way to achieve richer consistency and complementarity with respect to the information provided to parents/guardians and shared among teachers. In spirit, it may work to incarnate the belief that it takes an entire “village” to educate a child.

Parent/Guardian-Teacher Conferences

The findings of this study indicate that a specific and intentional extension of more formal parent/guardian-teacher engagement sessions (conferences) may allow greater in-depth discussions, specific feedback, and edifying conversations about both a student's academic performance and social life within the school. The specific purposes of such conferences may be that that parent/guardians- teachers can discuss and develop supportive ways that parents/guardians (working with teachers) might enhance both the academic outcomes and social and emotional well-being of the children/students both at home and at school.

Community Advisory Board

The findings of this study encourage the possible creation and inclusion of a Community Advisory Board (CAB) that may help to provide critical input and support in response to any challenges that may have an affect on the school/community engagement. This CAB may become a space of conversations that can share collectively both school and parents goals and may work collaboratively to engage those goals in practical ways.

Shared Parent/Guardian-Teacher Frameworks

The findings of this study suggest that schools and parents/guardians may want to establish a priority to continue to work together towards the construction of shared frameworks, guidelines, and tools that both parents/guardians and teachers/administrators could use to draw on from prior, during, and post engagement. In other words, the work of building relationships between parents/guardians-teachers/schools can be ongoing and may be instituted as a regular part of the life and culture of the school community.

Culture of “Not about us, with us.”

The findings of this study suggest that the entire school community and all its stakeholders can work to continue to create, instill, and normalize a culture that is inclusive of everyone. This work could include more proactive and practical school-centered invitations to involve parents/guardians with teachers within the school community. Given the findings of the research literature, a long-term goal may be to continue to work towards a more co-generative process of relationship. It is also recognized from this study that this process is long-term and cannot be fully built quickly.

Section 7: Conclusion

This collaborative inter-jurisdictional participatory research project provides valuable insight into parents/guardians' perspectives on how to enhance the current parent/guardian-teacher engagement process. The findings highlight that parents/guardians are invested in the success of their children. This understanding could encourage a more comprehensive, coherent, and collaborative process in parent/guardian-teacher engagement process to optimize the development and wellbeing of the child.

Establishing meaningful relationships within the school community was also highlighted as an important step towards enhancing parental/guardian engagement. These relationships include parent-teacher and parent-parent support groups, which help to foster a sense of belonging, and to promote communication and engagement with the school community.

Key messages shared by our participant parents/guardians to enhance meaningful relationships include:

- a focus on building trust in the school system and an appreciation of staff members who were genuinely interested in the wellbeing of the students and respectful of their families;
- building processes that 1) support teachers to engage effectively with families within the current multicultural school contexts and 2) support parents to understand the school system. The principal, other parents, and cultural leaders (e.g. Indigenous Elders) could be engaged to help foster understanding between parents and the school.

Specific to the current parent/guardian-teacher interview process, we suggest a shift in the language to 'parent/guardian-teacher engagement process' as this promotes the idea of a

collaborative and dialogic process. Additionally, the timing of the event, the duration, and the quality of discussion/reporting dynamics shared with parents are areas in which the process can be enhanced. Schools could consider engaging with parents/guardians in discussions to evaluate current communication processes to ensure that they are meaningful and accessible.

Engaging with a Community Advisory Board (CAB) in the schools was invaluable and positively received by all stakeholders as a strength-based and inclusive approach for facilitating this research project at all stages from conception to completion. The robust stakeholder relationships developed over the tenure of the CAB might help support the further development of subsequent novel and sustainable practices that would work to enhance effective parent/guardian-teacher engagement processes.

Our next steps will involve further engagement with the schools and stakeholders in knowledge translation activities based on the findings of this research project. Additionally, the research team seeks to work with the CAB, participant schools, and other jurisdictional and community stakeholders towards developing a novel framework to optimize parent-teacher engagement in a responsive and adaptive manner to meet the needs within a particular school context. The findings of this study provide key areas for discussion and action in schools with multicultural student populations to enhance effective and targeted communication of student learning progress with parents/guardians and teachers beyond the traditional parent-teacher interview paradigm towards a more culturally and educationally connected and coherent systemic pedagogical approach.

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Appendix A: Final Budget*AURORA ACADEMIC CHARTER SCHOOL Joint Research Project: Contract Number**2018-0046 Draft Financial Report to February 29, 2020*

Item	Cost Projection (\$)
Community Advisory Board resources	9,918
Principal & Co-Researcher Resources	4,703
Interview/FGD Transcription Support	484
Supports/Resources for Participant Stakeholders	749
Graduate Student Support	27,074
Knowledge Mobilization*	8,696
Total	51,624

* Research Findings Dissemination, including printing of Final Report

Appendix B: Research Project Timeline

2018	
Time	Activity
July-August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Hiring research assistant ● Start of literature review ● Start of ethics application process
October-December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Networking, creating awareness about the research project ● Establishment of Community Advisory Boards in Aurora Public Charter school ● Presentation at the Alberta Research Network meeting ● Presentation at the Alberta Public Charter Schools Teachers' conference ● Review of study protocol with stakeholders (including CAB, FNMI unit of Edmonton Public) ● Ethics application to University of Alberta, and Simon-Fraser University ● Working with Edmonton Public School Board to identify potential schools to engage in the research project
2019-2020	
January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ethics application to Edmonton Public Schools via University of Alberta Cooperative Activities Program ● Refinement and trial practice of research interview guide ● Initiation of study participant recruitment
February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Submission of interim report to Alberta Education ● Start of data collection (interviews, focus group discussions)

March-June	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Data collection, transcription and analysis
July 2019 - February 7 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Compilation of research results, knowledge translation, publication● Submission of final report draft due to Alberta Education

Appendix C: Knowledge Mobilization Plan

Our research team is highly engaged in sharing this research project from local to international and across multiple modes, from face-to-face to Podcasts and online research dissemination protocols

Knowledge mobilization practices past, current, and future include:

- Multiple research presentations at the Alberta Learning network over the last year including input/interview in an Alberta Education Research Unit research video;
- Dissemination of final research report to participating schools and Alberta Education;
- Engaging with the CAB and the school communities in discussions of findings and potential next steps;
- Conference and workshop presentations:
 - Research keynote presentation at the TAAPCS (The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools) Biennial Conference in Calgary, Alberta on October 25, 2019;
 - Public Health 2020 (Canadian Public Health Association);
- Online research website (Aurora Academic Charter Schools, Aurora School Ltd.) located online at: <https://www.auroraschool.ca/research> featuring an interview with the Principal Investigator Dr. Malcolm Steinberg and Co-Investigator and Key Research Contact Dr. Paul Wozny;
- Submission for potential publication of results in a peer-reviewed journal;
- Academic Conferences and Alberta Research Network participation.

Appendix D: Logic framework

Goals	Activities	Input	Audience	Outputs	Short Term Outcomes	Long Term Outcomes
1. Develop a framework for parent-teacher engagement	1. Identify current parent-teacher engagement procedures for each school setting based on evidence 2. Identify key elements for the framework 3. Develop a novel framework	Staff Time Funding Engagement with schools	Teachers School Administrators Parents Students	1. Literature Review on theoretical frameworks for parent-teacher interview/conference/engagement 2. New parent-teacher engagement framework 3. Framework presentation material	Increased communication and collaboration between stakeholders	Increased capacity for networking
2. Mobilize knowledge gained from development of parent-teacher engagement framework	1. Conference presentations 2. Presentations to School Divisions	Researcher time Funding	Academic audiences Schools and School Divisions	1. Research accessible to stakeholders	Increased trust with stakeholders New directions for research based on feedback	Development of framework to be considered by stakeholders
3. Implementation of new framework with research lens	1. Assessment of implementation process	Staff Time Funding Engagement with schools	Teachers School Administrators Parents Students	Report on the efficacy/effectiveness of the new framework with stakeholder input	Increased trust with stakeholders	Improved engagement between schools and families

Table 1. Logic model for developing a framework for parent-teacher engagement

Appendix E: Information and consent form**Strengthening Social Connectedness within the School Community**

Our Research Team acknowledge that we are located on Treaty Six Territory, and respect the history, languages, ceremonies, culture and knowledge of the First Nations, Métis, Inuit and all Indigenous Peoples of Canada.

Purpose

You are being invited to take part in a focus group discussion for the Social Connectedness Study. The discussion is to help gain insights into parent-teacher engagements. It is hoped that the findings from this study will inform the development of strategies to improve engagement and social connectedness between families and the school community. We believe that this can impact positively on student academic outcomes and well-being.

Participation

The topics for the discussion will include identifying the strengths of the parent-teacher interview process, and how to improve the parent-teacher interview process to strengthen relationships between parents and the school. The group discussion will be held at [school] and will last about an hour. You can choose to leave the group discussion at any time. The group discussion will strive to respect all participants and encourage participants to respect one another.

Benefits of taking part

We hope that by participating in the discussion, your input will provide more insights into social connectedness and parent-teacher engagements for the school community.

You will receive a \$20 gift card as an honorarium for taking part in the focus group discussion.

Possible risks of taking part

We do not expect that taking part in this study will harm you or your child(ren) in any way.

We acknowledge that complete confidentiality cannot be assured in the focus group discussions, however, we will request participants to respect the privacy and confidentiality of others by not repeating their comments outside of the focus group.

Confidentiality

- All your contributions will be kept private. We ask for your name on the consent form so that we know you have provided consent to take part in the discussion. This will be kept in a secure locker until our research is completed and will then be shredded.
- The insights gained from our discussion today will be shared with Alberta Education and the school. These will also be shared in a peer-reviewed journal. Participants will not be identified when findings are presented or published.
- The audio recording will be stored on a password-protected computer and kept at the University of Alberta until the research is completed and then destroyed.
- We request that each participant keep the discussions held today in confidence.
- The Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta has reviewed the plan for the study. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Following the discussion today, please feel free to present any questions or concerns you may have about this research by contacting the research assistant: Nicole Ofosu (lartey@ualberta.ca).

Thank you!

Who is doing this research?

Researchers from Aurora Academic Public Charter Schools, Edmonton Public Schools, University of Alberta and Simon Fraser University.

Research Team Members

Dr. Malcolm Steinberg, Simon Fraser University (Principal Investigator), Dr. Paul Wozny, Aurora Academic Charter School (Co-Researcher), Dr. Owen Livermore, Edmonton Public Schools, (Co-Researcher), Dr. Paul Veugelers (Co-Researcher) and Nicole Ofosu, University of Alberta (Research assistant).



Strengthening Social Connectedness within the School Community

Our Research Team acknowledge that we are located on Treaty Six Territory, and respect the history, languages, ceremonies, culture and knowledge of the First Nations, Métis, Inuit and all Indigenous Peoples of Canada.

To participate in this discussion, please complete and sign the *Consent Form* (below).

CONSENT:

I have read the information provided.

I understand that taking part in the focus group discussion is voluntary.

I appreciate that the researchers will respect my confidentiality and protect my identity and protect the information that I provide in the discussion.

I understand the need for confidentiality of the discussions and respectful conduct towards other participants, and I agree to comply with this.

Appendix F: Interview Guide

1. [school name]. This interview will help inform our approach to our later focus group discussions. I would like to start by getting to know more about you. Could you please tell me about your association/involvement with [school name]**Body**

A. Topic: The School

B. How did you come to settle on [school name]Topic: Experiences with the parent-teacher interview

- a. Have you ever participated in a parent-teacher interview?
- b. What do you think is the purpose of the parent-teacher interview process?
(Still ask if they say no to (a) above)
- c. What motivates/encourages your participation? (Do you find that the purpose is met?)
- d. Tell me about your most memorable experience with the parent-teacher interview process.
- e. Can you talk about the potential benefits of participating in the parent-teacher interview process?

(Transition): I'd like to talk more about the parent-teacher interview as a process for enhancing/encouraging connectedness between parents and the school.

C. Topic: The parent-teacher interview as a medium for promoting and enhancing social connectedness

- a. What does 'connectedness' to the school look like to you?

2. [School name] **Closing**

Do you have any further comments you wish to add? Thank you for your time today.

Appendix G: Focus Group Guide

- 1) Topic: The School
 - a. How did you come to settle on [school name] for your child(ren)?
 - b. Tell me a bit more about your involvement with the school?
 - c. Who do you regularly interact with at the school?
 - i. Have you built any relationships and got to know anyone well at the school?
- 2) Topic: Avenues for engagement in the school community
 - a. What avenues are there for parents to connect with the school? (Formal and informal events, etc.)
 - b. Could you describe your experiences with these avenues/events? (Probe for what works, challenges, etc.)
- 3) Topic: Parent-teacher engagement
 - a. Could you describe the parent-teacher interview process in this school? (Probe for what works, challenges, etc.)
- 4) Topic: The parent-teacher interview as a medium for promoting and enhancing social connectedness
 - a. What does 'connectedness' to the school look like to you?
 - b. From your experience, how does the school accommodate this diversity in the parent-teacher interview process?
 - c. Do you know what to do as a parent to be involved or be connected to the school? (Probe for what works, challenges, recommendations, etc.)

Appendix H: Sample of coding scheme

Text	Code	Category	Theme
<i>You can't build that relationship at that time [during the parent-teacher interview] with the teacher, because there's just no time to say, "Oh how was your weekend? What are you doing this summer? That's pretty much... you have to do that throughout the school.</i>	Building relationships	Meaningful relationships	Meaningful relationships
<i>I don't know if it means partnering with other parents who are falling through the cracks. Like if you have a parent who is invested and has some time. Can that parent, can you partner that parent with someone who probably needs some support and help? Maybe somebody is new to Canada and English is a second language and that kind of thing. And you have another parent who is Canadian and who is patient and has the time to support that family</i>	Parent-parent support	Support	Brokering
<i>Because of how many students there...and how many teachers there are. In order to have I think enough time, really for a good interview, they will probably have to have to do this for a week in the evenings</i>	Addressing time	Alternative scheduling	Time