

Strengthening Educational Partnerships with Indigenous Parents

By

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B.A. CYC, University of Victoria, 2023

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the School of Child, Youth, Family, and Community Studies

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We acknowledge and respect the Ləkʷəŋən (Songhees and Xʷsepsəm/Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

This thesis explores strategies to strengthen Indigenous parental engagement within Surrey Schools through a relational approach guided by the Indigenous Wholistic Framework and Métissage methodology. Drawing on my experiences as an Indigenous Child and Youth Care Worker, this research identifies systemic barriers rooted in colonial legacies and socio-economic challenges affecting Indigenous families' engagement. Through my work alongside Indigenous families, I have witnessed how factors such as housing instability, mobility, and experiences of racism and disconnection shape families' relationships with schools, and these experiences shaped how I interpreted and understood the findings presented in this study. An environmental scan highlights existing strengths, such as Indigenous Child/Youth Care Workers (ICYCWs), alongside significant gaps like inconsistent staffing and socio-economic instability. Recommendations include strengthening ICYCW roles, establishing Indigenous Parent Councils, mandatory, culturally responsive and anti-racist training, creating dedicated cultural spaces, improving culturally sensitive communication, and addressing socio-economic barriers through community collaboration. This research advocates for inclusive, equitable, and culturally safe educational practices that center Indigenous families' voices.

Acknowledgements

I want to begin by thanking Dr. Jennifer White. Your steady presence and thoughtful questions helped me think more clearly and stay grounded as this work took shape. Thank you for creating space for my thinking, and modeling what it looks like to do this work with care.

I am especially grateful to Shanne McCafferey, who stepped in at the end of the process and supported me in finishing. Your willingness to jump in, your clarity, and your encouragement during the final stretch made a real difference and helped carry this work across the finish line.

I also want to acknowledge Dr. Sandrina Carere, who offered generous guidance and insight during an important stage of this research. I am thankful for the care and wisdom you shared, and for the lasting impact your contributions had on this work.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my husband, Matt. Thank you for standing by me through the long hours, piles of drafts, and the moments when I wondered why I ever thought grad school was a good idea. Your encouragement, support, and sense of humour gave me the space (and sanity) I needed to finish.

To my daughter, Zoe, you came into this world early and fought every day just to be here. From the beginning you taught me about resilience and what it means to keep showing up. You are funny, outgoing, and fiercely yourself. Your birth introduced me to the family-centered care model in a very real way, and since then you've been teaching me every single day. You remind me that learning isn't just about books and lectures; it's about patience, laughter, tears, and trying again. You have pushed me to see the world differently, to imagine schools and systems that recognize the importance of relationship, and to believe that change is possible. This thesis exists because of you, and it is also for you.

I also think back to the doctors and nurses at Surrey Memorial Hospital who practiced family-centered care when it mattered most. Their example showed me how care can be respectful, relational, and grounded in partnership. These lessons I carry into every part of this work.

To my colleagues, mentors, and friends: thank you for the coffee chats, the pep talks, the reality checks, and the encouragement along the way.

To the families and students, I have worked with and walked alongside: thank you. You have been my greatest teachers, and this work is grounded in the lessons you have shared with me. Everything here is because of you and for you.

And finally, I hope this thesis adds something useful, even in a small way, to the ongoing effort to build systems of care in education that listen better, respond better, and honour the people they are meant to serve.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As a child, I struggled with school. Not because the work was difficult, but because finding the motivation to complete assignments or study for tests felt like an uphill battle. Reflecting on this experience, I recognize now how systemic barriers, family circumstances, and disconnection from my Métis identity and cultural ways of knowing influenced my educational journey. My parents, both raised within a Western educational context, often found it challenging to support my education or communicate with my teachers to make sure I stayed on the right path. This disconnect may have stemmed from their own experiences with school, shaped by systemic challenges, intergenerational impacts of colonial policies, including Indigenous Residential Schools and assimilationist policies, or perhaps from the demands of simply trying to make ends meet. By the time I was eight years old, their divorce added another layer of complexity to our family dynamic, making it even harder to prioritize my education amidst the chaos of our lives.

Years later, as a new parent, I was introduced to the Family-Centered Care (FCC) model during my daughter's time in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). This model emphasized the importance of collaboration between families and professionals, highlighting the strengths of parents as partners in their child's care. FCC's relational approach was transformative, showing me the power of systems built on respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. I often reflect on how different my own educational journey might have been if similar collaborative principles had been applied in schools.

This understanding has deeply influenced my approach as a Child and Youth Care Practitioner and my commitment to advocating for families within the public K-12 education

system. I believe that fostering meaningful partnerships between schools and families is key to addressing the systemic barriers that prevent students from thriving. Through my work in Surrey Schools, and in my relationships with Indigenous students and families, I began to see how these barriers show up in real and ongoing ways.

My personal and professional experiences have fueled my desire to ensure that Indigenous families feel supported and empowered to engage fully in their children's education, creating pathways for success that honor their unique perspectives and needs. I'm committed to fostering genuine and meaningful school partnerships that authentically support Indigenous students and their families.

My Journey

This research is deeply personal. My journey toward understanding my Indigenous identity and advocating for meaningful collaboration between families and schools has been transformative, both personally and professionally. Growing up, my family's disconnection from our Métis culture left me with a sense of ambiguity about what being Indigenous truly meant. It wasn't until I began pursuing post-secondary education and entered the field of Child and Youth Care that I was motivated to trace my family roots and reconnect with my heritage. Today, I am a proud citizen of the Métis Nation of British Columbia, and while this connection to my ancestry has been incredibly rewarding, it is also ongoing. I recognize that my understanding is limited by my experiences, particularly in relation to direct and ongoing impacts of colonial systems such as Indigenous Residential Schools, child welfare, and systemic racism. Much of what I understand about these realities comes through my relationships with Indigenous families and communities. I also recognize that reconnecting with Indigenous traditions and knowledge is not linear but a lifelong, relational process.

As a Child and Youth Care Worker in the Surrey School District, I have walked alongside Indigenous families and colleagues who navigate systemic barriers in our schools. Their resilience in the face of those challenges has not only shaped my approach to advocacy and my professional practice but it has also guided this research.

My Family Background

My family history reflects a rich, yet complicated intersection of cultures. On my father's side, I am Métis, and Ukrainian; on my mother's side, I am British and Ukrainian. Growing up, these parts of my identity showed up in different ways. The Ukrainian and British sides of my family were more visible through traditions, values, and everyday life, while my Métis identity was something I knew about, but didn't fully understand or see reflected around me.

Despite knowing I was Indigenous, my family's disconnection from Métis cultural practices left gaps in my understanding of what this identity meant. Looking back, I understand that this disconnection did not happen on its own, but it is connected to broader histories where Indigenous identity, culture, and ways of being were not always safe or supported to carry across generations. Over the years, I have been on a journey to reconcile these gaps by learning about my Métis ancestry and exploring what it means to carry this identity forward.

My understanding of my Métis identity is still growing. It has been shaped through relationships, through listening, and through learning over time. Rather than something I have fully arrived at, it is something I continue to work toward in a way that feels respectful and grounded in where I come from.

My role as a mother has also shaped my perspective. When my daughter was born 9 weeks early, spending 121 days in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at Surrey Memorial Hospital, I first experienced the Family-Centered Care, an approach that encouraged us as

parents to participate in rounds, valued our insights, and included us in the decision-making. This approach is built on mutual respect and shared responsibility. In this space, I wasn't just an observer, I was a partner in my daughter's care. This experience taught me the power of genuine collaboration and inspired me to explore how similar partnerships could be fostered between families and schools.

Raising my hard of hearing daughter, who has ADHD and Autism, has given me firsthand insight into the complexities of advocating for a child within the education system. These experiences deepen my empathy for Indigenous parents navigating similar challenges and inform my commitment to systemic change.

Connection to Indigenous Education

Working on the unceded territories of the q̓ic̓əy (Katzie)', q̓'a:n̓λ̓ən (Kwantlen) and SEMYOME (Semiahmoo) First Nations has deepened my understanding of the educational disparities faced by Indigenous families. My professional role provides me with direct insight into how systemic barriers, such as intergenerational trauma, systemic racism, and socio-economic challenges, impact Indigenous students and their families. These challenges are often compounded by a lack of cultural safety within the school system, creating environments where Indigenous parents may feel unwelcome or unsupported.

The connection between my work and this research is clear. I have seen how schools that prioritize meaningful collaboration with Indigenous families can foster more inclusive and supportive environments. These experiences drive my commitment to understanding and addressing the systemic barriers that hinder such collaboration.

Positionality

As a 41-year-old cisgender woman who is white-presenting, my identity and experiences shape how I approach this research. My heritage is a mix of Métis, and Ukrainian on my father's side and British and Ukrainian on my mother's side. My Métis family names include de LaSalle, Bélanger, and Dazé, with roots in the Red River Settlement, including St. Boniface, Manitoba and later connections to communities in Saskatchewan. While I proudly identify as Métis, my early years were marked by disconnection from my Indigenous roots, which has shaped my lived experiences in ways that are different from Indigenous peoples who have grown up more closely connected to culture, community, and language.

Being white presenting has also shaped how I move through the world and the privileges I hold, particularly within systems like education. At the same time, much of what I understand about Indigenous experiences has come through my relationships with Indigenous families, students, and colleagues in my work, rather than through direct lived experience of the colonial systems I discuss in this research. While I carry Métis ancestry, my own lived experience has been shaped by disconnection, which means I am more removed from direct, intergenerational impacts of colonial systems such as Indigenous Residential Schools, child welfare, systemic racism, and the ongoing ways Indigenous identities, cultures, and families have been disrupted across generations. These parts of my identity require ongoing reflection and humility, and continue to shape how I understand privilege, responsibility and relational accountability. They also guide how I approach this work, including the questions I ask and how I make sense of the findings.

Ontology

My worldview is informed by the interconnectedness of relationships, a principle deeply rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems. I believe that reality is not a singular, fixed entity but is instead dynamic and shaped by our relationships with people, the land, and the spiritual world. This understanding aligns with the Indigenous principle of “All My Relations”, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings (Poirier, 2008). As a researcher, I see this work as part of a broader relational network, recognizing that my actions and insights are deeply tied to the communities I engage with and the knowledge they share.

Epistemology

My approach to knowledge is shaped by both Indigenous and Western perspectives, reflecting my lived experiences and professional background. I view knowledge as relational and evolving, created through conversation, reflection, and engagement with diverse perspectives (Wilson, 2008). I value the integration of Indigenous ways of knowing, grounded in oral traditions, storytelling, and lived experiences, with Western methodologies, which often prioritize analysis and empirical evidence. Knowledge, for me, is co-created, shared, and respected (Kovach, 2009).

For me, this includes Métis ways of knowing grounded in relationships, story, and connection to family and community, even as I continue to learn and reconnect with these teachings. My understanding is also shaped by the work of Indigenous scholars such as Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) and Anishinaabe scholar Kathleen Absolon (2011), as well as through my relationships with Indigenous families, students and colleagues in my work with Surrey Schools. This perspective ensures that my research remains culturally responsive and community centered.

Axiology

My values as a researcher are grounded in respect, reciprocity, and responsibility, reflecting the principles of the Six Rs: respect, responsibility, reciprocity, relevance, relationality, and reverence (Tsosie et al., 2022). These values guide my engagement with literature and my approach to data collection and analysis. I strive to ensure that this research benefits the communities I aim to support, particularly Indigenous families navigating systemic barriers within the education system. My goal is to contribute to creating inclusive, equitable, and culturally safe educational environments that honor Indigenous knowledge and experiences.

Shawn Wilson (2008) emphasizes that research is ceremony, and as such, it must be conducted with relational accountability, ensuring that it is respectful, responsible, and reciprocal. By centering these principles, my goal is to conduct research that not only addresses the challenges faced by Indigenous families but also contributes to their empowerment and the preservation of their knowledge systems drawing on and mobilizing the inherent strengths that Indigenous communities possess.

The Challenge for Today

The disparities in educational outcomes for Indigenous students in Surrey are stark. Indigenous families continue to face systemic barriers rooted in colonial histories, including the legacy of Indigenous Residential Schools and assimilationist policies. Historically, schools have often been spaces that perpetuate systemic inequities, characterized by low expectations, cultural insensitivity, and systemic racism, creating environments in which Indigenous families may feel marginalized or unsafe (Milne & Wotherspoon, 2020). As Milne and Wotherspoon (2020) argue, progress exists, but meaningful decolonization remains limited. The challenge for today lies in addressing these barriers while fostering meaningful collaboration between schools and

Indigenous families. This research aims to examine and strengthen such partnerships, recognizing Indigenous parents as essential collaborators in educational systems and key agents for reconciliation and equity. In this research, "Indigenous" explicitly refers to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, recognizing and respecting the diverse cultures, languages, and histories within these groups. This includes the distinct realities of Indigenous families in urban contexts such as Surrey, where connections to community, culture, and care may take different forms. Similarly, "parents" or "parental engagement" broadly encompasses parents, caregivers, and family members who actively support children's education. By clearly defining these terms, I aim to acknowledge the diverse identities and relational roles that shape educational experiences and community engagement within Surrey schools.

Context

Surrey School District #36 is situated on the traditional, unceded territories of the ḡíçəy (Katzie), ḡʷa:n̓l̓ən (Kwantlen) and SEMYOME (Semiahmoo) First Nations. Surrey is one of the most diverse cities in British Columbia, and its Indigenous population reflects this diversity. According to the Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee (SUILC), the 2021 Census shows that Surrey is home to 4,895 Indigenous children and youth aged 0 to 24, making up 40% of the city's Indigenous residents. Within this demographic, 52% identify as First Nations, 42% as Métis, and only 12% are affiliated with local First Nations. This illustrates both the diversity and the complexity of Indigenous identities within the community (SUILC, 2023).

In the 2023/2024 school year, Surrey Schools served 81,775 students across 125 schools, of which 3,187 self-identified as Indigenous (British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2024). Despite representing only 4% of the student population, Indigenous students face significant disparities in educational outcomes. The district's five-year high school completion

rate for all students was 92%, but for Indigenous students, it was only 57%. Indigenous males experienced a particularly alarming 14% decrease in completion rates, highlighting the urgent need for targeted support and systemic change (British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Care, n.d.).

Recognizing these challenges, Surrey Schools set ambitious targets within its strategic plan, aiming to boost Indigenous graduation rates by 15 to 20% by 2028. This commitment underscores the importance of collaborative, culturally responsive initiatives that prioritize Indigenous learners and engage families as active participants in educational success (Surrey Schools, 2024).

Significance of the Study

These educational disparities are not isolated issues but reflect systemic barriers rooted in colonial histories, Indigenous Residential Schools, and assimilationist policies. Schools have often been perceived by Indigenous families as unsafe or unwelcoming spaces, where their voices and cultures are marginalized (Milne & Wotherspoon, 2020; Madden et al., 2013). Addressing these barriers is essential for fostering inclusive and equitable educational environments where Indigenous families feel respected and valued as partners in their children's education.

This research focuses on understanding these systemic barriers and exploring actionable strategies to support Indigenous parental engagement within the Surrey School District. By centering Indigenous perspectives, the study aims to contribute to the district's efforts to improve educational outcomes and create culturally responsive spaces that honor Indigenous knowledge and values.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to explore how the Surrey School District can strengthen collaboration with Indigenous parents to create an inclusive and supportive educational environment. This study focuses specifically on publicly funded K-12 schools within the Surrey School District. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- Identify the systemic barriers that hinder Indigenous parental engagement in the district.
- Explore culturally appropriate strategies and resources that support Indigenous families in engaging with their children's schools.
- Advocate for actionable recommendations aligned with Indigenous knowledge systems and values to improve educational practices and policies.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following central research question:

How can the Surrey School District work with Indigenous parents to create a more inclusive educational environment that supports their engagement as partners in their children's education?

Supporting sub-questions include:

- Based on a review of the literature, what potential barriers do Indigenous parents in Surrey face in engaging with their children's schools?
- What cultural, social, and systemic factors influence Indigenous parental engagement?
- What resources, strategies, and supports are available to strengthen Indigenous parental involvement, and how can these be improved?

These research questions point to the need to look more deeply at how Indigenous parental engagement is shaped by history, policy, and lived realities. To explore this, the next

chapter offers a relational literature review that weaves together scholarship, and community knowledge to ground the study in both systemic analysis and lived experience.

Chapter 2: Relational Literature Review

A relational literature review recognizes that knowledge is not gathered in isolation but, rather, it exists within relationships, lived experiences, and interconnected ways of knowing (Tynan & Bishop, 2023). In approaching this literature review, I have tried to stay mindful that the topic I am exploring - Indigenous parental engagement in education - is not just an academic subject. It is deeply personal, connected to histories of trauma and resilience, and rooted in the lived realities of families and communities. I carry with me stories shared by Indigenous families I have worked with, and these stories have shaped the questions I ask, the way I read each piece of literature, and how I interpret what it means.

This literature review is grounded in the understanding that Indigenous parental engagement cannot be separated from the broader historical and systemic contexts that shape Indigenous families' experiences. Colonial histories, intergenerational trauma, systemic racism, and socio-economic disparities continue to affect how Indigenous families interact with the school system (Battiste, 2013; Milne & Wotherspoon, 2021; Madden et al., 2013). My goal is to engage with literature in a way that honours relational accountability, and interconnected knowledge systems. By approaching the literature in this relational way, I hope to contribute to a conversation that centers Indigenous voices and community defined understandings of success. This review brings together scholarly research, policy analyses, and community-based knowledge, from national frameworks to the local experiences of British Columbia and the Surrey School District, to reflect a more complete picture of Indigenous education and parental engagement.

My Relationship to the Literature

As I engage with this literature review, my own positionality plays an important role in shaping how I interpret and interact with the scholarship. Wilson (2008) explains that research is not simply about collecting data; it is a relational process that holds researchers accountable to the knowledge systems and communities with which they engage. My understanding of Indigenous parental engagement is informed by academic research, lived experiences, professional practice, and relationships with Indigenous families, educators, and scholars. The literature I draw on for this review comes from multiple sources: scholarly articles, citations in those articles, and resources shared by Indigenous mentors, community members, and colleagues. This perspective reinforces my responsibility to engage with these texts in a way that acknowledges their roots in lived experiences and community knowledge systems.

My own relationship to literature helps explain why I chose certain frameworks to guide this study. From here, I turn to the Indigenous Wholistic Framework and Métissage, which give structure to how I read and make sense of the research.

Theoretical Frameworks: Indigenous Wholistic Framework and Métissage

This study draws from two methodologies that have deeply shaped my approach to research: the Indigenous Wholistic Framework (IWF) and Métissage. Both methodologies allow me to thoughtfully integrate multiple narratives and perspectives, reflecting the relational complexity that characterizes Indigenous ways of knowing. Absolon's (2011) concept of *Kaandossiwin* understands knowledge as inherently wholistic and inclusive of emotional, spiritual, physical, and intellectual dimensions and resonates deeply with my experiences. Absolon further reminds me that authentically engaging with Indigenous knowledge means honouring its roots in lived experience, oral traditions, and spiritual connections to community

and land. These insights have guided how I approach this work, ensuring my research remains grounded in respect, relational accountability, and community connections.

Indigenous Wholistic Framework (IWF)

IWF asserts that Indigenous knowledge systems view learning as inherently relational and wholistic, encompassing intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing (Pidgeon, 2014). In this literature review, I use IWF to organize findings across these four domains. For example, when exploring potential barriers to parental engagement, the IWF draws attention to how historical trauma affects not only academic outcomes, but also emotional and spiritual wellbeing.

IWF shows how education is wholistic and interconnected. Métissage adds another layer, offering a way to weave together multiple voices and stories.

Métissage

Métissage, as described by Donald (2012), Lowan-Trudeau (2015), and Styres, Haig-Brown, and Blimkie (2013), interweaves diverse narratives and epistemologies. This approach challenges reductionist, Eurocentric interpretations by integrating Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives (Donald, 2012; Lowan-Trudeau, 2015; Styres et al., 2013). In my analysis, Métissage will guide the synthesis of academic, policy, and community narratives, ensuring the review reflects the complexity and intersectionality inherent in Indigenous experiences. While the Indigenous Wholistic Framework (IWF) provides a grounding structure for understanding interrelated dimensions of Indigenous life, Métissage adds a distinct dimension by emphasizing relationality and the weaving together of multiple voices. In this way, it builds

on the IWF while offering a method of representation that resists singular interpretations and highlights the lived, storied nature of Indigenous knowledge.

Together, IWF and Métissage allow me to critically examine how systemic barriers, historical legacies, and cultural strengths influence Indigenous parental engagement. These frameworks also provide a basis for evaluating the role of family-centered education models within a broader socio-cultural and political context. Together, these frameworks shape not just how I understand the research, but how I put it into practice in this review.

Frameworks in Practice

The Indigenous Wholistic Framework (IWF) and Métissage will not only act as theoretical guides, but they will also act as analytical tools that structure my review and engagement with the literature. IWF informs the organization, of the findings across the emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and physical dimensions, helping to uncover how intergenerational trauma, systemic racism, and cultural strengths shape Indigenous parental engagement. For example, emotional and spiritual wellbeing are central to understanding mistrust in schools and the importance of cultural identity in definitions of success.

Métissage allows for the synthesis of knowledge from multiple sources: scholarly research, community narratives and perspectives and policy texts, without reducing their complexity. By weaving these diverse threads together, the review reflects a layered and relational understanding of engagement. Using this approach helps respond to the research questions by capturing both systemic barriers and Indigenous-defined strategies for building respectful partnerships within education systems. With these guiding frameworks in place, it is important to see them in relation to the longer history of Indigenous research.

History of Indigenous Research

Understanding Indigenous parental engagement requires awareness of the historical evolution of Indigenous research methodologies, which shapes my relational approach to this literature review.

Karen Martin (2003), as cited by Wilson (2008), divides the phases in the development of Indigenous research in chronological order as: terra nullius, traditionalizing, assimilationist, early Aboriginal research, recent Aboriginal research, and Indigenist research phases.

Terra Nullius Phase (1770 – 1900)

The Terra Nullius phase reflects colonial views in which lands inhabited by Indigenous peoples were “empty” and thus could be claimed as property by settlers. In research, this meant that Indigenous knowledge and culture were disregarded. In Canada, this era was marked by the erasure of Indigenous rights and identities, as Indigenous lands and resources were exploited without consent or acknowledgment of existing societies (Martin, K., 2003 as cited by Wilson, S., 2008).

Traditionalizing Phase (1900-1940)

During the traditionalizing phase, Indigenous people in Canada were seen as obstacles to progress and in this context research *on* Indigenous peoples and lands was done with government structural support. Research began acknowledging Indigenous cultures but often through a romanticized lens using terms like “the noble savage.” This approach was common in ethnographic studies and portrayed Indigenous cultures as unchanging and primitive which, in Canada, contributed to harmful stereotypes, further alienating Indigenous peoples from their cultural practices and histories (Martin, K. 2003., as cited by Wilson, S. 2008).

Assimilationist Phase (1940 -1970)

This phase coincided with government policies aimed at assimilating Indigenous people into the dominant colonial structure. Research during this time ignored and often justified the harmful impacts of the assimilation policies such as Indigenous Residential Schools. Indigenous Residential Schools sought to erase Indigenous cultures and languages, causing intergenerational trauma and loss of cultural identity (Madden et al., 2013; Milne and Wotherspoon, 2019; Martin, K., 2003 as cited by Wilson, S. 2008; McKenzie, Varcoe & Day, 2016).

Early Aboriginal Research Phase (1970-1990s)

During this phase Indigenous people continued to be the subjects of research. Researchers continued to view, interpret, and represent Indigenous lands and Indigenous people, their worldviews, their cultures, and their knowledges through a Western lens (Martin, K., 2003 as cited by Wilson, S. 2008).

Recent Aboriginal Research and Indigenist Research Phase (1990-)

These phases represent a movement towards research methodologies that are grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. “A basic principle of Indigenous epistemologies and research methodologies is that knowledge exists within a set of relationships rooted in place or land” (Chalmers, J., 2017, p. 99). In Canada, this was an important shift for addressing colonial traumas, as it centers Indigenous knowledge, perspectives and needs, which promotes research that is relevant, respectful, and beneficial to Indigenous communities (Martin, K., 2003, as cited by Wilson, S., 2008; Wilson, S., 2003).

Evolution of Indigenous Methodologies

The transition towards Indigenous research methodologies marks a paradigm shift in both the academic and scientific understanding of Indigenous communities, knowledge systems and worldviews. Shawn Wilson, in his book, “Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods” (2008) discusses the importance of relationships in research, explaining that knowledge is relational and should be collected and shared respectfully and reciprocally. Wilson emphasizes that research, especially with Indigenous methodologies, is not only an academic pursuit, but it is also ceremony and rooted in spirituality and traditions. Indigenous research is a sacred endeavor and storytelling, transmission of knowledge, and the engagement with research participants in a culturally sensitive manner is of utmost importance. Métissage extends this ethos by interweaving diverse stories and perspectives in ways that honour community authority and lived experience (Donald, 2012; Styres et al., 2013).

Karen Martin’s (2003) phases of Indigenous research, specifically “Recent Aboriginal Research and Indigenist Research,” highlight the transition toward methodologies that are both inclusive of and led by Indigenous perspectives (as cited by Wilson, S., 2008). Indigenous methodologies highlight the importance of community engagement, cultural sensitivity, and the recognition of Indigenous ways of knowing. This shift is needed to address historical imbalances, and colonial harms in research. It promotes a paradigm where Indigenous voices, knowledge and methods are not only acknowledged but become central to academic research. This history is deeply tied to the broader colonial legacies that continue to shape Indigenous families’ experiences with schools today.

Historical Context: Colonial Legacies and Educational Disparities

Indigenous family systems traditionally extend beyond Western concepts of the immediate family structures, and can include extended relatives, Elders, and broader community networks. Central to these systems are principles of communal responsibility, mutual support, and intergenerational knowledge transmission (Archibald, 2020; Absolon, 2011). The disruption of these structures through residential schools and child welfare policies has caused significant intergenerational trauma, profoundly impacting current family-school interactions (St. Denis, 2022). Despite these disruptions, Indigenous families maintain resilience, continuously adapting cultural practices and community connections (Milne & Wotherspoon, 2021). Understanding these aspects is essential for developing meaningful, culturally responsive educational partnerships.

The disruption of traditional Indigenous family structures through residential schools and child welfare interventions continues to shape how families engage with education today. These disruptions reflect the enduring legacy of colonial practices, with Indigenous Residential Schools in particular leaving deep intergenerational trauma that still impacts Indigenous learners and their families.

Indigenous Residential Schools and Intergenerational Trauma

Approximately 150,000 Indigenous children in Canada attended Indigenous Residential Schools between 1867 and 1996 and as of 2001, “nearly 50 percent of individuals who identify as North American Indigenous reported that at least one family member attended residential school” (Statistics Canada, 2003a as cited by Feir, 2016, p. 3). Indigenous Residential Schools aimed to impose a Eurocentric worldview on Indigenous students which resulted in physical,

sexual, emotional abuse, and high mortality rates. Although the last Residential Institution in British Columbia closed in 1996, “policies intended to intervene and reshape familial relationships continue to be widespread” (Bang et al., p. 790). These policies continue to create barriers to Indigenous parental engagement in the education system. It is important that we understand and acknowledge the historical context to actively work towards dismantling these systemic barriers. These historical policies and practices continue to significantly impact Indigenous families’ engagement with schools today, manifesting in systemic distrust and ongoing barriers. Understanding this history is essential to dismantling present-day barriers.

These harms shaped the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action, which place education at the center of reconciliation.

Truth and Reconciliation in Education

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) highlights the lasting impact of Indigenous Residential Schools on family and community members (Milne & Wotherspoon, 2021, p. 506; TRC, 2015a). The TRC Calls to Action (2015b) seeks to educate Canadians about residential schooling, promote healing for survivors, and foster better relationships between Indigenous peoples and other Canadians (Milne & Wotherspoon, 2021). Reconciliation involves establishing mutually respectful relationships and acknowledging harm (TRC, 2015a). Several Calls to Action address education:

- Call to Action 7 calls for the development of curriculum on residential schools, treaties, and Indigenous contributions to Canada in consultation with Indigenous peoples.

- Call to Action 10 advocates for new Aboriginal education legislation with Indigenous participation to close education gaps, support parental engagement, and improve educational outcomes (TRC, 2015b). This includes “enabling parents to fully participate in the education of their children” (TRC, 2015b, p. 2).
- Call to Action 11 calls upon the federal government to provide adequate funding to end the backlog of Indigenous students seeking post-secondary education.
- Call to Action 12 emphasizes the development of culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Indigenous families.
- Call to Action 16 urges post-secondary institutions to create degree and diploma programs in Indigenous languages.
- Call to Action 57 calls for the education of public servants on the history of Indigenous peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (TRC, 2015b).

Similarly, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007) supports Indigenous peoples’ rights to control their educational systems and integrate their languages and pedagogies. These mandates underscore the importance of dismantling systemic barriers; a focus aligned with the IWF’s wholistic perspective and Métissage’s integration of diverse epistemologies.

Both the TRC and UNDRIP advocate for educational reforms that respect and integrate Indigenous knowledge systems, fostering an inclusive and supportive educational environment for Indigenous students and their families. Unfortunately, the Western / Eurocentric model of education continues to marginalize Indigenous knowledge and peoples as schools continue to center European cultures, languages, histories, and epistemological foundations and

organizational practices thereby creating school environments that may be unwelcoming for Indigenous parents (Madden et al. 2013; Milne & Wotherspoon, 2021). The integration of UNDRIP principles into educational policies and practices, along with the efforts of FNEESC and targeted funding programs, is essential for creating equitable and culturally relevant education for Indigenous students. Alongside the TRC, organizations like FNEESC and targeted funding programs have become key vehicles for advancing Indigenous education in BC.

The Role of FNEESC and Indigenous Education Funding

The First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNEESC) plays an important role in advancing educational aspirations of First Nations in British Columbia. FNEESC's mandate includes supporting Indigenous students in achieving academic success, promoting integration of Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum, and advocating for equitable funding and resources. FNEESC prioritizes collaboration with Indigenous communities to ensure that education policies and programs reflect Indigenous perspectives and the needs of the community (FNEESC, n.d.).

The Indigenous Education Funding Program in British Columbia provides targeted funding to support educational needs of Indigenous students in the K to 12 education system. The funding aims to enhance educational outcomes by supporting language and culture programs, improving Indigenous student achievement, and increasing Indigenous graduation rates. Another focus of this program is to build strong partnerships between schools and Indigenous communities to create a supportive and culturally relevant educational environment (Government of British Columbia, n.d.-b). These initiatives naturally raise the question of how we define success in education, and whether Western measures align with Indigenous understandings.

What Is Success?

Educational success in Indigenous contexts is defined wholistically. Whereas Western paradigms typically focus on measurable outcomes like test scores and graduation rates (Tunison, 2013), many Indigenous communities view success as being connected to identity, culture, relationships, and community well-being (Battiste, 2013). Tunison (2013) explains that success for Indigenous students involves setting and achieving both personal and community-oriented goals. Research by Moon (2017) and Claypool and Preston (2014) further demonstrates that success encompasses spiritual growth and personal maturation, dimensions often overlooked by conventional metrics. Their work, alongside that of Tunison (2013), supports a broader understanding of student success grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems. The IWF directs attention to these diverse aspects of well-being, while Métissage enables the integration of varied criteria into a cohesive understanding of success.

Barriers to Educational Engagement

Multiple systemic barriers continue to impact Indigenous families' experiences within the education system; many deeply connected to the historical and ongoing legacies of colonialism. Gillies (2021) highlights that systemic racism persists through low academic expectations, exclusionary practices, and inadequate representation of Indigenous teachers and staff. Importantly, Gillies explicitly frames whiteness as a form of property within educational spaces, where white students are systematically privileged with exclusive access to educational success, while Indigenous students face persistent marginalization through racial stereotyping, limited curricular representation, and disciplinary practices rooted in exclusion.

Drawing from both my professional experiences and the literature, I recognize these barriers as profoundly interconnected with the lasting trauma caused by Indigenous Residential

Schools and the oppressive policies of the Indian Act. Three interwoven barriers: intergenerational trauma, systemic racism, and socio-economic disparities, emerge consistently throughout my engagement with Indigenous families and the research literature.

Intergenerational Trauma

Intergenerational trauma is woven through many Indigenous parents' experiences of school and can create significant barriers to feeling safe enough to engage in their children's education. In this context, Indigenous families are not only living with the ongoing effects of racial discrimination in schooling (Milne, 2016) but also carrying deep emotional and psychological wounds from assimilationist and colonial policies (Sianturi et al., 2022). For some, schools are remembered and experienced as places where Indigenous culture and identity were denied, diminished, or (Madden et al., 2013; Sianturi et al., 2022). These lasting impacts of Indigenous Residential Schools leave many Indigenous parents feeling uncomfortable in school settings, which can show up as reluctance to enter the school or to engage directly with their children's teachers (Sianturi et al. 2022).

Systemic Racism and Institutional Barriers

Systemic racism poses an additional barrier to Indigenous parental engagement with their children's school. The education system has been founded on "the very Westernized...very White way of seeing things...and doing" (Moon, 2017, p. 29). These barriers are further perpetuated by a history of domination and Eurocentric frameworks embedded in the contemporary school system, as explained by Madden et al. (2013). This leaves Indigenous families at a disadvantage within a system that centers European cultures, languages, histories, and epistemologies and ignores the wholistic paradigm of Indigenous knowledges (Bang, 2018;

Madden et al. 2013). Bang et al. (2018) explain that when interacting with non-Indigenous teachers and the school system, Indigenous parents and their children face low expectations, cultural stereotypes, and systemic barriers to participation. These interactions may result in a strong sense of disrespect of Indigenous families.

Another symptom of systemic racism within the school system can be seen in the overreporting of Indigenous families to child welfare agencies, which may stem from a disconnect between some teacher's views of "good" parenting practices and Indigenous cultural practices such as children's participation in traditional ceremonies and creates a risk of child apprehension (Milne & Wotherspoon, 2020). This alarming reality intensifies the systemic racism faced by Indigenous families as they navigate the education system. These systemic barriers are made even heavier when combined with socio-economic challenges.

Socio-Economic Challenges

Socio-economic status (SES) disparities also cause a significant barrier to Indigenous parental involvement in their children's education. Research shows a link between family SES and children's educational aspirations, high school performance and completion, career expectations and goals, attitude towards school and their teachers, as well as on parent monitoring and emphasis on achievement (Lam, 2014; Bhat, Joshi, & Wani, 2016; Milne & Wotherspoon, 2019). Economic challenges often create further barriers for Indigenous families' engagement with the school system including inflexible work schedules which prevent parents from attending school meetings and events, as well as limited educational knowledge and skills (e.g., being unable to provide homework help, transportation, and food security (Milne, 2016).

Family-Centered Care in Education

Family-Centered Care (FCC) is a model that prioritizes collaboration between families and professionals to support children's education and well-being. FCC aligns closely with traditional Indigenous parenting values that emphasize communal responsibility. Studies show that when FCC principles are applied, especially in culturally responsive ways, engagement and outcomes improve (Gerlach & Gignac, 2019; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). Programs like Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC) highlight how responsive and strengths-based engagement rooted in community needs can foster wholistic development for both children and their families (Gerlach & Gignac, 2019). In practice, FCC includes Elder involvement in educational planning, shared cultural events, and family-directed learning goals to support children's education and well-being; when implemented well, it supports advocacy and autonomy (Blue-Banning et al., 2015; Scott & Louie, 2020).

FCC emphasizes:

- Collaborative Relationships: Engaging parents in decision-making (Blue-Banning et al., 2015).
- Mutual Trust and Respect: Valuing family expertise and cultural insights (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008).
- Open Communication: Two-way dialogues grounded in transparency.
- Cultural Responsiveness: Integrating Indigenous traditions and knowledge (Archibald, 2020).
- Empowerment: Supporting advocacy and autonomy (Scott & Louie, 2020).

These practices are not external to Indigenous parenting philosophies but instead reflect a return to community-driven, relational approaches to care and learning.

While Family-Centered Care offers a powerful model, how it looks in practice shifts depending on whether we are looking nationally, provincially, or locally.

Indigenous Parental Engagement in the K-12 System: A National-to-Local Perspective

National Overview

Across Canada, Indigenous parental engagement is shaped by the legacies of colonial policies and systemic inequities. Frameworks such as the TRC Calls to Action (TRC, 2015a, 2015b) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007) have set goals for transforming education by empowering Indigenous communities. These frameworks emphasize Indigenous self-determination in education, including curriculum control, language preservation, and parental involvement in governance structures. Traditional engagement models have historically marginalized Indigenous voices. Emerging models advocate for co-creation of knowledge and shared governance in education (Archibald, 2020; Louie et al., 2018).

British Columbia

In British Columbia, Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (AEEAs) foster Indigenous parental engagement through collaborative planning and localized goals. Despite these efforts, persistent challenges such as systemic racism and communication gaps continue to shape how Indigenous families experience schools (FNESC, n.d.; Scott & Louie, 2020).

Surrey School District

Surrey School District highlights urban challenges in Indigenous education, such as high mobility and historical mistrust. Recent census data illustrates these dynamics: the Indigenous population in Surrey declined by nearly 10% between 2016 and 2021, reflecting patterns of

mobility linked to housing unaffordability and instability (Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee [SUILC], 2023). Educational disparities persist despite improvements. The five-year completion rate for Indigenous students dropped to 50% in 2022–23 before recovering to 57% in 2023–24—still lagging the approximately 88% rate for non-Indigenous students (Ministry of Education & Child Care, 2024). The six-year completion rate saw a similar pattern, rising from 64% to 75% over the same period (Ministry of Education & Child Care, 2024). Programs like Little Eaglets and efforts by SUILC (2023) emphasize the need for more culturally grounded and family-centered practices, including community-based meetings and involvement of extended family members. Together, these indicators reflect both ongoing mobility challenges and the enduring effects of historical mistrust in educational systems, highlighting the importance of approaches that not only address barriers but also draw on and mobilize the inherent strengths that Indigenous communities possess (SUILC, 2023).

Indigenous Youth Perspectives on Parental and Community Engagement

An intersectional lens is essential for understanding how Indigenous parental and community engagement varies across identity, geography, gender, and socioeconomic status. Engagement is not a uniform process but is shaped by the distinct realities families and youth face. For example, Inuit-led school–community models in Nunavik emphasize land-based learning and parental authority within the school system, creating culturally grounded and inclusive educational experiences (Ives & Sinha, 2016). In British Columbia, community-driven programs highlight how Métis and First Nations families in urban settings navigate systemic barriers differently depending on socioeconomic conditions and access to cultural supports (Gerlach & Gignac, 2019).

Youth perspectives add further depth to this understanding. Research with First Nations and Métis youth in Western Canada shows how strong family involvement directly shapes academic achievement while strengthening cultural identity and resilience (Liebenberg et al., 2019; Hodgson et al., 2022). Urban Indigenous youth in Ontario describe how parental advocacy helps counter systemic marginalization and rebuild trust in schools that have historically devalued Indigenous knowledge (Neeganagwedgin, 2020). Studies from Saskatchewan and Manitoba demonstrate that when schools integrate Indigenous knowledge and welcome Elders into classrooms, youth feel more respected and empowered in their identities (Bang, Nolan, & McDaid-Morgan, 2018; MacKay, Parlee, & Karsgaard, 2020).

Surrey-specific data underscores the importance of these insights. The five-year completion rate for Indigenous students in Surrey dropped to 50% in 2022–23 before recovering to 57% in 2023–24, still significantly lower than the 88% rate for non-Indigenous students. The six-year completion rate rose from 64% to 75% over the same period, again below their non-Indigenous peers (Ministry of Education & Child Care, 2024). Indigenous youth in Surrey have also spoken powerfully about their needs. In the *Skookum Youth Report*, young people identified the urgent importance of safe cultural gathering spaces, educational supports, and access to Elders and mentors, alongside basic needs such as housing, food, and healthcare. They emphasized that programs must be youth-led, wholistic, and culturally grounded, and they repeatedly named intergenerational mentorship and community connection as essential to their well-being (Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee [SUILC], 2023). These findings align closely with the national literature but also highlight the specificity of Surrey’s urban Indigenous youth context. While research across Canada emphasizes the importance of cultural grounding, family involvement, and youth-led approaches (Liebenberg et al., 2019; Hodgson et

al., 2022; Ferguson et al., 2021), Surrey youth place particular emphasis on the creation of safe, trauma-informed cultural gathering spaces, affordable housing, and consistent access to Elders and mentorship. The *Skookum Youth Report* further reinforces that programs in Surrey must be youth-led, wholistic, and rooted in cultural (re)connection, with concrete recommendations ranging from peer tutoring and scholarship support to the establishment of a permanent Indigenous youth hub (SUILC, 2023). This demonstrates that while the protective factors identified nationally are echoed in Surrey, the local priorities reflect the lived realities of youth navigating systemic racism, mobility, and socioeconomic precarity in an urban setting. For a summary comparison of these national themes alongside Surrey youth priorities, see table below.

Table 1

Themes of Indigenous Youth Engagement: National/Regional Literature Compared with Surrey Youth Priorities

Theme	National / Regional Literature	Surrey Youth (SUILC, 2023)
Cultural connection	Culturally grounded programs and integration of Indigenous knowledge into schools strengthen youth identity and resilience (Bang et al., 2018; MacKay et al., 2020).	Youth call for regular access to Elders, language classes, regalia making, drumming, carving, and land-based activities.
Family & community engagement	Strong family and intergenerational supports are protective factors for	Emphasis on intergenerational mentorship and creating youth

	youth well-being (Liebenberg et al., 2019; Hodgson et al., 2022).	councils to strengthen community leadership.
Educational success	Family involvement directly shapes educational achievement (Ives & Sinha, 2016; Gerlach & Gignac, 2019).	Youth identify need for tutoring, scholarship application support, and access to post-secondary pathways.
Safe spaces	Urban Indigenous youth often face alienation in schools that fail to respect culture (Neeganagwedgin, 2020).	Youth call for trauma-informed, multi-use safe spaces with basic needs (food, showers, computers) and cultural supports.
Socioeconomic barriers	Poverty, mobility, and systemic racism continue to shape youth outcomes (Hodgson et al., 2022).	Surrey youth highlight lack of affordable housing, racism, hyper-surveillance, and stigma around mental health.
Youth voice	Best practices emphasize youth-led program design and leadership (Ferguson et al., 2021; Lopresti et al., 2022).	Youth insist programs must be youth-led, with decision-making roles through councils and leadership opportunities.

Community-Led Programs and Educational Self-Determination

In addition to national policy recommendations, Indigenous-led educational initiatives demonstrate how relational and culturally grounded models of schooling support parental engagement and wholistic student well-being. The *Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC)* program, created in 1995, is one such initiative. It operates through 133 sites across Canada, serving Indigenous families living off-reserve and off-territory in urban centres such as Vancouver, Toronto, Halifax, and Prince Albert, as well as northern communities in the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut (Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC], 2022). Each site is governed by Indigenous organizations including, Friendship Centres, self-governing First Nations, and early childhood education centres and adapts programming to local cultural and social contexts.

The most recent federal evaluation found that AHSUNC supports not only children but entire families. Sites promote school readiness, strengthen cultural identity, and build lasting community connections. In the 2021 parent survey, 92% of caregivers reported their child learned basic school skills, 83% felt their child was ready for kindergarten, and 91% felt welcomed and supported at their site (PHAC, 2022, pp. 21–24). Families describe AHSUNC as “*Reconciliation in action*” because it restores language, culture, and parental leadership within education, responding directly to TRC Calls to Action on early learning (PHAC, 2022, pp. 7–9).

One case study from the evaluation comes from the Mi’kmaq Child Development Centre in Halifax, which blends early learning with wrap-around health and family supports. Families there spoke of the program as “inclusive, welcoming, and breaking cycles,” and highlighted how it created opportunities for children and parents to reconnect with Mi’kmaq language, cultural

teachings, and Elders (PHAC, 2022, p. 27). This shows how community-led models extend beyond schooling to nurture family well-being.

In British Columbia, First Nations–operated schools provide further examples of self-determination in action. Through education agreements with provincial and federal governments, Nations such as Seabird Island and Nisga’a Lisims operate their own schools, embedding language, culture, and governance into daily practice. These agreements allow families to set priorities and define what educational success means in their own communities (Government of Canada, Indigenous Services Canada, 2025).

In Surrey, the Little Eaglets program offers a local example of how culturally grounded, community-based education strengthens family engagement. Developed through the Surrey School District in partnership with Indigenous educators and families, Little Eaglets creates space for young learners to enter school in ways that honour Indigenous identity and involve extended family members. Like AHSUNC, the program emphasizes that parents and caregivers are central to their children’s learning journey, building confidence and trust between families and schools (Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee [SUILC], 2023).

Together, these examples highlight how Indigenous families and youth are not simply being invited into existing school structures but are actively shaping education on their own terms, whether through national programs like AHSUNC, First Nations–operated schools in BC, or Surrey-based initiatives like Little Eaglets. These models show that parental and community leadership is essential for building educational spaces where Indigenous children feel safe, connected, and proud of who they are.

In summary, this relational literature review affirms the need for Indigenous-centered, family-inclusive education rooted in respect, accountability, and cultural knowledge. The integration of the Indigenous Wholistic Framework and Métissage provides a robust foundation for analyzing parental engagement across policy, community, and lived experiences. Family-Centered Care adds an important dimension to this work, promoting relational, respectful, and culturally responsive engagement that can transform educational environments into spaces of healing and empowerment. In the next chapter, I outline the methodology that guides this study. Grounded in the Indigenous Wholistic Framework and Métissage, my approach is shaped by relational accountability and a commitment to honouring the voices and experiences of Indigenous families and youth. This framework informs how I gather and interpret knowledge and reflects my responsibility to carry out research in ways that are reciprocal, meaningful, and culturally grounded.

The literature shows both the systemic barriers and the strengths that Indigenous families carry into schools, and it underlines the importance of centering Indigenous voices in this work. With this relational understanding in place, the next chapter outlines the methodological approach used in this study, guided by the Indigenous Wholistic Framework, Métissage, and an environmental scan.

Chapter 3: Methodology

My research is guided by a qualitative approach rooted in relational accountability, informed by three interrelated methodological approaches: the Indigenous Wholistic Framework (IWF), Métissage, and environmental scan. Together, these approaches support a wholistic and relational exploration of Indigenous parental engagement within Surrey's K-12 education system. This approach felt important to me because it reflects the relational and interconnected nature of Indigenous parental engagement, and keeps the work grounded in the complexity of families' lived experiences rather than reducing them into simplified categories.

In this study, several key concepts guide how I understand and interpret the findings. Relational accountability refers to the responsibility I hold to the people, communities, and knowledge I engage with, ensuring this work remains respectful, reciprocal, and grounded in relationship (Wilson, 2008). Intergenerational trauma is understood as ongoing and shaped by both historical and present-day systems, including Indigenous Residential Schools, child welfare, and systemic inequities that continue to affect Indigenous families (Milne & Wotherspoon, 2021). Indigenous ways of knowing are understood as relational, community-based and grounded in specific cultural contexts, often shared through storytelling, lived experience, and connection to land and community (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009).

The Indigenous Wholistic Framework, as described by Pidgeon (2014), deeply resonates with my understanding of parental engagement as inherently connected and relational, encompassing intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical dimensions. This perspective allows me to explore Indigenous parental engagement wholistically, honouring and acknowledging the historical, cultural, and systemic contexts that profoundly shape families' experiences within the education system.

To enrich this relational approach, I draw from Métissage, inspired by Donald (2012). Métissage encourages the weaving together of diverse narratives, perspectives, and experiences, respecting the complexity and multiplicity of Indigenous voices while challenging simplified or Eurocentric viewpoints. This method builds on the concept of bricolage, defined by Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo (2009) as the creative integration and blending of varied forms of knowledge and methodological approaches. Métissage takes the idea of bricolage a step further by deeply intertwining diverse stories and perspectives, reflecting the lived realities and relational experiences of Indigenous families and communities.

Specifically, I used Métissage to intentionally weave together diverse community narratives, policy insights, and demographic data, creating a comprehensive relational analysis that respects the complexity of Indigenous experiences. Following the relational literature review, I then applied Métissage by thoughtfully integrating scholarly research, policy documents, and community narratives. This ensured that the literature review remained relationally grounded, respectful, and reflective of interconnected knowledge systems shared by Indigenous families and communities involved. This approach allowed me to bring these different sources of knowledge together in a way that stayed connected to relationships and lived experience, rather than separating or simplifying them.

To make sense of the literature, I approached it in a relational way, moving back and forth between sources and returning to them over time. As I read, I paid attention to patterns that connected across the literature, policy documents, and community-based reports. Instead of separating these sources into categories, I focused on how they are related to each other, especially in terms of barriers, strengths, and possibilities for Indigenous parental engagement. The Indigenous Wholistic Framework helped me organize what I was noticing across the

physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual domains, while Métissage supported bringing these insights together in a way that stayed grounded in relationships, lived experience, and context.

The third methodological approach used in this study is an environmental scan which looks at the policies, resources, and demographic contexts that shape Indigenous parental engagement in Surrey's K–12 education system. To do this, I use Métissage and the Indigenous Wholistic Framework (IWF) as guiding tools.

In Surrey's urban context, this work is also situated on the territories of ḡiçəy (Katzie)', ḡwɑ:nłən (Kwantlen) and SEMYOME (Semiahmoo). These Nations are important in relation to land, culture, and community, while at the same time many Indigenous students and families living in Surrey come from different Nations and backgrounds. This means the work takes place within both land-based Nation relationships and the realities of a diverse urban Indigenous population.

Métissage, as described by Lowan-Trudeau (2019), helps me weave together diverse narratives from Indigenous families, educators, and community leaders. This weaving process brings out the intersections between ecological, cultural, and social justice issues, and deepens my understanding of the realities Indigenous families are navigating in an urban school context.

The Indigenous Wholistic Framework (Pidgeon, 2014) adds to this by emphasizing the interconnectedness of the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual domains. Together, Métissage (Donald, 2012) and the IWF allow me to see both the big picture and the lived experiences—how Surrey Schools approach reconciliation and equity through Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (AEEAs), demographic analyses of Surrey's Indigenous population, and the many community-based resources that exist.

Drawing on data from the Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee (SUILC), I was able to see both systemic gaps and community-driven solutions aimed at making education more culturally responsive, wholistic, and sustainable (SUILC, 2021; SUILC, 2023). Using Métissage, I intentionally wove together policy documents, demographic data, and community voices into a single analysis, showing how these pieces connect, and where tensions and alignments exist in Surrey's approach to Indigenous parental engagement.

Looking through the dual lens of IWF and Métissage also helped me organize and interpret what I found. The IWF draws attention to wholistic well-being, while Métissage brings forward multiple voices and perspectives, reflecting the complexity of Indigenous educational realities in Surrey's urban context. Together, they highlight both the strengths of what is already in place and the ongoing gaps that need to be addressed to better support Indigenous families and students.

Guided by these approaches, it became clear that issues like housing instability, economic hardship, and educational access are deeply interconnected. These realities align with the wholistic domains of the IWF and are explored further below, organized around those domains.

Throughout this process, I consistently reflected on my positionality, maintaining relational accountability to Indigenous families and communities (Wilson, 2008). This also means the analysis is not meant to be neutral or fixed, and that other interpretations are possible. Ultimately, my methodological approach aims to foster culturally meaningful, reciprocal knowledge production. By centering Indigenous epistemologies, relational ethics, and diverse experiences, I hope to provide actionable insights and recommendations. These outcomes are

intended to support the Surrey School District in creating inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive educational environments for Indigenous families.

With this methodological framework in place, the following chapter turns to the findings of the environmental scan. Guided by the IWF and Métissage, the findings bring together demographic data, policy documents, and community-based resources to describe the current conditions shaping Indigenous parental engagement within Surrey School District. Organized across the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical domains, these findings reflect the interconnected and relational realities Indigenous families navigate within the school system, highlighting both existing strengths and ongoing systemic gaps.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the environmental scan as they relate to the lived realities of Indigenous families within Surrey's K-12 education system. Drawing on demographic data, community reports, and policy documents, the findings offer insight into the conditions that shape Indigenous parental engagement across the school system.

The findings are organized around the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical domains of the Indigenous Wholistic Framework (IWF). Viewed through a relational lens, these domains highlight how structural factors such as housing instability, economic hardship, and access to education are interconnected in the lived experiences of Indigenous families in Surrey. As I worked through this process, I was mindful that these findings reflect how these realities are represented through the reports, data, and community-based sources included in this scan. Although this work draws on existing documents, I approached it with care, knowing these are not abstract issues, but ongoing realities that shape how families experience and engage with schools.

The following sections explore these findings and highlight both areas of strength and ongoing gaps that continue to influence Indigenous families' relationships with schools.

As I worked through these findings, I found myself thinking about the families I have worked alongside in Surrey Schools. Many of the patterns described here, including housing instability, challenges with trust, and barriers to engagement, are not new to me. These are things I have seen show up in real ways for families navigating the school system. This made it clear that these findings are not just about policy or data, but about lived experiences that continue to shape how families connect, or don't connect, with schools.

Understanding the Urban Indigenous Population in Surrey

Surrey, BC, keeps growing. It's now one of Canada's most diverse cities, with its urban Indigenous community expanding every year. Estimates from Statistics Canada (2021) report approximately 16,480 Indigenous residents, while the Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee (SUILC, 2023) indicates approximately 12,175 Indigenous residents, comprising 2.2% of Surrey's total population. This diverse community includes 52.3% identifying as First Nations, 42.4% as Métis, and smaller percentages identifying as Inuit or holding multiple Indigenous identities (SUILC, 2023). Children and youth under 24 represent 40.2% of Surrey's Indigenous community, highlighting the need for youth-focused services and targeted supports within the K-12 education system (SUILC, 2023).

Compared to non-Indigenous residents, Surrey's Indigenous families face substantial socio-economic challenges, including lower average incomes, housing instability, and disproportionately high involvement with child welfare and justice systems (Surrey Schools, 2024; City of Surrey, 2023). These challenges significantly impact educational engagement and outcomes, underscoring the urgent necessity for culturally responsive educational policies, services, and supports.

Socioeconomic Trends

Educational attainment among Indigenous residents in Surrey highlights both strengths and gaps. On one hand, 45.2% of Indigenous adults in Surrey (ages 25–64) hold post-secondary qualifications which is a definite strength. Whereas on the other hand, 19.9% have not completed high school, almost double the 10.8% rate for the general population (SUILC, 2023). These figures suggest a need for culturally relevant high school retention programs and accessible pathways for adult and continuing education.

Housing is also an area of concern in Surrey. More than half (53.8%) of Indigenous households in Surrey are renters, and 8.6% need major repairs compared to 3.6% among non-Indigenous households (SUILC, 2023). These housing challenges intersect with broader systemic issues such as the child welfare system. In Surrey, 41% of children in foster care are Indigenous, despite comprising only 2.8% of the total population (SUILC, 2023). These socio-economic realities directly influence how policies are shaped and how effective programs can be.

Implications for Policy and Programming

The data and priorities outlined by SUILC (2023) clearly highlight the need for culturally relevant, community-driven initiatives in Surrey. These findings highlight the importance of programs that address youth education, housing security, cultural resurgence, and economic inclusion as essential components of a broader strategy aimed at working towards reconciliation and improving outcomes for Indigenous families. This understanding of the urban Indigenous population provides the foundation for exploring the resources and policies in place to meet these community-identified needs and priorities.

Historic and Policy Context

Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Calls to Action

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) has highlighted the enduring impact of residential schools on Indigenous families and communities (Milne & Wotherspoon, 2021; TRC, 2015a). Its Calls to Action urge all Canadians to learn about this history, support healing for survivors, and improve relationships between Indigenous Peoples and other Canadians (TRC, 2015a). The following table highlights key education related calls to action.

Table 2*Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action Related to Education*

Call to Action	Focus
7	Develop curriculum on residential schools, treaties, and Indigenous contributions to Canada in consultation with Indigenous peoples.
10	Advocate for new Aboriginal education legislation with Indigenous participation to close education gaps, support parental engagement, and improve outcomes for learners.
11	Urge the federal government to provide adequate funding to eliminate the backlog of Indigenous students seeking post-secondary education.
12	Emphasize the development of culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Indigenous families.
16	Encourage post-secondary institutions to create degree and diploma programs in Indigenous languages.
57	Call for the education of public servants on Indigenous history, including the history and legacy of residential schools and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

In Surrey Schools, the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement is grounded in the TRC Calls to Action and focuses on building relationships with parents and creating culturally respectful learning environments (Surrey Schools, 2013, 2018).

The TRC's Calls to Action are supported by international and provincial frameworks like United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA), which enshrines Indigenous rights into law.

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA)

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is an international instrument that sets minimum standards for Indigenous Peoples' "survival, dignity, and well-being" (United Nations, 2007). It affirms their rights to self-determination, cultural integrity, and freedom from discrimination. In the context of education, UNDRIP highlights Indigenous Peoples' rights to establish and control their own educational systems, including teaching in their languages and according to their cultural methods (United Nations, 2007). These principles position education not simply as a service, but a site of cultural continuity, identity, and collective wellbeing.

In British Columbia, The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA) (2019) represents a pivotal legislative commitment, as it embeds the principles of UNDRIP within provincial law and governance structures. (Government of BC, 2019). Unlike UNDRIP (2007), which functions primarily as an international and national standard, DRIPA is provincially situated and carries specific obligations for how laws, and institutional practices are developed and implemented in British Columbia. For Indigenous families navigating the education system, DRIPA represents a significant shift. It creates an expectation that institutions move beyond symbolic commitments toward reconciliation and instead take concrete steps toward implementing reconciliation in ways that are meaningful, accountable and grounded in relationship with Indigenous communities.

Within the education system DRIPA strengthens commitments to dignity, well-being, and self-determination by requiring that Indigenous Peoples be meaningfully engaged in process of consultation and cooperation (Government of British Columbia, 2019). This legislative framework reinforces the expectations that decisions affecting Indigenous students and families are made in relationship with Indigenous communities, instead of for them. For Indigenous families navigating the K-12 system in Surrey, DRIPA shapes understanding of what meaningful inclusion, culturally responsive education, and language revitalization should look like in practice.

The 2022-2027 DRIPA Action Plan (Government of British Columbia, 2022) provides a way of putting these commitments into practice through several education-focused actions. These include mandatory Indigenous-related course credits for high school graduation, the development of an Indigenous language policy framework, and enhanced financial and institutional supports for Indigenous learners in post-secondary education (Government of British Columbia, 2022). These actions reflect an intention to move reconciliation beyond stated principles and toward more concrete changes within the education system.

How these commitments are carried forward and experienced at the local level varies. For Indigenous families, this can mean navigating ongoing gaps between provincial policy intentions and everyday experiences within schools, highlighting DRIPA's role not only as a policy framework, but also as an accountability mechanism that continues to shape relationships, expectations, and responsibilities over time.

From a relational perspective, DRIPA can be understood as contributing to a shift in how relationships between Indigenous communities and the province are carried forward in British Columbia. It positions Indigenous parents and caregivers as rights-holders with inherent

authority in matters related to their children's education, while also emphasizing the responsibility of school districts to engage in sustained and respectful partnerships (Government of British Columbia, 2019).

Indigenous Education Policies in British Columbia

The British Columbia Ministry of Education advances Indigenous education through several key policies:

- Indigenous Education Council Policy

This policy outlines the roles of Indigenous Education Councils which collaborate with local Indigenous communities and school districts. These councils are to serve as advisory bodies, ensuring Indigenous voices are included in decision-making processes and that programming reflects community values and aspirations (BC Ministry of Education, n.d. a).

- Indigenous Specific Funding

Targeted funding for Indigenous education is allocated directly to school districts to support programs such as cultural initiatives, language revitalization, and student support services. Annual reports help to track and evaluate the use of these (BC Ministry of Education, n.d. b).

- Curriculum and Professional Development

All K-12 curricula must integrate Indigenous perspectives, histories, and cultures. Teachers are also required to engage in ongoing professional development on Indigenous histories, cultures, and knowledge systems (BC Ministry of Education, 2020).

These policies align with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015) particularly Call to Action #10 which

emphasizes equitable funding and culturally appropriate programming, and Call to Action #62, which focuses on the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum and teacher training.

The Role of The First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) and Targeted Funding Programs

The First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) plays an important role in advancing educational goals of First Nations in British Columbia. FNESC's mandate includes supporting Indigenous students in achieving academic success, promoting the integration of Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum, and advocating for equitable funding and resources. FNESC prioritizes collaboration with Indigenous communities to ensure that education policies and programs reflect Indigenous perspectives and community needs (FNESC, n.d.).

The Indigenous Education Funding Program in British Columbia provides targeted funding to support the educational needs of Indigenous students in the K-12 education system. The funding aims to enhance Indigenous educational outcomes by supporting language, culture programs, improving Indigenous student achievement, and increasing Indigenous graduation rates. Another focus of this program is to build strong partnerships between schools and Indigenous communities to create a supportive and culturally relevant educational environment (Government of British Columbia, n.d.).

Both the TRC and UNDRIP advocate for educational reforms that respect and integrate Indigenous knowledge systems, fostering an inclusive and supportive educational environment for Indigenous students and their families. However, the Western/Eurocentric model of education continues to marginalize Indigenous knowledge and peoples, as schools often center European cultures, languages, histories, and epistemological foundations. This creates school environments that may be unwelcoming for Indigenous parents (Madden et al., 2013; Milne & Wotherspoon,

2021). Integrating UNDRIP principles into educational policies and practices, along with the efforts of FNEESC and targeted funding programs, is essential for creating equitable and culturally relevant education for Indigenous students. These provincial supports come to life at a district level through Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (AEEAs).

Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (AEEAs)

First introduced in 1999, AEEAs aim to foster culturally responsive and equitable education for Indigenous students (BC Ministry of Education, n.d. -c). These agreements were developed collaboratively between school districts, local First Nations, Métis communities, and the Ministry of Education to create inclusive learning environments that honor Indigenous cultures, histories, and perspectives while improving student outcomes.

Scope of Implementation

Since 1999, most school districts in British Columbia have developed Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (AEEAs). These agreements are meant to be collaborative, bringing together school districts, local First Nations, Métis communities, and the Ministry of Education to create learning environments that respect and reflect Indigenous cultures and histories. In practice, AEEAs have helped move districts toward more inclusive approaches, but gaps remain. For example, Surrey has made some progress, yet the five-year high school completion rate for Indigenous students is still only 61% compared to 89% for the district overall (BC Ministry of Education, 2022). This highlights ongoing gaps in support for secondary students, especially around transitions in grades 8-12 and partnerships with continuing education programs to reduce dropout rates and support students pursuing non-traditional educational pathways.

Parental Involvement in AEEAs.

Most AEEAs emphasize the role of Indigenous parental involvement in student success. Across districts, direct communication, culturally safe spaces, and consistent feedback are regularly highlighted in AEEAs as strategies that strengthen families' sense of being valued and connected within the school system. Below are some examples:

- **School District #78 (Fraser-Cascade):** Focuses on improving communication with parents through face-to-face meetings and personal invitations, positioning parents as co-developers of intervention strategies for “at-risk” students.
- **School District #72 (Campbell River):** Stresses “the paramount role parents play” in their children’s education by offering programs that welcome parents, provide active input opportunities, and share knowledge to empower families.
- **School District #59 (Peace River South):** Uses satisfaction surveys and anecdotal results to measure parental input, emphasizing the importance of relational approaches to strengthen engagement (BC Ministry of Education, 2019).

These strategies illustrate the importance of multi-channel communication, culturally safe spaces for parental involvement, and regular feedback cycles.

Cultural Integration in Schools

Cultural integration lies at the heart of many AEEAs, with many districts weaving Indigenous languages, art, and cultural events, and land-based learning into school curricula and extracurricular activities (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). This includes displaying Indigenous artwork, using signage in local languages, welcoming Elders and Knowledge Keepers into schools, and hosting cultural nights that bring families together (FNESC, n.d.). These practices help students feel pride in their identities and create opportunities for families to participate and

lead. In Surrey, cultural celebrations, and leadership camps have made a difference in giving students and families spaces to connect with culture and community (Surrey Schools, 2013, 2018). Unfortunately, these efforts are not consistent across the district, and secondary schools still lack permanent gathering spaces and sustained cultural programming that would make Indigenous culture a visible and everyday part of school life (SUILC, 2023)

Addressing Barriers to Engagement

AEEAs also address systemic barriers to Indigenous parental engagement. These barriers include intergenerational trauma, logistical constraints, and communication gaps that can make it difficult for families to feel fully included in schools. To respond, AEEAs often highlight the importance of building trust by creating smaller, more relational gatherings such as family nights or potlucks. They also call for flexible supports, like providing childcare, transportation, and evening meeting times so that families can participate without additional burdens. Creating culturally safe spaces is another key strategy, with schools incorporating Indigenous protocols, land acknowledgements, and the presence of Elders to help foster a sense of belonging. Many AEEAs also recommend dedicated liaison staff, such as Indigenous support workers, whose role is to strengthen relationships and build ongoing trust between families and schools (BC Ministry of Education, 2019).

Expanded Overview of AEEAs Across BC

Many of the AEEAs share common goals, however the extent and transparency on parental engagement varies widely across districts. Table 3 provides a summary of how several school districts' Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (AEEAs) address parental engagement, including key strategies, areas of focus, and identified gaps.

Table 3 *Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (AEEAs) Parental Engagement Summary*

School District	Key Engagement Focus	Implementation Strategies	Outcomes / Gaps
SD #78 Fraser-Cascade	Strengthening communication with parents / caregivers, including face-to-face meetings and personal invitations.	Use multi-channel communication including face to face meetings and create culturally safe spaces, for collaboration.	Highlights the importance of relational approaches but lacks consistent methods for tracking engagement impact.
SD #72 Campbell River	Emphasizes the importance of parents / caregivers as active participants in their child's education.	Programs to welcome parents, share knowledge, and encourage input to support parents / caregivers to feel empowered to support their children.	Active input is encouraged, but more robust evaluation and feedback loops could strengthen the approach.
SD #59 Peace River South	Relational approaches are used to measure and encourage parental / caregiver involvement.	Uses satisfaction surveys, and anecdotal feedback to understand the experiences of parents and caregivers.	Effective at relational engagement but there is limited emphasis on broader, standardized engagement metrics.

SD #36 Surrey	Building culturally grounded, trust-based partnerships with Indigenous families.	Proposes Aboriginal Parent Councils increases Elder involvement and creating culturally grounded communication strategies.	Gaps include a lack of consistent engagement metrics as well as insufficient culturally safe spaces within schools.
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Surrey's own AEEA reflects these provincial commitments, while also showing the specific challenges and opportunities of an urban school district.

Surrey School District Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement

Surrey School District's AEEA outlines a shared vision to ensure that every Indigenous learning in the district graduates with dignity, purpose, and options (Surrey Schools, 2013).

Surrey's AEEA outlines three goals:

- 1) Increase positive identity and sense of belonging
- 2) Increase knowledge and understanding of Indigenous histories and cultures
- 3) Increase achievement for Indigenous learners

Surrey's AEEA emphasised collaboration between the Surrey School District, local Indigenous communities, and families. Parent / caregiver engagement is a key element, supported by tools such as the Indigenous Education Council, which includes representatives from local nations: Katzie, Kwantlen, and Semiahmoo First Nations, Métis Nation BC (MNBC),

and school district staff. The council's role is to ensure that district programming aligns with the community's needs and aspirations (Surrey Schools, 2013).

Surrey Schools worked towards this commitment through annual progress reviews, an increase in cultural events, and professional development that helped educators deepen their understanding of Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods. Through these efforts, Surrey aimed to address systemic barriers, celebrate Indigenous learner successes, and promote equitable educational outcomes (Surrey Schools, 2013).

Insights from Surrey's Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements

Progress and Achievements

Surrey School District's AEEA reports from 2008 to 2018 reflect steady improvements in fostering cultural integration, enhancing student engagement, and advancing academic outcomes for Indigenous learners. Programs like *Bannock and Books* and the *Windspeaker Leadership* initiative played an important role in nurturing cultural pride and personal growth. The reports note that over 90% of participating secondary students expressed a positive self-identity in connection with these initiatives, although the assessment methods are not described in detail (Surrey Schools, 2008, 2013, 2018). These programs also strengthened relationships with Indigenous families by creating culturally safe spaces where parents and caregivers could participate in events, which in turn fostered community engagement. The 2008-2009 report highlighted the success of the Elder-in-Residence programs and leadership camps, which not only connected students to cultural learning opportunities, but also engaged families in supporting their students' development (Surrey Schools, 2009). By 2013, cultural identity maintained a key focus and was further strengthened through district initiatives such as visits to Katzie First Nation longhouse, and district-wide seasonal cultural events which were enjoyed by

both students and their families (Surrey Schools, 2013). In 2018, Surrey saw continued progress with increased participation in cultural activities, including drum making workshops and story-telling session, as part of the AEEA's expanded efforts to include families as active participants in student learning (Surrey Schools, 2018).

Efforts to improve cultural awareness among all Surrey students were supported by Indigenous Cultural Facilitators (ICF), who conducted thousands of presentations to over 121,000 students, promoting an understanding of Indigenous history and traditions (Surrey Schools, 2018). Between 2011 and 2013 ICFs worked to integrate Indigenous knowledge into K-12 classrooms through interactive sessions on topics such as First Nations governance, traditional stories, and cultural artifacts, fostering a sense of pride among Indigenous students and families and creating opportunities for dialogue between schools and Indigenous communities (Surrey Schools, 2013).

Significant academic progress was experienced during this period. By 2018, 91% of Indigenous kindergarten students achieved reading readiness benchmarks, supported by early literacy programs and phonemic awareness interventions that were first introduced in 2008 (Surrey Schools, 2009, 2018). Parents were frequently engaged in these programs through literacy workshops and take-home reading initiatives designed to support learning at home. Despite progress in kindergarten literacy, challenges persisted, particularly in the literacy outcomes for Grades 4-7, as seen in the data collected from 2013 to 2018 (Surrey Schools, 2018). Graduations showed improvement with the six-year Dogwood completion rate rising from 50% in 2009 to 60% by 2013, a change that was attributed to engagement programs like English First Peoples courses and individualized transitions plans. Family engagement was emphasized in these plans, with schools working closely with caregivers to support students' educational

pathways (Surrey Schools, 2009, 2013). However, disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students remain, highlighting a need for ongoing efforts to strengthen family-school partnerships (Surrey Schools, 2018).

Challenges and Opportunities

Despite their successes, Surrey School District's reports identify systemic barriers, including lower participation in advanced academic courses, and inconsistent integration of Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum. Key areas identified for improvement include:

- Curriculum integration: Limited integration of Indigenous ways of knowing in core subjects persisted despite increased cultural programming (Surrey Schools, 2013, 2018).
- Achievement gaps: Reports highlighted disparities in literacy and numeracy outcomes, particularly in grades 4 to 7 (Surrey Schools, 2008, 2013, 2018).
- Teacher training: Expanding professional development opportunities for educators remains a priority to address implicit biases and promote equity-centered teaching practices (Surrey Schools, 2018).

Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements: Complicated Conversations as Pathways to Success

The article "Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements: Complicated Conversations as Pathways to Success" (Kitchenham et. al., 2016) discusses the complexity and transformative potential of AEEA's. The authors highlight the following themes:

- 1) Wholistic Definitions of Success: Success is not limited to academic achievement but includes fostering identity, community belonging and cultural pride.

- 2) **Building Trust:** Sustained trust between Indigenous communities and school districts is essential. Transparent communication and genuine collaboration are fundamental.
- 3) **Collective Responsibility:** Equitable education for Indigenous learners requires shared accountability among educators, administrators, and community members.
- 4) **Cultural Integration:** Efforts to embed Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum must balance Indigenous perspectives and Eurocentric frameworks.

This research emphasizes that AEEAs are not static documents but living agreements that must evolve to meet the needs of Indigenous students and their communities (Kitchenham et. al., 2016).

The themes identified in the research on Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (AEEAs) include the importance of fostering identity, building trust, collective responsibility, and integrating Indigenous knowledge. These serve as foundational principles that inform broader systemic initiatives. These themes emphasize the need for structured, actionable frameworks to operationalize equity and reconciliation in education at both district and provincial levels. The Equity in Action Framework (Ministry of Education, 2019) described below builds on these principles, offering a comprehensive approach to addressing systemic inequities and supporting Indigenous learner success through policies, practices, and partnerships.

From Audit to Action: Building Equity Frameworks

The 2015 Auditor General's report on Aboriginal Education (2015) highlighted systemic gaps in the Ministry of Education's efforts to close the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in British Columbia's public education system. While there was progress shown in some areas, such as an increase in the Indigenous student graduation from 39% in 2000

to 62% by 2014, challenges in leadership, data analysis, and accountability structures remained (Auditor General of British Columbia, 2015).

Key findings in the report highlighted a need for a comprehensive, system-wide strategy with clear responsibilities and accountabilities among the Ministry of Education, school districts, and Indigenous communities. The report also identified the underutilization of data to inform strategies and evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives such as targeted funding and Enhancement Agreements. This lack of systemic evaluation limited the Ministry's ability to address achievement gaps effectively (Auditor General of British Columbia, 2015).

In response to these findings, the Ministry of Education launched the Equity in Action Framework in 2016. Building on the Auditor General's recommendations, the aim of this initiative is to address systemic inequities by embedding accountability, data-driven-decision-making, and culturally responsive practices into district policies and operations. By creating Equity Teams and conducting district-wide Equity Scans, the framework provides actionable steps for closing gaps in educational outcomes, aligning with the Auditor General's call for stronger leadership and accountability (Auditor General of British Columbia, 2019).

The Equity in Action Framework aligns with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls (TRC) to Action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), further reinforcing its role in reconciliation efforts.

Equity in Action: Provincial Framework

The Equity in Action Framework, developed by the Ministry of Education, is meant to support Indigenous student success by fostering collaboration and driving systemic change (Ministry of Education, 2019). It was developed in response to the 2015 *Auditor General's Report on Aboriginal Education* and is closely tied to the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission's Calls to Action as well as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (Ministry of Education, 2019). Across British Columbia, school districts are engaged in this work by scanning their own systems, reflecting on what they learn, and then addressing barriers that limit equity for Indigenous learners.

At the core of this framework is a shift from equality to equity, focusing on closing the gaps in both achievement and opportunity (Ministry of Education, 2019). It is organized around four interconnected domains: policy governance, learning environment, pedagogical core, and learning profile. Each of these areas helps create the conditions for student success. Policy and governance is about making sure equity is present in district decision-making and strengthened through partnerships with communities and families. The learning environment calls for inclusive spaces where Indigenous learners feel respected and valued, while also addressing implicit bias and embedding the First Peoples' Principles of Learning. The pedagogical core focuses on bringing Indigenous worldviews and perspectives into teaching and learning, encouraging professional development, and holding high expectations for Indigenous learners. The learning profile draws on evidence and data to highlight inequities, track progress, and design supports that respond directly to the needs of Indigenous students (Ministry of Education, 2019).

The framework is also action oriented. School districts are asked to create Equity Teams that include educators, Indigenous representatives, and community members. These teams lead the process of conducting an Equity Scan, building an Equity Profile that identifies strengths and challenges, creating a Theory of Change to guide transformation, and drafting an Equity Action Plan that sets out measurable goals and strategies (Ministry of Education, 2019). The framework places equity at the centre, rooted in relationships, social justice, human rights, and the First

Peoples' Principles of Learning. Building on this, Surrey Schools carried out an Equity Scan to better understand its own strengths and challenges.

Surrey BC's Equity Scan Findings

The Equity Scan conducted for Surrey Schools is publicly available and highlights key themes that are essential to understanding and addressing equity gaps for Indigenous learners (Equity Scan, 2023). Through interviews with parents and caregivers, students, staff, and community members, several areas of focus emerged.

Access to Indigenous Culture and Cultural Safety in Schools.

Schools were seen as important gathering places for Indigenous communities. Parents and caregivers noted feelings of disconnection from Indigenous cultural education in Surrey Schools and identified opportunities to embed cultural learning into classrooms, playgrounds, and institutional practices (Equity Scan, 2023).

Communication and Active Participation.

Parents and caregivers expressed concerns about limited communication from Surrey Schools regarding supports for Indigenous learners. They raised questions about how schools foster inclusive environments, address racism and bias, and promote equity in tangible and visible ways (Equity Scan, 2023).

Continuity.

High turnover among Indigenous Support Workers was identified as a significant barrier, leading to a lack of consistency for students and families. Continuity of staffing was highlighted as essential for building trust and sustaining relationships (Equity Scan, 2023).

Shift in Curriculum.

Both students and parents emphasized gaps in trauma-informed practices and the integration of Indigenous ways of knowing. Participants stressed the importance of equipping teachers with training to address historical and ongoing colonial realities that shape the experiences of Indigenous learners (Equity Scan, 2023).

Racism and Bias.

Families described experiences of systemic racism and bias, including feelings of fear, judgment, and hyper-vigilance within schools. Participants underscored the need for Surrey Schools to directly acknowledge and address these barriers to foster cultural safety and inclusion (Equity Scan, 2023).

The findings of Surrey's Equity Scan provide a foundation for understanding the systemic barriers faced by Indigenous learners and their families. These insights not only point to areas requiring improvement but also serve as a starting place for strategies that address inequities. Building on this work, Surrey's *Racial Equity Strategy* and *Educational Equity Guide* outline comprehensive frameworks designed to confront racism, strengthen equity, and create inclusive learning environments.

Surrey Schools' Racial Equity Strategy and Educational Equity Guide

The findings from Surrey's *Equity Scan* provide an important foundation for understanding the systemic barriers that Indigenous learners and their families continue to face (Equity Scan, 2023). These insights not only highlight areas that need improvement but also create a starting place for strategies to address inequities. Building on this work, Surrey Schools

developed the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan 2023–2028* and the *Educational Equity Guide*, which both set out frameworks for confronting racism, strengthening equity, and creating more inclusive learning environments (Surrey Schools, 2023a, 2023b).

The *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* places anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism as district priorities, grounding this work in the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action* (2015), the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007), and the BC K–12 Anti-Racism Action Plan (Surrey Schools, 2023a). It identifies seven strategic areas, including strengthening culturally responsive policies, addressing racism in schools and workplaces, affirming cultural initiatives, and improving communication with Surrey's diverse school communities. Communication is emphasized as a key equity lever, with commitments to multilingual outreach and culturally responsive engagement with families (Surrey Schools, 2023a).

The *Educational Equity Guide* complements the strategy by giving educators practical steps to create inclusive and culturally responsive classrooms. It calls for embedding Indigenous perspectives and anti-racist teaching practices into the curriculum, while also supporting students' mental health and well-being through Social Emotional Learning (Surrey Schools, 2023b). In this way, the guide links staff knowledge and practice directly to student outcomes, stressing the importance of cultural safety, belonging, and equity in every classroom.

Together, these strategies show Surrey Schools' commitment to advancing equity by promoting collaboration, cultural responsiveness, and safe learning spaces. At the same time, one limitation is that while inclusive communication is prioritized, parent and caregiver engagement is not explicitly named as a central focus. Beyond improving access to information, there is little

direction on how families can be directly involved in decision-making. This presents an opportunity to strengthen equity commitments by embedding relational accountability and culturally responsive practices that centre families, particularly Indigenous and racialized families, as key partners in change. In my own experience, relational trust and authentic engagement with Indigenous families consistently open pathways to address systemic barriers.

By aligning its AEEAs, strategic plans, and provincial frameworks, Surrey Schools is making progress in cultural inclusion and improving outcomes for Indigenous students, though ongoing work is needed to ensure that all students, especially those from marginalized communities, feel valued and supported at school (Surrey Schools, 2023a, 2023b). See Table 4 for an overview of Surrey Schools' Racial Equity Strategic Priorities.

Table 4

Surrey Schools' Racial Equity Strategic Priorities (2023–2028)

Strategic Area	Focus
Strengthening Culturally Responsive Policies	Develop and review district policies through anti-discrimination, anti-oppression, racial equity, anti-racism, and human rights lenses.
Strengthening Racial Equity, Diversity, and Belonging in Schools and Workplaces	Ensure culturally affirming, respectful environments that create belonging, especially for Indigenous, Black, and other racialized groups.

Strengthening Culturally Affirming Initiatives	Highlight cultural events, embed Truth and Reconciliation commitments, and promote equity-focused school and community activities.
Strengthening Communication	Provide clear, accessible, and multilingual communication to all school communities, ensuring inclusivity and belonging.
Understanding Students and Staff through Data and Research	Build demographic data initiatives to better understand diversity, identify inequities, and inform improvement efforts.
Building Culturally Affirming Community Voice and Partnerships	Strengthen opportunities for student, staff, and community voice; develop partnerships with Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities.
Improving Culturally Responsive Student and Staff Well-being and Mental Health	Expand trauma-informed and culturally responsive supports for student and staff wellness.

While strategies set direction, it is also important to look at the actual resources available to Indigenous students and families in Surrey, BC.

Resources for Indigenous Students and Families in Surrey, British Columbia

The resources available in Surrey respond directly to community-specific needs identified in the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (AEEAs) and the Surrey Urban Indigenous Leadership Committee (SUILC) Census Report. These programs and services represent meaningful steps toward reconciliation and equity, although significant gaps remain in

accessibility, cultural safety, and transitional supports for older youth and adults no longer connected to formal schooling (SUILC, 2023).

Educational supports are central. The Fraser Region Aboriginal Friendship Centre Association (FRAFCA) offers culturally grounded programming such as the *Aboriginal Early Childhood Development Outreach* program for families with children ages 0–6, the *Spirit Bear Child Development Program* that integrates culture, nutrition, and education, and the *Awahsuk Aboriginal Headstart Preschool* for children ages 3–5 that emphasizes wholistic development (FRAFCA, n.d.). Surrey Schools, serving nearly 3,000 self-identified Indigenous students, provide cultural programming and targeted academic supports designed to create safe and culturally appropriate learning environments (Surrey Learning by Design, n.d.). Katzie First Nation also contributes through tutoring, academic guidance, and post-secondary planning (Katzie First Nation, n.d.). Despite these initiatives, disparities remain: the five-year graduation rate for Indigenous students in Surrey is 61% compared to 89% district-wide, and coordination with adult education programs is limited (BC Ministry of Education, 2022; SUILC, 2023). Secondary schools also lack culturally safe gathering spaces that mirror the strengths of early childhood programs such as Awahsuk Headstart (SUILC, 2023).

Family and social services are equally important. FRAFCA provides programs such as *Reclaiming Connections*, which draws on cultural teachings to strengthen parenting, *Bringing Traditions Home*, a 10-week program that combines Indigenous parenting practices with child development knowledge, and the *Family Connections Worker* program that links families with children ages 5–18 to subsidies, food banks, and childcare supports (FRAFCA, n.d.). Katzie and Semiahmoo First Nations also deliver family wellness initiatives and counseling services that

integrate traditional practices with contemporary supports (Semiahmoo First Nation, n.d.). Still, many families experience fragmented service navigation. In 2020–21, 15.3% of Indigenous residents in Surrey moved within or into the city, highlighting the need for a dedicated Family Navigator role (SUILC, 2023). Parental engagement is another gap: unlike other districts, Surrey has no formal Aboriginal Parent Councils, limiting opportunities for parents to shape school policies. This absence particularly impacts single mothers, who make up 34.4% of Indigenous families in Surrey (SUILC, 2023).

Cultural programming creates opportunities for connection, though it remains uneven. The *Totest Aleng Indigenous Learning House* at Elgin Heritage Park offers workshops in language revitalization, storytelling, and traditional artmaking rooted in the teachings of the Semiahmoo, Katzie, and Kwantlen Nations (City of Surrey, n.d.). Elder visits and Indigenous language programs occur within Surrey Schools, yet these efforts are inconsistent, particularly at the secondary level. The decline in language proficiency is striking: only 1.1% of Indigenous residents in Surrey reported speaking an Indigenous language in 2021, down from 225 people in 2016 (SUILC, 2023). Dedicated language hubs and Elder-in-Residence programs could help reverse this decline. Secondary schools in higher-poverty areas such as Whalley and Newton also lack Indigenous gathering spaces, where cultural programming could be combined with socio-economic supports such as meal programs and tutoring (SUILC, 2023).

Mental health and trauma-informed supports are emerging but remain limited. FRAFCA provides culturally informed counseling and workshops focused on healing intergenerational trauma (FRAFCA, n.d.). Surrey Schools' Indigenous Learning Department also launched *Indigenous Family Gatherings: Supporting Your Child's Wellness*, a monthly event where

families share a meal and participate in a circle facilitated by an Indigenous Registered Clinical Counsellor (Surrey Schools, 2023). Initially, only about five families attended, but by the 2024/2025 school year participation grew to 20 families per session. Conversations address topics such as anxiety, substance use, eating disorders, self-harm, and suicide, creating relational connections and community support (Surrey Schools, 2023). Even with these promising initiatives, Indigenous children continue to face significant barriers. They account for 41% of foster care cases in Surrey, yet schools lack consistent trauma-informed counseling tailored to Indigenous experiences. Stronger partnerships with delegated agencies such as Xyólheméylh could strengthen wholistic supports (SUILC, 2023). Table 5 highlights the resources and gaps for Indigenous students and families in Surrey, BC.

Table 5

Resources and Gaps for Indigenous Students and Families in Surrey

Area	Resources	Gaps
Educational Support	FRAFCA programs (<i>Aboriginal Early Childhood Development Outreach, Spirit Bear, Awahsuk Headstart</i>); Surrey Schools Indigenous programs serving ~3,000 students; Katzie First Nation tutoring and post-secondary planning.	Five-year graduation rate of 61% compared to 89% district-wide; limited transitional supports in Grades 8–12; weak coordination with adult education programs; lack of culturally safe secondary school spaces.

<p>Family & Social Services</p>	<p>FRAFCA programs (<i>Reclaiming Connections, Bringing Traditions Home, Family Connections Worker</i>); Katzie and Semiahmoo First Nations family services.</p>	<p>Service navigation remains fragmented; need for a Family Navigator role; lack of formal Aboriginal Parent Councils; limited parental engagement; 34.4% of Indigenous families are single-mother households.</p>
<p>Cultural Programming</p>	<p>Totest Aleng Indigenous Learning House; Elder visits; storytelling; traditional artmaking; occasional language programs.</p>	<p>Decline in Indigenous language proficiency (1.1% in 2021, down from 2016); inconsistent integration of cultural programming in secondary schools; lack of permanent Indigenous gathering spaces, especially in Whalley and Newton.</p>
<p>Mental Health & Wellness</p>	<p>FRAFCA counseling and trauma-healing programs; Surrey Schools' Indigenous Family Gatherings with Registered Clinical Counsellor.</p>	<p>Indigenous children represent 41% of foster care cases in Surrey; schools lack consistent trauma-informed counseling; stronger partnerships needed with agencies like Xyólheméylh.</p>

The environmental scan showed both the strengths already at work in Surrey Schools and the systemic gaps that still limit Indigenous parental engagement. To make sense of these

findings in a way that honours Indigenous ways of knowing, the next section organizes them within the four interconnected domains of the Indigenous Wholistic Framework: physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual.

Key Findings Organized by Indigenous Wholistic Model Domains

In this environmental scan, I organized the main findings according to the four domains of the Indigenous Wholistic Framework (IWF). This structure highlights the interconnected ways that policies, community resources, and existing service gaps collectively shape Indigenous parental engagement within Surrey's K–12 education system.

Physical Domain

In Surrey, Indigenous families experience significant challenges related to housing stability and access to culturally safe spaces within educational settings. High mobility rates (15.3% of Indigenous residents moved within or to Surrey in 2020–21; SUILC, 2023) underline the necessity of stable infrastructure to support continuity in education. Policies such as the DRIPA Action Plan and Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (AEEAs) aim to address these needs. Resources such as Awahsuk Headstart (FRAFCA) and some dedicated Indigenous spaces in select schools provide important supports. However, a notable gap remains in the absence of consistent, culturally grounded Indigenous gathering spaces at the secondary level, which significantly impacts community connections and parental involvement.

This is something I have seen in my work, where mobility and housing challenges often make it difficult for families to stay connected to schools over time.

Emotional Domain

Programs like the Fraser Region Aboriginal Friendship Centre Association (FRAFCA) mental health services and parenting initiatives, including *Reclaiming Connections* and *Bringing Traditions Home*, offer vital emotional supports. Surrey Schools' Indigenous Family Gatherings also contribute to building community relationships and supporting Indigenous families' emotional well-being. Despite these valuable resources, emotional wellness remains underserved due to fragmented service navigation and the absence of formal Aboriginal Parent Councils. Using the Indigenous Wholistic Framework highlighted how emotional barriers, particularly those arising from systemic trauma and instability, profoundly affect the capacity of Indigenous families to engage meaningfully with schools.

Intellectual Domain

Targeted funding and initiatives such as the BC Indigenous-Specific Funding Policy and academic supports for the district's 2,977 self-identified Indigenous students provide foundational educational support. In addition, local resources such as Katzie First Nation tutoring programs contribute to intellectual development. Yet, substantial gaps persist, particularly visible in the graduation rate disparity: 61% for Indigenous students compared to 89% district-wide (BC Ministry of Education, 2022), as well as limited adult or continuing education pathways. Applying Métissage as a methodology illuminated how these academic challenges reflect deeper systemic inequities, reinforcing the need for wholistic and culturally responsive educational strategies.

Spiritual Domain

Spiritual support is provided through cultural programming, Elder involvement, and Indigenous language revitalization initiatives, including the Totest Aleng Indigenous Learning House and occasional Elder-in-Residence programs. However, the limited and inconsistent integration of cultural education, especially at the secondary school level, continues to leave significant gaps in spiritual support. Guided by Métissage, my relational analysis emphasized the essential role of cultural integrity and spiritual connectedness as foundational for effective and meaningful parental engagement.

As I reflected on these findings, I also thought about my own experiences of disconnection from my Métis identity and how that shapes the way I understand relationship, belonging, and systems like education. My experiences are different from many of the families I work with, but they still shape how I see these patterns and how I approach this work.

This environmental scan highlights Surrey's efforts to improve outcomes for Indigenous learners through collaborative partnerships, cultural programming, and targeted supports. At the same time, it points to ongoing gaps in housing stability, emotional well-being, academic achievement, and cultural integration—domains that are deeply connected rather than separate. Together, these findings show that meaningful parental engagement can only be achieved through wholistic approaches that recognize both the barriers and the strengths present in Indigenous families' experiences with Surrey Schools.

Throughout this process, I understood myself as being accountable to the Indigenous families, students, and communities whose experiences are reflected in this work. For me, relational accountability meant being mindful of how I was interpreting what I was reading and writing, and making sure I was not focusing only on challenges, but also recognizing the

strengths and resilience that exist within these communities. It also meant staying aware of how my own experiences and relationships shaped what I noticed and how I understood these findings (Wilson, 2008).

Looking at the findings through the Indigenous Wholistic Framework makes clear how the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual domains are all interconnected. Building on this wholistic understanding, the final chapter discusses the broader implications of the research and offers recommendations for how Surrey Schools can strengthen relationships with Indigenous families.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

Reflecting on my journey with Métissage and the Indigenous Wholistic Framework (IWF), I recognize how these methodologies have shaped both my research and my personal understanding of relational accountability. Métissage allowed me to interweave diverse narratives, personal reflections, historical insights, and contemporary realities of Indigenous parental engagement. This weaving created a richer tapestry of understanding, highlighting the interconnectedness and relational complexity within Indigenous communities and educational contexts. The IWF further guided this process by emphasizing the balance between physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual domains. It helped me structure and interpret findings in ways that honoured Indigenous knowledge systems and reinforced relational values such as respect, reciprocity, and responsibility.

This methodological grounding transformed not only my approach to research but also my practice as an Indigenous researcher and advocate. By centering relational accountability and continuous reflection, I was able to genuinely honour Indigenous epistemologies and keep Indigenous voices at the heart of my thesis. This journey has been as much about personal growth as academic inquiry, and it directly shaped how I make sense of the findings that follow.

Discussion and Implications

Building from this methodological foundation, the research journey deepened my understanding of the intricate landscape surrounding Indigenous parental engagement within Surrey Schools. The exploration uncovered systemic barriers deeply rooted in colonial legacies and reinforced by present-day socio-economic realities, while also pointing toward possibilities for transformation. Family-centered care—a model I first encountered through personal experience—emerged as a powerful framework for building meaningful partnerships between

Indigenous families and schools. Grounded in relational accountability, reciprocity, and cultural responsiveness, family-centered care resonates with the principles of both Métissage and the IWF, affirming the interconnectedness of all relationships (Donald, 2012; Pidgeon, 2014). Guided by these methodologies, I was able to clearly identify nuanced intersections between systemic challenges, community resilience, and culturally informed educational practices. Throughout this process, it became clear that initiatives such as Indigenous Child/Youth Care Workers (ICYCWs) within Surrey Schools play an essential role like family navigators. These dedicated professionals facilitate communication between families and educational systems, provide culturally grounded support, and work to address socio-economic and cultural barriers. However, the research also revealed gaps in consistently integrating family-centered care principles district-wide, pointing to challenges such as inconsistent staffing, limited resources, and persistent systemic biases that hinder the full potential of ICYCWs (Surrey Schools, 2024; Milne & Wotherspoon, 2021).

The environmental scan further highlighted socio-economic challenges, particularly housing instability and high mobility rates, that profoundly shape Indigenous parental engagement. The legacy of Indigenous Residential Schools, coupled with ongoing systemic racism and Eurocentric educational norms, creates environments where many Indigenous families continue to feel marginalized or unwelcome (Bang et al., 2018; Milne, 2016). This relational disconnect ultimately diminishes the opportunity for Indigenous parents to engage as full partners in their children's education.

Reflecting on these insights, moving toward a family-centered educational framework requires a deliberate shift away from deficit-oriented views and toward approaches that recognize and build on the inherent strengths, knowledge, and resilience of Indigenous families.

Embracing relational accountability means acknowledging the responsibility schools and educators hold toward the wholistic well-being of Indigenous students and families and aligning with Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Wilson, 2008). These insights point directly to what needs to change and forms the basis for recommendations.

Based on the findings of this research, and returning to my guiding questions, I offer the following recommendations as pathways for Surrey Schools to strengthen Indigenous parental engagement and create more inclusive educational environments. This study asked: How can the Surrey School District work with Indigenous parents to create a more inclusive educational environment that supports their engagement as partners in their children's education? To answer this, I also considered: What potential barriers do Indigenous parents in Surrey face in engaging with their children's schools? What cultural, social, and systemic factors influence Indigenous parental engagement? And what resources, strategies, and supports are available to strengthen Indigenous parental involvement, and how can these be improved?

At the policy level, Surrey Schools need to prioritize the intentional hiring of Indigenous educators and administrators. This is not simply about representation but about creating schools where Indigenous identities are seen, valued, and reflected every day. Educators and administrators should also receive mandatory and ongoing training in culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices, guided by Indigenous pedagogies (FNESC, n.d.; Wilson, 2008). Training must also include important anti-racist education (Gillies, 2021), so that staff are equipped to identify systemic racism and work to change it.

At the school level, the role of Indigenous Child and Youth Care Workers (ICYCWs) should be strengthened. Stable funding and consistent staffing would allow ICYCWs to build trusting, long-term relationships with students and families. Regular opportunities for

professional learning in trauma-informed practices, cultural safety, and family-centered care would deepen their impact (Surrey Schools, 2024). Surrey Schools should also establish Indigenous Parent Councils that create safe and inclusive spaces for parents, caregivers, and extended family members to guide decision-making. These councils should be grounded in Indigenous governance practices to ensure that family voices genuinely shape school priorities (Madden et al., 2013). In addition, there is an urgent need for dedicated Indigenous cultural spaces in secondary schools. These spaces would serve as hubs for community connection and cultural practice, helping students and families strengthen identity, belonging, and pride (SUILC, 2023).

In terms of community collaboration, Surrey Schools should develop communication strategies that are consistent, culturally responsive, and accessible. Families need to feel included, respected, and informed, and clear communication is essential to building trust (Surrey Schools, 2024). At the same time, Surrey Schools must work with Indigenous community organizations to respond to the socio-economic challenges, such as housing instability, transportation barriers, and food insecurity, that directly shape parental engagement. These challenges extend beyond the reach of schools alone and require shared, community-driven solutions (Milne & Wotherspoon, 2019).

Together, these recommendations respond to the central questions of this research by offering tangible strategies for Surrey Schools to build stronger partnerships with Indigenous families. More importantly, they reflect the need for relational accountability, moving away from deficit-based approaches and towards approaches that build on the knowledge, strengths, and resilience of Indigenous families. By embracing these recommendations, Surrey Schools can move closer to creating educational environments that are equitable, culturally safe, and

grounded in respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. Of course, recommendations mean little without considering the realities of implementation.

Implementation

These recommendations offer clear pathways toward meaningful improvement in Indigenous parental engagement. However, practical implementation barriers, such as securing stable funding for Indigenous staff positions, coordinating consistent professional development opportunities, and overcoming persistent biases among educators and administrators, must be explicitly acknowledged and strategically addressed. Overcoming these barriers will require sustained collaborative dialogue, dedicated leadership, ongoing reflection, and a firm commitment to reconciliation and systemic transformation.

By embracing these recommendations, Surrey Schools can foster deeper, more meaningful partnerships with Indigenous families, cultivate culturally safe educational spaces, and actively uphold the relational values essential for genuine, family-centered care.

Conclusion

This thesis has been a deeply personal and transformative journey, rooted in relational accountability and guided thoughtfully by the Indigenous Wholistic Framework and Métissage methodologies. Throughout this exploration, I have developed a deeper understanding and appreciation of the complexities and barriers Indigenous families experience within Surrey Schools. These barriers are shaped by historical and systemic colonial legacies. Moving forward meaningfully requires educational practices that genuinely center relationships, value Indigenous knowledge, and actively involve Indigenous families as respected partners.

Looking back on this process, I can see how the Indigenous Wholistic Framework and Métissage shaped not only how I carried out this research, but how I came to understand the findings. These approaches kept the work grounded in relationships and helped me stay connected to the lived experiences and realities of the families and communities this work is rooted in.

Reflecting on my journey, as an Indigenous woman, parent, and Child and Youth Care Practitioner, I recognize the transformative potential embedded in relational approaches like family-centered care. My research highlights key pathways for Surrey Schools, including strengthening the roles of Indigenous Child/Youth Care Workers (ICYCWs), establishing formal Indigenous Parent Councils, implementing culturally responsive and anti-racist educator training, and creating dedicated cultural spaces that foster community, cultural identity, and belonging. Improving consistent, respectful, and culturally sensitive communication with Indigenous families, as well as proactively addressing socio-economic barriers through collaborative community partnerships, are also essential strategies.

While I have outlined clear steps forward, I acknowledge that practical implementation will not come without challenges, particularly regarding stable funding, ongoing professional development, and confronting persistent biases within educational systems. Addressing these barriers will require sustained dialogue, courageous leadership, and genuine commitment to reconciliation.

This thesis journey has deepened my own professional and personal commitments to relational accountability, reciprocity, and respect. It is my sincere hope that Surrey Schools and the broader educational community see this work as both an invitation and a call to action to engage collaboratively and authentically with Indigenous families, to center Indigenous voices

and knowledge, and to courageously foster culturally safe, equitable, and inclusive educational spaces.

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Appendix 1

INDIGENOUS FAMILY GATHERING

JOIN US FOR
DINNER AND CONVERSATION
TOPIC: SUPPORTING YOUR
CHILD'S WELLNESS

NORTH SURREY NOVEMBER 6TH, 2024
SECONDARY *5 to 7:30pm*

RSVP *by November 4th, 2024:*
indigenousearning@surreyschools.ca

CHILDMINDING PROVIDED.

