



## **Focus Groups with Students and Parents**

### **Summary Report of Findings**

#### **Contents**

Context.....	2
Purpose .....	3
Process.....	3
Who Participated?.....	3
What We Heard.....	6
The importance of identity .....	6
Representation .....	7
Staff Awareness .....	8
Programming for Students.....	9
Connectedness.....	10
Conclusion.....	11
Next Step.....	11
References.....	13

## Context

In 2017, the Province enacted the Anti-Racism Act and provided a framework for school boards in Ontario to collect identity-based data. The purpose of the Act is to identify systemic barriers and biases to help advance racial equity for all students. The Act specifically identified four groups that are adversely impacted by racism including Indigenous, Black, Jewish communities, and communities that are adversely impacted by Islamophobia. The OCDSB has added LGBTQ2S+, New Comers, Poverty, and Accessibility groups to align with the current strategic direction.

The Ontario Education Equity Secretariat in the Ministry of Education has worked with staff from several school districts across the province to plan for province-wide collection of identity-based data. Collecting identity-based data is aimed at helping districts to precisely identify systemic barriers and help with strategies on how to eliminate discriminatory biases in order to support equity in student achievement and well-being. Consequently, on 4 February 2019, Report No. 19-019 on the Identity-Based Data Collection was presented to Committee of the Whole that described the work to be undertaken by the OCDSB to support the collection of identity-based data for all students K-12.

Equity in education is crucial in terms of improving all students' academic achievement and well-being as set out in *Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan* (2017). As defined in *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation*, (Ministry of Education, 2014), an equitable educational environment provides a welcoming and respectful environment for all students. Further, the guidelines indicate that an equitable and inclusive education system also supports and inspires each student to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning. Following this lead, the OCDSB 2019-2023 strategic plan reinforces and supports an equitable education environment for all students.

*“Opportunities that were open to me when teachers thought I was White have now been closed. Now that people know I am Indigenous, teachers expect me to only work on Indigenous topics and issues. Being Indigenous is treated like a disability.”*

According to *Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan* (2017), the diversity of the students in Ontario should be reflected in the diversity of their educators including teachers, school administrators, and school system leaders. Several students who participated in our focus groups reiterated the need to see staff members with similar identities as themselves. In a recent study examining the lived experiences of disengaged First Nations youth from schools, Walker (2019) highlights the importance of cross-cultural staff training to increase the understanding related to cultural norms of others. Recently, the Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO, 2016) held forums with immigrant and refugee parents who expressed that they would like to see a welcoming, inclusive and engaging environment, clear and accessible communications, knowledge of what the curriculum entails, and a clear understanding of values and cultures being taught to their children.

In order to promote a safe and welcoming environment, information garnered from the collection of identity-based data will allow the OCDSB to identify and take action to eliminate systemic barriers faced by students in our school district.

## Purpose

The purpose of this report is to summarize what was shared during the focus group discussions with students and parents with a view to using the information to plan for district-wide collection of identity-based data in November 2019, the subsequent analysis and reporting out of results and identification of next steps for action as a result of what we learn. In the OCDSB, the current project includes three key phases:

(1) **community partner meetings** - two meetings held at the beginning of May 2019 helped staff refine plans for focus group discussions with students, and parents of students who have experienced racism, bias, or barriers, including anti-Black racism, anti-Indigeneity, anti-Semitism, Homophobia, Islamophobia, Transphobia, Poverty/Classism, and Ableism/Disabilities;

(2) **student and parent focus group discussions** - two student sessions and three parent sessions allowed participants to share their experiences as they related to racism, bias, or barriers with other attendees in a safe environment; and,

(3) **the collection of identity-based data** – will take place beginning in November 2019.

## Process

This Identity-Based Data Collection Project adopted a qualitative research approach to engage in conversations with the community to better understand the lived experiences in our schools regarding systemic barriers and identity-based disparities. Focus groups were utilized to obtain the narrative from students and parents. The goal of the focus groups was to explore participants' experiences, understanding and interpretations of their experiences in-depth (Tavakol & Sandars 2014).

These narratives were captured to give power and a voice to those who have been marginalized by the system. Processes and outcomes such as behaviours, attitudes, interactions, and learning environments cannot always be understood adequately through numerical data (Pope & Mays, 2006; Harding, 2013). Qualitative research is well established and has gained acceptance as a valuable tool in the study of education, with a growing recognition that they can be pursued with rigour (Ramani & Mann, 2016). The information collected from focus groups will help the District better understand the disparities, biases, and gaps that exist in the system, and help shape questions for the data collection tool. They will also assist in setting priorities for analysis and reporting.

## Who Participated?

The Identity-based Data Collection project involves collecting data from community partners, parents, and students. As a first step, the community partner meetings helped with planning for recruitment of parents and students for the focus groups and for the actual data collection scheduled to take place in November 2019. Guiding questions for both focus groups were developed based on the feedback received from the community partners. Focus groups provided a safe environment for students and parents to share their lived experiences within the school board. Recruitment strategies and data collection methods were as follows:

## 1. Community Partners

An invitation letter with guiding questions was sent to 40 community partner organizations and/or individuals with whom the District had an established relationship and that represent the eight groups of students identified above. They were asked to invite up to three members from their respective communities. Dates and venues were communicated to the community partners, along with an online registration link. A total of 44 community members from diverse communities attended one of the two meetings where they discussed the following questions:

- What are the conditions that need to be in place for students and parents to feel safe in sharing their experiences and that they have been heard?
- What suggestions do you have for focus group question that will help us identify potential systemic barriers and/or bias from the lived experiences?
- What strategies do you have that might support engagement of your community in either the focus groups or the data collection in the fall?
- Is there anything we should be asking in the focus groups?

## 2. Student Focus Groups

Principals from OCDSB secondary schools (7-12 and 9-12) were asked to recruit a maximum of five (5) students in grades 7 to 12 to participate in the focus groups sessions and to identify a member of staff who could accompany the students to the venue. Sessions were held at non-OCDSB facilities at the recommendation of community partners. Approximately 60 students from 11 schools participated in the opportunity to discuss the following questions with their peers:

- How do you identify yourself and why is that important to you?
- How has your identity been shaped within the school system?
- What has helped to create a sense of belonging in your school? What has helped promote your academic success?
- What has prevented you from feeling and doing your best in school?
- What do you think is important for the school system district to consider when collecting identity-based data?

## 3. Parent Focus Groups

Multiple ways of communication were used to recruit parents for focus groups including a memorandum to principals that included posters to create awareness at the school, and distribution of information letters and invitations to parents/guardians of all students via the District's *School Connects* system. While the invitation suggested that these discussions may be of particular interest to parents of students who have experienced racism, bias, or barriers, including anti-Black, anti-Indigeneity, anti-Semitism, Homophobia, Islamophobia, Transphobia, Poverty/Classism, and Ableism/Disabilities, no restrictions were placed on participation from parents/guardians of students who do not identify in these ways.

Participation in the focus groups was voluntary and no personal information was collected. Sessions were organized for parents of students in our District, and took place on June 11, 17, and 18 from 7 p.m. – 9 p.m. Two sessions were held off-site, and one was held at a secondary school. These discussions were used to gather information from parents of students in kindergarten through Grade 12.

The following questions were used to shape the discussion for parent's focus group:

- Why is identity important?
- How has the school system impacted your child's sense of identity?
- What has helped promote your child's academic success and sense of belonging?
- What has prevented your child from feeling and doing their best in school?
- What do you think is important for the school district to consider when collecting identity-based data?

A total of 147 participants registered for the parent focus group discussions. Out of the 147 - 81 registered for June 11, 52 registered for June 17, and 14 registered for June 18. Students attending the sessions and/or their parents expressed appreciation for the opportunity to have these conversations and help shape our work moving forward.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Participants' responses to questions were recorded by a note taker assigned to each table – in most cases note takers were members of central staff (primarily research and instructional coaches from Curriculum Services, Equity, and Indigenous Education). The data collected from community partners, student and parent focus group discussions were analyzed using NVivo. A standard thematic coding process was used to create idea groupings as well as a list of codes grouped into themes (Patton, 2002). The themes were created in response to the focus group questions and to develop a deeper understanding of systemic barriers and/or bias and their potential to impede success in learning as well as impact on students' well-being.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

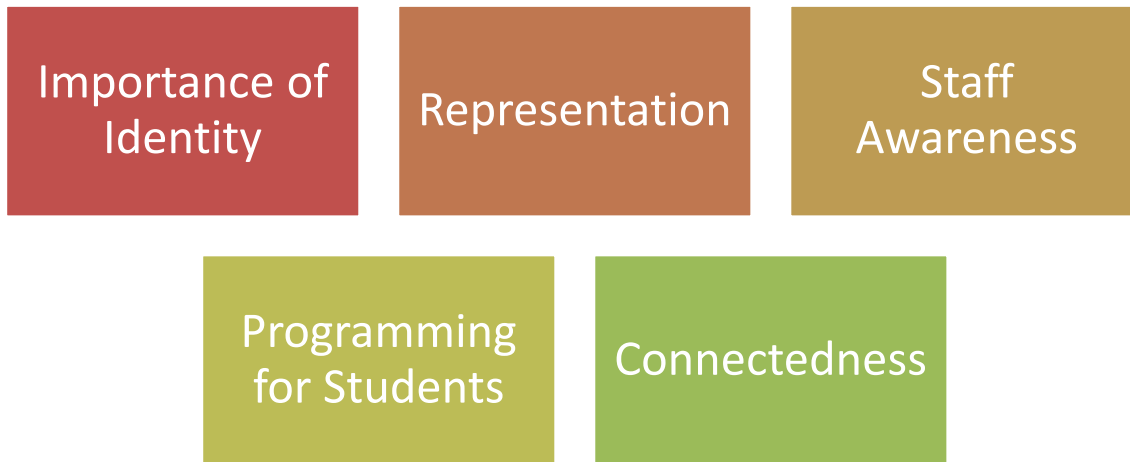
The strength of the focus group lies in gathering and sharing the lived experiences of students and parents who have experienced racism, bias, or barriers in our school system. The candidness with which participants shared their experiences was appreciated, ultimately providing a foundation that will assist the District in better understanding the challenges faced by marginalized communities in their efforts to succeed in learning. It is also worth noting that the parent focus group discussions brought together parents who were allies, parents preparing for their children to enter the system and parents of children with invisible disabilities. The questions asked by community partners, parents and expressed challenges by students will guide the development of future survey questions and help with the analysis and dissemination strategies/process. A few limitations should also be considered when interpreting the results of the focus group discussions;

- limited time to raise awareness of the session in the community,
- limited knowledge of the purpose of identity-based data collection by the participants,
- reliance on students belonging to clubs and principal's selection for recruitment,
- unequal representation of diverse groups

## What We Heard

Key findings based on the focus group discussions with students and parents are reported together as the coding practice of responses revealed similar themes. Direct quotes from both students and parents have been incorporated to enhance understanding of the five themes that emerged, including: the importance of identity, representation, staff awareness, programming for students, and connectedness.

### Overarching Themes



### The importance of identity

Consistent with literature on the importance of identity within the educational system (e.g., a review study on the role of school in adolescents' identity development by Verhoeven, Poorthuis, & Volman, 2019), the sense of identity in schools was an overarching theme as stated by both students and parents during focus group discussions. Narratives on the importance of identity, the impact of the school system on their sense of identity, and the challenges that prevent students from feeling and doing their best in school were derived from focus group discussions. Variation in how identity is valued by those who do not identify “like them” was evident among participants. It was evident that participants highlighted the importance of identity and that it gives them meaning and a sense of belonging. At the same time, participants acknowledged the complexity of identity. The concept of identity has become visible and relevant specifically due to diversity in societies. Self-identity is viewed as a critical step in the process of ensuring that students who self-identify are recognized and matched with appropriate educational programs and supports.

*“Identity is complex – it puts you into a community but emphasises your individuality.”*

Participants attending focus group discussions had the opportunity to explore questions and discuss the importance of identity at length. Identity is linked in many different ways to self-esteem, confidence and understanding more about who you really are as an individual. When examining the importance of identity, the majority of participants stated that they need to be themselves and express their identity. They further said that their identity helps them to reinstate their culture. They learn more about themselves. According to participants, “Identity is complex – it puts you into a community but emphasises your individuality”, “identity ensures cultural safety”, “identity is something to be proud of” and “identity gives an individual a sense of purpose, and direction. One parent described identity from this perspective:

*“Identity goes further than the nation you’re from, clan, spirit name etc. Our generation had to deal with residential schools, my parents were scared of identity, and they thought it was witchcraft.”*

There was overwhelming agreement among the participants regarding the complexity of the concept of identity. While most spoke about the importance of identity in “grounding” them, and that it is one thing that an individual can own and feel special about, some indicated that the issues of identity promote stereotypes. A majority of participants emphasised that the District is aware of the unequal treatment received by students who have experienced racism and bias in the system. A community member pointed out that:

*“District has to acknowledge [that] harmful things have been happening and that we want change.”*

Further related to the issues around identity and its connection to the public school system, one of the parents shared that:

*“The school system created an identity crisis in my children. Our background, culture, and religion clash with values of school. Our kids are struggling with shaping their identities between conflicting values which result in a low sense of belonging and self-esteem. ”*

From the Indigenous community partner meeting, it was proposed that the District should “have a thorough understanding of cultural awareness”, and “students need to be listened to” and know that there will be “action taken” by the school system. There was an overwhelming response suggesting that the system needs to improve representation of marginalized groups in teaching and non-teaching staff, and in educational leadership. The participants echoed the different layers of demographic factors such as culture, socialization, situational encounters, and skin colour influencing the individual’s identity. There was overwhelming concerns of “tokenism” from students. This is consistent with shifts in opinion from marginalized students, who have changed from fighting within the school system with peers for their recognition to advocating for their recognition and equal treatment by staff.

Further, parents also cautioned the school board about the use of identity data. Some of the parents noted that the collection of identity-based data is important if it helps the student. However, if it is not used very well by people who are aware of different identities, it has the potential to isolate students more.

## Representation

In the student focus group discussions, “representation matters, we need teachers who look like us” was a statement that resonated with many. It was clearly indicated by students that representation is central to feelings of belonging. They stated that when there are teachers who identify like them, they feel safe and that they have a trusted adult in the school. Some of the parents also pointed out that the lack of representation among staff members made students aware of the differences in how they were treated compared to their “white” counterparts.

Indigenous students felt that they are not fully reflected in the teaching staff and/or curriculum. Further, they reported that administrators have taken down Indigenous resources on the walls and not replaced them. Some also reported that they grew up in schools that are predominantly white; no representation of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit...in high school there is lot of discrimination and stereotype.

In a similar vein, families of students from other marginalized groups also expressed concern that there is lack of diversity in staff and students and that they do not see themselves reflected in the staff population. One of these parents shared:

*“...schools are doing a superficial level. The data shows that 43% of students are members of racial groups but only 8% is staff. On an international day, Caucasian teachers represent different nations, which is funny. Hiring practices are keeping the school board “white.”*

Parents of Indigenous students were also asked about their experience regarding the representation at schools. Responses suggested that there is no representation of Indigenous people in the school system. This has created lack of understanding by many people and promoted discrimination and stereotype, specifically in high school. Consequently, the limited exposure to positive representation at schools impact students’ sense of belonging severely. The lack of representation at schools threatens students’ identities in the classroom resulting in decreased feelings of school belonging and negatively impacting academic performance (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Moving forward, the District will need to find ways to increase representation of diverse groups in its employees.

### Staff Awareness

There were lots of discussions about the role of the school system in shaping student’s identity. Across groups, participants expressed the need for the school system to change and “listen” to students. Students expressed that there are low expectations from the school staff specifically for minority students:

*“...teachers hold you back, and want you to know your place...you score good marks, you are accused of plagiarism...they assume we are dumb.”*

Indigenous students reported that treatment at school changes once they declared their identity. They felt that the school authorities do not listen to them. Teachers are ignorant and use trauma as teaching opportunities. For example, one of the students pointed out:

*“Opportunities that were open to me when teachers thought I was White have now been closed. Now that people know I am Indigenous, teachers expect me to only work on Indigenous topics and issues. Being Indigenous is treated like a disability.”*

A parent of one of our students said that “Lack of understanding and connection creates intimidation and assumptions about intelligence and capability of others. It is difficult to live like that, when you are always fighting to prove yourself.”

When asked about the impact of the school system on shaping students identity, a high school student reported that “the school system is not shaping my identity. It is my reaction to the school system...school system still treat residential school as a history project instead of something that still



hurts people today.” Further another parent reported that “Teachers need more support to be able to accommodate for students. They don’t have enough time, resources and space, to be able to treat and support students the way they need.”

Taken together, the lack of complete understanding related to values that shape identity of students from marginalized groups and limited staff awareness were identified as pervasive issues within the school system. This lack of understanding inhibits the ability to support students from diverse cultures and communities. Further, the research on the identity development at schools shows that schools and teachers may *unintentionally* convey messages to students about who they should be through differentiation and selection, teaching strategies, teacher expectations, and peer norms (Verhoeven et al., 2019).

### Programming for Students

Focus group participants reported several barriers related to programming for students that interfere with their benefitting from the education system. Examination of responses from participants indicates a clear pattern associated with barriers to programming/streaming practices in schools. One of the parents reported that:

*“My son was forced to go to applied courses, children are being misled. I had to take him out of the public school system and continued with the home schooling. He is doing great at the university now.”*

Further, the majority of students also indicated that the programs that are taught or delivered in some of the classes (e.g., English literature, social studies, law classes) have curriculum content that is outdated. Where attempts have been made to teach about the Indigenous education, students stated that “administrators have taken down Indigenous resources on walls and not replaced them.” Additionally, one of the parents of an indigenous student shared her perspective regarding the curriculum as follows:

*“the curriculum shows outdated racially stereotyped images of Indigenous communities... When the word Indian is used, teachers don’t always look to correct it. When the Inuit national anthem is sung in the morning, teachers do not stop children from making fun of throat singing.”*

Some students also emphasized the importance of mental health support at schools and expressed their concerns with the lack of mental health services available at school. Many students reported not having a trusted adult at the school with whom to discuss mental health issues One of the students shared that:

*“They (referring to educators) do not understand the reasons why students miss school or submit assignments late due to mental health issues.”*

Many parents of students with special needs and mental health issues who attended the focus groups sessions expressed similar concerns about assumptions, values, and limitations. These parents identified limited staff knowledge of visible and invisible disabilities such as life threatening asthma/allergies as one of the biggest barriers that hinder their children's academic success. They also added that teaching and non-teaching staff's limited knowledge regarding students' special needs and Individual Education Plan (IEP) result in "treating everyone the same" or a lack of action on the part of school staff, as described by this parent:

*"My child was diagnosed with Dyspraxia- lots of work done to identify and then nothing happens after that."*

Accessibility within heritage buildings is also a significant barrier to students and parents with disabilities, yet they cannot be changed. Taken together, the findings suggest that there are prevalent barriers to programming for students within the school system that need to be addressed to help all students reach their full potential with respect to academic achievement and well-being.

### Connectedness

Students' sense of connectedness at school is related to their academic achievement and well-being. The research on sense of belonging indicates that sense of belonging has a big impact on students' academic motivation (Goodenow, 1993) and thus is related to their academic outcomes (Becker & Luthar, 2002).

Students from focus groups reported that extra-curricular activities help them become more involved in schools. These students shared the examples of extra-curricular activities such as clubs and sports activities, cultural celebrations, and events like "Black Students Symposium" and "Indigenous Youth Symposium" as opportunities to help them connect with friends who identify like them and increase their sense of belonging. A parent reported:

*"Lunch club allowed my child to have sense of belonging outside regular classroom with access to other peers in the school."*

Similarly some students shared that:

*"..club and sports activities and, cultural celebrations are great opportunities to help us connect with friends who identify like us and increase our sense of belonging."*

These occasions create spaces where students find their community members, learn more about their cultures, and are able to socialize with their peers. The current research on schools' role in shaping students' feelings of connectedness also supports the idea of organizing various learning experiences to provide students with opportunities to explore different identities in a supportive climate at school (Verhoeven, Poorthuis, & Volman, 2019).

## Conclusion

Understanding our students and factors that contribute to their academic success, well-being, ability to build resiliency and cherish their values are important principles for the District. The research on the relationship between students' identity, academic success, and well-being suggests that a relatively strong identity helps students to be more resilient, reflective, and autonomous in making important life decisions (e.g., Flum & Kaplan 2006; Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia 2010). Throughout the first phase of the identity-based data collection, the District wanted to better understand the challenges and successes that students experience in school. The importance of identity was a key finding, yet there were varying perspectives about what defines identity and how identity impacts students' school experience. As a second key theme, representation and advocating for the marginalized were among the key aspects of ensuring that students feel understood and were able to own their identity. Both students and parents propose interventions to engage student voice in problem solving, an idea supported by Day-Vines et al. (2007). For example, it was recommended by community partners that the District should find ways of eliminating "preconceived notions of what it means to be an immigrant" and "stop perpetuating cultural stereotypes". The third theme was related to barriers to programming and streaming for students. It is vital to create and encourage inclusive opportunities within schools to meet students varied needs and build further all-inclusive programs and streaming practices. Finally, the decreased level of perceived sense of belonging was another key issue discussed during the focus group discussions. Moving forward, considering strategies aimed at promoting greater sense of belonging is warranted. Ultimately, the District must find better ways and standards of practice that will help us identify equitable and inclusive ways for improving student achievement and well-being.

## Next Step

This work was considered an important first step in seeking community input to help inform thinking about how the collection of identity based data could help to overcome systemic barriers and identity-based disparities. The information gathered from the community partner meetings, students, parents/families focus group discussions will be used in planning for the collection of the identity-based data in November 2019. We have listened to what community partners, parents/families, as well as students have told us. Moving forward, the District will continue in its on-going efforts to seek feedback on the survey questions and process for the Identity-Based Data Collection.

Further, the District currently reports on a range of student data, such as program enrolment, graduation rates, special education supports, suspensions and expulsions. Identity-based data will enhance the District's capacity to understand areas of strength and need for particular student populations. The collection of Identity-Based data will allow for the linkage of survey data to other administrative data (e.g., achievement data, suspension data, course participation rates, etc.) in order to respond to the following types of questions:

- Who are the students who lack a sense of belonging at school? What are some strategies schools could try that would create a more inclusive environment for students?
- Who are the students who feel disengaged from school? (e.g., attendance patterns)
- Who are the students who are most likely to be enrolled in academic, or applied, level courses? Who do students turn to most often when deciding which courses to take?
- Are some students suspended at a higher rate compared to others? If so, who are they?
- Which students report not feeling safe at school?

- Which groups of students perform below the provincial standard on measures of achievement (e.g., provincial assessments, report card)?
- Are there some students who are less likely to attain full credit accumulation in grade 9, 10, etc. that would limit their ability to graduate with their peers?

## References

- Becker, B. E., & Luthar, S. S. (2002). Social-emotional factors affecting achievement outcomes among disadvantaged students: Closing the achievement gap. *Educational Psychologist*, 37(4), 197-214.
- Day-Vines, Norma L.; Wood, Susannah M.; Grothaus, Tim; Craigen, Laurie; Holman, Angela; Dotson-Blake, Kylie; Douglass, Marcy J. (2007). Broaching the Subjects of Race, Ethnicity, and Culture during the Counseling Process. *Journal of Counseling and Development* 85(4).
- Goodenow, C. (1993). Classroom belonging among early adolescent students: Relationships to motivation and achievement. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 13, 21-43.
- Flum, H., & Kaplan, A. (2006). Exploratory orientation as an educational goal. *Educational Psychologist*, 41(2), 99–110.
- Kroger, J., Martinussen, M., & Marcia, J. E. (2010). Identity status change during adolescence and young adulthood: a meta-analysis. *Journal of Adolescence*, 33(5), 683–698.
- Kozleski, Elizabeth. (2017). The Uses of Qualitative Research: Powerful Methods to Inform Evidence-Based Practices in Education. *Research and Practices for Persons with Severe Disabilities*. Vol 42(1) 19-32.
- Tavakol M, Sandars J. (2014). *Quantitative and qualitative methods in medical education research: AMEE guide no 90: Part I*. *Med Teach* 36:746–756.
- Pope C, Mays N. (2006). *Qualitative research in health care*. Malden, MA: Blackwell publishers.
- Harding J. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis from start to finish*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Ramani, Subha & Karen Mann. 2016. Introducing medical educators to qualitative study design: Twelve tips from inception to completion. *Medical Teacher* 38:456-463.
- Ministry of Education (2014). *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation*.
- Ministry of Education (2017). *Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan*
- Ottawa Carleton District School Board. (2015). *Framework for Student Well-Being*. Ottawa Carleton District School Board. Retrieved from <https://www.ocdsb.ca/common/pages/DisplayFile.aspx?itemId=2594677>
- Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO), (2016). *Newcomer Parental Involvement in the School*.
- Patton, M.Q., (2002). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (3rd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications
- Walker, L. (2019). Giving voice to First Nations young people disengaged from education in the Northern Territory with a specific focus on barriers to education and their aspirations for the future. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 29 (1).
- Verhoeven, M., Poorthuis, A., M., G., Volman, M. (2019). The Role of School in Adolescents' Identity Development. *Educational Psychology Review*, 31 (1), pg 35.