

**Cultural Competence in Alberta Schools: Perceptions of ESL Families
in Four Major School Boards**

Coalition for Equal Access to Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Growing cultural diversity has transformed the student populations in the K-12 education system. Between 1988 and 2008, the number of identified ESL students in Alberta has tripled from 14,673 to 48,346. ESL learners are diverse in terms of racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds. Their complex linguistic, acculturative and social needs have also challenged the K-12 education system to develop cultural competence in working with culturally diverse families.

This study surveyed 242 self-identified ESL students and their parents from four of Alberta's major school boards, namely the Calgary Board of Education, Calgary Catholic School District, Edmonton Public School Board and Edmonton Catholic School District in the 2007-2008 school year. Respondents were diverse in terms of gender, country of birth, school division and language proficiency. The survey questionnaire focused on the perception of ESL learners and their parents on how Alberta schools have responded to cultural diversity with respect to school environment, cultural representation, school practices, competence of school staff, school-student-family interactions, family-school communication, school-community collaboration, involvement of families in school activities and overall satisfaction.

This study has some limitations. It focuses solely on the perceptions of self-identified ESL students and their parents. The sample size for this study was relatively small, and the number of respondents to some questions was less than ideal.

Summary of Findings

School Environment

- ✓ About one in two parent and student respondents rated the physical school environment favorably with respect to multicultural/multilingual signs and notices, photographs, and book selection. However, one in five parent and student respondents reported that there was nothing in their schools that tells them about different cultures.
- ✓ Less than half of the parent and student respondents rated the social school environment favorably with respect to opportunities for inter-cultural and –racial interactions, cultural activities, and celebration of histories and contributions of cultural and racial groups. Only one in four parents and one in three students felt that their schools had encouraged the use of heritage languages.

Cultural Representation

- ✓ A slight majority of parent and student respondents reported cultural diversity among school council members (55.5 and 61.0 per cent respectively).
- ✓ Less than half of the parent and student respondents felt there was adequate cultural representation among school administrators.
- ✓ One in three parent respondents (34.5 per cent) and one in two student respondents (55.2 per cent) reported cultural diversity among teachers.

Integration of Cultural Diversity into School Practices

- ✓ A slight majority of parent respondents (between 52.7 and 61.4 per cent) expressed positive opinions on how schools had integrated cultural diversity into methods of teaching, curriculum, school support services, selection of textbooks, and extra-curricular activities. However, less than half of student respondents (between 27.5 and 44.3 per cent) rated those school practices favorably.

- ✓ Only one in four student respondents felt that their schools had integrated cultural diversity into the school curriculum (27.5 per cent) and extra-curricular activities (29.3 per cent).

Competence of School Staff

- ✓ A slight majority of parent and student respondents (63.5 and 56.2 per cent respectively) felt that school staff understood the immigrant experience.
- ✓ About one in two parent and student respondents (46.8 and 50.9 per cent respectively) reported that school staff could openly discuss issues related to racism and discrimination.

Student / Family-School Interactions

- ✓ Significant majorities of parent and student respondents (between 73.6 and 83.7 per cent) reported that they had experienced respectful interactions with various school personnel. Parent and student respondents, however, were least likely to report positive interactions with other students (60.0 and 64.1 per cent respectively).
- ✓ Three in four parent respondents (75.9 per cent) and four in five student respondents (80.5 per cent) felt that teachers had treated ESL students with equal respect. A slightly lower percentage of parent and student respondents (68.0 and 74.1 per cent respectively) felt that teachers had high expectations for academic success for ESL students.
- ✓ About 59.5 per cent of student respondents reported that their teachers supported their future career dreams. Another 33.5 per cent indicated that they did not know if their teachers supported their future plans.

Family-School Communication

- ✓ One in two parent and student respondents (52.5 and 47.6 per cent respectively) reported easy access to interpreters. Parent and student respondents were less likely to report access to written information in first languages (31.6 and 27.5 per cent respectively).
- ✓ Parent and student respondents identified parent-teacher interviews (54.5 and 80.0 per cent respectively) and written notes or letters (37.8 and 49.8 per cent respectively) as the most frequent modes of school- family communication.

School-Community Collaboration

- ✓ Only one in five parent and student respondents (20.1 and 16.7 per cent) reported that their schools worked with community and service groups to provide services for ethnocultural families.
- ✓ One in two parent respondents (49.4 per cent) and seven in ten student respondents (68.6 per cent) did not know if their schools worked with other community and service partners to support ethnocultural families.
- ✓ Parent respondents reported modest support from schools in providing school orientation (52.3 per cent), staying in touch with the school (45.8 per cent), learning about Canadian education (42.7 per cent), helping their children's learning (41.3 per cent), participating in school activities (47.0 per cent) getting connected with other parents (23.4 per cent), dealing with conflicts with staff (19.3 per cent), and to using community resources (17.8 per cent).

Involvement of Families in School Activities

- ✓ One in three parent respondents indicated that schools had involved them in developing services for ethnocultural learners (30.9 per cent), creating a plan to communicate with ethnocultural families (32.5 per cent), and developing school based services to support ethnocultural families to deal with

difficult situations. Another one in four parent respondents reported that schools had involved them in helping school staff to gain cross cultural skills and knowledge (27.3 per cent) and to develop a plan to promote cultures (25.9 per cent).

- ✓ One in three students (33.9 per cent) indicated that their schools had involved them in developing a plan to promote cultures. Another 44.2 per cent reported that they had been involved in the development of school services to help ethnocultural learners.

Overall satisfaction

- ✓ One in three parent respondents (31.5 per cent) and six in ten student respondents (59.1 per cent) reported that they were happy with how schools had dealt with cultural diversity.

Congruence of Parents' and Students' Responses

- ✓ There were no significant differences in parents' and students' responses to 21 of the 41 common items of the parent and student surveys.
- ✓ Student and parent respondents were more likely to demonstrate congruence in their assessments of the physical school environment, competence of staff, access to language support and school-community collaboration.
- ✓ Student and parent respondents were more likely to express different opinions with respect to the social school environment, modes of family-school communication, involvement of families in school activities, and overall level of satisfaction.

Key Recommendations to Alberta Education and School Boards

The Coalition for Equal Access to Education would therefore recommend that Alberta Education and school boards work collaboratively with stakeholders to address the following areas:

- ✓ Conduct system-wide cultural audits with due attention to policies and guidelines, business plans, curriculum, funding allocation, accountability, and professional requirements for staff;
- ✓ Develop plans to integrate cultural diversity into all aspects of governance, administration and management, and services;
- ✓ Allocate adequate resources to promote cultural diversity and competence;
- ✓ Develop reporting and accountability structures to monitor and evaluate cultural competence of the Ministry, school boards and schools;
- ✓ Set cultural competence as a professional requirement for all school personnel;
- ✓ Offer sustainable professional development opportunities for all school personnel to ensure cultural competence;
- ✓ Work with Advanced Education and universities to ensure integration of cultural competence into pre-service education and education leadership programs;
- ✓ Provide support for ethnocultural families to strengthen parent-child-school communication, and school involvement; and
- ✓ Involve ethnocultural families and community groups in the development, implementation and evaluation of initiatives to address and promote cultural diversity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Growing cultural diversity has transformed communities across Alberta. According to the latest 2006 Census, the foreign-born and visible minority populations in Alberta are 16.2 and 13.9 per cent respectively (Statistics Canada, 2008). In the K-12 education system, the English as a Second Language (ESL) student population has grown exponentially. In fact, the number of identified ESL learners has tripled from 14,673 in the 1988-1999 school year to 48,346 in the 2007-2008 school year (Alberta Learning, 2004; Alberta Education, 2008). ESL learners are diverse in terms of racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds. Their diversity provides ample opportunities for meaningful intercultural exchange and learning in schools. At the same time, their complex linguistic, acculturative and social needs have challenged the K-12 education system to develop competence in working with culturally diverse families.

This report examines from the perspective of ESL learners and their parents how Alberta schools have responded to cultural diversity. It draws upon the 2007-2008 survey of 242 self-identified ESL learners and 242 parents of those learners in the four major school boards in Calgary and Edmonton, namely Calgary Board of Education (CBE), Calgary Catholic School District (CCSD), Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB) and Edmonton Catholic School District (ECSD).

2. BACKGROUND

Learners of an ESL background are often confronted with unique linguistic, educational and social challenges. Linguistically, the complex process of second language acquisition requires up to two years of English instruction for ESL learners to develop basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS), and between five to seven years or longer to reach cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1994; Collier, 1989). Development of CALP is essential for success in high school and post-secondary education. Skills and abilities which contribute to CALP include the

acquisition of English language proficiency, learning strategies, and understanding of underlying concepts and background knowledge relevant to subject curricula (Roessingh, 1995; 1999).

Many ESL learners have experienced limited educational success. Cummins (1981) suggested that ESL learners are two or more years behind their native English speaking counterparts by the time they reach sixth grade. Watt & Roessingh (1994, 2001) tracked educational outcomes among ESL youth in a single, large urban school in Calgary for 10 years. They found that the drop-out rate for ESL learners remained unchanged at 74 per cent. In their study of the academic achievement of ESL high school students in one urban school board in Alberta, Derwing, DeCorby, Ichikawa and Jamieson (1999) reported that nearly 46 per cent of high school ESL learners did not complete their studies within the K-12 system. Latimer (2000) examined the 1996-1999 provincial achievement test scores of students in the Calgary Board of Education, and found that ESL learners in grades 3, 6 and 9 were between 16 to 28 percentage points behind other students in language arts.

Many ESL learners also face cognitive and psychosocial challenges related to cultural adjustment and adaptation (Delgado, Jones & Rohani, 2005). Some may experience difficulties in forming cross-ethnic friendships, over-reliance on support from peers with similar cultural backgrounds, alienation and isolation, and limited access to positive role models and mentors (Anisef & Kilbride, 2003; James, 1997). Many ESL learners struggle to achieve positive identity formation due to conflicting values at home and in the community and the pervasive impact of internalized racism (Desai & Subramanian, 2003).

A number of ESL learners experience a range of physical and mental health challenges. Those raised in families with disadvantaged socioeconomic status are at higher risk of malnutrition (Weissman, 1994). Some have been exposed to communicable diseases in their home countries (Cookson, Waldman, Gushulak, MacPherson, Burkle, Paquet, Kliewer, & Walker, 1998). Youth

from certain religious and cultural backgrounds also face cultural taboos and practices that prevent their access to sex education, and compromise their sexual and reproductive health (Orgocka, 2004, Elgaali, Strevens & Mardh, 2005). In terms of mental health, those ESL learners of a refugee background who were subjected to persecution, war, violence, loss of family members and trauma in their home countries or during migration are more likely to experience post-traumatic stress syndrome (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2007). Recent research has also linked poor mental health among some visible minorities to their experiences of racism and discrimination (Davies & Stevenson, 2006; Zayas, 2001).

In response to changing socio-demographics in schools, scholars and advocates have called for educational reform and asserted the notion of multicultural education (see Banks & Banks, 1989; Cenoz & Genesee, 1998; Johnson, 2007, Tator & Henry, 1991). Rooted in the perspective of cultural pluralism, the multicultural education approach recognizes cultural diversity as a salient, positive element in a society (Banks, 1988). It encourages the education system to critically examine existing stereotypes and discriminatory practices in schools, and to address educational equity in order to promote meaningful educational opportunities for culturally diverse student populations (Cenoz & Genesee, 1998; Parla, 1994). Coehlo (1998) recommends integration of multiculturalism into every facet of school life, including school environment, curriculum development, classroom practice, school policy and school community relations. Ngo (2003) also advocates a systemic change approach, which requires schools to address cultural diversity in school culture, representation in school councils and school personnel, operationalized regulations and guidelines, communication, professional development, resource allocation, research and inquiry, collaboration, and support to families.

3. METHODS

Survey Research Design

This study used a survey research design to gain an understanding of the perspectives of self-identified ESL learners and their parents on how Alberta schools have responded to cultural diversity. The development of the survey study was informed by an inclusive, multicultural education framework. The questionnaire focused on how schools have addressed cultural diversity in various aspects of school structures and functions, including: school environment, cultural representation, school practices, school- student-family interactions and communication, staff competencies, school-community collaboration, and involvement of families in school activities. A team of six academic researchers and community leaders served as research advisors and provided their feedback and recommendations throughout the development of the questionnaire. The survey was also piloted with a group of ESL learners and a group of parents of ESL learners for further feedback and recommendations. The survey was available in Arabic, Chinese, English, Filipino, German, Hindi, Italian, Polish, Spanish, Urdu and Vietnamese. The translated versions of the survey were cross-checked by independent reviewers to ensure accuracy of the translation.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. It focuses solely on the perceptions of self-identified ESL students and their parents. While their viewpoints are very important and offer insights into their first hand experiences in Alberta schools, the students may not always be aware of all aspects of school structures and functions. Further, the sample size for this study was relatively small. The numbers of respondents to some questions were also less than ideal.

Data Collection

The researchers recruited participants from various ethnocultural communities in Calgary and Edmonton. The non-random sample was stratified according to the demographic trends of the immigrant populations in Calgary and Edmonton. Two teams of community research assistants (17 members in Calgary and 19 members in Edmonton) supported the data collection process. All research assistants received an orientation to the study and signed an oath of confidentiality. The members of the research teams used their networks of community serving agencies, ethnocultural groups and other service organizations to recruit the research participants. They further made public presentations to ethno-cultural families to promote the research project. Recruitment notices were also placed in various ethnic media outlets, such as newspapers, newsletters and radio. The research teams collected the data in the 2007-2008 school year.

Participants

All student participants met the following criteria of inclusion: (1) They had to be ethnocultural children or youth who had identified themselves as ESL learners; (2) They had been resident in Alberta for at least 6 months; and (3) They were attending the K-12 education system during the 2007-2008 school year. All parent participants were either mothers or fathers of the student participants. Our sampling strategies took into consideration differential levels of student enrollment in various school boards, immigration patterns, gender representation, and school divisions. A total of 242 ESL learners and 242 parents of those ESL learners from four major school boards in Alberta, namely the Calgary Board of Education (CBE), Calgary Catholic School District (CCSD), Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB) and Edmonton Catholic School District (ECSD), participated in the study.

Table 1a provides a demographic overview of student respondents. The student sample was reflective the enrollment patterns of students in the four major school boards. It slightly mirrored the proportions of students in the elementary, junior high and high school divisions (in the 2007-08 school years, the percentages of students in the elementary, junior high, and high school divisions were 44.8, 24.5 and 18.9 per cent respectively). The sample consisted of the equal numbers of male and female students. Consistent with the immigration trends in Canada, the respondents were more likely to arrive from East and Southeast Asia (36.8 per cent), followed by those from West, Central and South Asia, and Middle East (19.4 per cent), Africa (16.1 per cent). The Canadian born ESL student population made up 14 per cent of the sample. A slight majority of respondents (63.1 per cent) had been in Canada for 5 years or less.

Table 1a: An overview of student respondents

	N	%
Total Surveys	242	100.0
School Board		
CBE	79	32.6
CCSD	44	18.2
EPSB	73	30.2
ECSD	46	19.0
School Division		
Kindergarten	4	1.7
Elementary	101	41.7
Junior High	69	28.5
Senior High	68	28.1
Gender		
Female	121	50.0
Male	121	50.0
Region of birth		
Canada/ USA	34	14.0
Latin America	21	8.7
Europe	12	5.0
Africa	39	16.1
West, Central, and South Asia, and Middle East	47	19.4
East and Southeast Asia	89	36.8
Years in Canada		
5 years or less	152	63.1
6 years or more (Maximum 18 years)	89	36.9

Note: Some columns do not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Student respondents demonstrated varying levels of proficiency in first (heritage) languages and in English. With respect to first language proficiency, respondents assessed their speaking ability most favorably, with 75.6 percent selecting “good” or “very good” as their responses (Table 1b). The respondents, however, were less confident in their reading and writing abilities in their first language. Only 54.2 percent and 43.9 percent of all respondents respectively ranked their reading and writing abilities higher than average. In terms of English language proficiency,

respondents assessed their speaking ability most favorably, with 64.3 percent selecting “good” or “very good” for their responses. They, however, reported lower rates of proficiency in reading and writing. About 56.2 percent and 49.6 percent of all respondents respectively ranked their reading and writing abilities above average.

Table 1b: Language proficiencies of student respondents

		Poor/ Very Poor	Average	Good/ Very Good
	N		%	
English				
Reading	235	12.8	31.1	56.2
Writing	234	18.4	32.1	49.6
Speaking	235	12.3	23.4	64.3
First language				
Reading	236	33.9	11.9	54.2
Writing	237	38.8	17.3	43.9
Speaking	237	10.5	13.9	75.6

Note: Some rows do not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Table 1c provides a demographic overview of parent respondents. Female respondents made up of 72.3 per cent of the sample. A slight majority of the respondents (53.8 per cent) were in the 40 to 50 year old cohort, followed by those between the age of 30 and 39 (33.3 per cent). With respect to marital status, 83.1 per cent of the respondents were married. Consistent with the immigration trends in Canada, the respondents were more likely to arrive from East and Southeast Asia (44.5 per cent), followed by those from West, Central and South Asia, and Middle East (21.0 per cent), Africa (20.6 per cent). A slight majority of the parent respondents (65.3 per cent) had been in Canada for 5 years or less.

Table 1c: A demographic overview of parent respondents

	N	%
Total Surveys	238	100.0
Gender		
Female	172	72.3
Male	66	27.7
Age		
20 – 29	11	4.7
30 – 39	78	33.3
40 – 50	126	53.8
50 and over	19	8.1
Marital status		
Single	12	5.1
Married	197	83.1
Divorced	9	3.8
Separate	12	5.1
Widowed	7	3.0
Region of birth		
Latin America	23	9.7
Europe	10	4.2
Africa	49	20.6
West, Central, and South Asia, and Middle East	50	21.0
East and Southeast Asia	106	44.5
Years in Canada		
5 years or less	145	65.3
6 years or more	77	34.7

Note: Some columns do not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Table 1d illustrates the socioeconomic characteristics identified by parent respondents. Only two in five parents (44.1 per cent) reported a high level of English fluency. With respect to formal education, a slight majority of the respondents (56.8 per cent) had university education in their home countries. Further, one in three respondents (33.8 per cent) reported a family income level below the Low Income Cut-off rate (about \$21,000 in 2007). Another 79.9 per cent of the respondents reported a family income below the average income for Canadian families (about

\$77,300 in 2007). On the other hand, about one in five respondents (18.9 per cent) reported that they had worked more than 40 hours per week. Another one in two respondents either worked less than 20 hours per week, or was unemployed. A majority of the parent respondents (84.5 per cent) indicated that they have access to the internet.

Table 1d: Socioeconomic characteristics of parent respondents

	N	%
English fluency		
Poor/Very poor	76	32.8
Average	60	25.9
Well/ Very well	96	41.4
Highest level of education in home country		
Grade 1 to 9	37	15.4
Grade 10 to 12	52	21.6
University or college	137	56.8
Other	8	3.3
Not applicable	7	2.9
Highest level of education in Canada		
Grade 1 to 9	26	10.8
Grade 10 to 12	22	9.1
University or college	30	12.4
Other	64	26.6
Not applicable	99	41.1
Annual income		
Under \$20,000	79	33.8
\$20,000-\$39,999	74	31.6
\$40,000-\$59,999	34	14.5
\$60,000-\$79,000	23	9.8
\$80,000 and over	24	10.3
Number of working hours per week		
More than 40 hours	43	18.9
30 to 40 hours	79	34.8
20 to 29 hours	8	3.5
Less than 20 hours	20	8.8
Unemployed	26	11.5
Other (in school, working at home)	51	22.5
Access to internet		
Yes	201	84.5
No	37	15.5

Note: Some columns do not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

4. FINDINGS

Cultural competence requires schools to meaningfully integrate cultural diversity into all aspects of its structures and functions. The following section examines the perceptions of ESL students and parents on how schools have promoted cultural diversity in the following areas: school environment, cultural representation, school practices, school- student-family interactions and communication, staff competencies, school-community collaboration, and involvement of families in school activities

School Environment

Table 2a demonstrates the opinions of the student and parent respondents about the physical school environment. One in two parent respondents (50.4 per cent) and a slightly higher percentage of student respondents (58.4 per cent) indicated that they had noticed signs of welcome and notices in different languages in their schools. Another one in two parent and student respondents (52.2 and 51.5 per cent respectively) reported that they had seen photographs of people of different cultures in their schools. The parent and student respondents demonstrated disagreement in their views on the availability of books about different cultures. While 66.7 per cent of the student respondents had noticed books about different cultures in their schools, only 42 per cent of the parents observed cultural diversity in book selections. Roughly one in five parent and student respondents (21.9 and 17.3 per cent respectively) indicated that their schools had nothing that tells them about the different cultures in their schools.

Table 2a: Physical school environment

	Parents		Students	
	N	%	N	%
Signs of welcome and notices in different languages	113	50.4	135	58.4
Photographs of people of different cultures	117	52.2	119	51.5
Books about different cultures	94	42.0	154	66.7
Nothing that tells me about different cultures	49	21.9	40	17.3

Note: Some rows do not add up to 100 percent due to multiple responses.

Further, parent and student respondents demonstrated modest levels of agreement with the statements related to social school environment (Table 2b). Only 25.8 per cent of parent respondents and 31.4 per cent of student respondents reported that their schools encourage students and teachers to use languages other than English. Roughly one in two parents (50.3 per cent) and students (46.4 per cent) felt that there are adequate opportunities for inter-cultural or inter-racial interactions. Less than half of parent and student respondents (44.7 and 37.1 per cent respectively) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that there are cultural activities throughout the school year. About 41.8 per cent of parent respondents and 30.7 per cent of student respondents assessed the celebration of histories and contributions of cultural and racial groups in their schools as adequate.

Table 2b: Social school environment

Agree/Strongly agree	Parents		Students	
	N	%	N	%
Use of heritage language encouraged	42	25.8	74	31.4
Opportunities for inter-cultural/ racial interaction	97	50.3	110	46.4
Cultural activities throughout school year	84	44.7	88	37.1
Celebration of histories and contributions of cultural and racial groups	71	41.8	73	30.7

Note: Some rows not add up to 100 percent due to multiple responses.

Cultural Representation

Parent and student respondents were asked to evaluate cultural diversity in their school councils, administration and teaching staff. As demonstrated in table 3, a slight majority of parent and student respondents (55.5 and 61.0 per cent respectively) agreed or strongly agreed that their school council members reflect cultural diversity in their communities. Less than half of the parent and student respondents (44.9 and 38.8 per cent respectively) felt that there is adequate cultural diversity among school administrators. Parent and student respondents expressed markedly different opinions about cultural diversity among teaching staff. While one in two student respondents (55.2 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that teaching staff represent different cultural groups in their communities, only one in three parent respondents (34.5 per cent) supported the statement.

Table 3: Cultural representation in schools

Agree/Strongly agree	Parents		Students	
	N	%	N	%
Cultural diversity among school council members	131	55.5	83	61.0
Cultural diversity among school administration	106	44.9	62	38.8
Cultural diversity among teachers	82	34.5	106	55.2

Note: Some rows not add up to 100 percent due to multiple responses.

Integration of Cultural Diversity into School Practices

Table 4 examines the integration of cultural diversity into school practices, including methods of teaching, curriculum, development of school support services, selection of text books and development of extra-curricular activities. A modest majority of parent respondents felt that schools had considered cultural diversity in the various aspects of school practices. About one in two parent respondents agreed or strongly agreed that schools had considered cultural diversity in

their methods of teaching (52.7 per cent) and selection of text books (53.6 per cent). A slightly higher percentage of parent respondents felt that schools had thought about cultural diversity in their decisions about what to teach (57.3 per cent), development of school support services (60.1 per cent) and development of extra-curricular activities (61.4 per cent).

Compared to parent respondents, student respondents were less enthusiastic about their school practices. Roughly four in ten student respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their schools had integrated cultural diversity into their methods of teaching (39.1 per cent), development of school support services (44.3 per cent) and selection of text books (43.1 per cent). Another one in three student respondents felt that schools had integrated cultural diversity into teaching curriculum (27.5 per cent) and development of extra-curricular activities (29.3 per cent). Overall, parent and student respondents demonstrated a divergence in their opinions about the integration of cultural diversity into school practices. Their opinions were markedly different with respect to the integration of cultural diversity in the curriculum, development of school support services and development of extra-curricular activities.

Table 4: Integration of cultural diversity into school practices

	Parents		Students	
	N	%	N	%
Agree/Strongly agree				
Choosing different ways of teaching	69	52.7	68	39.1
Deciding what to teach	75	57.3	44	27.5
Developing school support services	92	60.1	74	44.3
Selecting textbooks	74	53.6	81	43.1
Developing extra-curriculum activities	94	61.4	70	29.3

Note: Some rows not add up to 100 percent due to multiple responses.

Competence of School Staff

With respect to the capacity of school staff to deal with cultural diversity, a slight majority of parent and student respondents (63.5 and 56.2 per cent respectively) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that school staff show understanding about the immigrant experience (table 5). Roughly half of the parent and student respondents (46.8 and 50.9 per cent respectively) reported that school personnel openly discuss issues related to racism and discrimination.

Table 5: Competence of school staff

	Parents		Students	
	N	%	N	%
Agree/Strongly agree				
Show understanding about the immigrant experience.	115	63.5	113	56.2
Openly discuss issues related to racism and discrimination.	65	46.8	83	50.9

Note: Some rows not add up to 100 percent due to multiple responses.

Student/ Family – School Interactions

Parent and student respondents provided an overall positive assessment of their interactions with school personnel and students. Parent respondents were most likely to report that librarians had shown respect for their cultural beliefs and practices (83.6 per cent) (table 6). Student respondents, however, rated their interactions with their teachers most favorably (83.7 per cent). Both parent and student respondents, however, expressed reservations about their interactions with other students. Only 60.0 per cent of parent respondents and 64.1 per cent of student respondents felt that other students had shown respect for their cultural beliefs and practices.

Table 6: Respectful interaction with school personnel and students

Agree/Strongly agree	Parents		Students	
	N	%	N	%
Principal or vice-principal	136	78.6	126	79.7
Counselor	119	79.3	106	75.2
Teachers	161	77.0	174	83.7
Receptionist	142	73.6	106	74.1
Librarian	112	83.6	129	76.8
School aids/assistants	102	77.9	98	74.8
Students	111	60.0	134	64.1

Note: Some rows do not add up to 100 percent due to multiple responses.

Parent and student respondents further elaborated on interactions between teachers and ethnocultural learners. About four in five students (80.5 per cent) felt strongly that their teachers had treated them as equal to other students (Table 7a). A smaller percentage of student respondents (74.1 per cent) indicated that their teachers had high expectations for their academic success. Compared to the student sample, a slightly lower percentage of parent respondents agreed with the statements that teachers had treated their children equal to other students (75.9 per cent) and that teachers had high expectations for academic success of their children (74.1 per cent).

Table 7a: Student-teacher relationship

Agree/Strongly agree	Parents		Students	
	N	%	N	%
Treat me/ my child as equal to other students.	148	75.9	173	80.5
Have high expectations for academic success.	119	68.0	143	74.1

Note: Some rows not add up to 100 percent due to multiple responses.

Student respondents provided further insights about their teachers' expectations for their future after their high school graduation (table 7b). About seven out ten student respondents (71.8 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that their teachers had encouraged them to pursue university education. Another 27.1 per cent of student respondents indicated their teachers had

encouraged them to attend college after high school. A small percentage of student respondents reported that their teachers had encouraged them to go to vocational schools (4.7 per cent) or to join the workforce after high school (8.3 per cent).

Table 7b: Teachers’ expectations for future plans of students

Agree/Strongly agree	Students	
	N	%
Go to university.	138	71.9
Go to college.	52	27.1
Go to vocational school.	9	4.7
Look for work.	7	8.3

Note: Some rows not add up to 100 percent due to multiple responses.

Overall, a slight majority of student respondents (59.5 per cent) indicated that their teachers were supportive of their future career dreams (table 7c). About one in three student respondents (33.5 per cent) did not know whether their teachers were supportive.

Table 7c: Teachers’ support of students’ future career dreams

	Students	
	N	%
Yes	135	59.5
No	16	7.0
Don’t know	76	33.5

Parent and student respondents were asked whether they had experienced conflicts with school staff due to cultural differences in their interactions with schools. Only 9.0 per cent of parent respondents and 8.2 per cent of respondents reported conflicts with school staff (table 8a).

Table 8a: Experience of cultural conflicts with school staff

	Parents		Students	
	N	%	N	%
Yes	19	9.0	18	8.2
No	192	91.0	201	91.8

Among those who have experienced conflicts with school staff due to cultural differences, 33.3 per cent of parent respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that schools were fair in how they dealt with cultural disagreements (table 8b). A slightly higher percentage of student respondents (38.9 per cent) expressed their agreement with the statement.

Table 8b: Fairness in school responses to cultural conflicts

	Parents		Students	
	N	%	N	%
Disagree/ strongly disagree	10	37.0	6	33.3
Neutral	8	29.6	5	27.8
Agree/ strongly agree	9	33.3	7	38.9

Note: Some rows do not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Family – School Communication

With respect to access of immigrants to language support, roughly one in two parent respondents and student respondents (52.5 and 47.6 per cent respectively) agreed or strongly agreed that they readily had access to interpreters (Table 9). Only 31.6 per cent of parent respondents and 27.5 student respondents indicated that they readily had access to written information in first languages.

Table 9: Access of Families to Interpretation and First Language Support

Agree/Strongly agree	Parents		Students	
	N	%	N	%
Access to interpreters when needed.	94.0	52.5	91	47.6
Access to written information in my first language.	59.0	31.6	52	27.5

Note: Some rows do not add up to 100 percent due to multiple responses.

Table 10 elaborates on the modes of communication between schools and families. Both parent and student respondents identified parent-teacher interviews, notes or letters, and phone calls as the primary means of communication between their families and schools. However, student respondents consistently reported higher percentages of the use of various modes of communication between their families and schools than did parent respondents.

Table 10: Modes of communication

	Parents		Students	
	N	%	N	%
Parent-teacher interview	128	54.5	188	80.0
Phone calls	56	24.5	101	42.6
Home visits	4	1.8	9	3.8
Requested meetings	31	13.8	60	25.3
Notes or letters	84	37.8	118	49.8

Note: Some rows do not add up to 100 percent due to multiple responses.

School-Community Collaboration

This survey asked parent and student respondents whether their schools work with community groups and agencies to provide services for students and their families of diverse cultural backgrounds. Only one in five parent respondents (20.1 per cent) or student respondents (16.7 per cent) reported existing school- community partnerships to support culturally diverse families (table 11a). About 30.5 per cent of parent respondents and 14.6 per cent of student respondents

indicated that their schools do not work with community groups and service providers to support culturally diverse families. A large percentage of parent and student respondents (49.4 and 68.6 per cent respectively) acknowledged that they did not know whether their schools were working with community groups and agencies to provide services to culturally diverse families.

Table 11a: School-community collaboration

	Parents		Students	
	N	%	N	%
Yes	48	20.1	40	16.7
No	73	30.5	35	14.6
Don't know	118	49.4	164	68.6

Note: Some rows do not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Among those participants who had used the existing services for culturally diverse families, one in two parent respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that services for culturally diverse students and families are effective (table 11b). A slightly lower percentage of student respondents (43.6 per cent) agreed with the statement.

Table 11b: Quality of Services

	Parents		Students	
	N	%	N	%
Disagree/ strongly disagree	5	10.4	11	28.2
Neutral	19	39.6	11	28.2
Agree/ strongly agree	24	50.0	17	43.6

Parent respondents further provided their opinions on the support they had received from schools (Table 12). About one in two parent respondents felt that schools had provided adequate support for ethnocultural parents with respect to school orientation (52.3 per cent), how to stay in touch with the school (45.8 per cent), and how to be involved in school activities (47.0 per cent).

About four in five parent respondents indicated that they had received adequate support to learn about Canadian education (42.7 per cent), and to develop skills in order to help their children with learning (41.3 per cent). A significantly lower percentage of parent respondents reported that they had received adequate support from schools to stay connected with other parents (23.4 per cent), to deal with conflicts with staff (19.3 per cent) and to use community resources (17.8 per cent).

Table 12: Support for Parents

Agree/Strongly agree	Parents	
	N	%
School orientation.	124	52.3
Staying in touch with school.	108	45.8
Learning about Canadian education.	100	42.7
Developing skills to help my child with learning.	97	41.3
Staying involved in school activities.	111	47.0
Getting connected with other parents	55	23.4
Dealing with conflicts with staff	45	19.3
Using community resources	42	17.8

Note: Some rows do not add up to 100 percent due to multiple responses.

Involvement of Families in School Activities

Parent and student respondents perceived modest efforts from schools to involve them in school activities (Table 13). Only one in four parent respondents felt strongly that schools had involved them in planning processes to promote different cultures (25.9 per cent), and to help school staff to gain cross-cultural skills and knowledge (27.3 per cent). About one in three parent respondents indicated that their schools had involved them in developing services to help culturally diverse students to learn (30.9 per cent), creating plans to communicate with culturally diverse families (32.5 per cent), and developing school services to support culturally diverse families to deal with

difficult situations (31.3 per cent). Compared to parent respondents, student respondents rated school efforts to engage culturally diverse families in school activities more positively. One in three student respondents (33.9 per cent) reported that their schools had involved them in planning processes to promote different cultures. About 44.2 per cent of student respondents also indicated that their schools had involved them the development of school services to help students of diverse cultures learn.

Table 13: Schools’ efforts to involve families in school activities

Agree/Strongly agree	Parents		Students	
	N	%	N	%
Develop a plan to promote cultures.	42	25.9	76	33.9
Develop school services to help students of different cultures to learn.	46	30.9	99	44.2
Help school staff to gain cross cultural skills/knowledge.	41	27.3	-	-
Create a plan to communicate with families of different cultural and language backgrounds.	50	32.5	-	-
Develop school services to support culturally diverse families to deal with difficult situations.	45	31.3	-	-

Note: Some rows do not add up to 100 percent due to multiple responses.

Overall satisfaction

Overall, student respondents were more likely than their parent counterparts to agree with the statement that they were happy with how schools had dealt with cultural diversity. While 59.1 per cent of student respondents reported a high level of satisfaction with schools, only 31.5 per cent of parent respondents felt the same way (Table 14). A significant number of parent respondents (40.1 per cent) and student respondents (29.8 per cent) felt neutral about the efforts of schools to address cultural diversity in their schools.

Table 14: Overall satisfaction of parents and students

	Parents		Students	
	N	%	N	%
Disagree/ strongly disagree	63	28.4	26	11.1
Neutral	89	40.1	70	29.8
Agree/ strongly agree	70	31.5	139	59.1

Congruence in Parents' and Students' Responses

Chi-square analysis was conducted to examine the differences in the parents' and students' responses to the 41 common items in the 9 areas of focus for this study: school environment (physical and social environment), cultural representation, integration of cultural diversity into school practices, competence of school staff, family and school interactions (interactions between families and school personnel and students, student-teacher relationship, conflict resolution), family and school communication (language support, modes of communication), school and community collaboration, involvement of families in school activities and overall levels of satisfaction of parents and students. The results revealed significant differences in parents' and students' responses to 21 of the 41 common items of the parent and student surveys (Table 15). Notably, the Chi-square analysis pointed out significant differences in students' and parents' opinions with respect to social school environment, modes of family-school communication, involvement of families in school activities, and overall level of satisfaction with how schools have dealt with cultural diversity. The test results further showed significant differences in students' and parents' responses to several indicators related to cultural representation, integration of cultural diversity into school practices, interactions between families and school personnel and students, and student-teacher relationship. The results of the chi-square tests, however, found no significant differences in parents' and students' assessments of the physical school environment, competence

of school staff, how schools have responded to conflict resolution, access to language support, and school community collaboration.

Table 15: Congruence of responses from parents and students

	χ^2	df	p
<i>School environment</i>			
Physical environment			
Multilingual sign	3.104	1	0.08 *
Multicultural photographs	0.023	1	0.88
Multicultural books	0.00007	1	0.99
Nothing to celebrate multiculturalism	1.448	1	0.23
Social environment			
Use of heritage languages	10.900	4	0.03 **
Opportunities for intercultural interactions	7.949	4	0.09 *
Availability of cultural activities	12.795	4	0.01 **
Celebration of cultural histories/ contributions	15.162	4	0.00 **
<i>Cultural representation</i>			
School council	7.745	1	0.01 **
Administration	1.765	1	0.18
Teachers	55.722	1	0.00 **
<i>Integration of cultural diversity into school practices</i>			
Methods of teaching	15.868	4	0.00 **
Curriculum	30.541	4	0.00 **
School support services	11.547	4	0.02 **
Text book selection	6.995	4	0.14
Extra curriculum activities	14.633	4	0.01 **
<i>Competence of school staff</i>			
Knowledge of immigrant experience	6.372	4	0.17
Knowledge of issues related to racism and discrimination	7.328	4	0.12
<i>Student / family-school interactions</i>			
Interaction with school personnel and students			
Administrators	14.324	4	0.01 **
Counselors	20.725	4	0.00 **
Teachers	18.360	4	0.00 **
Receptionists	8.185	4	0.09 *
Librarians	9.101	4	0.06 *
School aides/ assistants	5.037	4	0.28
Students	4.128	4	0.39
Student-teacher relationship			
Equal treatment of students	9.743	4	0.04 **
High expectations for academic success	2.481	4	0.65
Conflict resolution			
Have experienced cultural disagreements	0.084	1	0.77
Fairness in dealing with cultural disagreements	1.864	3	0.60
<i>Family-school communication</i>			
Language support			
Access to interpreters	1.354	4	0.85
Access to written information in first languages	7.214	4	0.12
Modes of communication			
Parent-teacher interview	22.086	1	0.00 **
Phone calls	56.636	1	0.00 **
Home visits	14.773	1	0.00 **
Requested meetings	38.629	1	0.00 **
Written correspondence	54.110	1	0.00 **
<i>School-community collaboration</i>			
Availability of culturally focused services	3.494	1	0.06 *
Quality of services	7.168	4	0.13
<i>Involvement of families</i>			
Promoting cultures	26.712	4	0.00 **
Developing services for culturally diverse students	28.558	4	0.00 **
<i>Overall satisfaction</i>			
Level of satisfaction	47.483	4	0.00 **

** p<.05, *p <. 1

Further, as illustrated in table 16, student respondents assessed school responses to cultural diversity more favorably than their parents in the areas of cultural representation, interactions between families and school personnel and students, student-teacher relationship, involvement of families in school activities and overall satisfaction. They, however, rated schools less favorably than their parents with respect to social school environment, integration of cultural diversity into school practices, and modes of communication. Notably, student and parent respondents demonstrated great divergence of opinions on availability of multicultural books (a difference of 24.7 per cent), cultural representation of teachers (a difference of 20.7 per cent), integration of cultural diversity into the curriculum (a difference of 29.8 per cent) and extra-curricular activities (a difference of 32.1 per cent), modes of communication (differences of 25.5 and 18.1 per cent in the perceptions of the use of teacher-parent interview and phone calls as the modes of communication between families and schools), and overall level of satisfaction (a difference of 27.6 per cent).

Table 16: Extent of differences in responses of students and parents

	Parents (%)	Students (%)	Differences (% Students - % Parents)
<i>School environment</i>			
Physical environment			
Multilingual sign	50.4	58.4	8.0
Multicultural photographs	52.2	51.5	-0.7
Multicultural books	42.0	66.7	24.7
Nothing to celebrate multiculturalism	21.9	17.3	-4.6
Social environment			
Use of heritage languages	25.8	31.4	5.6
Opportunities for intercultural interactions	50.3	46.4	-3.9
Availability of cultural activities	44.7	37.1	-7.6
Celebration of cultural histories/ contributions	41.8	30.7	-11.1
<i>Cultural representation</i>			
School council	55.5	61.0	5.5
Administration	44.9	38.3	-6.6
Teachers	34.5	55.2	20.7
<i>Integration of cultural diversity into school practices</i>			
Methods of teaching	52.7	39.1	-13.6
Curriculum	57.3	27.5	-29.8
School support services	60.1	44.3	-15.8
Text book selection	53.6	43.1	-10.5
Extra curriculum activities	61.4	29.3	-32.1
<i>Competence of school staff</i>			
Knowledge of immigrant experience	63.5	56.2	-7.3
Knowledge of issues related to racism and discrimination	46.8	50.9	4.1
<i>Student / family-school interactions</i>			
Interaction with school personnel and students			
Administrators	78.6	79.7	1.1
Counselors	79.3	75.2	-4.1
Teachers	77.0	83.7	6.7
Receptionists	73.6	74.1	0.5
Librarians	83.6	76.8	-6.8
School aides/ assistants	77.9	74.8	-3.1
Students	60.0	64.1	4.1
Student-teacher relationship			
Equal treatment of students	75.9	80.5	4.6
High expectations for academic success	68.0	74.1	6.1
Conflict resolution			
Have experienced cultural disagreements	9.0	8.2	-0.8
Fairness in dealing with cultural disagreements	33.3	38.9	5.6
<i>Family-school communication</i>			
Language support			
Access to interpreters	52.5	47.6	-4.9
Access to written information in first languages	31.6	27.5	-4.1
Modes of communication			
Parent-teacher interview	54.5	80.0	25.5
Phone calls	24.5	42.6	18.1
Home visits	1.8	3.8	2.0
Requested meetings	13.8	25.3	11.5
Written correspondence	37.8	49.8	12.0
<i>School-community collaboration</i>			
Availability of culturally focused services	20.1	16.7	-3.4
Quality of services	50.0	43.6	-6.4
<i>Involvement of families</i>			
Promoting cultures	25.9	33.9	8.0
Developing services for culturally diverse students	30.9	44.2	13.3
<i>Overall satisfaction</i>			
Level of satisfaction	31.5	59.1	27.6

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study sought to illuminate the perceptions of ESL learners and their parents about schools' responses to cultural diversity in Alberta, particularly with respect to school environment, cultural representation, school practices, competence of school staff, school-student-family interactions, family-school communication, school-community collaboration, involvement of ethnocultural families in school activities, and overall satisfaction of parents and learners. The results demonstrate that parent and student respondents have provided rather lukewarm assessments of school responses to cultural diversity in almost all areas, except for their interactions with school personnel. Parent and student respondents assessed schools least favorably with respect to encouragement of heritage languages in schools, availability of culturally focused services in schools to support ethnocultural families, and involvement of ethnocultural families in promoting their cultures. Overall, parent and student respondents demonstrated congruencies in their answers to 21 of the 41 common items (51 per cent) in the parent and student surveys. Their divergent opinions in a number of areas call for more support for families to strengthen communication and understanding of school issues among parents and students.

The results of this study are quite consistent with those findings discussed in the 2004 review of ESL K-12 program implementation in Alberta (see Howard Research Management and Consulting Inc, 2006). For example, among those schools surveyed for the Howard report, only 19 per cent reported that they had a plan or strategy to address cultural diversity and competence, and 29 per cent reported that they had a plan to meaningfully involve parents of ESL students in supporting student learning. With respect to school-community partnership, the Howard report indicated that only 28.5 per cent of schools had partnerships with ethnocultural groups and immigrant serving agencies to provide interpretation and translation to families with limited

English. The report further highlighted that 65.0 per cent of schools had never, almost never or seldom involved parents in promoting cultural competence. The Howard report also pointed out the incongruence between the reported commitment of leadership to cultural competence and the actual allocation of resources to promote cultural competence. About 74.0 per cent of schools asserted that their leadership demonstrated a commitment to cultural competence. Yet, 53.0 per cent of schools reported that they rarely had adequate resources allocated to address and promote cultural competence.

Critical insights from this study and those from the Howard research report should serve as a reminder that the K-12 education system in Alberta has yet to fully appreciate and realize the diversity advantage. A culturally competent school system would tap into diverse ways of knowing, teaching, learning and doing, and support the enriched development of intellectual, social and personal growth of all students. It would prepare learners to be effective in cross-cultural interactions in all social, economic and political realms, both at home and abroad. A culturally competent school system would be in a good position to address the existing educational inequities that have challenged the academic success and wellbeing of learners on the basis of social class, immigrant status, language ability, ethnicity or race. It would strengthen the ethical grounding of public education, particularly in its treatment of ethnic and racial minorities. Also, a culturally competent education would most likely uphold and meet its legal responsibilities to ensure access to quality education for all learners, as enshrined in various provincial, national and international legislation, including the Alberta School Act, Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act, Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In order to achieve cultural competence, the K-12 education system needs to move beyond the public discourse on cultural diversity, political correctness, and an add-on or ad-hoc approach

to cultural diversity. Rather, the system needs to embrace systemic change and integrate cultural diversity into all structures and functions. The Coalition for Equal Access to Education would therefore recommend Alberta Education and school boards to work collaboratively with stakeholders to address the following areas:

- ✓ Conduct system-wide cultural audits with due attention to policies and guidelines, business plans, curriculum, funding allocation, accountability, and professional requirements;
- ✓ Develop plans to integrate cultural diversity into all aspects of governance, administration and management, and services;
- ✓ Allocate adequate resources to promote cultural diversity and competence;
- ✓ Develop reporting and accountability structures to monitor and evaluate cultural competence of the Ministry, school boards and schools;
- ✓ Set cultural competence as a professional requirement for all school personnel;
- ✓ Offer sustainable professional development opportunities for all school personnel to ensure cultural competence;
- ✓ Work with Advanced Education and universities to ensure integration of cultural competence into pre-service education and education leadership programs;
- ✓ Provide support for ethnocultural families to strengthen parent-child-school communication, and school involvement; and
- ✓ Involve ethnocultural families and community groups in the development, implementation and evaluation of initiatives to address and promote cultural diversity.

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