



# INDIGENOUS LITERACY ASSESSMENT 2021

## Trigger Warning:

Contents of this report may contain triggering or sensitive material such as discussions of abuse, Indian Residential Schools and other challenges experienced by Indigenous peoples.



# USAY

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## Land Acknowledgement

USAY is situated on the traditional territory of the Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, Iyârhe Nakoda and the Tsuu t'ina Nations as well as the Métis Nation of Region 3.

SCAN QR CODE TO HEAR LAND  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT



# PRAYER

Aayo ihstipatapiyoop, nohk'ksikaakskohsaakinaann ahohk ksisstsikoyik.  
O Creator, be near us today.

Kimmaatookinaan, anak kaanomyanistsitapi nit'hpipoy.  
Take pity on us, all peoples included.

Ok y niit'h piipoy, annak kawaapoomahka, payootah,  
sooyitapii.

Also, I pray for all creation who roam the Earth, all  
birds, and all sea creatures.

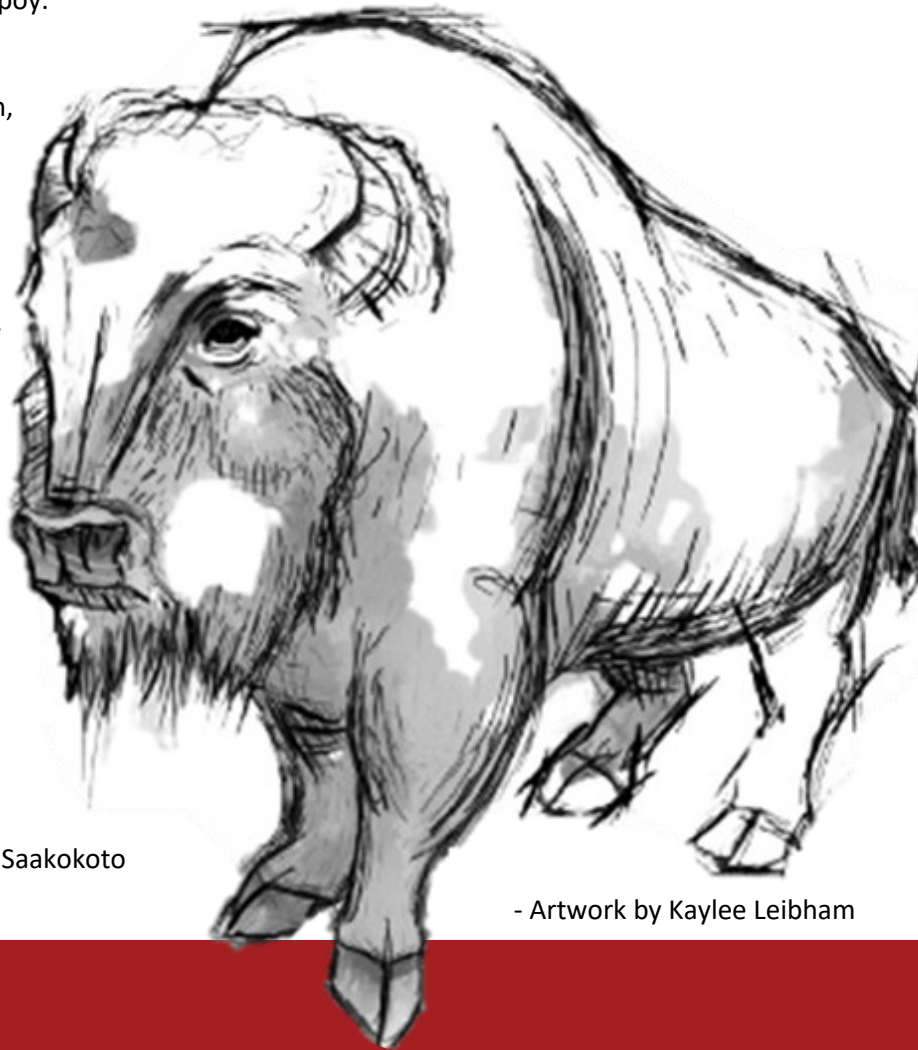
Maakoohkomaanist asookapis ksahkoom.  
Everything on Earth to remain the way it should be.

Anak maatsoopookhkootima maakohksi  
piik'khotsimass.  
All unfortunate people to acquire their needs.

Noomhpiipoy anak kanaitapi makooohsookapis  
opatapiisowiy  
For all people to have a good life, good health.

Ok y ninoohkitoot'hsisk miisaamipaatapiysin,  
Miistawaatsimaan, kaamotaani, kootsimaan.  
Also, I ask for a long life, to raise my children to  
adulthood, to escape harm, and to have all my  
necessities taken care of.

- Elder Saakokoto



- Artwork by Kaylee Leibham

## About USAY

USAY is an Indigenous led and governed organization that serves urban Indigenous youth ages 12 to 29 years. The agency was formed after a council was created by Mayor Al Duerr to address the rising rates of Indigenous youth suicides in the city. After several conferences, it was decided that an organization that focuses exclusively on the needs of Indigenous youth was necessary and USAY was formed.

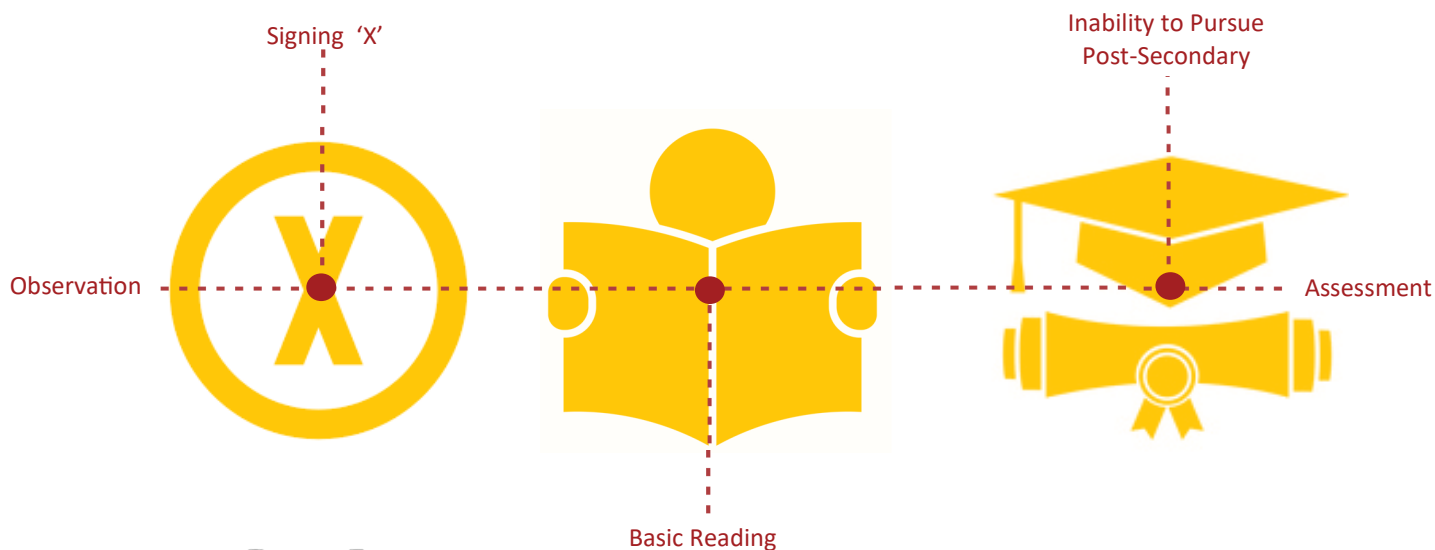
Today, USAY focuses on three major strategic objectives:

- Successful transition to adulthood
- Social Inclusion
- Healing

WATCH USAY'S  
CORPORATE VIDEO

With these overarching goals, USAY operates more than 30 programs annually. The programs we offer are highly diverse and can be seen on our website ([usay.ca/programs](http://usay.ca/programs)). We encourage you to watch the various videos to understand the incredible work we do. It is important to remember that USAY upholds the traditional role of 'the helper', which means we support Indigenous youth in uncovering their pathway to success.





Overwhelming observations by USAY staff working with urban Indigenous people and experiencing the intensity and severity of literacy challenges among our participants was worth exploring.”

## The Catalyst

USAY has been in operation for more than 20 years, and literacy has always been a concern and barrier when planning and implementing programs. In the past 15 years of service delivery, USAY has actively identified literacy as a major barrier for the youth we serve, and we have creatively and intuitively developed clever ‘workarounds’ to ensure participation. However, we acknowledge and understand that literacy is a major challenge, one which we were unsure how to address. Drawn entirely on the experiences of our staff who have worked with a large cross-section of Indigenous people living in Calgary, USAY aimed to understand the challenges we see with literacy prior to undertaking any information gathering processes.

In our programs we see three types of literacy challenges, impacting almost 100 percent of our youth, they include:

- Virtually no ability to read, write or comprehension skills, for example signing their name with an ‘x’;

- Ability to sign their name, can read forms and have basic reading skills to functionally get through daily experiences; and,
- Simple reading, writing and comprehension skills that would be on par with elementary school level reading levels (based on our observations), but not enough to move forward with employment, post-secondary and/or training programs that require a robust level of literacy.

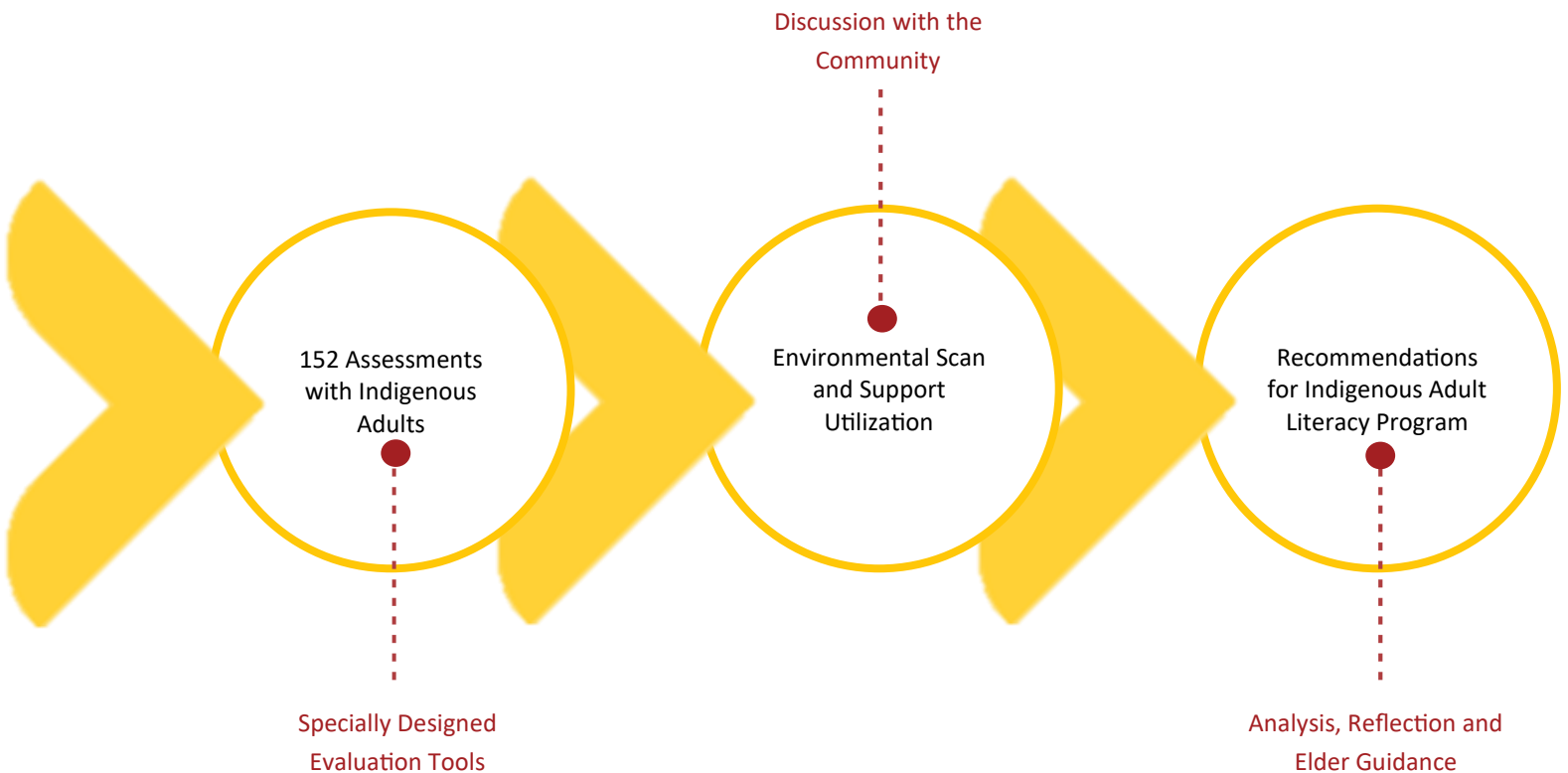
Prior to our beginning the literacy assessment, we had not identified any youth in our programs that can read, write or comprehend written English language at their standard grade/age level. Essentially, all the Indigenous youth in our programs are experiencing some sort of barrier to their adult literacy skills.

Overall, the overwhelming observations by USAY staff working with so many urban Indigenous people and experiencing the intensity and severity of literacy challenges among our participants was worth exploring.



# Overview

From May 2020 to June 2021, USAY conducted an information gathering project among 152 Indigenous adults within the City of Calgary focussed on literacy. The findings from that process are found within this document and aim to understand the scope of literacy challenges, programs that support their needs and referral systems, and provide recommendations for providing better services to Indigenous people. The goal of this document is to provide understanding so that future projects can make informed decisions that improve literacy skills among Indigenous adults by better understanding their unique needs and the environments of learning that they exist in.



## Scope

The Indigenous Literacy Assessment project had three main outcomes, they included:

- Assessment of 152 Indigenous adult's level of literacy
- Environmental Scan of current Indigenous literacy programming, level of utilization and potential system navigation/referrals
- Recommendations for Indigenous literacy programming, resources and support.

The final deliverable of these outcomes is this document that can be utilized by agencies and others in the community to increase understanding of the level of Indigenous youth literacy, the current available supports and the potential development of future programming that specifically meets the needs of the community.

# The Tools

USAY wanted assessment and information gathering tools that were reflective of our organization and community. Therefore, we sought out various literacy assessment tools that could be utilized, with the support of Calgary Learns, USAY decided on the Read Forward Literacy Assessment Tool. This tool allowed USAY to understand the 'industry standard' for literacy assessment and reading comprehension in a measurable and communicable manner. It also allows those in the literacy 'world' to pinpoint the level of literacy among the community in a way that is more broadly accepted.

The Read Forward Literacy Assessment Tool was combined with a 'survey' to understand various factors of the individual that was taking part in the literacy assessment. The factors that were considered include:

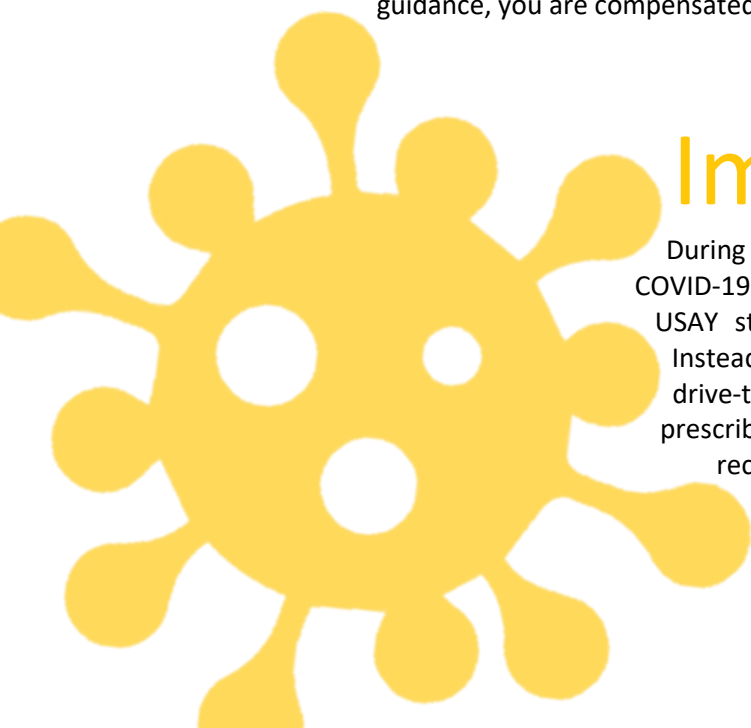
- Demographic information
- School experience
- Home experience
- Employment experience
- Health
- Access to technology
- Culture
- Spirituality
- Self-Esteem

These demographic and lifestyle questions were combined with others to understand their access to resources in the community and what types of literacy supports they had been previously offered or accessed, with the intention of including this with the environmental scan. Through this process, USAY identified partners and literacy programs within the city that is further detailed in subsequent sections of this document.

Finally, the participants were asked about their recommendations to improve literacy among Indigenous adults in the community, and the types of programs they would be likely to partake in. Allowing for a sense of self-determination among participants about the types of services that reflect their needs in the community, in the hopes that future programming would be reflective of their voice.

After taking part in a 'simple language' webinar with Calgary Learns, USAY was able to integrate learnings into the assessment to ensure it was in alignment with our expectations, as well as with the growing knowledge within the adult literacy resource community. The tool that was created can be accessed through USAY and will be shared with Calgary Learns for future use by others if desired.

It is important to note that each of the participants were provided with a \$30 honorarium for their participation and knowledge sharing in alignment with Indigenous protocol. It is believed that when sharing your knowledge and guidance, you are compensated or gifted an item within that exchange.



## Impact of COVID-19

During the assessment phase of the information gathering process, the COVID-19 pandemic caused strict public health measures, which impacted USAY staff from 'sitting with' those taking part in the assessment. Instead, participants were asked to take part in the assessment in a drive-thru fashion to allow for adherence to health restrictions prescribed by the Government of Alberta. Participants were also receiving COVID relief support from the USAY office in the form of food gift cards. It is important to note that the findings of this information gathering process may have been impacted by the pandemic in ways that we are unsure of.

# The Context

It is important to note that this document was written in June 2021, shortly after the remains of 215 children were uncovered at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in a mass, unmarked grave. At the time of writing this document, more mass graves were being discovered throughout the country, including Brandon, Manitoba, who were actively exploring 104 children's burial sites. The reporting of these children in the mainstream media brought to light the 'truth' or 'evidence' of the abuses experienced within the Indian Residential School System that had been described by Survivors.

The uncovering of these mass graves sparked renewed and intense grief for the Indigenous community across Canada and the world. The grief, anger and fear was profound for the USAY staff and community, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. The inability to reconcile personal feelings of loss, trauma and pain as separate from the findings of this report are transparent and a clear bias. It was impossible, as information gathers, community members and changemakers in the community to be objective about the acute pain that these children's burial had on our organization, work and commitment ongoing.

For those reasons, it is important to understand the USAY will be honouring our children by sharing the voices of Indigenous adults in the way that they shared their expertise, knowledge and thoughts. A profound, deliberate and calculated decision has been made to not compare the statistics of Indigenous adult readers against those of non-Indigenous people in any context. It is apparent that Indigenous people should not be compared to non-Indigenous people in any way; literacy is no exception. To quote the Alberta Reading Benchmarks, "Eurocentric standards do not correlate with Indigenous standards of literacy" (ARB, 3).

The intentionality of this decision is to let the truth of their voices and information stand alone, and then make recommendations and decisions based on those voices in the space it was shared. It is important to not present non-Indigenous statistics as the standard in which Indigenous people have to be measured against. The tool of colonization and the Doctrine of Discovery are based on the premise that Indigenous ways of knowing, being and living are not in equal to that of non-Indigenous ways and should therefore be suppressed, oppressed and eliminated, with damaging and lasting impacts. It is for that reason, and others, this document will take a decolonized approach in not drawing comparisons between information that should not be compared.

This document also does not aim to explain the history of Indigenous people in Canada. It is the expectation that the reader will take on the responsibility of becoming knowledgeable about history of colonization in Canada. In cases where specific historical information is relevant to discuss to provide context, those pieces will be included. However, it is encouraged that readers have a foundational knowledge of Indigenous peoples in Canada, both pre and post contact.

In many cases the information is presented as it was shared, and the reader can draw conclusions about what that information can mean in the context of their own work. USAY has taken the findings of this information gathering process and made recommendations and conclusions that are based on our work with Indigenous youth and the community, as well as our own lived experiences. As with all information, it is influenced by our experiences, bias and lens, including the context of grief, anger and pain from those children uncovered at Kamloops Indian Residential School and throughout the world.





# Weaponization of Education

It is essential to understand the Indian Residential School system when discussing Indigenous education in Canada. This extensive school system was developed by the Canadian government and administered by churches as a tool for genocide. The objective was nominally focussed on educating Indigenous children who were forcibly removed from their homes, however the primary function was to 'kill the Indian in the child' to force assimilation and indoctrination into the Euro-Christian belief systems.

This system of genocide was in operation from the 1880s until 1996, when the last school closed in Saskatchewan. During their time at the schools, Indigenous children were tortured, and many were murdered and buried in mass, unmarked graves all across Canada. The Indian Residential School system was a systemic, calculated and widespread practice that contributed to loss of language, culture and life. By the mid-century, the government was beginning to acknowledge the detrimental health outcomes of this practice and made amendments to the Indian Act.

However, the Indian Residential School system evolved in the 1950s into what has been coined the Sixties Scoop. This ongoing practice of disrupting Indigenous families by the government continued when ten of thousands of Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes without consent from parents or authorities. The government hired advertising companies to market Indigenous children in newspapers and television for adoption into non-Indigenous homes across the globe. Many of those adopted or fostered during this time have shared stories of abuse, and the long hours spent providing manual labour.

Presently, Indigenous children and youth are overrepresented in the child welfare system. Many Indigenous people have stated that this system is repeating the horrors of the past in the modern day evolution of the Indian Residential School system. The apprehension of Indigenous children into the child welfare system since the early 1980s is now being thought of as the 'Millennium Scoop', and survivors are calling for investigations and reform.

The impact from this genocide has caused Intergenerational Trauma, which has longstanding and ongoing repercussions within Indigenous community. The impacts of Intergenerational Trauma include higher involvement with the sorrow systems including justice, reduced health outcomes and poor educational attainment.

When aiming to understand topics such as literacy, it is paramount to understand that education was weaponized against Indigenous people for more than 100 years, and that many of those practices have evolved, not disappeared. The ongoing systemic challenges facing Indigenous people in Canada need to be recognized, discussed and considered when evaluating data, understanding findings and viewing the information provided within this document.





If research doesn't change you as a person, then you haven't done it right."

- Shawn Wilson,  
Research as Ceremony

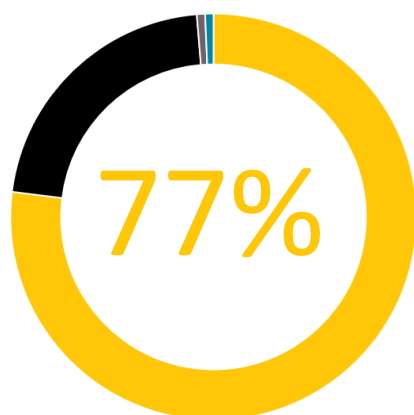
## The Findings

The findings found in this document are reflective of the information provided by 152 Indigenous adults living in the city of Calgary. The participants of the assessment self-selected to participate and may have been from the same household as others who are being reported on. USAY has aggregated the data to ensure the protection of all participant's identities and any quotes shared have been kept anonymous. The analysis of the findings could be used in other ways and create additional learnings, however, the information reflected here was most pertinent and of interest to the goals and objectives of this project. Aggregated data could be shared with others interested in learning more.

# Demographics

The information below is basic demographic information to understand those that participated in the information gathering process. USAY understands that examining this information through a gender lens, for example, may impact how the findings could be utilized and recommendations made. When applicable, and relevant to the information being sought, USAY drew correlations and possible areas of intersectionality. The demographic information shown here are the highlights of the findings in this area.

## Gender



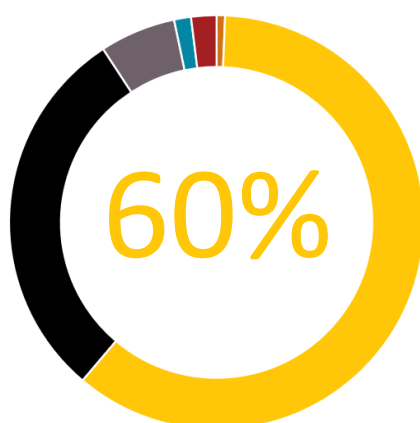
77% of the participants identified as women. Some research suggests that gender can play an important role in literacy and the majority of participants being female-identifying in this project could have an impact on the results. When looking at last grade completed, both male and female had a average completion rate of grade 11 (female = 11.19, male = 11.45).

## Age

35

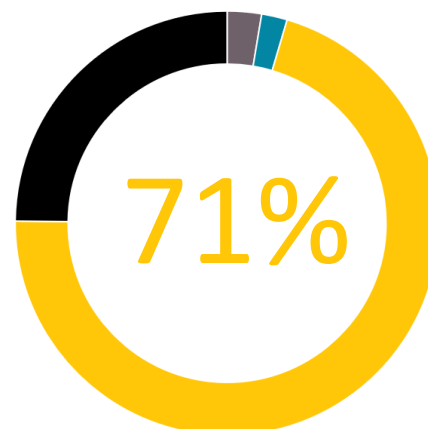
35 was the average age of participants. This age is much older than those typically accessing USAY's services, and in most cases these are the parents and guardians of those that attend, which provides a unique view into the programs that would support the entire family's literacy.

## Identity



60% of the participants identified as First Nation, 30% as Indigenous, 6% as Métis, 2% as Non-Status, 1% as Bill C-31 and 1% chose not to identify themselves.

## Language

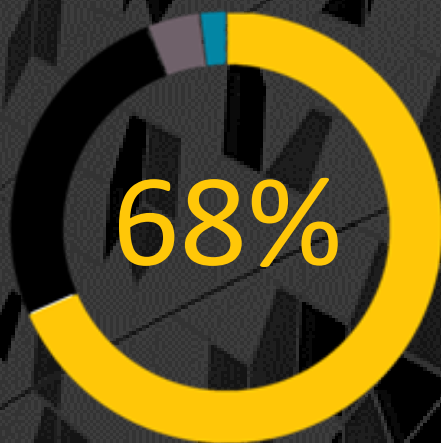
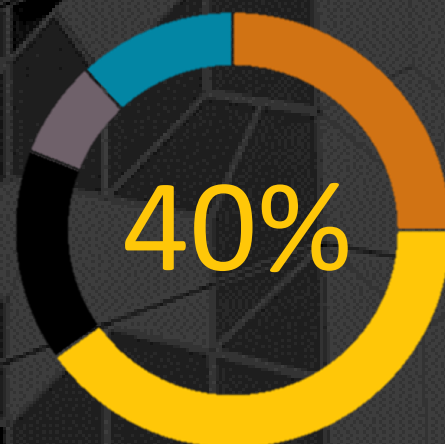


71% of the participants did not speak their traditional Indigenous language, 29% stated they did, 3% said "a little/some", and 2% did not state. Understanding access to traditional language could be an indicator of lack of English proficiency.

# Household Structure

## Number of Adults per Household

40% of the participants had two people over 18 years old in their households, possibly indicating households that have 'coupled' parents. The findings would indicate 25% are single parent households, 16% have three people over 18, 7% with four and 12% with five or more adults in the household (one indicated 8 people). This information showcases the types of household structures that exist within the Indigenous community in Calgary, including a multi-generational housing network.

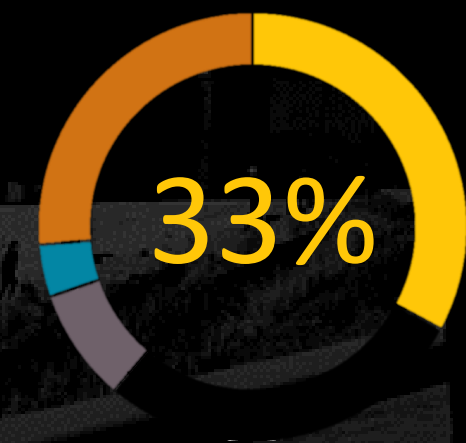
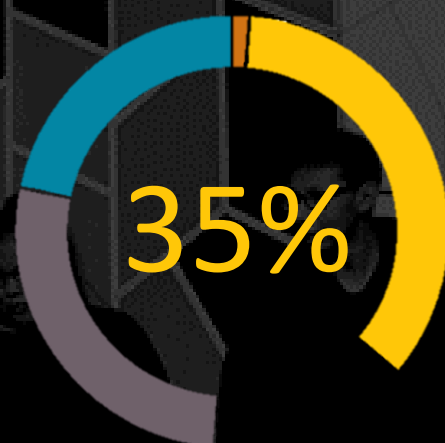


## Number of Children per Household

60% of households had zero to three people in their household under the age of 18 years old, 26% had four to seven and 6% had eight or more. In one case, there was 21 people living in one household under the age of 18 years old, it is possible they live in a group home, shelter or other group living situation (2% did not indicate). The average number of those under 18 per household was 2.9 people.

## Location of Indigenous Households

35% of the participants live in the Northeast, 27% in Southeast, 22% in the Southwest, and 15% in the Northwest (1% did not indicate); this information allows for an understanding of where services should be offered to Indigenous community members.



## Number of Schools Attended

33% of the participants attended one to three schools during grade school, 28% attended four to six, 26% were unsure (comments below) 9% attended seven to nine and 6% attended 10 or more.

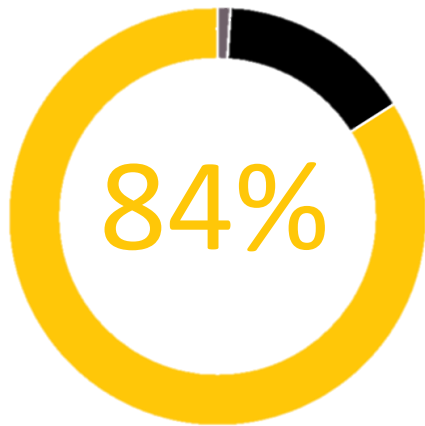
Many of the participants could not indicate how many schools they had attended in grade school because of the large amount of transition they experienced. The comments included:

- "One every year"
- "I was in care so I moved around a lot"
- "Too many to count"

# Impacts of Colonization

It was imperative to understand the types of colonial systems participants had been a part of and the intergenerational impacts of their participation. The participants were asked "Have you been affected by Residential Schools, Sixties Scoop or Child Welfare?", their responses are captured below.

## All System Participation

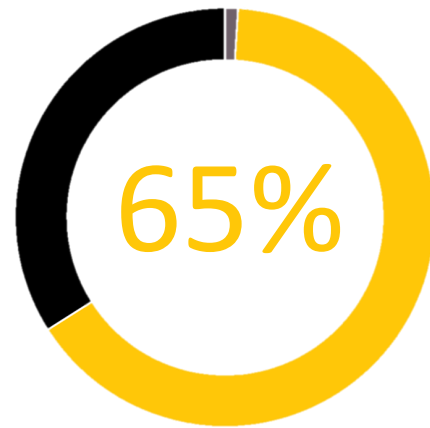


84% of the participants had been involved with a colonial system, such as Residential Schools, Day School, Sixties Scoop and Child Welfare.

The following quotes from participants showcase the level various impacts of being part of these colonial systems:

- "It was hard to show love in our family. Lots of substance abuse growing up, physical abuse, family in foster care, etc."
- "My mother was in foster care and because of that us kids never knew about the native tradition until I was 10"
- "I went to residential school and the day school, it affected my parents and families for us, I still can't talk about what I remembered"
- "My mom was a residential school survivor and we suffered by loss of language, culture and abuse. My great granny was a residential school survivor she raised my mom thus carried onto my mom, her abusive teachings my granny was exposed to; also my mom was involved in the 60s scoop as well"
- "My grandma went to residential school and it effected my mother and how she was treated that was passed down to me of how she treated me"

## Child Welfare System



65% of the participants had not been involved in the Child Welfare system, 34% had been (all but one removed from their home) and 1% were unsure. However, based on the comments associated with this question, the definition of 'child welfare' and family disruption is complex.

The following quotes from participants who stated they were not part of the child welfare system but illustrate the complexities of understanding the impacts of colonization and family disruption:

- "Although no one has ever said, I do have a reason to believe CFS many have been involved at some time in my early years I know I lived with my grandparents for a short time"
- "I left home at 15 years old, stayed with my friend's family for 3 years, it wasn't part of child welfare, they just did it out of the goodness of their hearts"
- "My mom did have an addiction and she gave me to my auntie when I was 4 years old"
- "My dad died at age 2 so I grew up with other family"
- "I think what impacted my learning journey was the separation of my mother and my step dad, because it was difficult time in my life. I went on to living alone with a friend for 2 years. It impacted my learning and studying in a bad way"

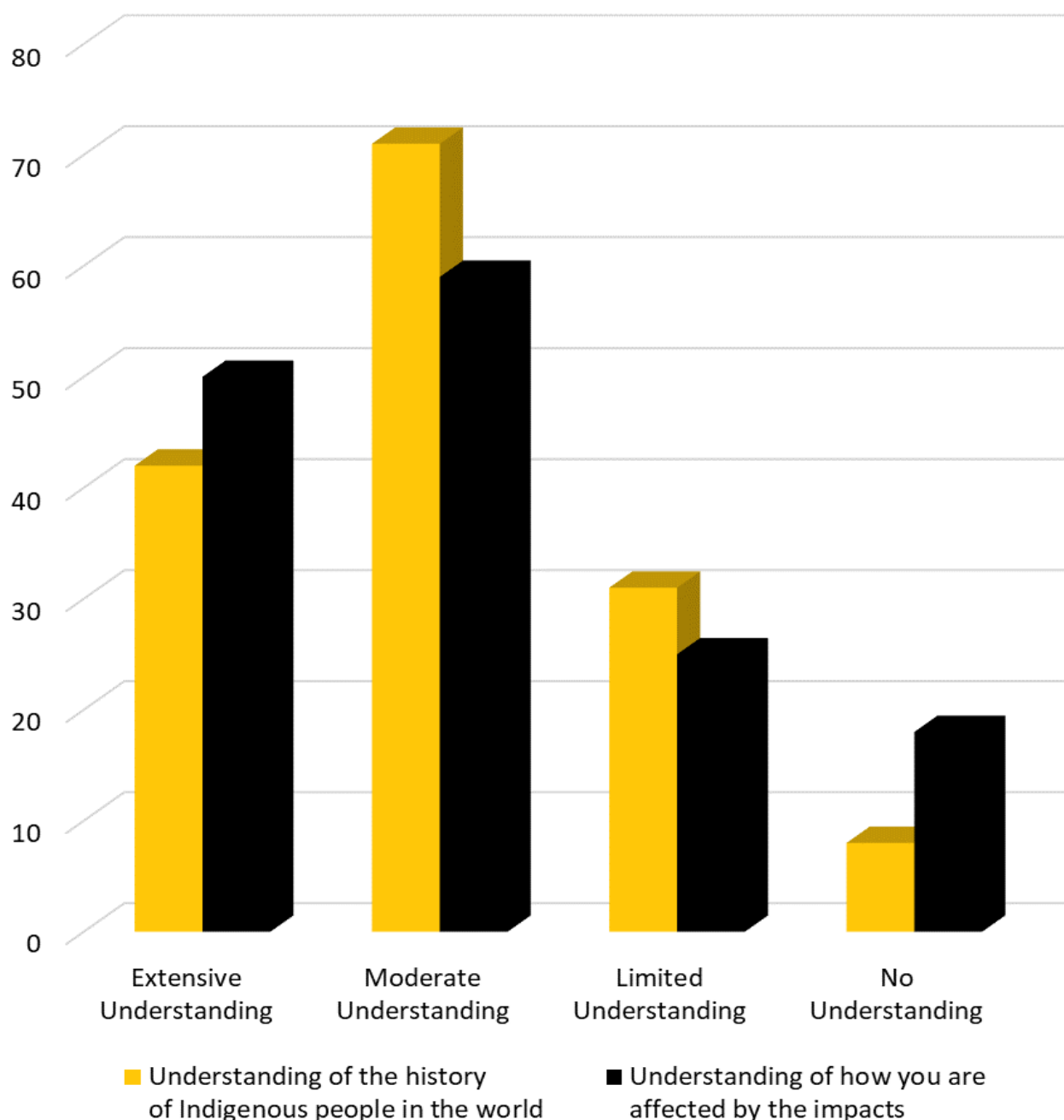


# Understanding Colonization

Participants were asked if they understand the history of Indigenous people in Canada, from contact to colonization, and current social justice issues, and if they understood how that history and ongoing legacy impacts their lives. The following is a summary of those that had some understanding (indicating extensive or moderate):

- 74% had an understanding of Indigenous people's history in the world and Canada
- 71% understood how that history impacted their living, such as Intergenerational Trauma

## Understanding of Colonization and Impacts

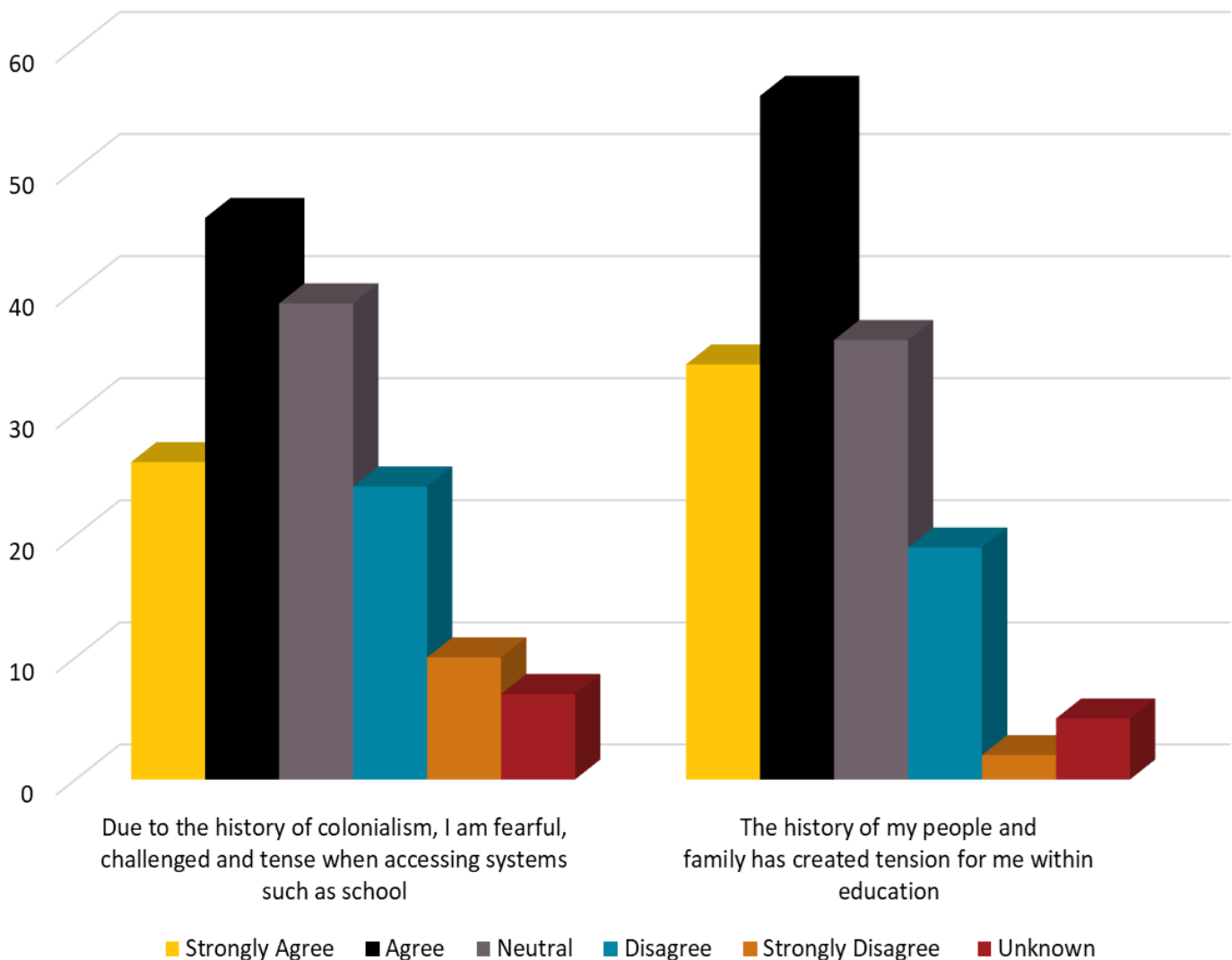


# Colonization and Education

It was important to understand how colonization impacted how participants felt about the education system, since education and literacy are so intrinsically linked. The following is a summary of those that did have tensions or concerns with the education system due to the colonial practices:

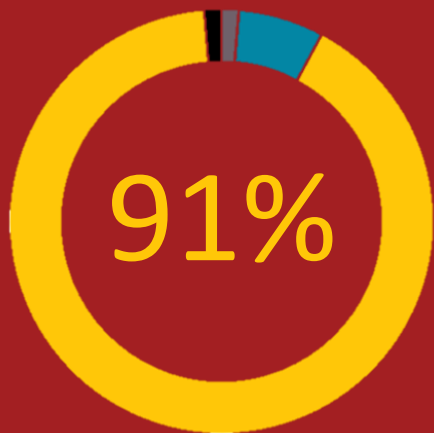
- 47% felt that due to the history of colonialism they were challenged or tense accessing systems such as school
- 59% felt that the history of Indigenous people and their families had created tensions for them within education

## Impacts of Colonization on Accessing Education

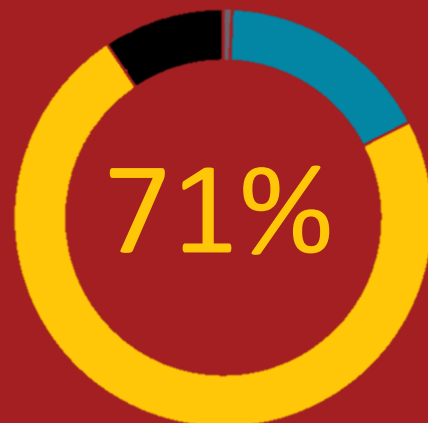


Participants were also asked if they felt that traditional oral ways of knowing aligned with education, and 73% did feel as though it did.

# School Connectedness



91% of the participants made it to high school, with 55% completing grade 12. It is important to note that 7% of participants had completed junior high school, with one person who had completed to grade 6.



71% of the participants felt the most connected in high school, with 16% in junior high, 1% in elementary, and 10% unsure when they felt connected to school, with some saying they never felt connected to school.

The following are quotes from participants that indicate why they felt connected to school, creating a better understanding of the in-school supports that may increase literacy among Indigenous students. The following themes emerged from those responses as to the ways to improve school for Indigenous peoples:

- Increased availability of cultural supports
- Understanding the expectations
- Access to recreation and extracurricular activities
- Supportive friendships, peers and relationships
- Increased sense of maturity, self-reflection and motivation
- Access to non-traditional school settings (upgrading, specialized school, etc.)
- Motivation to graduate and to have a better future or career
- Supportive school staff



[Grade 12 because] by then there was more culture being introduced into the school system.”

“I was more part of school activities and classroom learning”

“A good relationship with one of my teachers”

“I felt close to the end and figuring out what I wanted to after high school”

“I played sports and had a lot of friends and also met my girlfriend in that grade”

“I feel it really depended on my teacher and their way of teaching. I struggled academically throughout grade school due to lack of in class support and racism/discrimination, and stereotyping. Once I was removed from regular class and put in to a smaller group with more academic support I started to excel later in life (secondary school). I was diagnosed with a learning disability and the university was very supportive with assisting in an alternate learning plan which resulted in me graduating with a social work diploma.”

“It wasn't until I returned to school as a mature student that I felt purpose in school.”

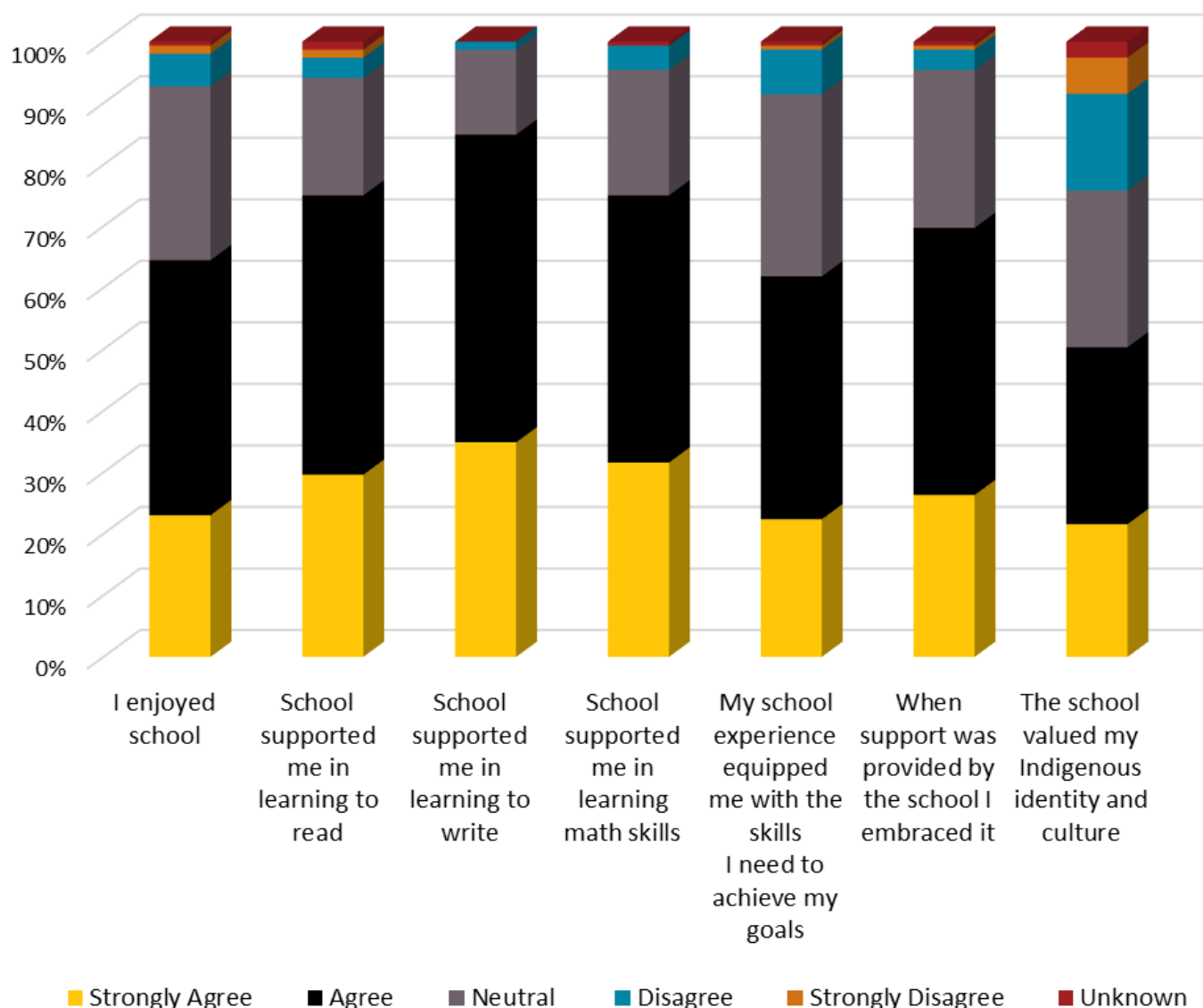
# School Connectedness

Participants mostly felt that school was a place that supported them in their journey. The following is summary of those that provided a positive response (strongly agree or agree):

- 64% enjoyed school
- 75% felt that school supported them in reading
- 84% felt that school support them in writing
- 75% felt that school allowed them to learn math skills
- 62% felt that school equipped them with the skill they needed to achieve their goals
- 70% felt as though they embraced help from the school when it was offered to them
- 51% felt that the school valued and understood their Indigenous identity and culture

As stated, when participants felt more connected to their schools, teachers, peers and culture they excelled in their studies.

## School Connectedness

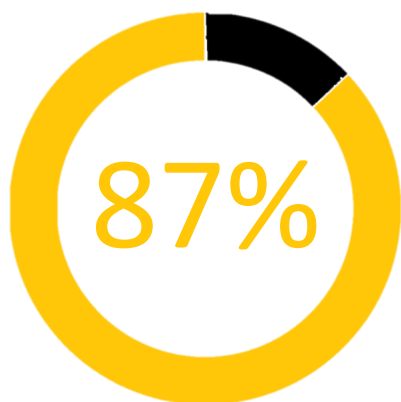




# Health

Participants were asked if they had any learning or physical disabilities or mental health concerns, to understand what factors might have impacted their literacy level. The intention was to have a clearer picture of the types of barriers that might be present in future literacy programming and build in the necessary supports.

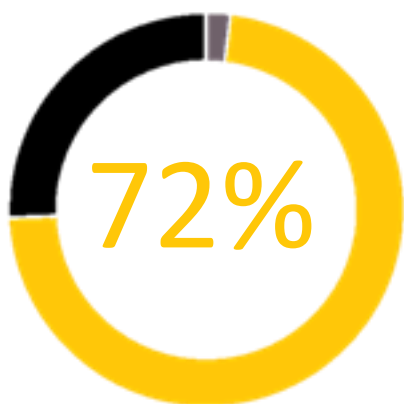
## Learning Disabilities



87% of the participants did not have a learning disability, 13% did have one, as shown in the adjacent chart. 67% of those with a learning disability received support, 24% did not and 9% were unsure.

Learning Disability	Number of Participants
Anxiety	2
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	6
School Related	3
Unknown	2
Autism Spectrum Disorder	1
Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder	2
"Being Slow" (quoted from participant)	1
Deafness	4
Memory Loss	1
Oppositional Defiant Disorder	1

## Physical Conditions

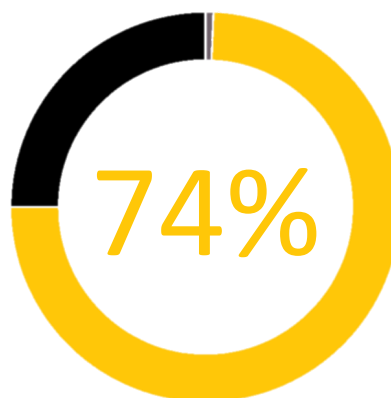


72% of the participants did not have a physical condition, 26% did have a condition shown in the below list and 2% were unsure.

Conditions included:

- Asthma
- Arthritis
- Muscular conditions
- Diabetes
- Seizures
- Cleft Palate
- Heart Disease

## Mental Health



74% of the participants did not have a mental health concern, 25% did have a condition shown in the below list and 1% were unsure.

Mental Health concerns included:

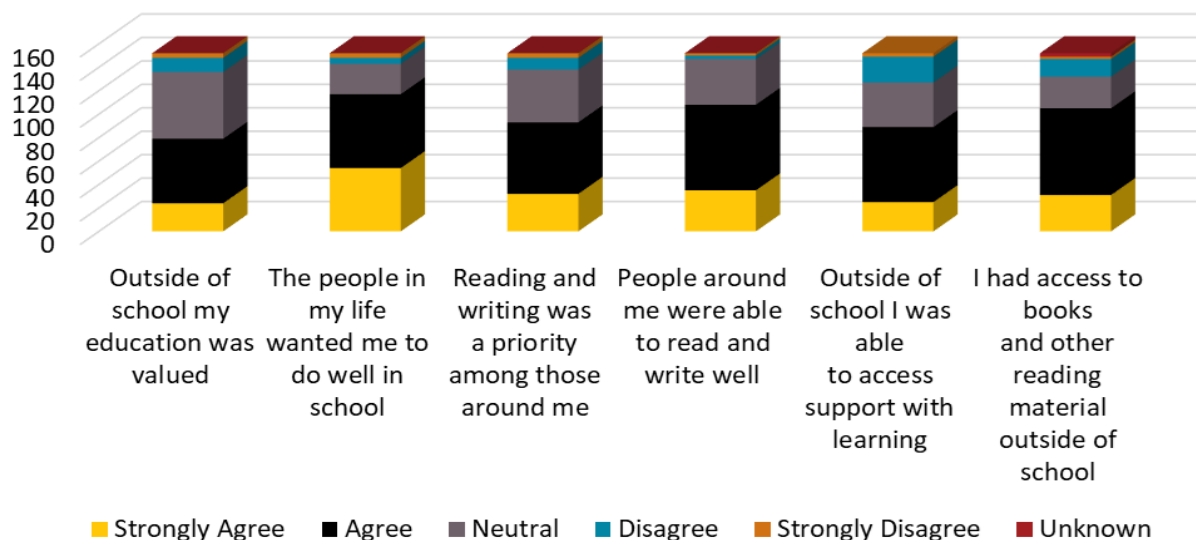
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Schizophrenia
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Post-Partum Depression
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Bipolar

# Natural Supports

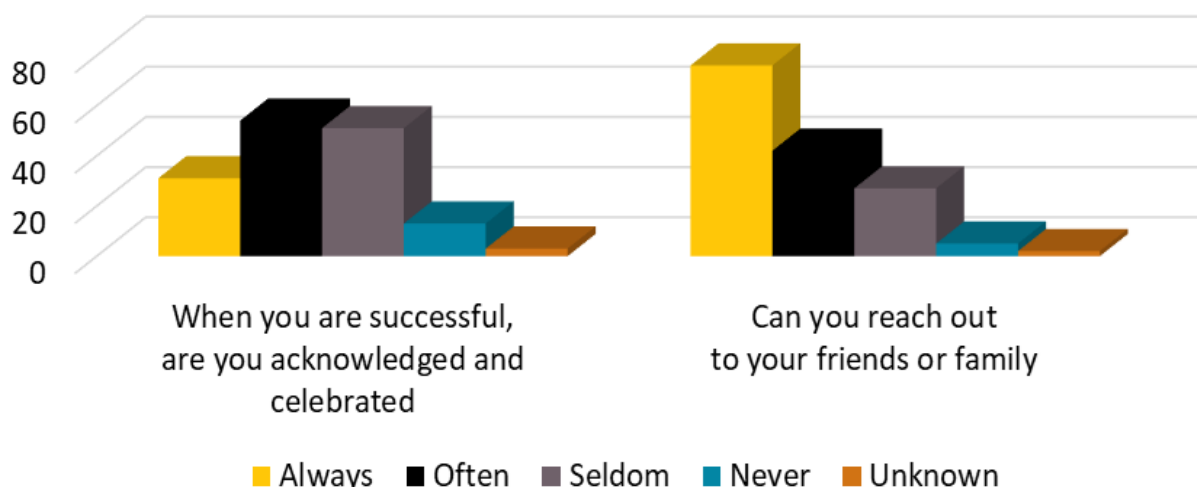
Participants were asked what their natural supports were like during their time in school to understand how this might have impacted their adult literacy level in order to develop recommendations for programming. The following chart showcases their responses to these questions, and below is summary of the percentage who responded positively (strongly agree/agree or always/often):

- 52% felt that outside of school their education was valued
- 77% felt that the people in their lives wanted them to do well in school
- 61% felt that reading and writing was a priority for those around them
- 71% felt that the people around them were able to read and write well
- 59% felt that outside of school they were able to access support with learning
- 69% felt that they had access to books and other reading material outside of school
- 56% felt that they were acknowledged and celebrated when they were successful
- 78% felt like they could reach out to friends and family when they needed to

## Learning Supports Outside of School



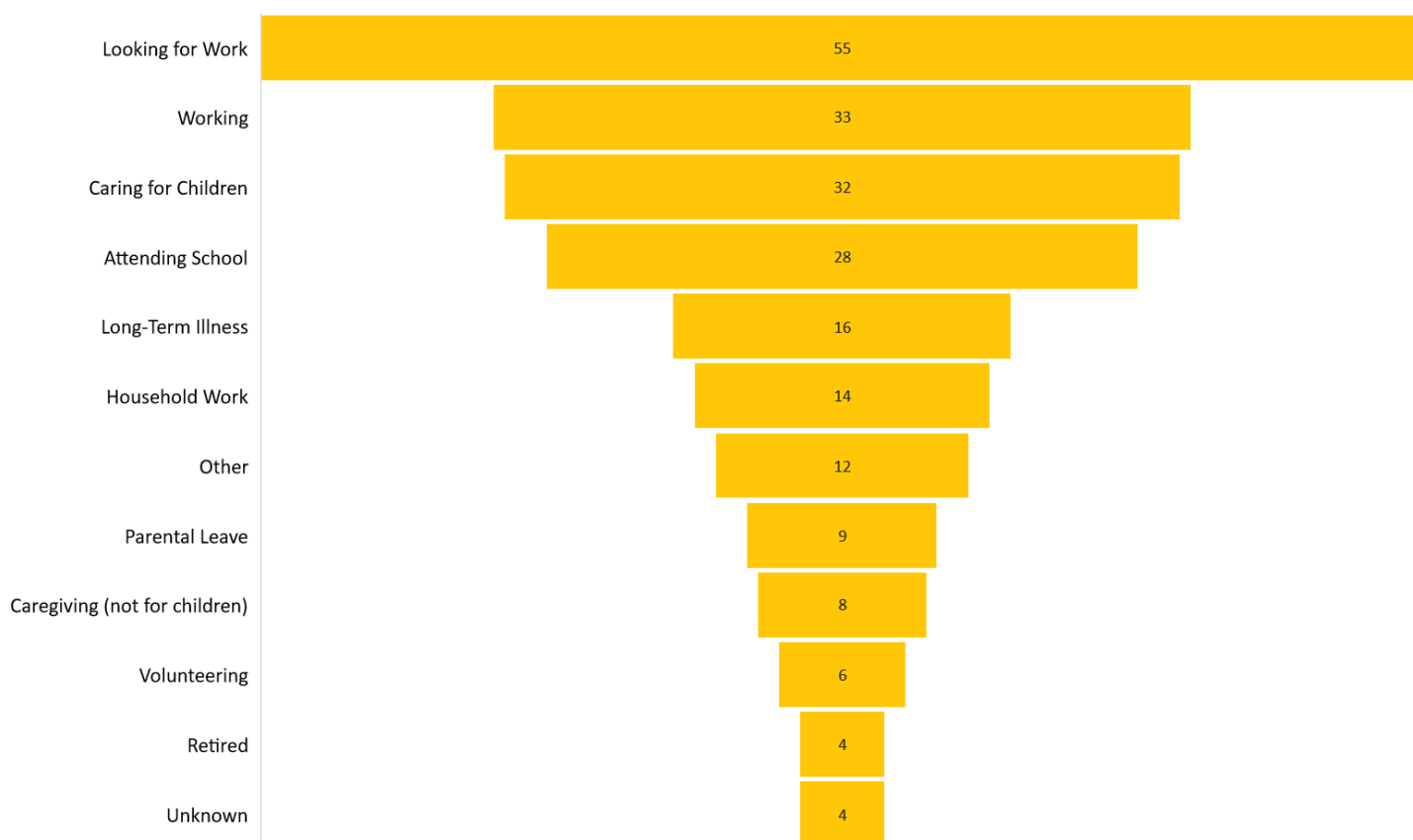
## Support of Natural Supports



# Employment

Participants were asked about their current employment status, which indicated that 36% of participants were looking for employment, while 21% were employed. A large number of participants were caring for children and others in their life, while also completing household tasks. It is important to note that the high rates of those unemployed may be reflective of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown of the city of Calgary. Of those that were working 78% were working one job, 24% were working two jobs, 3% three jobs and 6% five or more. The following chart outlines the types of tasks participants were taking part in that equate to 'work', both outside and within the home.

## Employment, Education and Domestic Tasks



## Barriers to Employment

44% of the participants felt like they experienced barriers to their employment, the following lists those barriers from most reported to least:

- Childcare (n=37)
- Job Training (n=29)
- Lack of Experience (n=28)
- Health Issues (n=20)
- Other (n=17 vaccinations, COVID-19, lacking identification, criminal record, lack of education and fear of discrimination)
- Life Skills (n=16)
- Transportation (n=15)
- Discrimination (n=9)
- Lack of Language Skills (n=7)

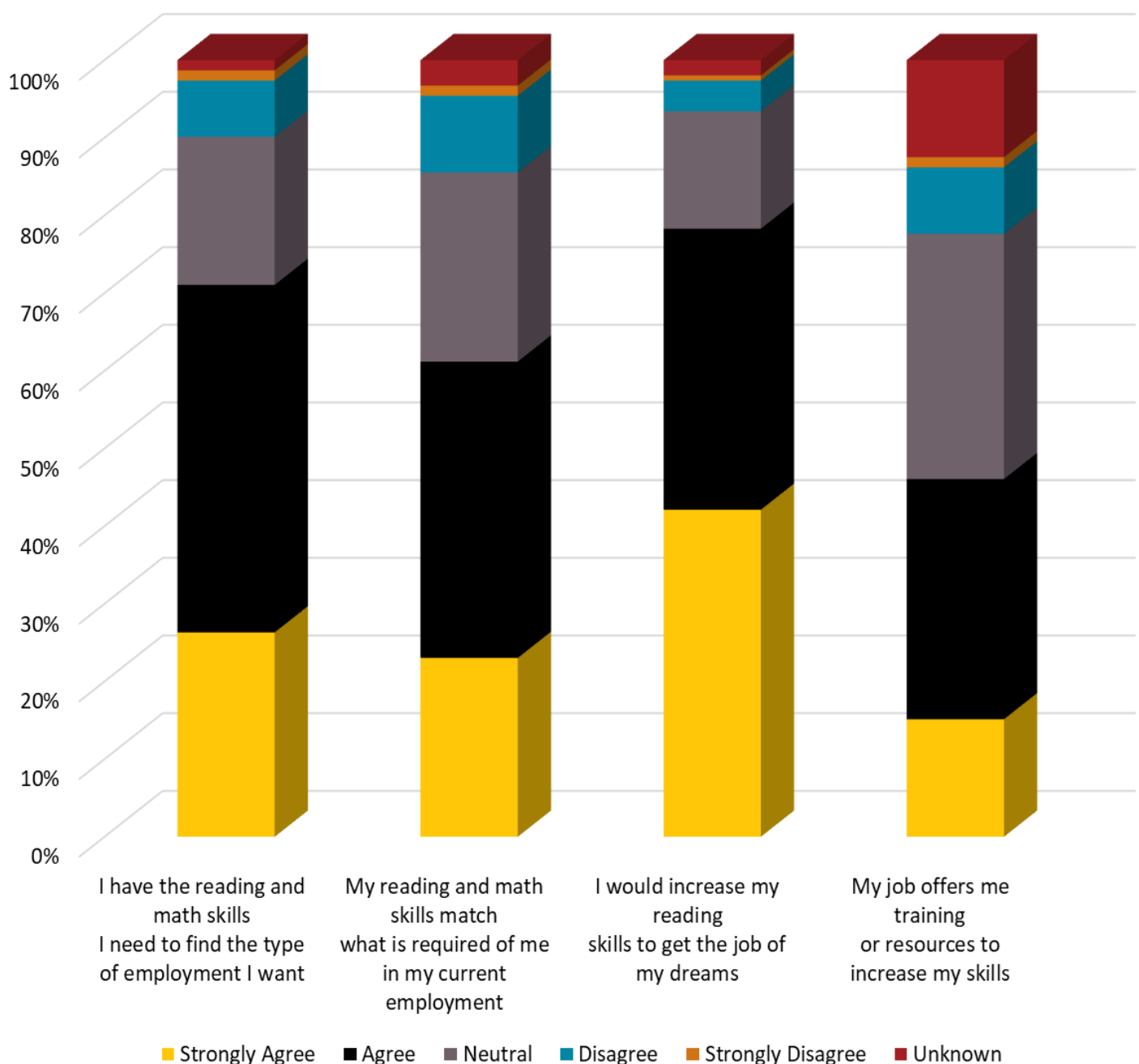
It is important to note that 77% of the participants were women and may likely be the primary care providers for children. Also, during the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and childcare facilities were shutdown which impacted the ability for parents to work.

# Impact of Literacy on Employment

To understand the impact that literacy has on employment, the participants were asked a series of questions, the following is a summary of the positive responses (strongly agree or agree):

- 71% felt as though they have the reading and math skills to find the type of employment they want
- 61% felt that their reading and math skills matched what is required of them in their current employment
- 78% felt that they would increase their reading skills to get the job of their dreams
- 46% felt that their current employment offered them training and resources to increase their skills

## Literacy and Employment





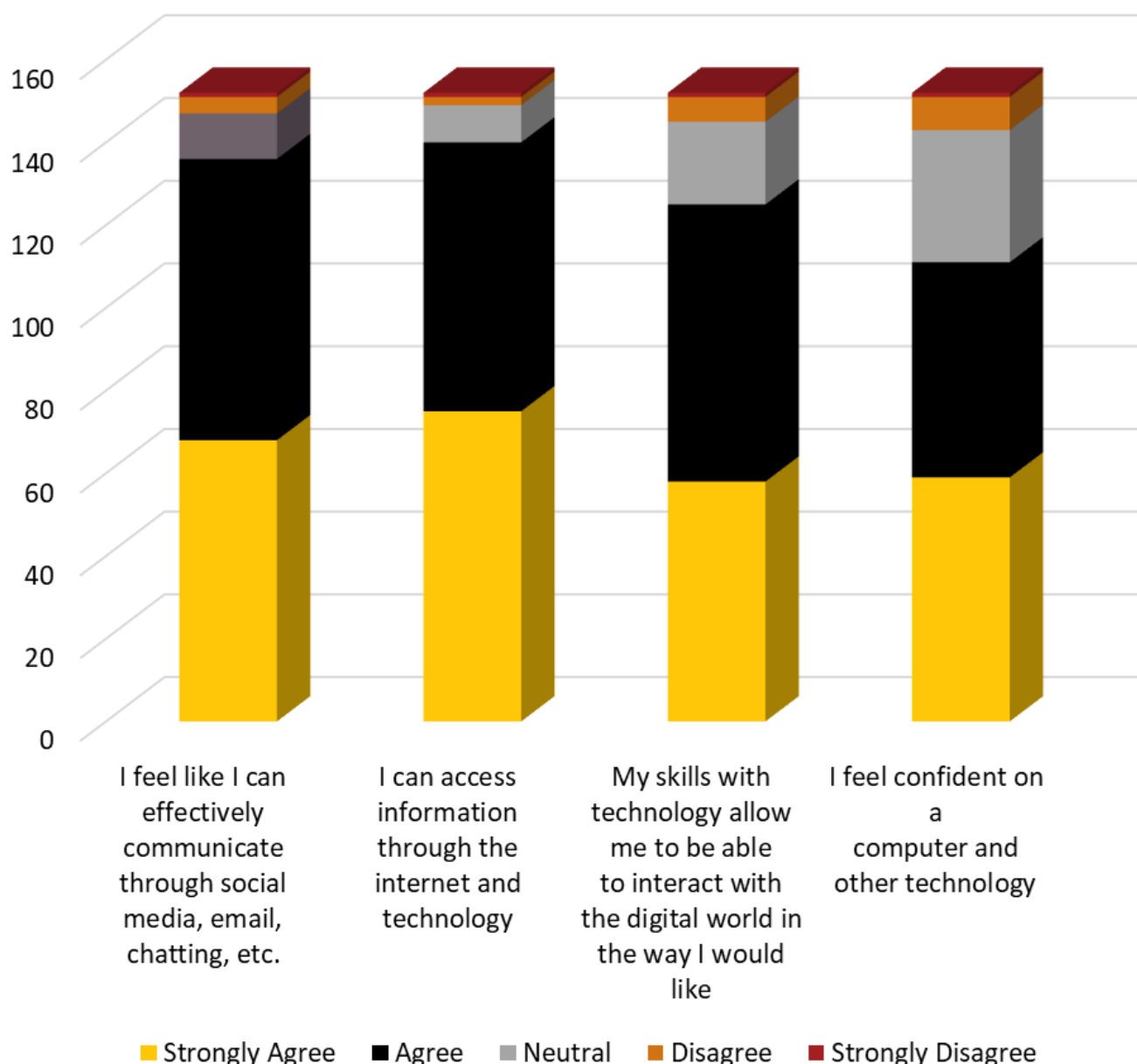
# Digital Literacy

To develop an understanding of the types of supports required to increase literacy among Indigenous adults, it was important to evaluate their level of perceived comfort with technology. The following is a summary of the positive responses (strongly agree or agree):

- 89% felt like they could effectively communicate through social media, email, chatting, etc.
- 92% felt they could access information through the internet and technology
- 82% felt that their skills with technology allowed them to interact with the world in the way wanted
- 73% felt confident on a computer and other technology

This level of comfort with technology may allow for online or virtual literacy programs that could be offered during pandemic lockdowns, but also with service providers where distance or transportation may be a prohibiting factor.

## Digital Literacy





“

Colonization is the disease. What is colonization and how do we ensure that we are not contagious — that we do not colonize those we strive to assist, by accident?

- Darien Thira

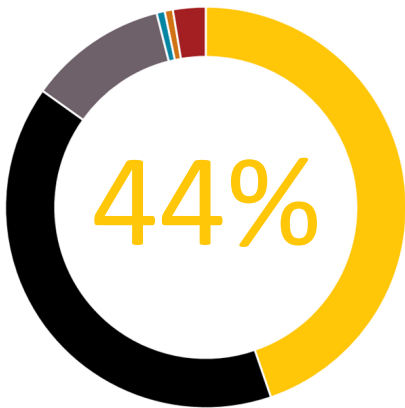
Research indicates that connection to and reclamation of Indigenous culture can provide a whole host of protective factors. In the words of Darien Thira, “Culture serves to hold our spiritual experiences on a community level — together they offer us Meaning”. It is important to pursue these efforts in ways that are culturally and spiritually safe.

# Connection to Culture

To understand the current level of access to culture and spirituality, the participants were asked a series of questions regarding their understanding or involvement in reclamation activities, the results found that the following:

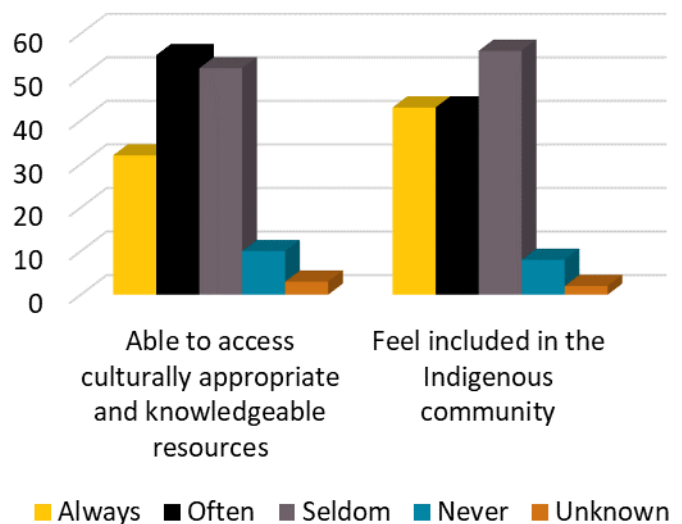
- 65% had extensive or moderate involvement in traditional social events (smudging, powwow, ceremony, etc.)
- 62% had extensive or moderate understanding of traditional Indigenous protocol and how to use them
- 62% had extensive or moderate understanding of their own personal traditional teachings
- 84% strongly agreed or agreed that oral traditional practices were important to them
- 57% were able to access culturally appropriate and knowledgeable resources (Elders, Knowledge Keepers, etc.)
- 57% felt included in the Indigenous community

## Importance of Oral Tradition

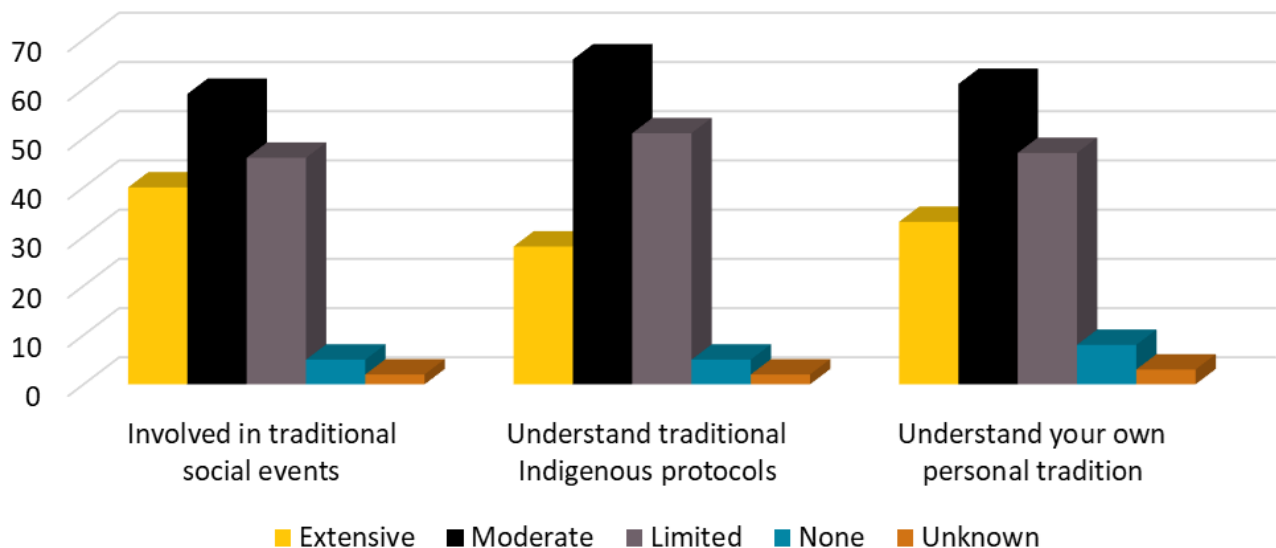


44% of the participants 'strongly agreed' that oral tradition was important to them, while 40% agreed (84% strongly agree and agree), 11% were neutral, 1% disagreed, 1% strongly disagreed and 3% were unknown.

## Access to Cultural Activities



## Involvement in and Understanding of Cultural Activities

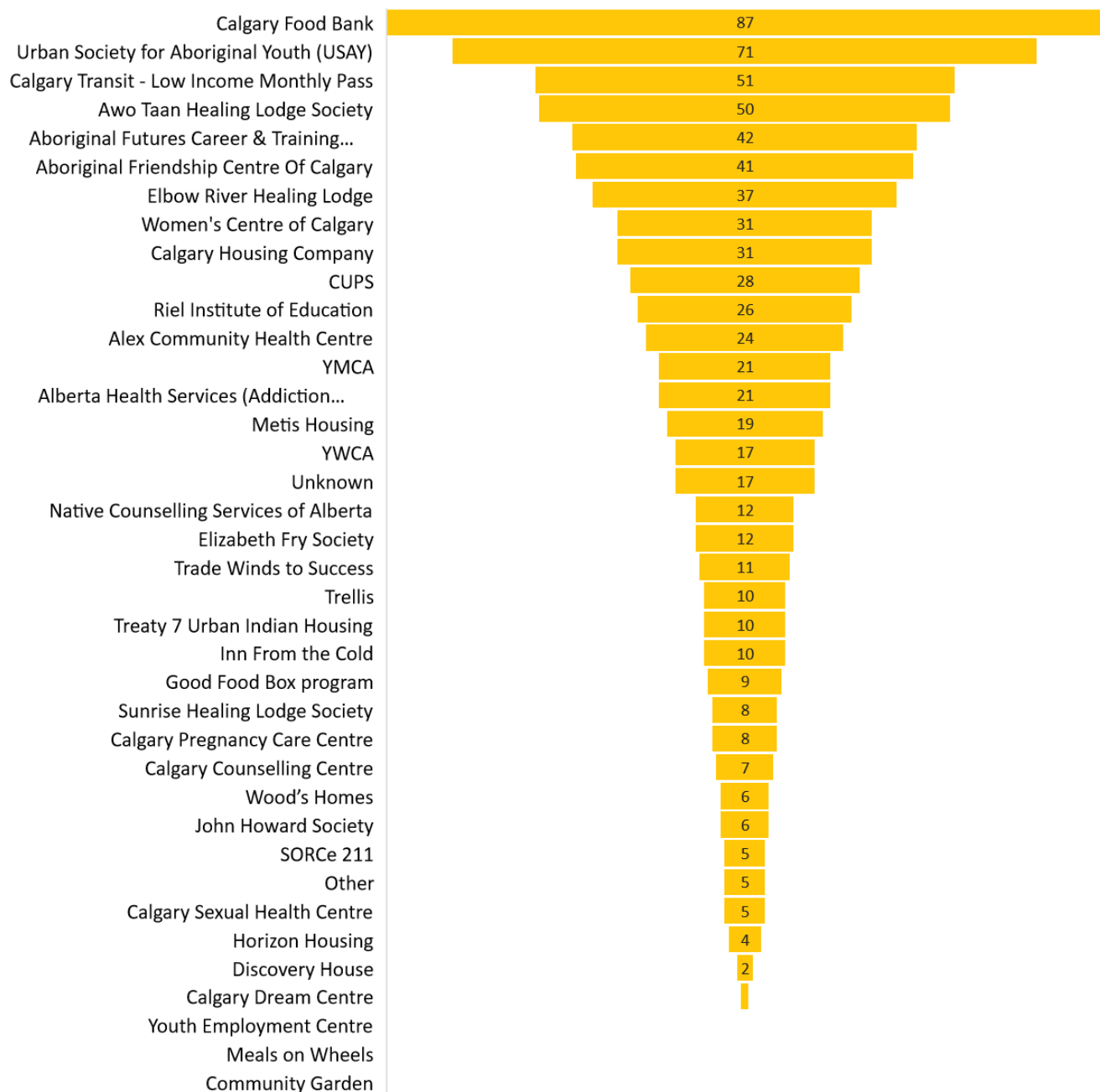


# Access to Community Supports

To understand the types of services and supports access by Indigenous community members, a list was provided to them to select from. The findings from this question may support the types of agencies that could promote or implement literacy programming in the community. Findings found that 80% were accessing supports, 14% were not and 7% did not indicate, this data may be skewed since all were accessing COVID Relief from the USAY office; therefore, despite the indicated list below, 100% of the participants were accessing USAY's services.

An important note is that the findings from this question found that 87 out of the 152 (57%) were accessing support from the Calgary Food Bank, and they were also accessing support from USAY for food insecurity. This is an indication that food insecurity is a prevalent and pervasive challenge facing the community.

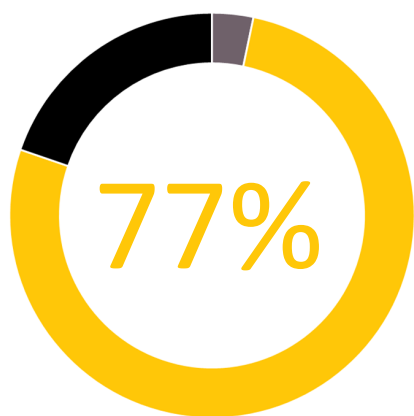
## Community Agencies Accessed



# Access to Literacy Resources

To better understand the literacy journey of Indigenous adults in Calgary, participants were asked whether they had completed a literacy assessment in the past, accessed a literacy program and, if yes, how might those experiences impacted their literacy skills. The goal was also to understand why community members might not have accessed supports to improve the ways in which program awareness is built and maintained ongoing.

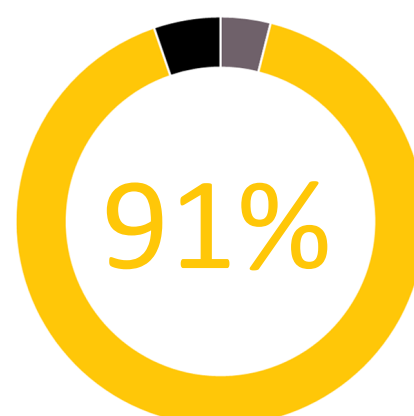
## Previous Literacy Assessment



77% of the participants had not been assessed for their level of literacy in the past, 20% had and 3% were unsure. The participants stated that they had been assessed at the following places:

- SAIT
- Bow Valley College
- CDI College
- Colombia College
- Elementary School
- Mount Royal University
- Old Sun College
- "School" in general was common

## Previous Literacy Program

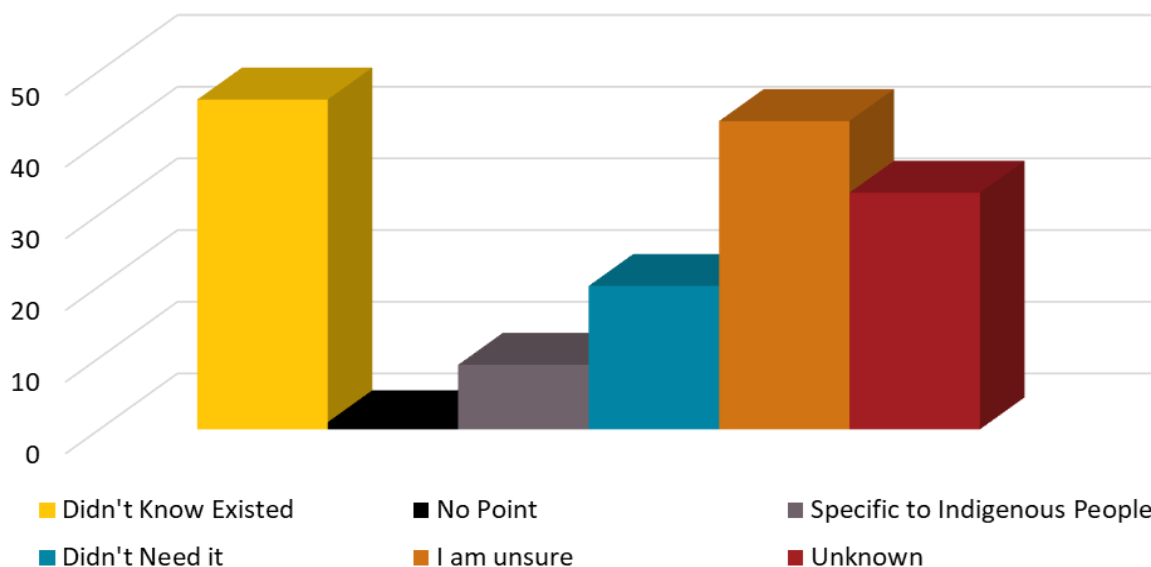


91% of the participants had not accessed a literacy program in the past, 5% had and 4% were unsure. The participants stated they had received literacy supports from the following places:

- "Employment Centre"
- Riel Institute
- Parenting Class
- Bow Valley College
- USAY (note: USAY does not have a literacy program)

Those that indicated they had attended a program 100% said it improved their literacy skills.

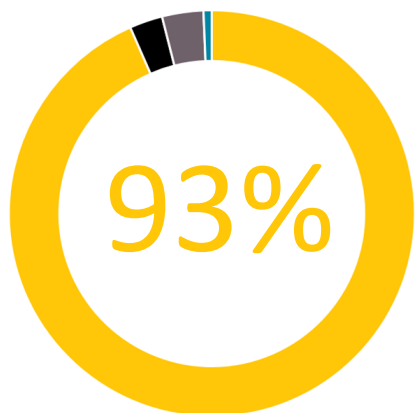
## Reasons for Not Accessing Literacy Support



# Literacy Assessment Findings

The objective of the information gathering process was to assess 152 Indigenous adults level of literacy. As stated, USAY utilized the Read Forward Literacy Assessment, which provides a series of levels to indicate the reading and comprehension level of a person.

## Read Forward Literacy Level



# 1B

93% of the participants were ranked at a level 1B for their reading level, 3% at 2A, 3% at 2B and 1% at 2C.



Feel okay but a refresher is always welcome”

According to Read Forward, a 1B reading skill means that participants are able to:

- Identify and use familiar words
- Know where to write their name on a form
- Understand simple lists such as shopping lists and simple menus
- Choose words from a list of words
- Use common structures such as phone numbers, addresses and prices

## Feelings About Literacy

Many of the participants had ‘mixed’ feelings about their literacy, the quotes below illustrate the complexity that literacy plays in the lives of people:

- “I wish I could be better at reading so I would feel better about getting a job for my children”
- “I am confident in my level, I've been to post-secondary”
- “I feel colonial English literacy has made me more successful in an English colonial world + trauma from cultural genocide”
- “I feel I would have more confidence in everyday life if I had the higher level of literacy”
- “I am comfortable with my literacy level. My positive impact was a good experience with the right teachers/ professionals I am connected with on my own through self advocating”
- “Sometimes I feel awkward”
- “Confident, I've had great jobs”
- “I feel content with my literacy level but I would like to gain more knowledge and confidence”
- “Limited especially when it comes to helping my children”
- “I am confident in my literacy level it has impacted me positively”
- “I have trouble with math which makes it near impossible to help my kids in school”
- “I feel positive and I am able to access more resources because of it”

Overall, many of the participants felt positive about their level of literacy because they were able to access employment, post-secondary and resources in their community. However, many indicated that confidence, math skills and presentation abilities negatively impacted their lives and ability to support their children with their education.





# Recommendations

The following section outlines recommendations for programming to increase literacy among Indigenous adults. These recommendations are broken into sections:

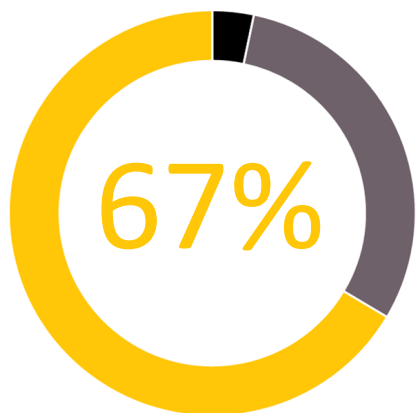
- Program Models
- Systems Change

The intention is to provide an understanding of the work that can be done in the service sector, but also the systems changes that would support that work, with the understanding that building literacy skills for adults is best suited when supports are in place during childhood.

# Program Recommendations

The following program recommendations were provided by the participants. The subsequent section provides the results of those related questions, but also provides suggested programmatic considerations from USAY that could support literacy program development for Indigenous peoples.

## Interest in Literacy Programming



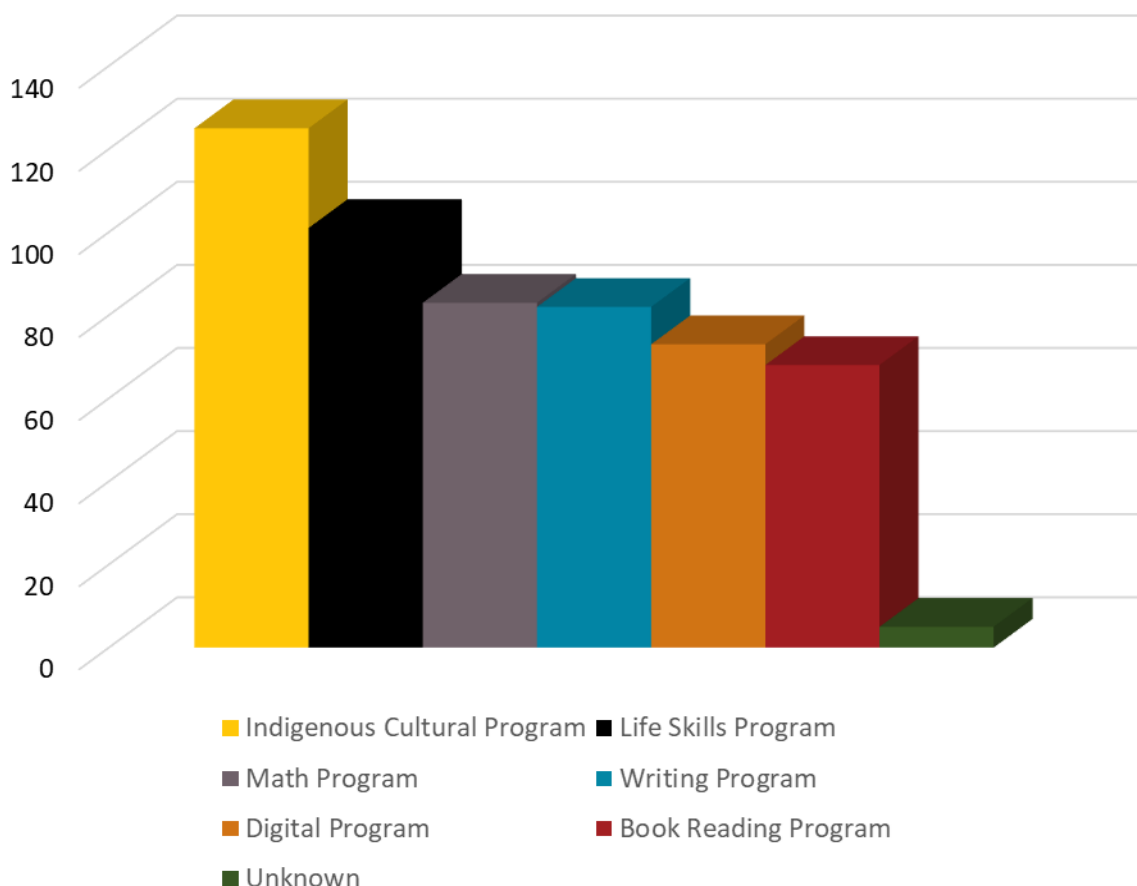
67% of the participants said that they would like to attend a literacy program.

## Desired Activities for Literacy

Participants were asked what types of activities they felt would increase their literacy, the chart below showcased those results. As shown the majority of participants felt that Indigenous cultural programs, followed by life skills, math programs, writing, digital and then book reading club.

Indigenous cultural activities are primarily oral in nature, however deconstructing the idea of literacy, participants could be asked to journal afterwards, agencies could provide written instructions combined with teachings, and other ways of involving written text, where appropriate and applicable could be meaningful. It is important to not create cultural confusion or conflict when undertaking this approach.

## Desired Activities for Literacy



# Proposed Program Model

The following is a proposed program model based on the findings of this information gathering process. This is not meant to be prescriptive, but instead a general idea of what a program could look like from what was uncovered during this process. In all cases, Indigenous programming should be designed for the area in which Indigenous people reside, and the cultural activities that are relevant to them.

## Target Group

Based on the fact that the majority of the participants were women who had the role of primary caregiver of children, the ideal literacy project would be designed for the family unit. Allowing for children and parents to have activities designed for their increased literacy.

Families would also have a broad definition, allowing for multi-generational family members to be included, such as grandparents, aunties, etc. Since so many children are a part of the child welfare system, this project should allow all people to be included to allow for greater awareness among non-Indigenous people regarding cultural protocol.

Being inclusive of all people would allow for a greater ability to build understanding, skills and reduce tensions between groups of people.

## Activity Examples

As stated, most participants would like activities that focus on cultural knowledge and traditional teachings. Through a deconstructed approach, there could be written instructions, journaling and even utilization of written English words combined with learning oral traditional languages. Language learning was of importance to participants, and therefore uniquely combining a dual language learning process could be innovative, while resonating with participants.

Secondarily, they would like to engage in life skills programs that increase their ability to engage in the workforce and post-secondary system. Although including more internal motivations within activities like this would improve outcomes overall.

It would seem that the activities within the program itself are not as important as building connections, creating cultural learning and supporting the family unit. Literacy can be included in ways that increase skills without it being the primary focus of the project itself. More importantly, literacy should not be the only objective in the project, as it seems like it might be a deterrent to attendance.

## Duration

An ideal project would be long-term, allowing families to return to the project for multiple years in a row, without a particular time limit or barrier to continued support ongoing. Ideally, there may be a graduated system in which cohorts could increase on a continuum of supports and skills.

Based on USAY's understanding of the community, the program should align with the school year (September to June) with a pause during the summer months for community members to participate in cultural activities.

The participants would like it take place during the day, evening or on weekends to accommodate their school and work schedules.

## Location

Many of the participants lived in the Northeast and Southeast quadrants of the city. With 54 people saying they would like the program to take place in the Northeast, and 44 selecting the Southeast. About half of the respondents said that they would go anywhere for programming as long as it was close to transit and/or had access to parking.

## Referral Sources

Reflecting on the systems of supports currently being accessed by Indigenous participants, it would be wise to connect with those agencies to act as partners as referral sources to the program and to provide additional supports. Understanding that creating a network of services around Indigenous participants would be necessary for their success in the project.

## Accessibility

As many of the participants have learning disability, mental health and/or physical conditions, it would be important to ensure the program is accessible and responsive to their needs. Before launching any activities utilizing a network of services ensure there are available assessments, supports and referrals, while also utilizing Treaty benefits and Jordan's Principle.

# Holistic Program Supports

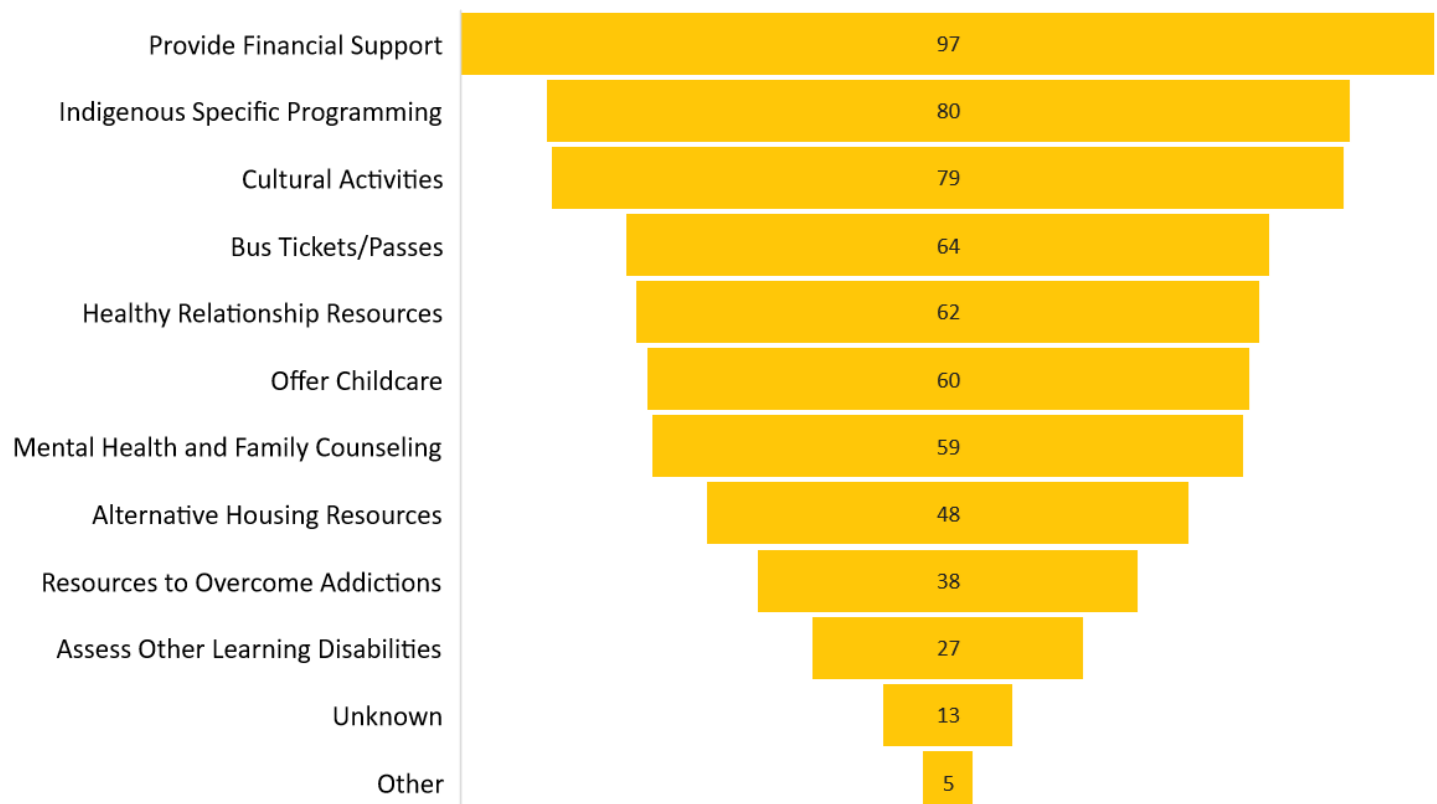
The following describes the way in which literacy programs could engage Indigenous participants, reduce barriers for participation and retain participants long-term.

## Holistic Supports

As stated, specific activities do not seem to be as important as creating a supportive, culturally safe environment. One of the biggest ways to support participants in engaging in long-term programmatic support is to provide holistic or wrap-around services. This may include:

- Financial supports such as honorariums for attending or incentives for participating
- Indigenous specific programming such as Indigenous staff, worldview and discussions about history
- Cultural activities such as Elder teachings, prayers, smudging and other ceremonies
- Transportation supports such as bus tickets or passes, as well as free and accessible parking
- Healthy relationship resources or opportunities to discuss family conflict and harm reduction without fear of ramifications
- Childcare and/or family programming that allows for caregivers to have time to connect to their peers and children the opportunity to connect to their community
- Mental health and family counseling such as counseling, conflict resolution and traditional parenting and mental health approach
- Alternative housing resources including referrals to safe housing, discussions about housing plans and other ways to ensure safe and adequate housing is part of the discussion for participants
- Addiction supports that are from an Indigenous perspective and are focussed on harm reduction
- Access to learning disability supports and assessments and ensuring people understand their diagnosis in terms of their literacy

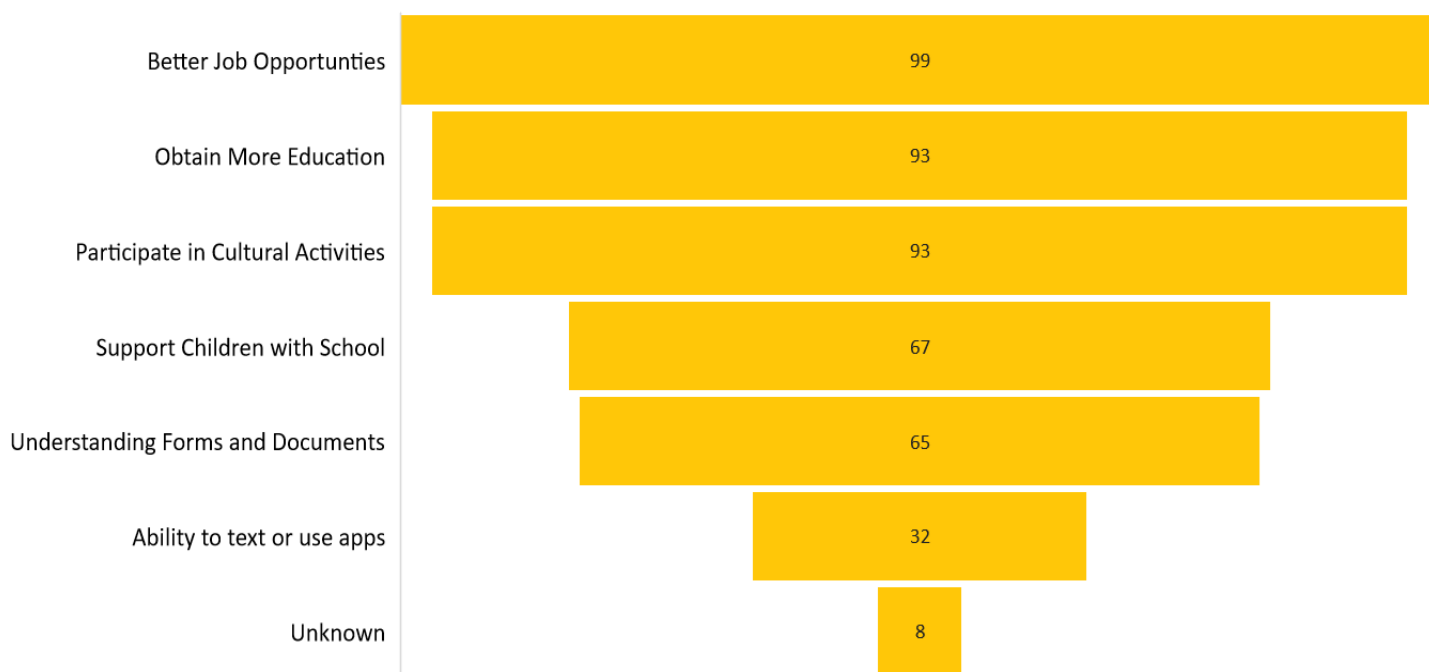
Overall, ensuring that participants feel supported within the program setting and that it reflects their worldview, teachings and interests, while not focusing solely on literacy as the primary outcome.



# Forecasted Benefits to Literacy

The following are the ways in which participants hoped literacy would improve their lives overall, or the intended outcomes they would like from a literacy project. As shown below, access to better employment opportunities was the first priority, followed by education and access to culture being equal, then supporting their children, understanding forms, ability to text and use apps, and then some did not respond to this question.

## Desired Outcomes for Literacy Programs



ALBERTA READING  
BENCHMARKS



Honour the whole student in the  
context of his or her culture”

- Alberta Reading Benchmark

However, according to Alberta Reading Benchmarks, ‘Sharing the Journey with Adult Indigenous Learners: A Teaching Reading Strategies Guide,’ many learners outside of the mainstream cultural influence, such as Indigenous peoples, have internal motivations such as enhancing their whole life. As shown above, many participants indicated that they wanted to improve holistic impacts of their lives, including external outcomes such as employment and education, but as internal motivators such as their cultural empowerment and success of their children, as well as social interactions.

Program outcomes should be focused on increasing literacy skills among participants without attachment to particular external motivations, but instead allowing participants to self-determine their motivations for accessing supports. Alberta Reading Benchmarks also captures this sentiment by stating,

“learning is a lifelong journey that integrates all aspects of one’s being (body, mind, spirit and emotions). Given that authentic learning requires the integration of all levels of being (holistic learning), it is very difficult to separate reading literacy from other aspects of literacy development and treat it in isolation”. To do this is almost counterintuitive to Indigenous culture-based learning principles” (ARB, pg. 7).

# System Change

This section of the document focuses on systems changes that could support Indigenous adult literacy but are outside of the scope of USAY and most charitable organizations. The following recommendations are based on the findings of the report and the inability to provide services from a charitable organizational approach, or even a sector one. There is also an intentional focus on schools, as they are the upstream support that would support early learners versus programs for adults who may already have experienced negative lifestyle outcomes from lack of literacy skills and/or would be difficult to re-engage in a learning program due to a traumatic or negative experience.

## Universal Basic Income

Due to the fact that many of the participants were experiencing intense food insecurity, unemployment, mental and physical health conditions, and other ailments that created barriers to their participation in the workforce, it would be recommended that there be a form of basic or guaranteed income. Beyond the current system of social services, which still prohibits families from meeting their basic needs, this systems change would have positive outcomes in reducing critical needs and providing more opportunities to participate in literacy projects and others that would improve their lives.

## Child Welfare

Although not a specific recommendation about how this system should be improved it is important to highlight, as much of the participants were involved with child welfare, apprehended from their homes and expressed the impact this had on their learning. A general systems change to a harm-reduction lens within the child welfare system could significantly increase outcomes for Indigenous children and their families, and overall reduce conflicts within programs such as the one proposed herein.

## Mental Health Supports

Mental health was a growing concern as communities transition out of the recent pandemic restrictions, as well as the recent recovery of Indigenous children in unmarked and mass graves combined with low availability and access to support. Therefore, ensuring that mental health is seen as health and integrated into our communities is important to the success of all community members. Reducing barriers to access, increasing navigation supports, reducing wait times and generally reducing the stigma to pursuing mental health support are ways in which the system could invest in Indigenous community members. As well, future investment in Indigenous models of mental health.

## Trauma-Informed Approaches

All systems from education and healthcare, to policing and justice need to have a trauma-informed approach. Creating an understanding of coping skills, trauma-manifestation and, more broadly, what trauma is, could dramatically increase the positive ways in which systems respond to Indigenous community members.

This approach will also include understanding Canada's history with Indigenous peoples, including contact, biological warfare, Treaties, Indian Act, Residential Schools, and others. Through understanding these important and key topics of Indigenous history, service providers, systems and the community will be more responsive and understanding of the unique needs of Indigenous people. Through this work it is intended to reduce systemic barriers, violence and racism that Indigenous people face when accessing support from all systems.

## Universal Childcare

Universal childcare would allow women to participate in the workforce and increase their family's stability. As the majority of the participants were women, the lack of childcare is evident on their ability to access systems.

## Building Natural Supports

Although not specific to any particular system, but an overall recommendation, to increase literacy success among Indigenous people, is to build natural supports in the form of:

- Valuing education and learning through internal motivation and feelings of safety
- Obtaining supports to learning outside of school
- Accessing books and tools to encourage literacy
- Acknowledging and celebrating school related success

This can only occur when Indigenous community members feel safe accessing service, begin to believe the systems are working with them, and the work of truth and healing has occurred.





Education is the new buffalo.”

- Blair Stonechild

Literacy and education are intrinsically linked. In our society, school is often the first place that children are introduced to the concepts of reading, writing and math skills. For that reason, it was important for this work to understand what it was about education that could be improved as a ‘first line of defense’ to increasing adult literacy in the future. Understanding how to improve systems to ensure more Indigenous children and youth leave with a higher level of literacy before entering adulthood may increase literacy rates ongoing.





# Recommendations for Education

Participants were asked, 'When you think about grades 1 to 12, what stands out to you?', and their responses create a list of recommendations that could support the education system to increase positive outcomes among Indigenous students. It is important to note that the responses were changed for grammar and spelling purposes, and although USAY prefers to utilize Indigenous terms such as 'Native' or 'Aboriginal' were left unchanged. Also, not all of the responses are showcased, primarily those that highlight the theme most accurately.

## Connection to Peers

- "A time where you make friends and learn all the skills to succeed in life"
- "The friends I made. Also being first in my family to graduate with a diploma"
- "Making friends having a better understanding and having the tools"
- "Meeting new peers and lifelong supports and skills"
- "Friends, teachers, boyfriends, dances"

## Experiential and Fun Learning Opportunities

- "Hands on activities participation"
- "What stands out to me about grade 1-12 was my love for certain subjects and how it changed as I progressed through the grades. I also remember my excitement for sports"
- "The fun times like trips and outings, plus Grad"
- "Being able to learn something new everyday and high school provides opportunities to find hobbies and career choices"

## Trauma Informed and Safe Spaces

- "I came from domestic violence, so it was a safer place"
- "I moved a lot, so I found that school I went to were all the same. I like the connection with the teachers"
- "Lots of change and experience in different learning environments"
- "Grade 11, I found out I don't exist. Been using the wrong name"

## Build an Understanding of Expectations

- "Going to high school is a giant leap forward from previous grades, and feels more stressful."
- "Grades 6, 10, 11 and 12 because they are the biggest transitions one can make in school as a kid"



# Recommendations for Education

## Cultural Supports

- “Learning more about my culture”
- “Support for Indigenous students, lunch programs, mentorship”
- “In the catholic and public schools, it would be the Native liaisons person who helped me to succeed. Also joining community programs that helped Indigenous youth”
- “My Indigenous supports teacher in high school pushed me to finished high school”
- “There were classes for Blackfoot students with language and cultural teaching”
- “The need to ensure that accurate history and subject matter are taught include actual education in Indigenous studies for all”

## Connection to School Staff

- “Getting through English 30 and Macbeth. Finally found a teacher who invested her time to help me understand. It was the third time I took English 30, dropping out each time when we got to Macbeth. Finally passing the third time.”
- “All the great teachers I had to help me through the year”
- “My teachers were always there to help with my studies”
- “My teachers because they were always supportive in my learning and always made time to give me one on one learning when I needed the help.”

## Support Diverse Learning Needs

- “Getting the help and learning with my disability”
- “I personally struggled throughout high school due to depression and anxiety”
- “They helped young pregnant mothers”

## Barriers to School Success

- “I went to catholic school, so it was a lot if God, Jesus, and prayers.”
- “I struggled in school with math and homework”
- “Did not have enough education.”
- “Feeling different like I didn’t belong most times I didn’t want to be there, and my mom was not very supportive when it came to my education, I was also very quiet and shy I would not ask for help often.”
- “There was a lack of Indigenous studies and teachings”
- “Conservative attitude; racist times”
- “The racism from teachers, students, and the whole town”
- “Schools closer to me were more racist find larger schools more accepting in other cultures”
- “Not having the support by teachers and staff where learning was important”
- “Experienced racism when was growing up in grade school but got better in high school”
- “The racism in the education system”
- “[Grades] K to 6, and 7 to 8 [were] difficult, no Indigenous supports or programming”





# Our Learnings

Initially, USAY intended to undertake a full environmental scan, but after uncovering the findings, many Indigenous community members were not accessing services and stated they were hesitant to receive programs or supports that were not Indigenous specific (implemented by Indigenous organizations and people, within that worldview and lens). This meant that developing a sophisticated referral system or network would burden our capacity, as well as be completely underutilized. Therefore, working within the system that exists, developing new programs and working within the comfort of the community is the strategy USAY will undertake to providing literacy supports.

The standout learning for USAY was the complexity of literacy, and how intrinsically it is tied to feelings of self-worth, confidence and historical trauma. Unpacking literacy through long-term connection, support and holistic approaches is the primary way in which to invest in literacy skill development among Indigenous adults in our opinion. Literacy will not be improved without building relationships and connection beyond simply trying to invest in skill building, for example reading and writing be the sole and only objective.

After completing this project, USAY has a better understanding of literacy in our community, the complexities that exist and the ways in which we may be able to integrate literacy skills building within our current programming for Indigenous peoples. Understanding that literacy can permeate all of our programming in a way that builds confidence, worth and strength is a simple way that we can generate change. As USAY reflects on this project, we have chosen to integrate literacy in a deconstructed way into our program model and continue to assess the ways we are on this literacy journey with the community.