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# INDIGENOUS LITERACY ASSESSMENT



**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.

Pets &  
Cooking

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A photograph of three people sitting in a modern, brightly lit room with a wall of colorful, horizontal slats. On the left, a man in a grey hoodie is wearing a VR headset and looking towards the center. In the middle, a man in a black cap and a yellow and black t-shirt is looking at a tablet held by a woman on the right. The woman has long blonde hair and is wearing a white cardigan over a blue patterned top. They are all smiling and appear to be engaged in a collaborative activity. A white round table in front of them holds several papers and a tablet. The overall atmosphere is collaborative and focused on technology and learning.

# Catalyst

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

# Overview

In May 2020, USAY received funding from Calgary Learns and began our information gathering process among 152 Indigenous adults living in the City of Calgary. The findings and recommendations of that information gathering process will be presented here, as well as an accompanying final report. The hope is that this information can be used by agencies to support their literacy work within the community.

It is important to note that this information gathering took place during COVID-19 and strict public health measurements impacted USAY staff from sitting with the participants in the way that was initially anticipated.



# Tools

USAY created a 'survey' to understand more about the participants that took part, this included areas like demographics, school experience, natural supports, employment and others.

To assess literacy, USAY utilized the ReadForward adult literacy reading assessment tool. This allowed USAY to have a framework to understand lifestyle and how it might impact literacy.



# Terms

When thinking about literacy, it is important to understand that literacy is not just about reading and writing, it is also about an individual's capacity to put skills and knowledge to work.

This presentation and the document also uses the term 'foundational learning', which is, "an adult who chooses to engage in foundational learning opportunities such as literacy, numeracy, skills for learning, basic digital skills, and/or English language learning to address knowledge and skills gaps. Foundational learners often experience economic, social, and/or other challenges or barriers that may interfere with their learning - challenges that cannot be separated from the learning journey itself."

# Context

This project completed in June 2021, shortly after the remains of 215 children were uncovered at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in a mass, unmarked grave. It was impossible, as information gatherers, community members and changemakers to be objective about the acute pain that these children's burial had on our organization, work and commitment ongoing.

A profound, deliberate and calculated decision has been made to not compare the statistics of Indigenous adult learners 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".



# Weaponization of Education



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 needs to be recognized, discussed and considered when evaluating data, understanding findings and viewing the information provided within this document.



# Findings

It is important to show a distinction between those participants that achieved a grade nine or less formal education, and those that completed grade 10 or above. Adults who have completed grade nine or less are considered ‘foundational learners’.

The data was separated based on those that had completed grade nine or less of which there were 11 participants that met that criteria. Although this is a small number compared to that of those that completed the assessment overall, it is important to look at the differences between the two groups and create programs based on their feedback.



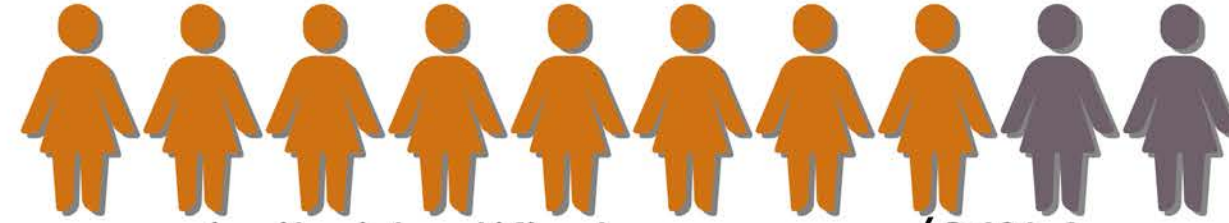
# Demographics

**34**

average age of participants

**100%**

identified as Indigenous



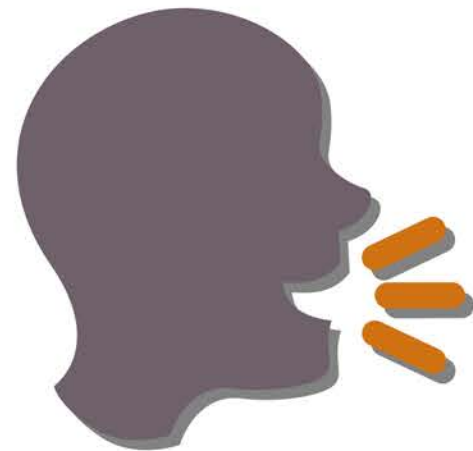
majority identified as women (91% for foundational learners, 76% for 10+)

**3 children**

average of 3.5 children/household for foundational learners, 2.8 for those grade 10+

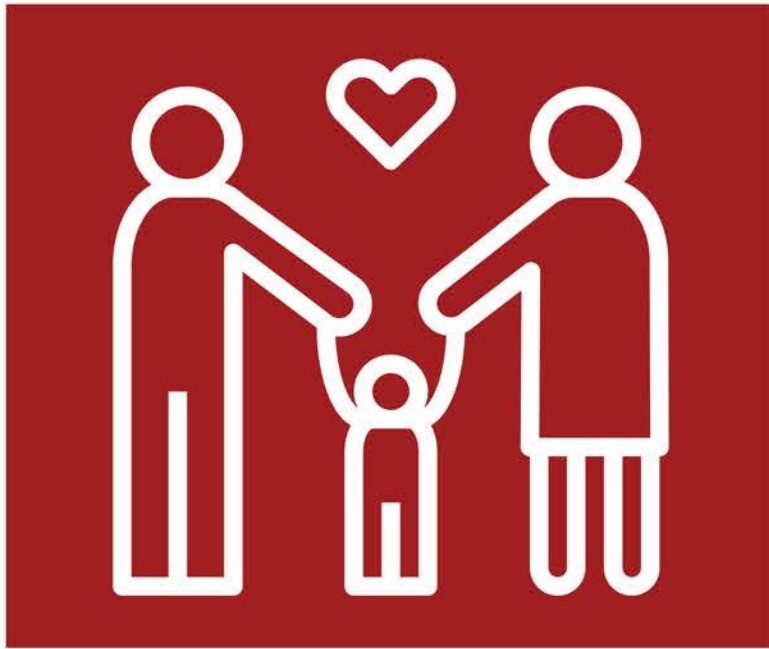


primarily located in the southeast and northeast quadrants of the Calgary

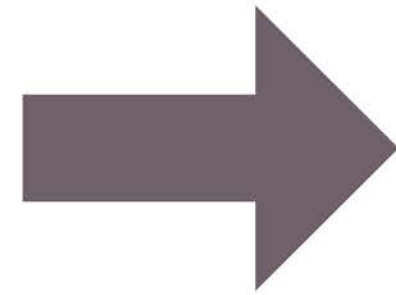


more foundational learners (+12%) could speak an Indigenous language compared to those that had completed above grade 10

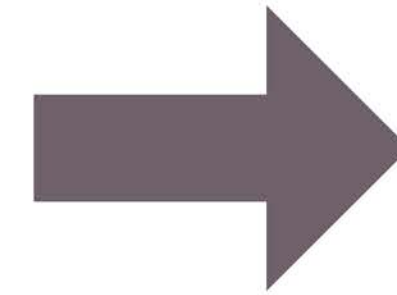
# Recommendations from Demographics



Family Programming



Strategic Locations



Indigenous Languages

## Systems Change

Universal child care 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 in their ability to access systems.

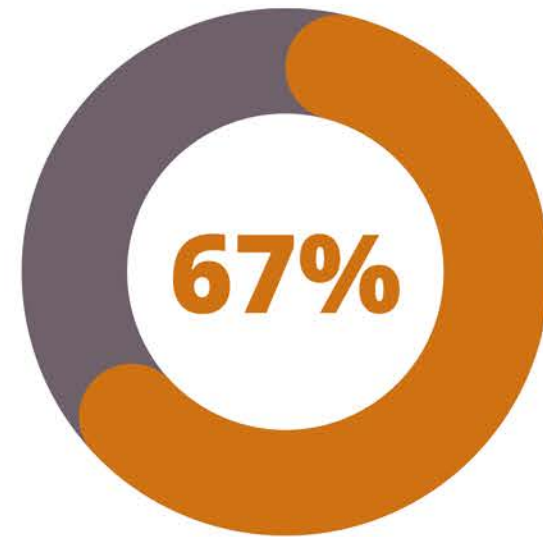
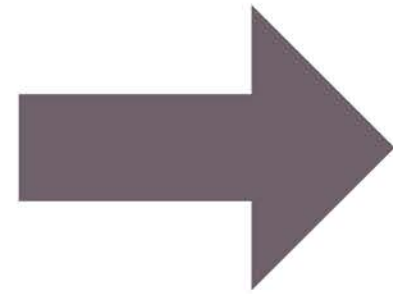
# Health and Wellness

# Recommendations

## Learning Disability

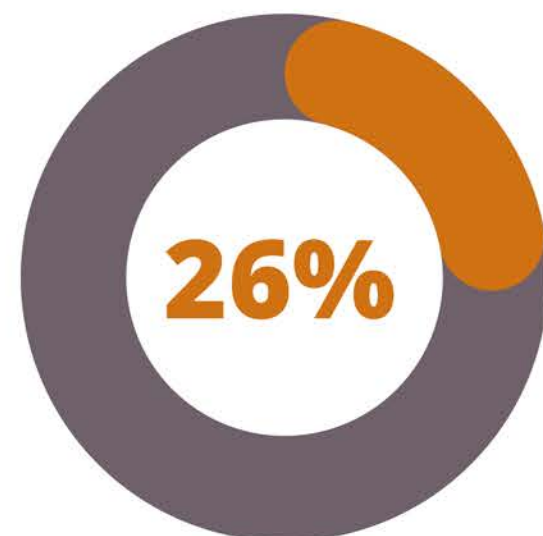


Diagnosed Disabilities



Received Support

## Physical Conditions



## Mental Health Condition



Increase awareness of learning disability and difference before it creates a 'personal' burden and forces the person to exit school early



Create an accessible space that is responsive to participants needs, especially around family learning

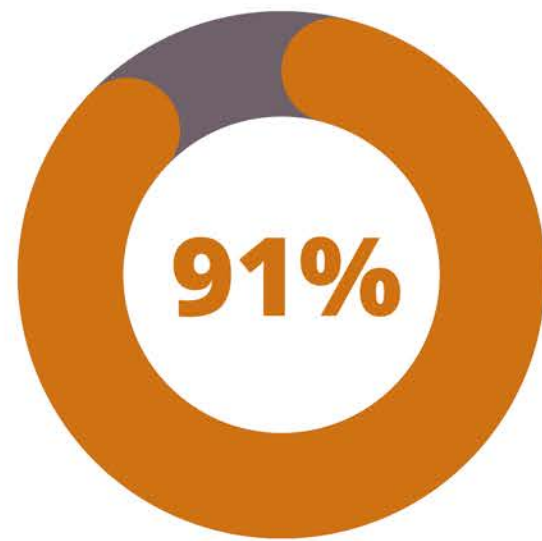


Utilize a network of services to ensure there are available assessments, such as Treaty Benefits or Jordan's Principle

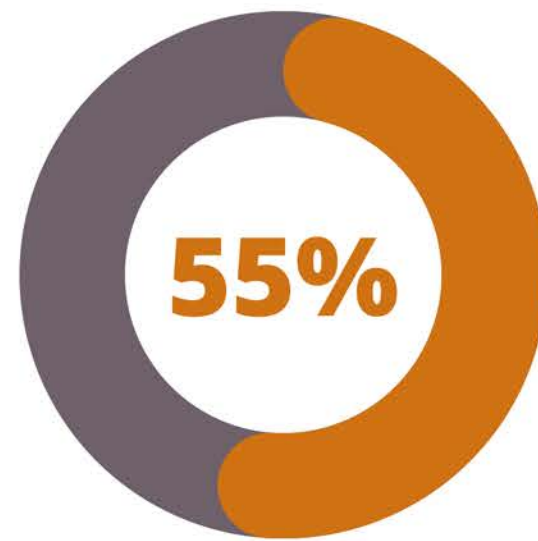
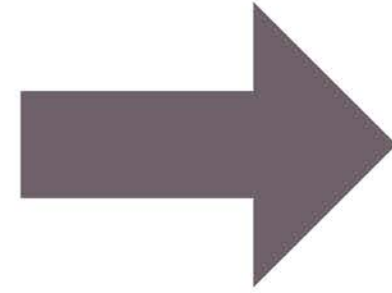
## Systems Change

Increased mental health supports that are integrated into the healthcare model to decreased barriers to receive essential supports. Future investment in decolonized or Indigenized models of mental health is necessary.

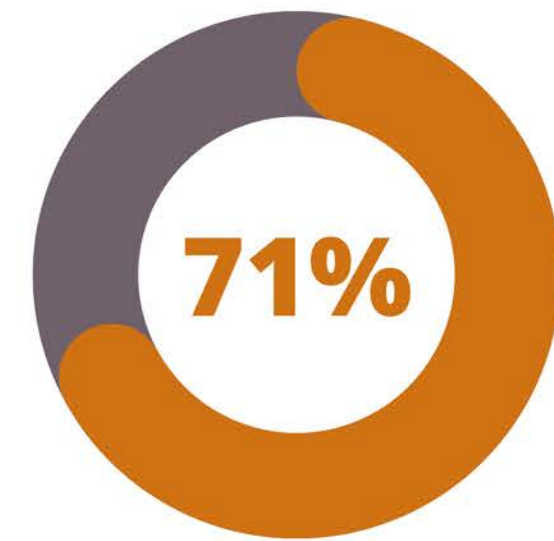
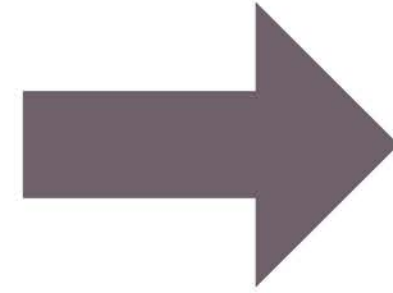
# School Experience



Completed to Grade 10

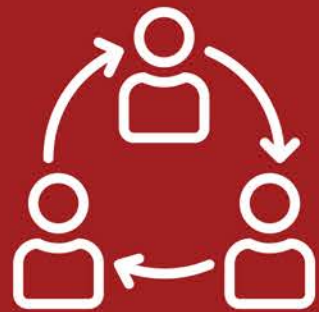


Completed Grade 12



Most Connected to High School

# Recommendations



Build connection within the school, to teachers, peers and even support staff

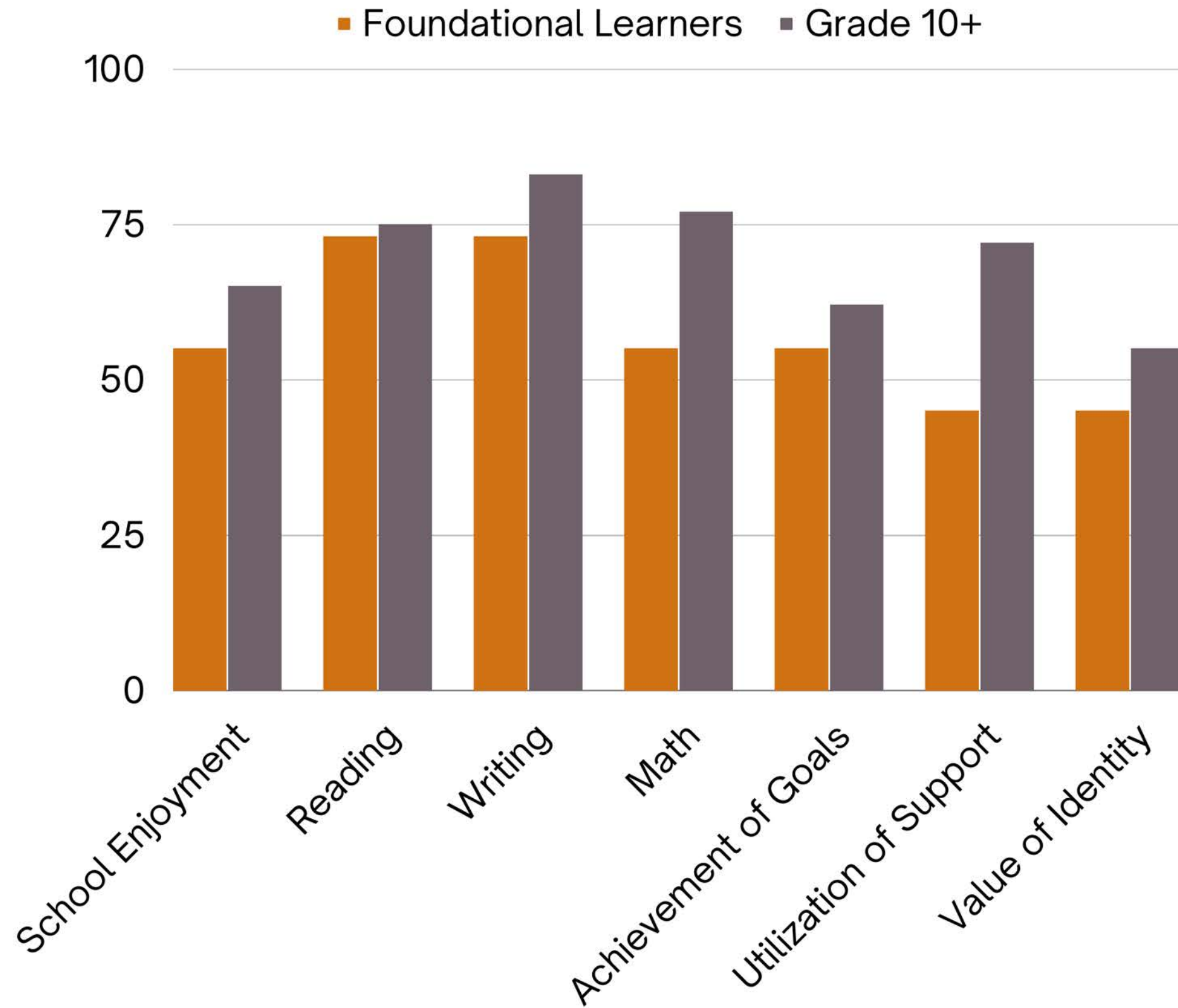


Intentional effort on relationship building



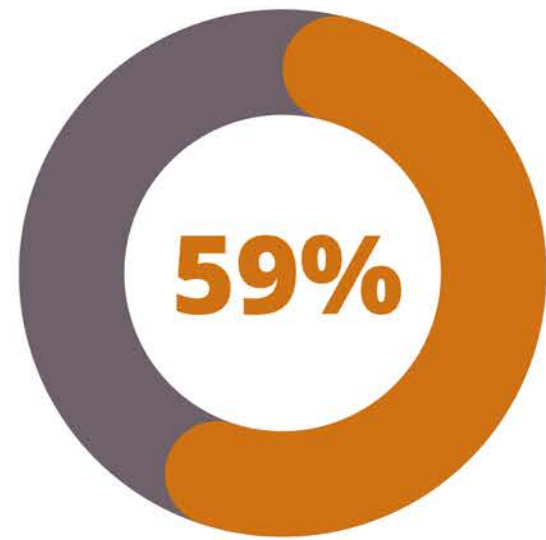
Focus on building a connection to high school, when students feel most connected

# School Experience

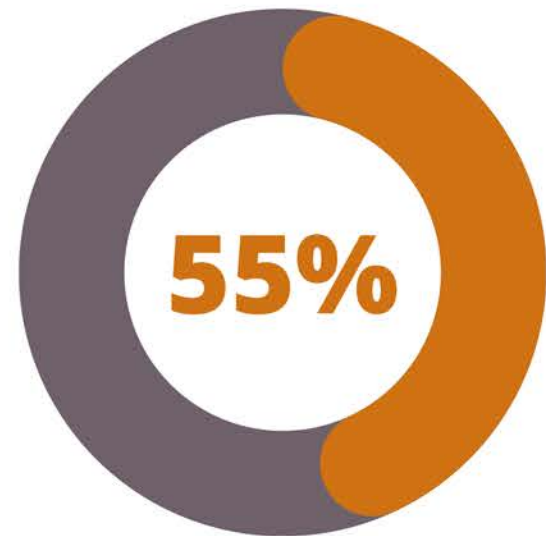
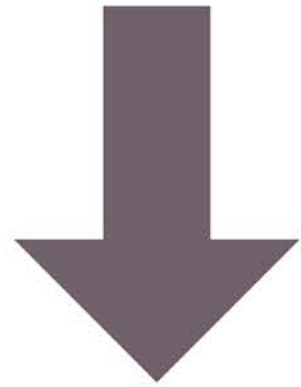


“Education is the  
new buffalo”  
- Blair Sinclair

# School Experience



felt that the history of Indigenous people had created tensions for them within education



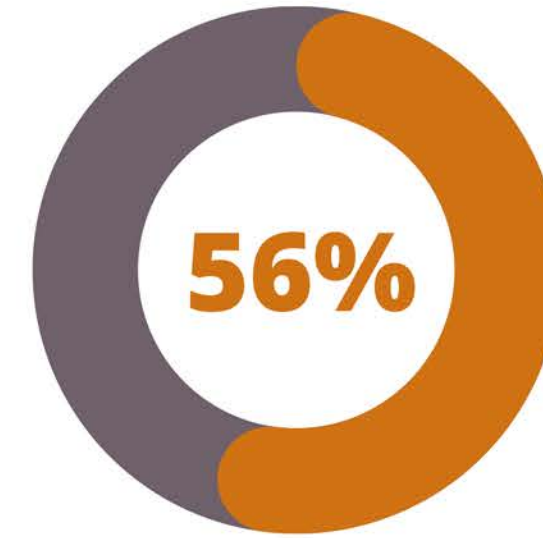
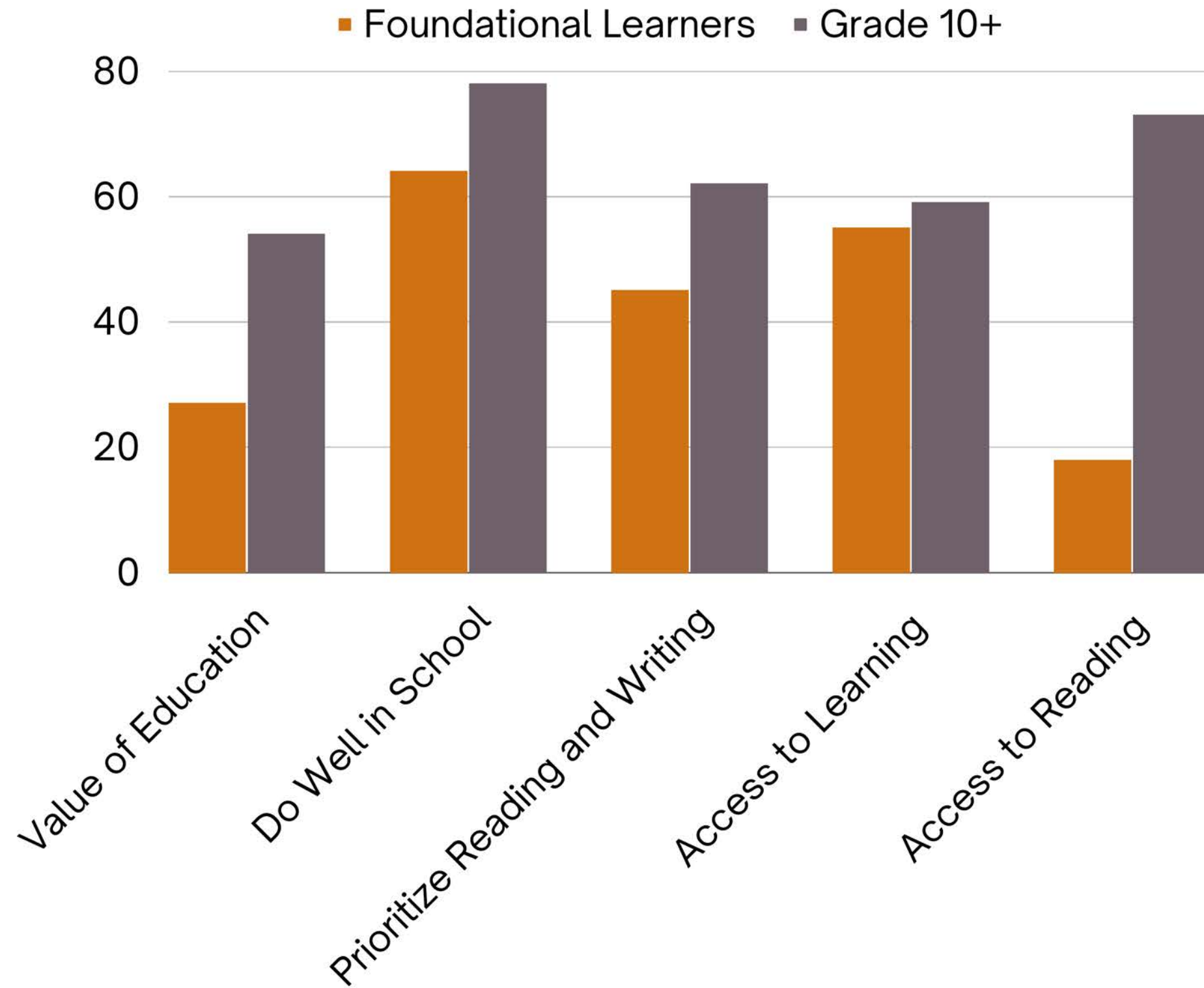
were fearful of accessing systems such as schools

## Systems Change

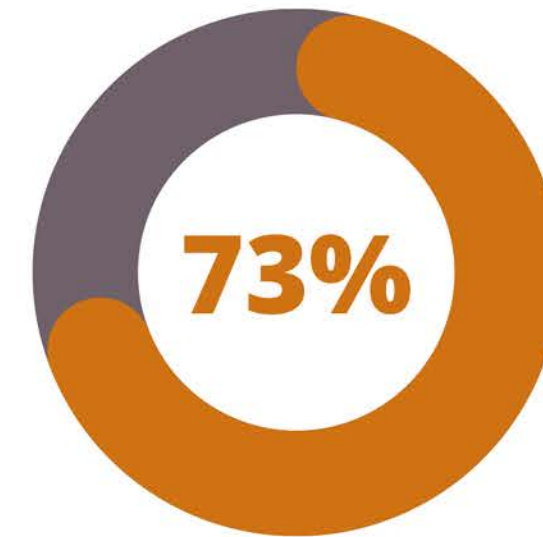
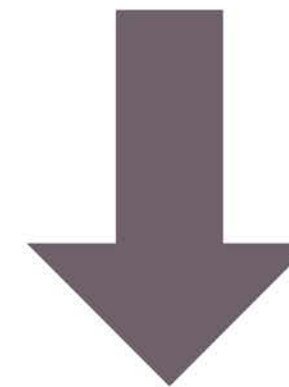
The following are strategies that would increase school connectedness among Indigenous adults and children:

- Recognize and address the historical context of schools/education for Indigenous people
- Be actively anti-racist
- Provide cultural supports
- Recognize of the importance of Indigenous families
- Create a sense of belonging and community
- Provide extracurricular activities that are meaningful
- Build spaces for friendships, connection and relationship building
- Create non-traditional school settings that allow for unique learning environments (for example land based learning)
- Provide experiential and fun learning opportunities (for example field trips)
- Have supportive school staff and ways to connect on a personal level
- Create more holistic connections between education and future paths
- Become trauma-informed and intentional about creating safe spaces

# Natural Supports

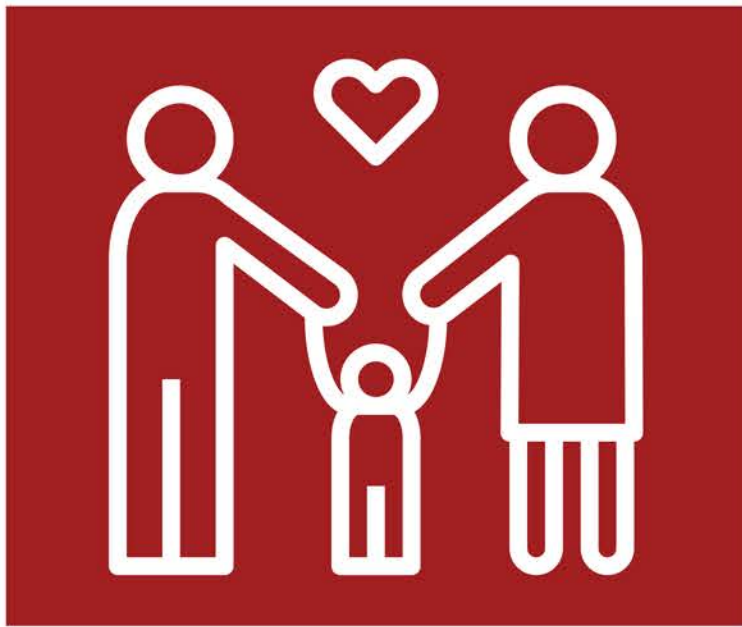


felt they were celebrated and acknowledged for their successes



felt they had friends and family they could reach out to

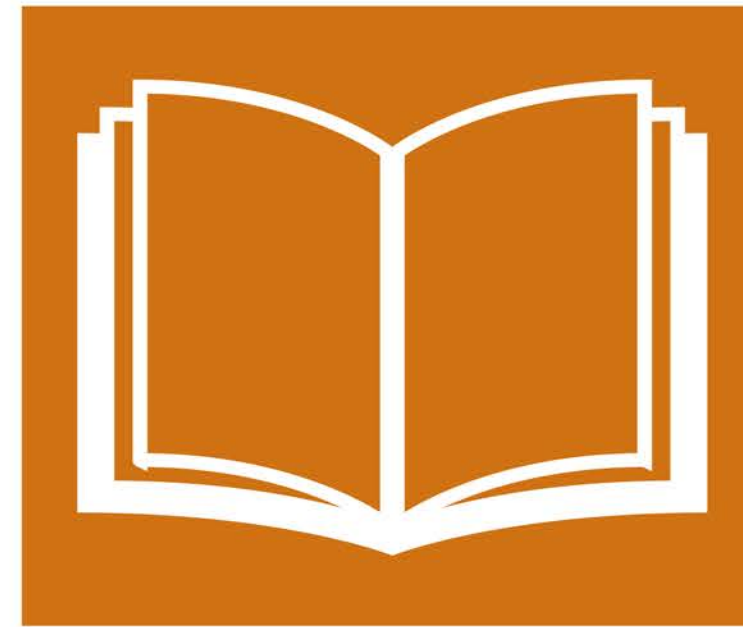
# Natural Supports Recommendations



Family Programming



Strategic Locations



Co-Design Items



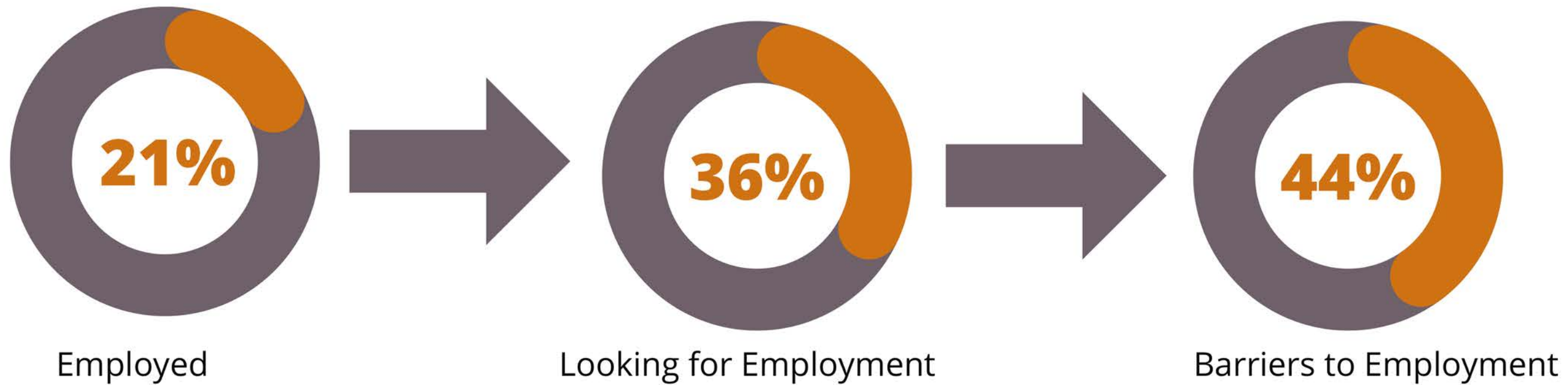
Celebrate

## Systems Change

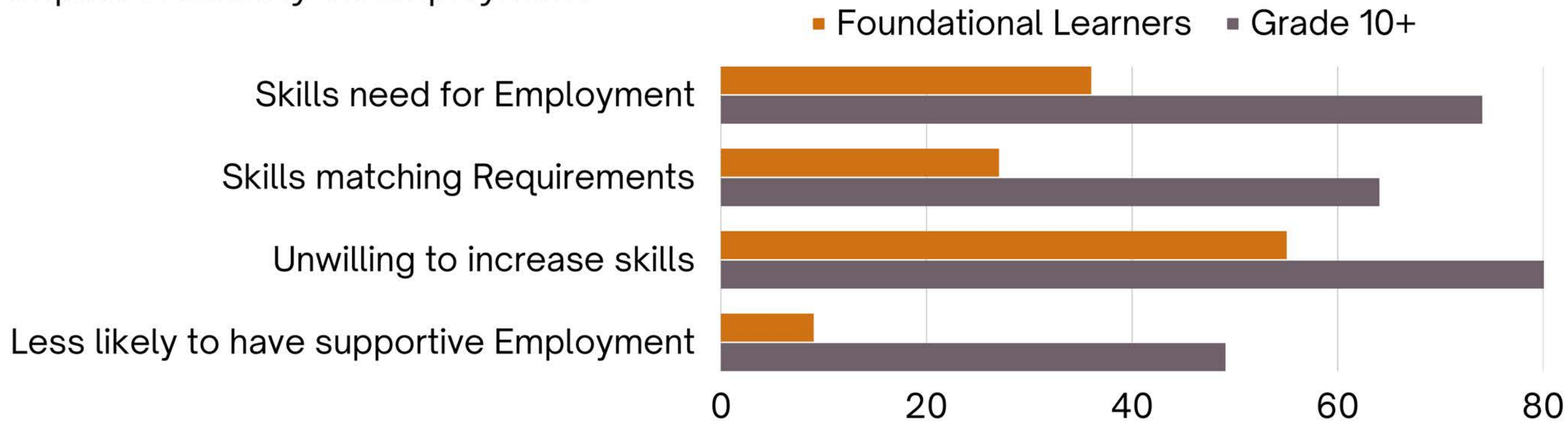
Not a specific recommendation, but natural supports and Indigenous families would feel supported when systems work 'better' for them. Indigenous community members will feel safe accessing services when they begin to believe the systems are working with them, and the work of truth and healing has occurred.



# Employment



## Impact of Literacy on Employment

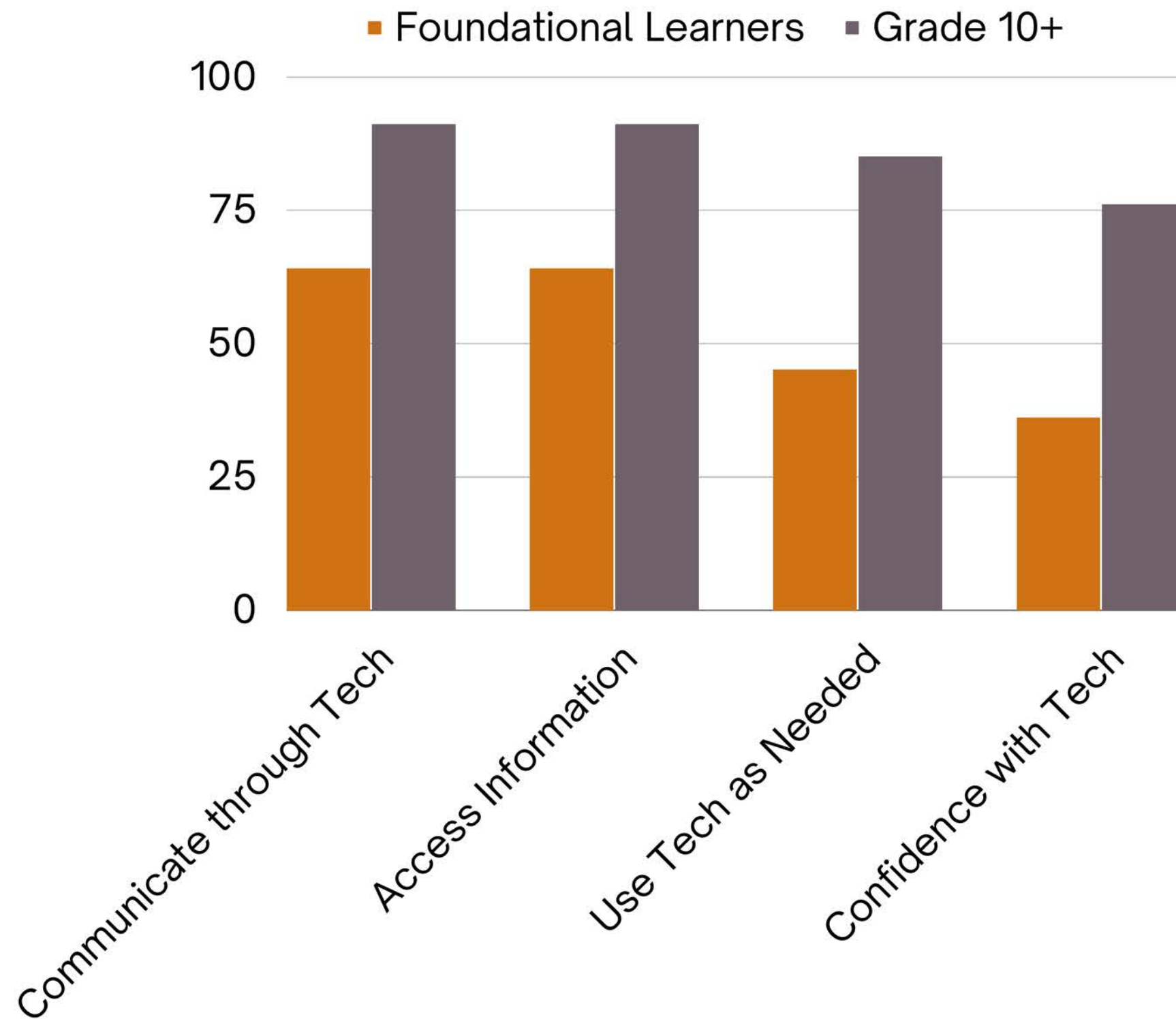


## Recommendation



Due to the complexity of these responses and literature around increasing literacy programming, it would be recommended that programs do not focus on career training, employment or economic prosperity as the primary 'value' of a literacy program for Indigenous foundational learners, in particular.

# Digital Literacy



# Recommendations



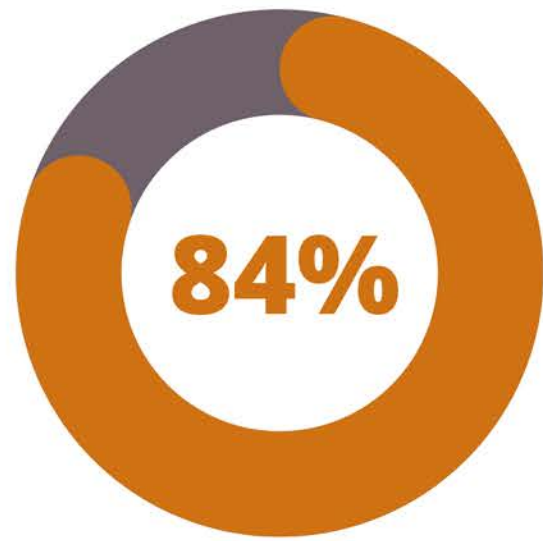
Use oral means of communicating, or try a hybrid approach.

Only 7% indicated that the ability to text or use apps would be a desired outcome of a literacy program. Therefore, making technology or digital literacy the central 'motivator' or focus of a program may not provide the recruitment and retention desired.

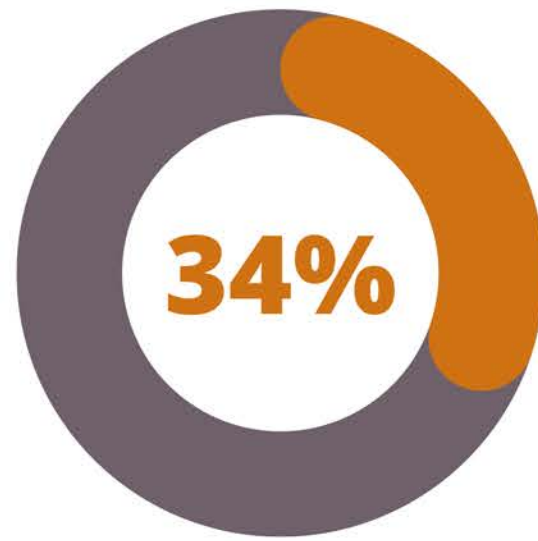
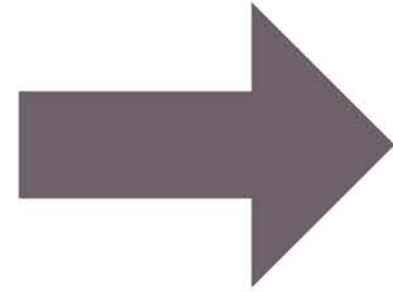
## Systems Change

Better and affordable access to technology a 'basic right' with being able to achieve minimal connection for education, work and healthcare. Systems ensure that people have access to the 'right' hardware to access these basic needs.

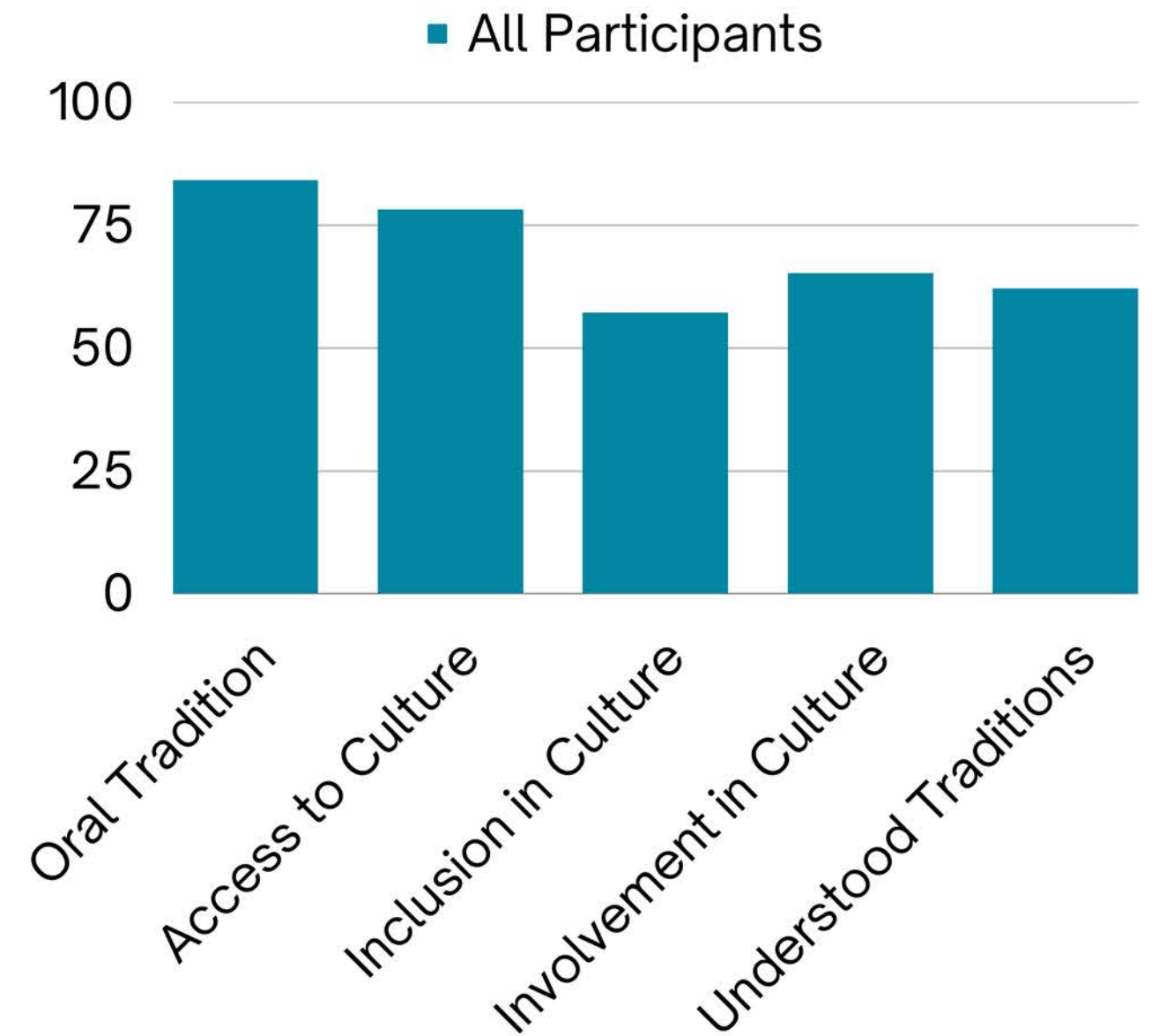
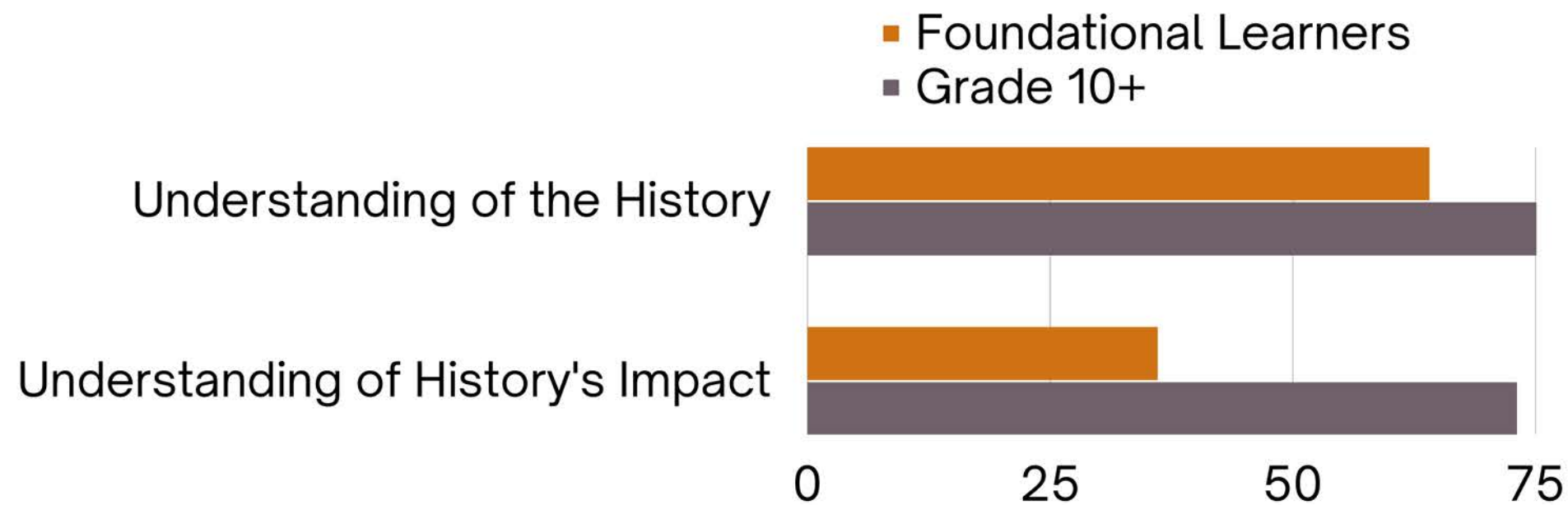
# Colonization



Participated in a Colonial System

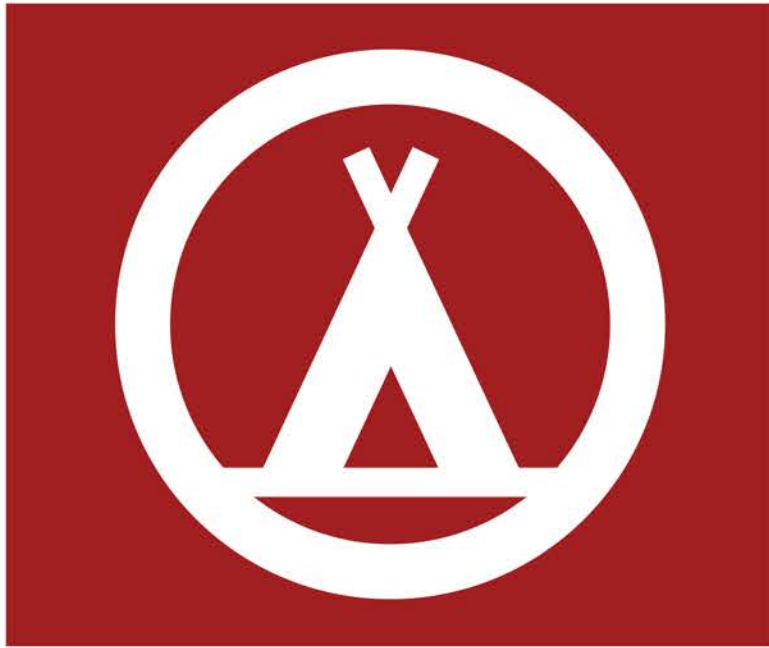


Involved in the Child Welfare System



The biggest difference between foundational learners and those that had completed beyond grade 10 was their understanding of traditional protocols and how to use them (36% compared to 69%).

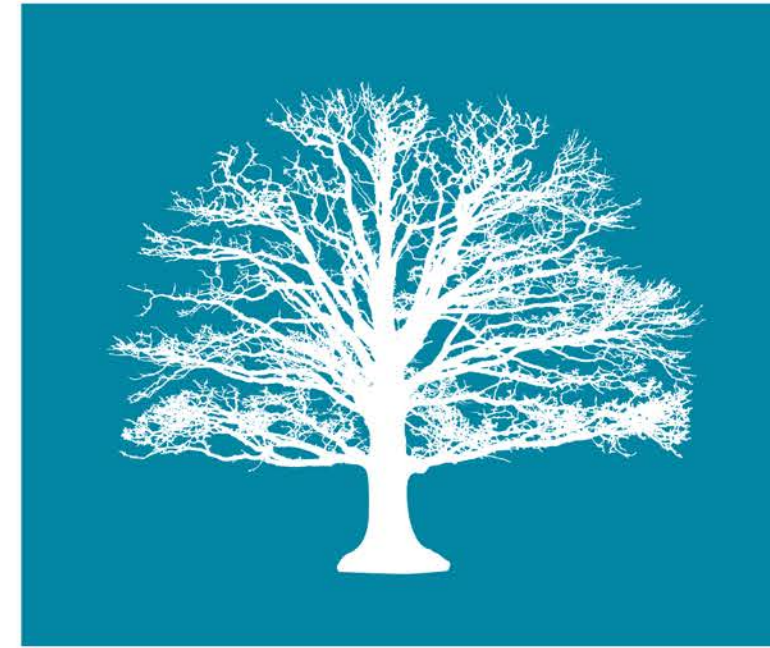
# Recommendations for Culture



Build Cultural Knowledge



Deconstruct Literacy



Land Based Activities



Guidance from Elders

## Systems Change



Acknowledge History  
and Privilege



Be Trauma  
Informed



Listen



Take Action



Reduce Harm

# Community Supports and Partnership

The findings found that 57% of participants were accessing support from the Calgary Food Bank, and they were also accessing food support from USAY and other organizations. This is an indication that food insecurity is a prevalent and pervasive challenge facing the community.

## Recommendations



Connect with Indigenous serving agencies



Develop EASY referral processes



Intentional effort on relationship building

A list of agencies Indigenous adult learners were connected to can be found in the larger report.

### Systems Change

Universal or guaranteed basic income beyond the current system of social services would have positive outcomes in reducing critical needs and providing more opportunities to participate in literacy project to improve their lives.

# Literacy Findings



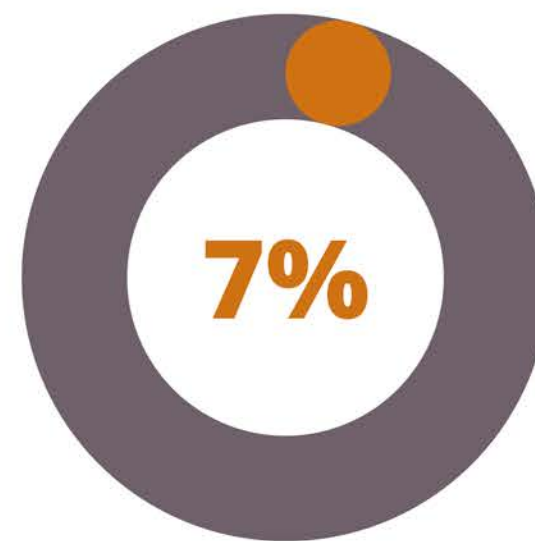
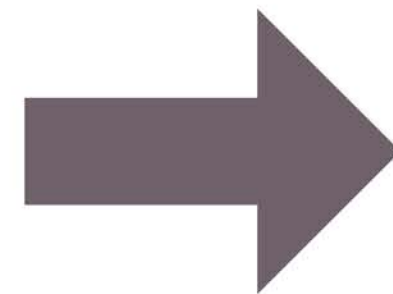
According to Read Forward, a 1B reading skill means that participants are able to:

- 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

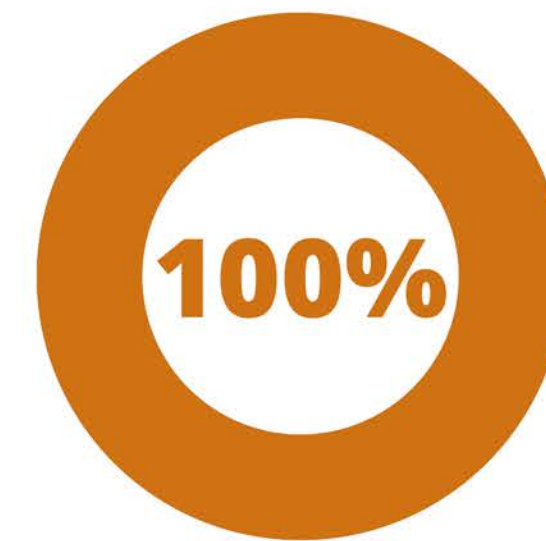
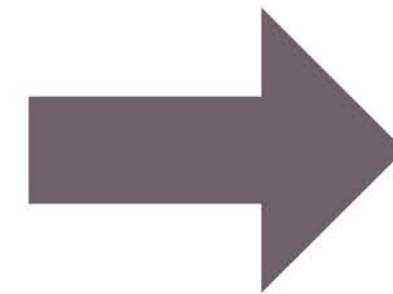
Overall, many of the participants felt positive about their level of literacy because they were able to access employment, post-secondary and resources in their community. However, many indicated that confidence, math skills and presentation abilities negatively impacted their lives and ability to support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



Previously Assessed

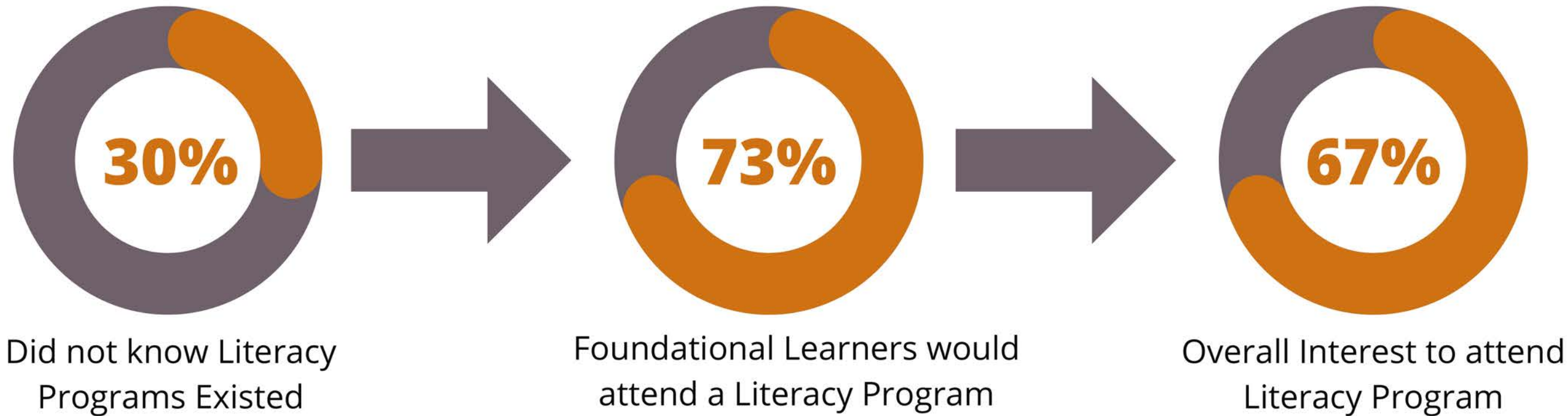


Attended Literacy Program



Indicated Program Improved Skills

# Literacy Findings



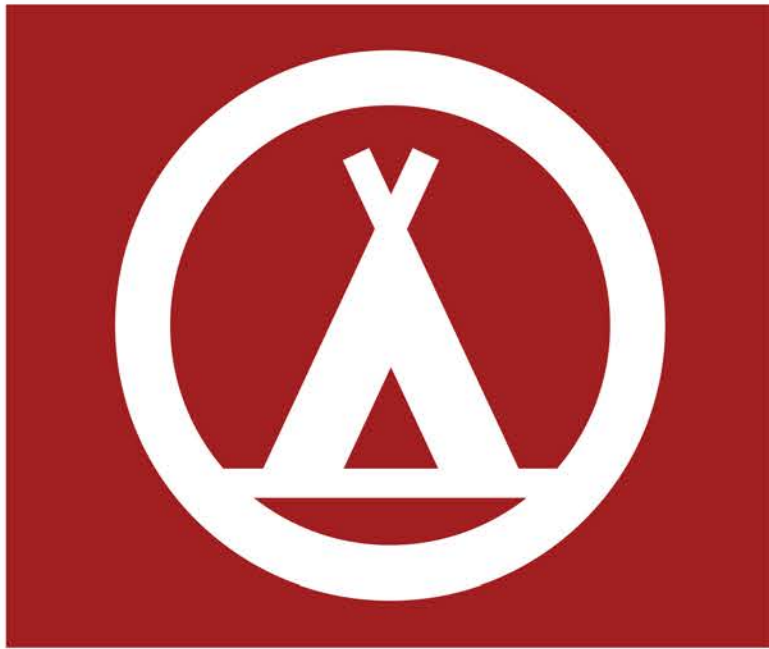
## Recommendations

Participants were asked what types of activities they felt would increase their literacy, the majority of participants felt that:

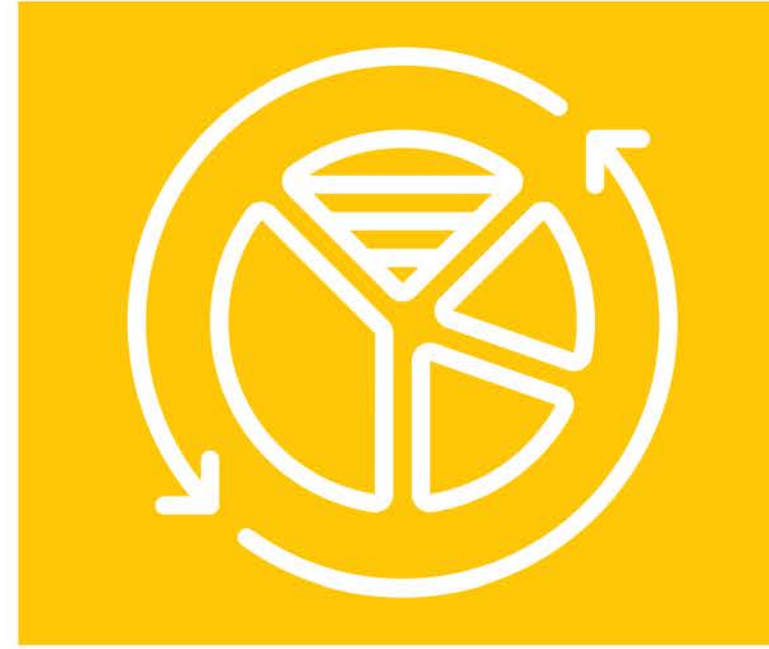
1. Indigenous cultural programs (by far the favourite)
2. Life skills
3. Math programs
4. Writing
5. Digital
6. Book reading club

# Literacy Recommendations

The primary literacy activities recommended were the same as cultural programming!



Build Cultural Knowledge



Deconstruct Literacy



Land Based Activities



Guidance from Elders

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. 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 support.

More importantly, literacy should not be the only objective in the project, as it seems like it might be a deterrent to attendance.



# Literacy Program Snapshot

## Strategic Location:

- Indigenous Representation
- NE or SE Calgary
- Around Learning/Reading
- Accessible for people with all abilities

## Timing:

- Aligned with School Year
- Accommodate work and school schedules

Consider internal motivations such as social interactions, cultural connection and others.

## Foundation:

- Holistic
- Long-Term
- Continuum of Support
- Co-Designed
- Indigenous-Led
- Culturally Sound
- Relationship Focused
- Connected

## Activities:

- Cultural
- Indigenous Languages
- Deconstructed Literacy
- Land Based
- Elder Guidance

## Partnerships:

- Financial Supports
- Transportation
- Indigenous Specific
- Housing Resources
- Health Relationship Resources
- Mental Health
- Family Counselling
- Childcare
- Addiction Supports
- Learning Disability Supports
- School Connection

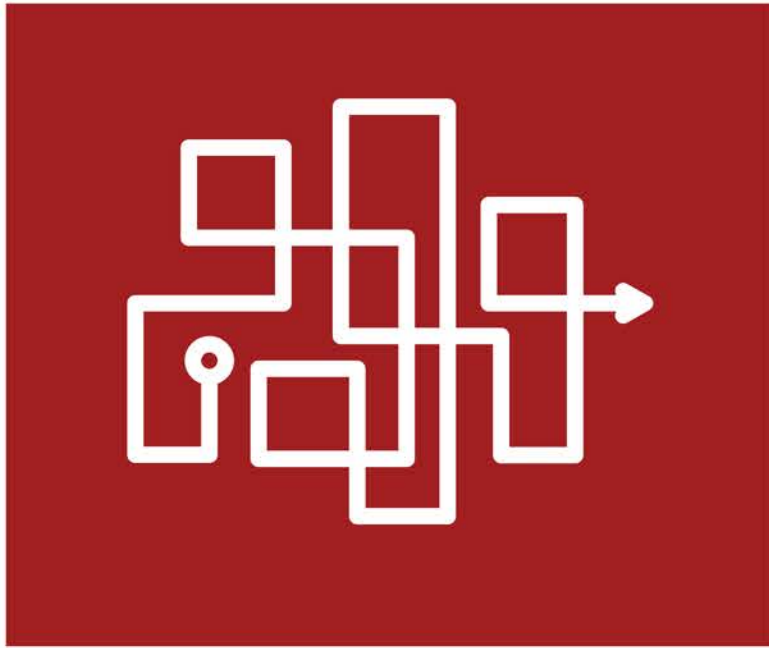
## Participants Suggested Outcomes:

- Employment
- Life-long learning
- Opportunities to Support Children
- Understanding forms
- Ability to text and use apps

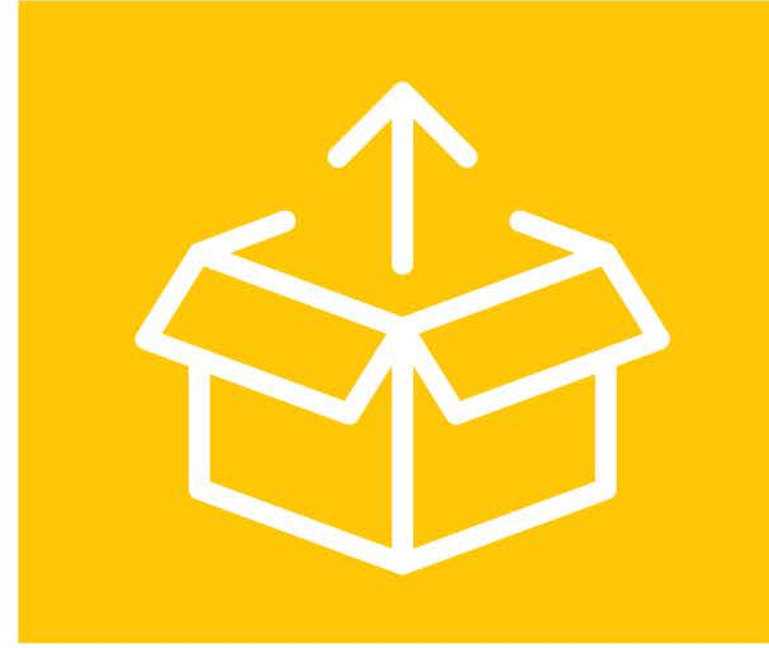
## Outcomes:

- Literacy is not the primary outcome
- Strengthened Relationships
- Deepened Connections
- Social Inclusion

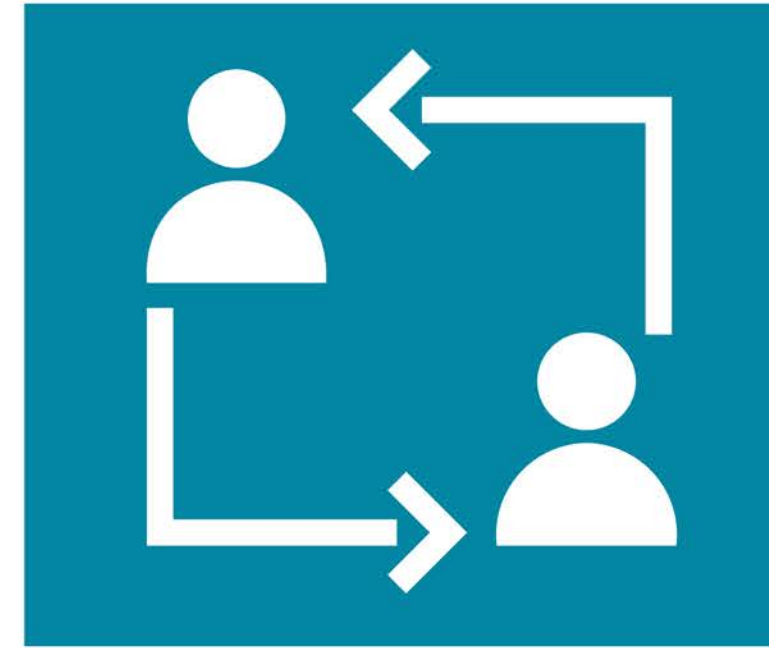
# Learnings



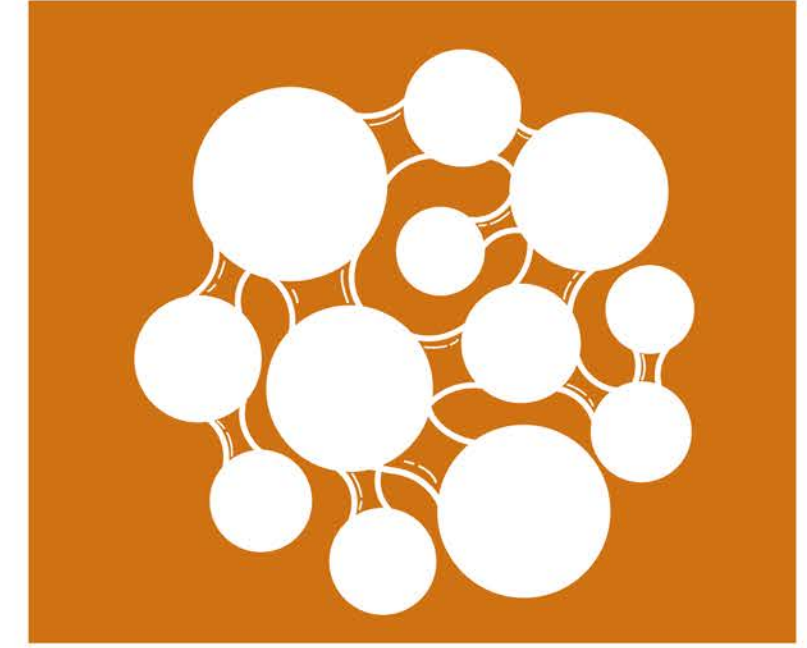
Complexity of Literacy



Unpacking Literacy



Relational In Nature



Program Permeation

# Thoughts

Possible areas of discussion:

- How have you accidentally created barriers for Indigenous people to participate in your program? (accessibility, lack of representation, lack of connections, identification requirements, etc.)
- Where might you be missing opportunities to integrate Indigenous culture, representation and holistic approaches?
- How might you meet the need of Indigenous adults in their literacy journey, even if it can not be the primary focus of the program? Even if the program funding is not specific to Indigenous people for example.
- How can we create safety if spaces for Indigenous people (even online, content creation, etc.)?

# MORE TO COME

## Building Connections

Reach out to USAY with more questions of ways to connect.

 **Telephone**  
403-690-4004

 **Website**  
[usay.ca](https://usay.ca)

 **Address**  
211, 811 Manning Rd. NE, Calgary, AB



# Let's Talk

Areas of discussion:

- How have you accidentally created barriers for Indigenous people to participate in your program? (accessibility, lack of representation, lack of connections, identification requirements, etc.)
- Where might you be missing opportunities to integrate Indigenous culture, representation and holistic approaches?
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