

**Individual Diversity Research Project
Personal Attitudes and Experiences**

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Research Problem

The Waterloo Region is the fastest growing area in Ontario according to Statistics Canada. The rate of growth in 2023 was 5.5% which is higher than Toronto's 4% annual growth. This incredible level of growth brings new families into the region and students into the Waterloo Region District School Board, many of whom are from diverse backgrounds. While students tend to arrive at school embracing all aspects of school life, their parents or caregivers tend to be more cautious and less engaged. A challenge for schools is to bring parents into the school system as partners in education. Engagement from parents is viewed in the Ontario education system as critical to student success. One way to encourage parent involvement is through school councils. There is an abundance of research that underscores the merits of school councils as associations that have the potential to increase parent and community involvement in the school (Preston, 2011). In Ontario the belief in the power and promise of schools councils is so strong that School Councils are legislated. The Ministry of Education states:

All schools in Ontario have a school council. They are important advisory bodies to the schools and school board. The purpose of a school council is, through the active participation of parents, to improve student achievement and increase accountability of the education system to parents.

Although schools reap the benefits of school councils through fundraising and other events, many parents and caregivers do not take an active part in their child's school nor in the work of the school council. An ongoing and consistent challenge for many schools is how to bring more parents into the activities and work of the council. In a region like Waterloo the diversity in parents and caregivers is an added challenge that principals and school council Chairs must grapple with in order to create welcoming spaces for all parents.

A second challenge for school councils is how to ensure the parents coming to council meetings are representative of the children attending the school. For example in some schools the school council members are stay at home White mothers who have children enrolled in a specialty program like French Immersion or Gifted classes. Parents of children in specialized programs almost always see the benefits of participation in their child's school as they can advocate for program continuance among other benefits. Parents and caregivers who work

outside the home or those who are new to the country may be reluctant to participate in school councils for a number of reasons. Working mothers or professional students might find it difficult to carve out time for the meetings and school council events. Some parents are not fluent in English and this may cause a barrier to participation.

Homophily might also pose a barrier. Homophily is the tendency for people to be attracted to or seek out associations with people who look like them. Attributes such as race, gender (Greenlee, 2010) and religion can create a social categorization that excludes others. Homophily might occur on the part of parents or the dominant group leading school council. Some studies have found that the school council membership tends to reflect the racial and ethnic background of the school principal or council chair even when their race and ethnicity does not reflect that of their school communities (Greenlee, 2010) they serve. Nevertheless, it is very important for schools to ensure that they are creating a welcoming environment that embraces the diversity and differences of parents and caregivers. Finding ways to bring parents into the school community is the responsibility of the school principal and council chair. One way to do this is through the promotion of the principles of equity and inclusion. It therefore becomes important to have principals and council chairs not only comfortable with diversity, equity and inclusion but also champions of practices that will create culturally safe places for all parents.

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the attitudes and experiences of individuals who are members of Waterloo Region Assembly of Public School Councils (WRAPSC) and the Parent Involvement Committee (PIC). These groups are actively engaged parents and caregivers who represent the voice of many parents who have children attending WRDSB schools. The tone they set in meetings and in interacting with other parents, has the ability to attract more people to the table or deter others from participating.

The primary problem to solve for schools is: *How can we increase the diversity among our parents and caregivers attending council meetings and events?* While there are a number of strategies in place to address low attendance among parents, such as providing childcare and meals during meetings, it is equally important to ensure that there are no unintended barriers resulting from negative attitudes or experiences of council members with diversity. This study

was designed to explore the following question: *What are the experiences and attitudes of WRAPSC and PIC members regarding diversity that might impact their interactions with diverse parents and caregivers?*

A survey design was selected because it offers a number of advantages including a quick turn-around, anonymity, and a quantitative description of attitudes and opinions (Creswell, 2018). While interviews can provide in depth answers and insights to answers, they require a face-to-face interaction between the informant and the researcher. This can be time consuming for the researcher and uncomfortable for the informant. The anonymous and voluntary nature of a survey was expected to result in candid and honest answers and produce a robust response.

Literature Review

The divide that exists between home and school diminished during the COVID-19 pandemic when in many cases parents had to assume the role of teachers and teachers often had to parent their own children while teaching students online. Students' homes became the new educational setting without the physical presence of classmates and teachers (Misirli & Ergulec, 2021). More than 1.6 billion students in more than 190 countries were forced to study at home (Abo Hamza & Elsantil 2023). Parents played a critical role in supporting their children during this time and mothers in particular had an increased workload in supporting their children with at-home learning (CQ Researcher, 2021). The return to onsite classroom learning has been slow but welcomed by parents who are able to return to their workplace with their children safely back at school and teaching returned to the capable hands of trained teachers.

Although the pandemic is behind us, the impact continues to be felt as the world slowly returns to the way it was with the notable addition of lessons learned and pandemic casualties. Schools, for example, must grapple with learning loss and lost opportunities. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) noted in their June 2023 report *UNESCO's Educational Response to COVID-19* that some of the gains made toward the goals of Education 2030 have been lost. UNESCO has 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that aim to transform the world as we know it, or at least in the 191 participating UN member states. Among the 17 goals is the call to end poverty and hunger. The fourth SDG is:

**Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote
lifelong learning opportunities for all.**

Countries and member states that have embraced the 17 SDGs are expected to do their part in realizing the targets set in order to reach the goals by 2030. One of the best ways to achieve inclusive education is to involve parents and community members as partners.

Today's classrooms might be described as a league of nations for all the diversity visible and invisible that characterize students. Schools must manage the ever increasing layers of diversity and provide quality education to ensure students are making academic gains (Sanders & Lewis, 2005). To ensure schools remain equitable and inclusive learning environments a number of stakeholders should be involved in supporting educator decision making and student learning. One of the lessons learned from the pandemic is that parents make great educational partners.

Parent and caregiver involvement in school life continues to be a very desirable aspiration especially now that students have returned to doing the bulk of their learning in schools. When parents and caregivers are involved in their child's school life students show improvements in academic achievement, school attendance, and the quality of school programming also improves (Michael et. al., 2007). On the part of schools there needs to be a recognition that parents are a child's first teacher. When they are involved in their child's education positive benefits include: greater academic achievement, prosocial behaviors, improved efficacy of interventions (academic and behavioral), and reduction of referrals to special education (Latunde, 2018).

Additionally, most classroom teachers understand and appreciate that welcoming parents or other community partners into the school brings rich and relevant resources. With the diversity among students growing, parent involvement can provide important information to support teachers in creating inclusive and equitable classrooms. Parents are a natural asset and their involvement in schools and classrooms as co-creators can serve to support the school learning environment (Preston, 2013). Schools can bring parents into participation with schools by recognizing that there needs to be dual capacity building (Latunde 2018), which means both parents and educators engage in a partnership where they learn from each other. This can be done through parent meetings, open-houses, and town halls. Perhaps one of the best ways to

share knowledge between what schools do and what parents know, including building knowledge about school expectations, exposing families to the curriculum, and increasing parents' ability to help their children at home is through participation in school councils. School Councils can be an important resource for schools that extend well beyond fundraising.

School councils are intended to be an advisory body to the school principal. Their purpose is to improve student achievement and keep the communication channels open between the school and the wider community. This is the ideal, the reality is that most school councils are only entrusted with fundraising (Rushowy, 2010). While fundraising dollars are an important addition to the school purse because these monies can be used for extras that can bring in luxury items to the school such as an electronic sign board or provide funding for school trips, parents want to do more. Parents want to be involved in policy development, academic initiatives and academic initiatives (Rushowy, 2010). As advisory bodies, school councils can also provide a tremendous amount of feedback, recommendations and advice to a principal to enhance school operations and impact school climate by helping to create a sense of belonging for all families. One of the challenges councils have faced long before the pandemic was creating a culture of inclusion to ensure all students were served and all parents felt they were an important stakeholder. Robust parent engagement can enhance the effectiveness of school councils (El Paso Times, 2023). School Councils are characteristically small in number and limited in diversity. Yet the research is clear, group diversity improves decision making and has a positive effect on accessing information, problem identification and strategy implementation (Greenlee, 2010). The few active moms who sit on council generally do not represent the diversity found in the community and even when they do there is a very small percentage of parents participating. Growing council membership is an agenda item for most school councils at some point during the school year.

One barrier to participation for some caregivers which is particularly relevant for the Waterloo region is the lack of familiarity with the Ontario school system. Although some families are not from the region or Canada, and as a result they may have a different cultural or ethnic background, educational attainment or income level, they can still positively influence their children's learning and behavior (Michael et. al., 2007). There are common barriers to participation such as the time at which council meetings are held, a lack of babysitting and the inconvenience of attending in person meetings. During my first principalship the school council

at my school held meetings Tuesday mornings at 11:00 am. While this meeting time worked for me as the school principal, the time was clearly a barrier as there were never more than four mothers attending although we had over 70 families in the school community. Changing the meeting time to 6:00 pm, offering pizza as a light meal, and childcare created an immediate boost to parent attendance. While these three changes resulted in immediate success for my school, engaging the community is not always this easy.

Developing positive partnerships with parents and caregivers requires that the school and the current council members create a welcoming environment to encourage new faces and new perspectives. There needs to be a recognition that Partnerships between schools, families, and communities cannot occur if there is a reluctance to engage with people from diverse backgrounds. It is critical for the school and current council members to examine their attitudes, experiences and values to create a welcoming and inclusive school environment that creates a space for everyone.

Cultural Context

The Waterloo Region is the fastest growing region in Ontario (D'Amato 2024). Historically, this region has been attractive to immigrants. According to The Waterloo Centre for German studies, German settlers and immigrants settled in the Kitchener-Waterloo region in the early 1800s. Today, the Waterloo region has the greatest density of German-Canadians in the country. City signs, names and architecture pay homage to the early German settlers. The Waterloo region is also known for their large Mennonite population who migrated from Pennsylvania. The town of St. Jacobs was historically where many Germans settled and later in the 1850s German Mennonites from Pennsylvania migrated to the town. According to the Waterloo Centre for German studies, approximately 59,000 Mennonites live in Ontario today, however only about twenty percent are members of conservative groups, such as Old Order Mennonites, Old Order Amish, or Old Colony Mennonites.

When people think of Mennonites they think of a lifestyle that shuns modern conveniences and embraces simplicity based on Christian values. Often what comes to mind are black clothes, horse and buggy transportation, black bonnets and long dark dresses, and life without most modern technologies. Of course not all Mennonites subscribe to those clothes or that lifestyle, unless they are members of the Old Order. Out of the 24 schools I supervise, only

two have students from the Old Order, however these schools are prominent because the Mennonite students are the majority. At these schools the students dress in traditional clothing and no child outwardly looks any different from any other. All bonnets, jackets, shoes and lunch boxes are exactly the same. Shirts and dresses for young children can be in three different colors, but otherwise all clothing is black. Shorts are never worn, but short-sleeves for boys are allowed in the spring and summer. Hairstyles for girls are two plaits in the front joined by one in the back. The girls wear their hair this way for their entire lives. Boys have their hair closely cropped or shaved. When I am visiting my regional schools I am very mindful of families using horse-and-buggy transportation. This is quite a common sight in the region and there are signs alerting drivers of this mode of transportation.

What people do not see is, however, is how the early German and Mennonite settlers impact the way people think, behave and respond to diversity today. The Waterloo region despite the prominence of two renowned universities and a distinguished and well celebrated college, remains a conservative town. The evidence of this is found in such things as the quiet streets and neighborhoods on Sundays. The church parking lots are full while the stores open for business are empty. Furthermore, many family-run stores and services are closed on Sunday. The prototypical family of father, mother, two children and a pet, seems to be the expected family configuration. Any deviation of this, such as two moms, childlessness, a race other than White and religious teachings other than Christianity, does not seem to be welcomed. There is a respectful place and space for everyone, but differences are not acknowledged. To acknowledge that some people choose to have a same sex partner would be seen as promoting that lifestyle. There have been a number of delegations at school board meetings denouncing the teaching of the Ontario Health Education Curriculum which includes a number of controversial sex education topics such as differences in gender expression and sexual choice. Parents have the right to remove their children from those lessons and Mennonite and other religious families do.

It is important to acknowledge the possibility that the strong Christian foundations characteristic of this region, might have an impact on how people report their experiences and attitudes about diversity.

Research Design and Methodology

This study explores the attitudes and experiences of parents and caregivers involved in the Waterloo Region Association of Public School Councils and the Parent Involvement Committee using the Reflective Diversity Inventory (RDI) developed by Dr. Polka and Dr. Marwaha (2023). The study used a mixed-methods procedure which involved the collection of both qualitative (open-response) and quantitative (multiple choice closed-response) data collection (Creswell, 2018). A survey design was selected because it offers a number of advantages including a quick turn-around, anonymity, and a quantitative description of trends, attitudes and opinions. Surveys help to answer questions about the predictive relationship between variables. (Creswell, 2018). The main topic of interest being explored is how the attitudes toward diversity of WRAPSC and PIC members shape their later experiences. While interviews can provide in depth answers and insights to answers, they require a face-to-face interaction between the informant and the researcher. This can be time consuming for the researcher and uncomfortable for the informant. The anonymous and voluntary nature of a survey is likely to result in candid and honest answers.

The RDI is divided into four sections: A) Personal Attitudes, B) Personal Experiences, C) Reflective Responses and D) Demographic Data. The RDI is a self-administered instrument requiring approximately 15 - 25 minutes to complete. The first section of the RDI contains 33 questions measured on a Likert 1- 4 scale: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree. A sample question from the survey is: *I believe there are no racial issues at my organization.*

The next section of the RDI contains 20 questions on experiences with diversity issues. An example of a question from this section is: *I have witnessed racial discrimination at my organization.* These experiences are also measured on a Liekert 1- 4 scale delineated as: never, sometimes, often, and very often.

Section C of the RDI contains five open response questions that provide qualitative data. An example question is: *What specific diversity-related activities and events have you attended at your current or previous organization?* The fourth section of the RDI has a series of seven demographic questions pertaining to gender, age, ethnicity and sexual orientation. The RDI also provides space for informant feedback and all questions are completed voluntarily.

Volunteer convenience sampling was used to recruit participants. The chair of the two respective committees sent a recruitment email invitation to all registered members. A Letter of Information was included as an attachment to provide additional details. The invitation

included a link to the survey hosted on Qualtrics. Participants were informed that the survey was entirely voluntary and would not impact on their work or association with the Waterloo Region District School Board. Additionally, questions that the informant did not want to answer could be skipped without jeopardizing the entire survey.

While it is difficult to predict the number of individuals who received the email invitation due to errors with email addresses, or the possibility that the recruiting email went to a junk folder, it is likely that at least 130 unique email addresses received the recruitment email. The first recruiting email was sent on June 25th to WRAPSC and June 28th to PIC. A second email was sent to WRAPSC on July 5th. The survey remained open until July 24th at which time the available data was downloaded.

A total of 39 responses were received for a return rate of approximately 31%. Seven surveys were blank and had to be deleted. Two were only partially completed and were also deleted. This resulted in a total of nine listwise deletions. Many participants chose not to complete the demographic information or parts of the demographic data. For example, questions pertaining to sexuality received charged responses or were left blank. Nine additional surveys were excluded because of missing demographic information. A total of 16 surveys were available for results and interpretation on Section C of the RDI.

Analysis/Findings

Sections A and B of the RDI explored personal attitudes and personal experiences with diversity, respectively. These qualitative sections have not been fully analyzed however the data did reveal that the majority of the informants had positive attitudes toward diversity. Additionally they reported positive experiences with diversity in their workplace and in their previous educational experiences. There were interesting findings such as 69% had never witnessed sexual discrimination in the workplace. Additionally, 69% had never witnessed the exclusion of people from different backgrounds in their organization. Congruently, 77% of the respondents had never felt discriminated against because of their race. Language discrimination was even rarer with 88% of respondents indicating they had never felt discriminated against because English was not their first language. And 92% of respondents indicated they had never felt discriminated against because of their sexual orientation. These results are very interesting and suggest two things. First there is the possibility of a cognitive bias occurring. The participants seem to be remembering experiences in the most favourable manner and expressing themselves in ways that would preserve their self-esteem. The data looks very “rosy” and yet racially motivated incidents occur in this region and hate language is a consistent and persistent problem. Furthermore, if the WRAPSC and PIC members have positive feelings and experiences with diversity why are so many families and caregivers absent from participation in school council? These are findings that should be explored further. The Diversity Advocacy scale (Kundro, et al., 2024) would be an excellent companion to the RDI as it moves from positive feelings about diversity to social action to make a place for diversity.

Sections C and D of the RDI were the two sections that had the most incomplete information. While Section C had open response questions that required participants to provide written responses, Section D was multiple choice with diversity in choice options. Some participants felt that there were not enough options for Ethnicity and others felt Sexual Orientation should not have been included. One informant wrote: *My sexuality has nothing to do with this.* Another wrote: *Sexuality should not be discussed in the workplace.*

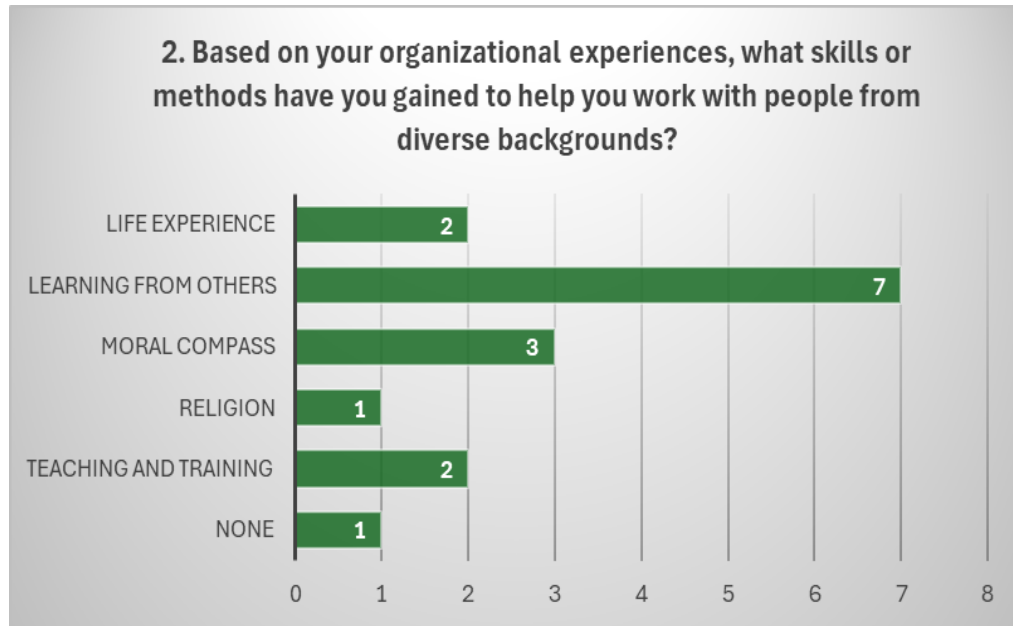
The demographic questions seemed to elicit strong emotions which might be the result of the fundamental Christian values that anchor the Waterloo Region. Difference in this community isn't celebrated, it is avoided. Nine surveys had to be excluded due to a lack of demographic information. Participants clearly did not want to share identifying information such as age,

gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation.

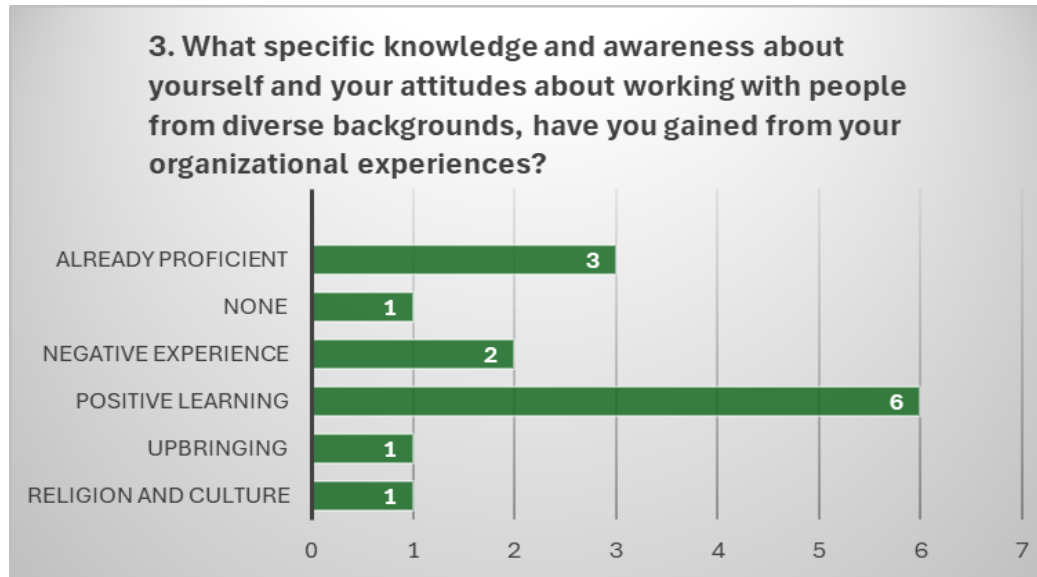
Coding was used to analyze questions 1 through 4 in Section C. In qualitative data analysis a code is used to interpret the data based on a pattern, theme, or category. The code should be an accurate representation of the data (Saldana, 2021). The charts summarizing the qualitative data for the first four questions are presented below. The data is based on 16 surveys that were completed with sufficient demographic information to be included in the analysis. For each question the raw data was analyzed for patterns in the responses. These patterns were then grouped into larger categories and labeled or coded. Salanda (2021), notes seven attributes that researchers need for the coding process: organization, perseverance, ability to deal with ambiguity, flexibility, creativity, ethically committed, and possess an extensive vocabulary. The coding process might also benefit from having a second researcher or assistant cross-check the raw data against the code developed to ensure consistency, accuracy and reliability. Some studies rely on two or more researchers to participate in the coding of the data in order to refine the coding process, determine the efficacy of the initial codes, and to collaboratively identify the codes to be used for final analysis (Saunders & Lewis, 2005). From analysis of the codes a theme that emerged in the four questions was that experiences with diversity leads to positive attitudes and affinity towards diversity. The more experiences we have with people from diverse backgrounds the greater our affinity grows for diversity. This is more effective than education and training.

In analyzing the first question, the results indicate that most participants, who responded to the questions, have not attended any diversity related events and activities organized by their current organization.





Question two results indicate that learning from each other is the most effective and important method for gaining skills that will help individuals work successfully with diverse populations.



Question three was the hardest to code despite utilizing traits such as flexibility and creativity as suggested by Saldana (2021). The responses defied being corralled into tidy categories. Two that were particularly challenging were: *Racism can happen in any group against any group, it is not whites only*, and *I have difficulty speaking up in white dominant spaces because quite often I do not feel safe*. A critical research partner would have been beneficial to test the coding applied to the data from question three.

The results from question four indicate that positive learning that occurred in the workplace from such things as well as travel had the greatest impact on working with people of diverse backgrounds.



Question five asks for additional information on diversity in the participants' organizational experiences. Due to the wide variety in responses this question generated, it was not analyzed. One informant wrote:

Personally, I'm tired of the push about diversity! Up until recently, diversity was not an issue as we navigated our way through childhood, puberty, teen years, young adulthood, middle aged years and senior years. We simply lived life. Now all of a sudden we are being told how we need to behave and treat people and that we must always throw the diversity phrases around so that we aren't shunned or labeled or discriminated against ourselves! What ever happened to just loving our neighbours and treating everyone as we wanted to be treated? Now we are being told we have to feel guilty and make amends for things that we never did, but because some random person/group feels that there was HARM done somehow, everyone else who is NOT like them, must be punished in some way. It's gotten to be so crazy out there in society because of this that no one wants to participate in normal, every day activities with the general public anymore because one never knows if they will be accused of something that they aren't even aware of!

This question allows for a glimpse into what the respondents are actually thinking and feeling about diversity in their organizations. The strong feelings about DEI that are suppressed

or surfacing among these participants are generalizable to the broader community. Organizations taking action to decenter whiteness and provide staff with training and professional development are sometimes met with resistance in thinking or in actions or both. Question 5, provides a temperature read on the current climate for DEI work which might help inform future versions of the RDI.

Limitations

The timing of the recruitment emails was challenging since the end of the year is a busy and stressful time for parents. Acquiring parent and caregiver participation needs to occur at time periods that do not coincide with school start-up or break periods. October, November, February, April and May are ideal months for maximizing participation.

A second limitation to this study was the lack of stratification. The surveys were distributed to WRAPSC and PIC members without targeting specific groups which would have allowed for comparisons. For example are there regional differences or divisional differences among WRAPSC and PIC members? In the future discrete survey links could be sent to WRAPSC at the secondary and elementary levels. Another survey code could be used for the regional townships that are rural in nature, while a different link might be used for the city members.

Finally, it is possible that a cognitive bias may have influenced how the informants responded to questions on the RDI particularly Sections A and B. In particular the social desirability bias, which is the natural tendency to portray ourselves in the best light and conform to societal norms (Kohler, 2023) may have influenced responses. This bias might impact how experiences are remembered or what choices are made in responses as the informants seek to select answers that demonstrate they have positive attitudes toward diversity.

Conclusions

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the attitudes and experiences of individuals who are members of WRAPSC and PIC. Parent engagement is the cornerstone of effective councils. Robust involvement ensures that policies are attuned to the shifting realities of the demographics served, decisions are well informed, and programs and events are aligned to the needs and values of families. A challenge is how to increase and amplify the voices at the table.

While parents may see themselves as key players in their child's educational journey, schools can emphasize the value parents have in being positive role models, engaging in open dialogue, setting exemplary behaviors, and imparting values of tolerance and respect (Sierra-Huedo, et al, 2024). In order for schools to engage more parents they must view parents as assets with an important fund of knowledge that benefits the partnership between home and school (Latunde, 2018).

The positive experiences and attitudes of the WRAPSC and PIC members is an indication of the openness that exists to welcome diversity in all spaces. The participants in this study indicated that experiences with diversity is the main driver for improving positive associations and attitudes toward diversity. While education and professional training is helpful, creating a culture of inclusion will be driven by positive experiences with diversity. To ensure this happens, schools along with the parent council must engage in dual capacity building to foster opportunities where new families are invited into the school and feel a sense of belonging and safety. Schools can impart important information about expectations, the curriculum and school safety while families have opportunities to share with the school important information about their values, customs, and culture expressions.

Increasing these experiences may increase the likelihood of having more voices at the table. It is important to keep in mind that diversity is like being invited to dinner; inclusion is eating at the same table but belonging is being able to eat as if you were in your own home (Servaes, 2022). As soon as schools are able to create that feeling of belonging we might see greater diversity on school councils.