

Supporting School Attendance Among Indigenous Children and Youth in Canada: A Rapid Review and Call to Action

Abstract

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Many community leaders in Canada have asserted the need for improved school attendance to promote educational success and well-being among Indigenous students. This paper reviews the extant literature from researchers, government agencies, school districts, and other organizations that have identified factors that improve school attendance among Indigenous students in Canada. The reviewed literature and reports indicate a need for more culturally relevant supports, as well as a more holistic approach for Indigenous students and their families. This review also highlights the dearth of research on this topic and demonstrates the need for studies and initiatives that closely examine contributing factors at various levels (i.e., administrative, policy, community, classroom, household, individual), and that deeply engage families and communities.

Keywords: Indigenous, school attendance, absenteeism, cultural programming, student supports, academic achievement, Canada

Introduction

National offices across our country have raised the need to support educational success among Indigenous students. After conducting an audit on how the federal Indigenous Services of Canada Department was progressing in their work to reduce socioeconomic gaps affecting Indigenous populations in Canada, the Office of the Auditor General of Canada (OAG, 2018) found that the proportion of high school graduates increased from 2001 and 2006 throughout the country, except on First Nations reserves. The current Governor General of Canada, Her Excellency the Right Honourable Mary Simon, C.C., C.M.M., C.O.M, C.D., an Inuk woman from Nunavik, introduced the National Strategy on Inuit Education in 2011 while serving as the president of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatmi (ITK). In that strategy, Her Excellency wrote:

[T]he reality of Inuit education in Canada is that too many of our children are not attending school, too few are graduating, and even some of our graduates are not equipped with an education that fully meets the Canadian standard. (ITK, 2011, p. 3)

Roberta Jamieson, O.C., a Mohawk woman from the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, is the first Indigenous woman to earn a law degree and was the recent president of Indspire – a national charity that aims to help Indigenous students across Canada achieve educational success. In the charity’s 2020 annual report, Jamieson, O.C., wrote that “improving educational attainment is the key to creating systemic change in communities” (Indspire, 2020, p. 3).

It is clear that supporting educational success for Indigenous students must be made a priority in Canada. When working to support such success, there are several specific areas that must be addressed. Numerous studies and environmental scans have been conducted by academics, governmental agencies, and other organizations in an effort to understand what could be done to support Indigenous students to succeed in school. As with any population, regular school attendance has been identified as a critical factor to school success among Indigenous students. However, very few literature reviews or environmental scans have been conducted to specifically understand how to best support school attendance among Indigenous students. Education Connections (2017) conducted such a scan, but their review included Indigenous populations in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, as well as Canada. Given the scope of their review, it is possible that their scan did not capture all potentially relevant publications specific to Indigenous populations in Canada. As well, it is possible that more recent work on this subject has been published since their scan was conducted.

This rapid review aims to identify existing literature and publications that seek to understand factors that foster attendance among Indigenous primary and secondary students in Canada. A rapid review is a method of knowledge synthesis in which the components of a systematic review are simplified to produce information in a timely manner (Tricco et al., 2015). As noted in Birioukov’s (2021) recent review paper in the *Canadian Journal of Education*, there is a paucity of academic research being conducted on student absenteeism in Canada. Research from other parts of the world clearly demonstrates that children and youth who experience significant disruptions to school attendance face numerous adverse consequences to their educational, social-emotional, and socio-economic development, both in the short- and long-term (Ansari et al., 2020; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014).

By reviewing what is currently known about how to improve school attendance for Indigenous students specifically, this timely analysis will help future researchers, educators, officials, and policy makers to identify ways of promoting school success for Indigenous students in Canada. Furthermore, this review focuses on understanding the factors that foster school attendance for Indigenous students, rather than simply identifying problems. This framing is important as it shifts the focus away from deficit-thinking and into a framework of understanding strengths and possibilities.

Methods

A comprehensive environmental scan was conducted to identify existing literature that describes or analyzes factors that have been demonstrated to improve school attendance among Indigenous primary and secondary school students in Canada.

After consultation with a social sciences research librarian, searches were conducted on several databases, including PsycINFO, Education Source, and ERIC. Based on Birioukov's (2021) review paper, we expected a limited amount of scholarly literature from Canada. Therefore, to capture non-academic literature as well, searches were conducted in Google and Google Scholar as well. Searches conducted on databases included specific keywords, as well as general terms, under subject headings (see Table 1A in Appendix). General searches conducted on Google included a range of related keywords in various combinations to maximize the chances of finding relevant academic publications, grey literature, government reports, and organization-led research.

Publications were excluded if they provided only general statements or indirect observations concerning school attendance. Publications were included if they provided quantitative analyses or qualitative reports from educators, community members, or students that specifically mention improving school attendance for Indigenous youth. Only publications that were published between 2000 and 2021 were included to ensure that the results provided relevant and up-to-date information.

Results

During the first pass, the search in ERIC yielded 240 results, and 13 possibly relevant publications were selected to screen. The search in Education Source yielded 12 possibly relevant publications, and three were selected to screen. The search in PsycINFO yielded 40 results with four possibly relevant publications selected to screen. Finally, multiple searches were conducted in Google Scholar and together yielded 83 results, four of which were selected to screen for their potential relevance.

From the multiple searches conducted and after screening, eight relevant publications and reports were identified and included in this review that clearly identified factors that improve school attendance among Indigenous students in Canada (see details in Table 2A of Appendix): Advisory Board on English Education, 2017; Crooks et al., 2009; Education Connections, 2017; Fulford & Daigle, 2007; Lessard, 2015; Raham, 2009; School District 69 Qualicum, 2012; and Wilson & Gobeil, 2017. These studies are detailed in Table 1 and the results are graphically depicted in Figure 1.

Table 1
Descriptive Characteristics of the Studies Included in the Rapid Review (continued)

Author (s) (Organization)	Year	Title	Province/ Territory/ Region	Age	Indigenous Group	Other context (e.g., urban or on reserve)	Sample size	Method	Source Type
Advisory Board on English Education	2017	Indigenous education: Walking on both sides of the river	Québec	Secondary 1-4	Indigenous	Community	N/A	Observational	Government report
Crooks, C. V., Chiodo, D., Thomas, D., & Hughes, R.	2009	Strengths-based programming for First Nations youth in schools: Building engagement through healthy relationships and leadership skills	Ontario	Grade 8	First Nations	N/A	Not specified	Qualitative	Peer- reviewed journal
Education Connections	2017	Strengthening attendance and retention of Indigenous youth in elementary and secondary schools in Canada and beyond: Environmental scan	CANZUS*	N/A	Indigenous	N/A	N/A	Literature review	Organization report
Fulford, G. T., & Daigle, J. M.	2007	Sharing our success: More case studies in Aboriginal schooling	Canada	N/A	Indigenous	N/A	N/A	Case studies	Organization report

*CANZUS countries include Canada, Australia, United States, & New Zealand

Table 1
Descriptive Characteristics of the Studies Included in the Rapid Review (continued)

Lessard, S.	2015	Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools Indigenous Education Initiative: Oskāyak "Young People" High School	Saskatoon	High school	Indigenous	Urban	Not specified	Program evaluation	Organization report
Raham, H.	2009	Best practices in Aboriginal education: A literature review and analysis for policy directions	Canada	N/A	Indigenous	N/A	N/A	Literature review	Government report
School District 69 (Qualicum)	2012	First Nations, Métis and Inuit education: Enhancement agreement 2011–2012 Promising practices in Fort McMurray	British Columbia	N/A	Indigenous	N/A	398	Trend analysis	Organization report
Wilson, J. R., & Gobeil, M.	2017	Guitars and makerspace: Examining the experience of First Nations students	Saskatchewan	15–19	First Nations	Not specified	20	Mixed methods	Peer-reviewed journal

*CANZUS countries include Canada, Australia, United States, & New Zealand

Figure 1

Graphical Depiction of Factors That Contribute to Improved School Attendance

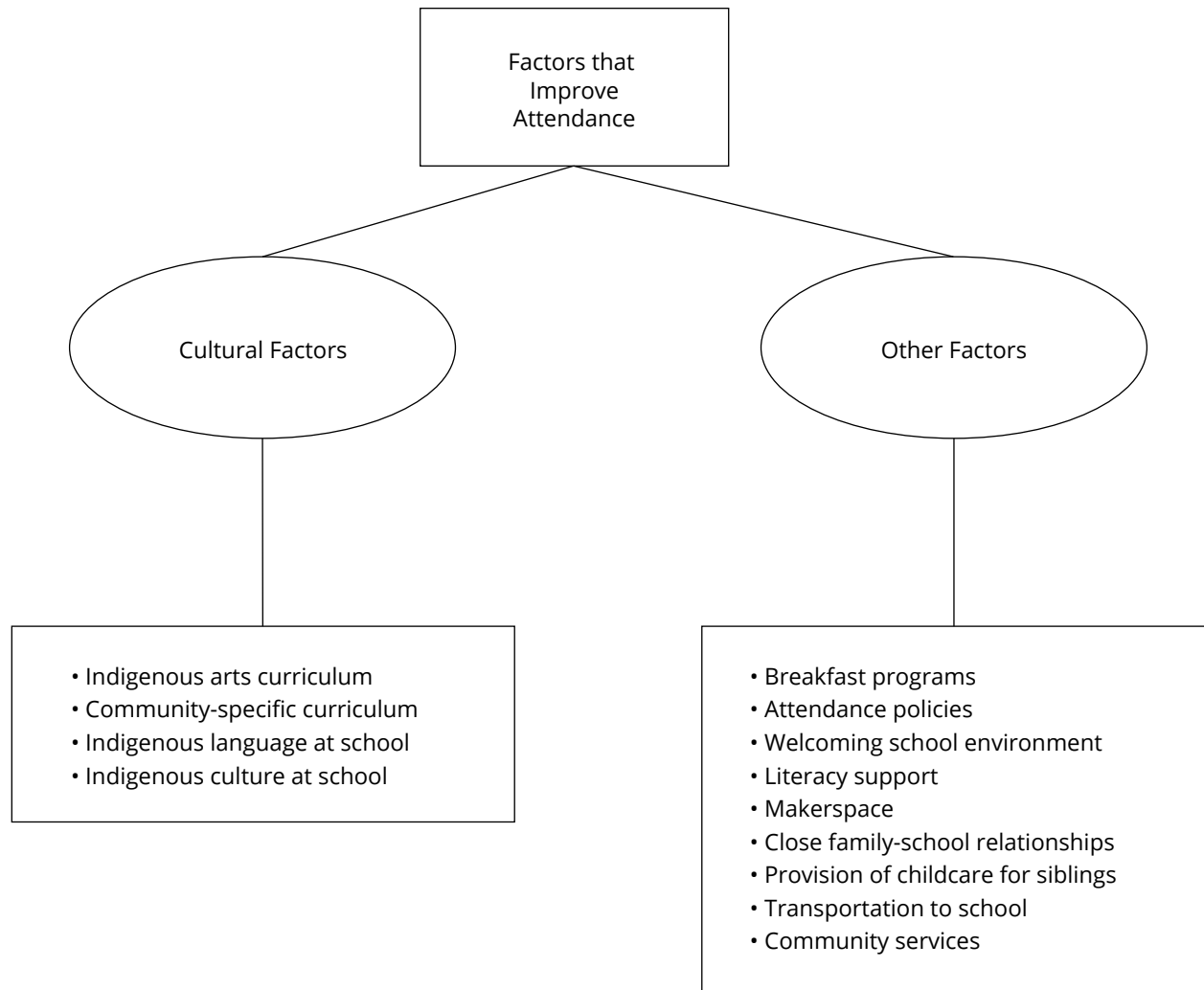


Table 2
Indigenous Authorship and Community Consultation of Studies in the Rapid Review

Author (s) (Organization)	Year	Title	Indigenous Authors	Community(ies) consulted?
Advisory Board on English Education	2017	Indigenous education: Walking on both sides of the river	Kimberly Quinn (Cree)	No, individuals from specific offices were consulted.
Crooks, C. V., Chiodo, D., Thomas, D., & Hughes, R.	2009	Strengths-based programming for First Nations youth in schools: Building engagement through healthy relationships and leadership skills	Darren Thomas (Seneca Nation, Bear Clan)	Unclear, however the evaluated program offered to Thames Valley School District students serve the Oneida Nation of the Thames, Chippewas of the Thames, and the Munsee-Delaware First Nation.
Education Connections	2017	Strengthening attendance and retention of Indigenous youth in elementary and secondary schools in Canada and beyond: Environmental scan	None	No
Fulford, G. T., & Daigle, J. M.	2007	Sharing our success: More case studies in Aboriginal schooling	Jackie Moore Daigle (Cree)	No
Lessard, S.	2015	Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools Indigenous Education Initiative: Oskāyak “Young People” High School	Sean Lessard (Montreal Lake Cree)	Oskāyak High School administrators were consulted. This school serves First Nations and Métis students.
Raham, H.	2009	Best practices in Aboriginal education: A literature review and analysis for policy directions	None	No
School District 69 (Qualicum)	2012	First Nations, Métis and Inuit education: Enhancement agreement 2011–2012 Promising practices in Fort McMurray	Possibly (i.e., administrators of the First Nations Program in the Qualicum School District)	Yes, a public forum and advisory committee was consulted. Both included First Nations, Métis and Inuit participants.
Wilson, J. R., & Gobeil, M.	2017	Guitars and makerspace: Examining the experience of First Nations students	None	Unclear, however the evaluated program served First Nations high school students from the Oskāyak High School.

Cultural Factors

With the exception of Wilson and Gobeil's (2017) study and the report from School District 69, Qualicum (2012), all of these publications found that incorporating culture or culturally relevant programming is a factor that improves attendance among Indigenous students. While their study focused on the effect of incorporating a specific makerspace course on student attendance, Wilson and Gobeil (2017) still highlighted the importance of culturally relevant curriculum and delivery models for Indigenous student success. While the authors from School District 69, Qualicum (2012) did not cite specific cultural programming that led to improved school attendance, the overarching purpose of this particular school district is to deliver culturally relevant education to First Nations students in their area.

The Advisory Board on Education (2017) cited a report on an intensive arts residency program that incorporated Cree and individual identity. This report indicated that participating in this program improved student success and attendance. Crooks et al. (2009) conducted a mixed methods study to evaluate the outcomes of a "First Nations Cultural Leadership Course" which was delivered to grade 8 First Nations students in London, Ontario. They found that during the delivery of this program there were 20% fewer absences among the students (p. 168).

Education Connections (2017) conducted an environmental scan exploring attendance and retention of Indigenous students across Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Specific to the Canadian context, Bravo, in 2017, together with Indspire, cited one school's efforts to improve student success and attendance on a First Nations reserve in Alberta. The school provided an alternative curriculum that incorporated Cree language and culture and which resulted in significant improvements to school attendance (Education Connections, 2017).

Other Factors

Fulford & Daigle (2007) collected qualitative data from many schools across the country that are working to improve education outcomes for Indigenous youth. They reported on a number of programs that found specific factors that seemed to improve attendance among their Indigenous students. In addition to cultural programming, these factors included breakfast programs, firm attendance policies, a welcoming environment, consistent school efforts to reduce absenteeism, and literacy training (Fulford & Daigle, 2007). Wilson and Gobeil (2017) examined the effects of introducing a makerspace course on student success among First Nations high school students and found that attendance in the makerspace course was slightly higher than in other courses.

In their literature review, Raham (2009) reported that working with families to address social issues also improved attendance among Indigenous youth. For instance, addressing socioeconomic challenges may involve providing adequate childcare so that students do not have to care for siblings, providing adequate and flexible transportation for students who must travel long distances, and

offering community services to ensure that students are adequately homed, fed, clothed, and overall prepared to meaningfully participate in their education.

Discussion

Despite an increased awareness of the educational inequities in Canada, Indigenous students continue to disproportionately experience worse school outcomes compared to their non-Indigenous peers (Mitrou et al., 2014). As such, it is imperative that we actively work to find ways to support Indigenous children and youth to succeed at school. Based on the findings of this review, several factors are related to improved school attendance for Indigenous youth. Taken together, this body of literature has identified both cultural and non-culturally related factors that may improve school attendance and other educational outcomes for Indigenous students in Canada.

Our rapid review suggests that culturally relevant programming is a key factor when it comes to improving attendance among Indigenous students. In fact, many argue that the entire education system serving Indigenous youth should be reconsidered from Indigenous perspectives; designed by and for Indigenous populations with approaches that align with their cultures' unique values (Berger et al., 2006; Yukon Child & Youth Advocate Office [YCAO], 2021). This idea is further supported by the fact that several studies that reported successful improvements in students' attendance did so through this type of decolonized approach to education delivery (Crooks et al., 2009; Education Connections, 2017; Lessard, 2015).

In addition, this rapid review identified several non-cultural factors that could help improve school attendance for Indigenous students. Our results suggest that there is a need for specific supports to minimize the socioeconomic and other systemic barriers that disproportionately affect Indigenous students that may prevent them from attending school on a regular basis (Berger et al., 2006; Fouillard, 2013; Fowler & McDermott, 2020; Kanu, 2007; Moscou et al., 2016; Philpott, 2006; Philpott & Nesbit, 2010; Raham, 2009; Sanderson et al., 2013; School District 69 Qualicum, 2012; YCAO, 2021). Some possible initiatives to reduce these barriers could include: child care for parents so that Indigenous students are not required to care for siblings; improved community services so that students do not have to work to support their families; flexible transportation for students who need to travel long distances to attend school; improved communication between schools and thorough student files for highly mobile students (whose families have to move a lot); and unique supports or schedules for students who may have been involved in the criminal/juvenile system.

As with any rapid systematic review, there are limitations to this study. First and foremost, only eight studies were included in the analysis. This is due to the absolute dearth of existing research on school attendance in Indigenous communities in Canada, and points to the urgent need for more attention to this topic. As well, none of the reviewed publications directly asked for the perspectives of parents or other community members, such as Elders. Future research in this area should consider ways of incorporating the perspectives of parents and Elders who play important roles in the overall wellbeing,

and therefore educational success, of Indigenous students. Finally, due to the diversity of Indigenous communities across Canada, further analyses should look at the unique contributions of how Inuit, Métis, and First Nations peoples are promoting school attendance in their respective communities.

Conclusion

More community-based studies and initiatives that promote and study school attendance are needed to thoroughly understand how communities, schools, and families can work together to improve school attendance for Indigenous children and youth. Although student absenteeism is not a concern unique to Indigenous populations, most Indigenous community leaders agree that education is a critically important factor for minimizing the effects of other socioeconomic challenges that Indigenous populations have disproportionately faced. Collaborating to improve school attendance among Indigenous students requires immediate attention from researchers, educators, policy makers, and communities to minimize existing barriers and foster school success for Indigenous students in Canada.

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Appendix

Table 1A

Search Terms Used in Rapid Review

Database	Search Terms: Population	Search Terms: Subject
ERIC	Keywords: aboriginal, indigenous, Inuit, Eskimo, Métis, OR First Nation Subject headings: indigenous populations, Canada natives, OR Eskimos	Keywords: school attendance, absenteeism, OR retention Subject headings: attendance, attendance patterns, dropouts, enrolment, truancy or “withdrawal (education),” elementary secondary education, elementary education, secondary education, academic persistence, dropout research, dropouts, OR student attrition Limits: Canada, Canadian, year 2000 to current Limits: Canada, Canadian, year 2000 to current
Education Source	Keywords: applied related words, and applied equivalent subjects: First Nations, indigenous, aboriginal, native peoples, Indian, Métis, OR Inuit	Keywords: Attendance, OR absenteeism
PsycINFO	Keywords: aboriginal, indigenous, Inuit, Eskimo, Métis, OR First Nation Subject headings: indigenous populations, Canada natives, OR Eskimos	Keywords: school attendance, absenteeism, OR retention Subject headings: attendance, attendance patterns, dropouts, enrolment, truancy or “withdrawal (education),” elementary secondary education, elementary education, secondary education, academic persistence, dropout research, dropouts, OR student attrition Limits: Canada and Canadian, year 2000 to current
Google Scholar	Attendance, absenteeism, drop out	Indigenous, Inuit, First Nation, Métis Limits: Canad*, Canada, year 2000 to current
Google	All of the above (in various combinations)	All of the above (in various combinations)

Table 2A
Descriptive Data About Publications Included in Review

Authors	Year	Study Informants				Population Studied	Methodology
		Students	Parents	Educators	Community Members Other		
Advisory Board on English Education	2017				X ^a	Multiple	Educator observations
Crooks, C. V., Chiodo, D., Thomas, D., & Hughes, R.	2009	X				First Nations	Mixed methods
Education Connections	2017				X ^b	Multiple	Literature review
Fulford, G. T., & Daigle, J. M.	2007				X ^a	Multiple	Qualitative
Lessard, S.	2015			X		First Nations	Mixed methods
Raham, H.	2009				X ^b	Multiple	Literature review
School District 69 (Qualicum)	2012			X		First Nations	Educator observations
Wilson, J. R., & Gobeil, M.	2017	X				First Nations	Mixed methods

a These publications are informed by reports from schools or other organizations. b These publications are literature reviews, with a range of informant types in the specific literature reviewed.