Research Paper Summary

In 2021-22, the Supports for Student Learning Program (SSLP) within ESDC contracted seven research projects to better understand barriers and facilitators to educational attainment in Canada. Each project was led by an external researcher(s) and involved a literature review, a scan of provincial/territorial programs and services, and a discussion paper. The objective of this research series was three-fold:

1. *Build the knowledge and evidence base and refine the SSLP's understanding of the various groups of clients served (i.e., the barriers they face);*
2. *Improve the SSLP's capacity to engage in targeted outreach with groups and organizations that serve specific groups or underserved populations (e.g., Black and racialized students, Indigenous students, 2SLGBTQI+ students, youth in care, youth experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, and youth facing a digital divide);*
3. *Inform future directions for the SSLP (e.g., to identify priority streams supporting specific population groups or projects reaching certain underserved students or partners who have expertise in addressing specific barriers).*

Below is an overview of the research project examining barriers and facilitators experienced by Indigenous students. This project was completed in March 2022.

Supports for Student Learning Program Research Series:
Barriers Faced by Indigenous Students

CONTEXT

In order to deliver on its mandate of increasing student success in the span of a two-year funding window, the SSLP seeks to rapidly advance knowledge and understanding of key issues affecting unique groups of underserved students, and into measuring the impact of its investments.

According to the 2016 Census, the high school dropout rate[1] in Canada was 9.4%. However, this rate exponentially increased for Indigenous populations, particularly if they lived on reserve or within Inuit Nunangat. For Indigenous peoples, the dropout rate was 28.2%, and varied by Indigenous identity (First Nations, 34.0%; Métis, 16.2%; Inuit, 50.7%). For comparison, the dropout rate was 8.2% for the

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[1] High school dropout rates are defined as youth aged 20 to 24 whose highest level of education is less than high school (or "no certificate, diploma or degree").

non-Indigenous population. In addition, the gap in educational attainment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people extends to the working population (aged 25 to 64). In 2016, 64.8% of the working population had completed some form of post-secondary education, in comparison to only 49.3% of Indigenous peoples. Attainment of some form of post-secondary education also varied by Indigenous identity (First Nations, 45.5%; Métis, 55.4%; Inuit, 37.6%).

Research Question(s)

Noting the above, this project aimed explore the underlying promotive and risk factors, including systemic inequalities, related to the educational outcomes of Indigenous students across high school and post-secondary studies. Specifically, the SSLP sought to answer the following research question(s):

- What are the barriers to education faced by Indigenous students (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis)?
    - What factors may prevent Indigenous students from fully engaging in their studies and how might these barriers affect completion of high school as well as transitions to and persistence in post-secondary education?
    - Beyond barriers that may be experienced in the formal education system, what external factors may affect Indigenous students' attachment to their learning and social networks, thereby contributing to their overall sense of belonging and academic motivation?
    - What recent trends are emerging as challenges facing this underserved population? Particularly following and during the COVID-19 pandemic, what barriers have recently changed, been highlighted, or worsened or improved?
    - How do varying identity factors (sex or gender, age group, Indigenous heritage, geography, mental or physical disability, household income(s), etc.) intersect with Indigeneity to influence educational outcomes and experiences of Indigenous students (First Nations, Inuit, Métis)?
- What services are provided and/or investments have been made by provincial and territorial governments to reduce these barriers? What gaps or overlaps exist?
- What recommended actions could Employment and Social Development Canada's SSLP take to reduce these barriers, enhance learning experiences, and overall improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students

ABOUT THE RESEARCHER(S)

Dr. Sean Lessard is Woodland Cree and is from Montreal Lake Cree Nation in Northern Saskatchewan Treaty 6 territory. Dr. Lessard is a former youth worker, teacher and high school guidance counsellor. He is known for his award winning work alongside indigenous youth and communities in the development of innovative educational programming and in particular Indigenous youth empowerment. Dr. Lessard currently is an Associate Professor Secondary Education at the University of Alberta, in Indigenous Education and Teacher Education. He continues to write and research on the experiences of Indigenous youth and families in and outside of school settings.

KEY FINDINGS

- Experiences in elementary and secondary school significantly shape the direction of Indigenous students' postsecondary pathway and experience. As such, it is vital that positive spaces and experiences are created for Indigenous youth in these formative educational years.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Calls to Action
- The TRC (2015a) Call to Action #62 points to the significance of implementing culturally appropriate curriculum in K-12 publicly-funded schools to promote intercultural understandings that reflect Indigenous students' epistemic and cultural realities.

- The response to the TRC Calls to Action vary across the country. This contributes to the evolving context around Indigenous youth and school engagement.

Indigenous Knowledge
- School landscapes in Canada have been systematically structured over time to privilege Eurocentric and Western ways of education (Lessard, 2013; Lessard, Caine, &Clandinin, 2015).
- Culturally relevant and appropriate curriculum is a significant factor in fostering Indigenous youth engagement in school (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007; St. Denis, 2011).

- Pathways of engagement become more possible when Indigenous youth see their identities and history represented in their learning environment. As such, there is growing endorsement for schools to adopt pedagogy that supports Indigenous knowledge and experience.

- Often, school policy and curriculum reform documents are idealized broad statements that provide little insight into how they will be implemented and

measured.

- There is still a predominant sense that school systems operate from a colonial perspective. That is, there is a sense that Indigenous youth can be shaped into more productive people within mainstream society via education systems. This prevailing belief has the effect of directly and/or indirectly viewing Indigenous knowledge and learning as inferior.

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Representation within school spaces and curricula

- There is a need for more Indigenous teachers, administrators, counsellors and support staff to deepen connection with Indigenous students.

- Indigenous content is often taught as "additional"" or "optional" content. In separating "regular" content from Indigenous content, curricula and educators are inadvertently othering cultural content. As mentioned previously, this once again reinforce the ideals of whiteness and protects false narratives of the supremacy of colonial ways of knowing.

- Federal programs may have good intentions, but significant power continues to reside with funding agencies rather than the communities that are affected by colonialism

Prevalence and impacts of racism

- Indigenous students and Indigenous teachers have identified that racism in school contributes to negative educational spaces (St. Denis, 2011). The assimilative policies that were part of colonization have created a mistrust of educational institutions among Indigenous peoples.

- While Canada is known for its welcoming multiculturalism, for Indigenous people and other racialized minorities, multicultural approaches and strategies can feel like an attempt to homogenize and minimize their interests. Indigenous people have expressed that multiculturalism is a form of colonialism and works to distract from the recognition and redress of Indigenous rights.

- In a detailed review of the available literature in Australia with respect to Indigenous education, researchers sought to hear directly from Indigenous Peoples. They heard that the impacts of racism on Indigenous students are harmful, wide reaching and life long, and influence academic achievement, attitudes to use of Indigenous language, emotional wellbeing, physical health, self-concept, school attendance and post-school pathways, and eventually school choice and engagement when those students become parents. (The Educator, 2018)

Structural oppressions

- In addition to racism, the devaluing of Indigenous identities and gender violence affect the lives of many Indigenous students. These disparities often mean that, when seeking educational or developmental support services, Indigenous families have an additional burden of dealing with service providers who are not equipped to understand the needs of Indigenous children.

Pandemic impacts

- Pointing to a digital divide, Cherubini (2020) observes, "online platforms adopted across Canada may disadvantage Indigenous epistemologies based on holistic and communal learning. For Indigenous students already struggling with attendance issues due to their disengagement in public education, the demands of online learning certainly are not beneficial.

- There are additional socioeconomic concerns affected by online learning. Poverty can create a lack of access to school food and health services typically provided in person. Challenges with internet connectivity and access to electronics and other devices required for online learning are an issue as well. One that SSLP is currently working to reduce. In this way, the pandemic may significantly widen the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Family support, community support and agency

- For generations, formal education for Indigenous peoples was associated with oppression, not only through the use of residential schools to remove and assimilate Indigenous students, but also through requirements to revoke Indian status (which resulted in widespread alienation from communities and families).

- In a study of Native American males transitioning from secondary to post-secondary education (Benally, 2013) a major motivating factor for attending and completing college was found to be support and encouragement from family. It is important for Indigenous students to feel they have the support of family and community in attending PSE so that they don't feel like they are further contributing to the oppression of their community and their people through further seeking further education. According to Australian Indigenous students, education and employment were secondary to family relationships. Employment is a way to provide for themselves, their families, and their communities (Walker, 2019).

- Community partnership programs can increase PSE attainment. Empowering Indigenous people to practice and disseminate their culture can assist in developing stronger cultural connections, strengthen community relations, and enhance computer literacy skills for children and youth who

far too often feel disenfranchised. In their work concerning Australian Indigenous youth, Cuervo, Barakat, and Turnbull (2015) proposed "tailored and holistic educational innovations that are the result of direct engagement by government, schools, academia and business with Indigenous communities" to help promote positive transitions.

- Positive educational attainment at the community level can shape spaces for further educational attainment. An example provided in Dr. Lessard's report explains how a community in Nunavut was learning about land claims and used an inquiry-based module to learn about traditional Inuit lifestyles by speaking to community about their experiences and memories. The final project required students to identify actions they could take in their own community to promote Inuit culture and language (McGregor, 2013). Community driven learning experiences like this can empower Indigenous youth to take positive actions in their communities thereby creating new spaces and opportunities to further educational attainment in diverse ways.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Promote Indigenous epistemologies
- The misrepresentation of Indigenous peoples can be countered through the **promotion of Indigenous epistemologies, which connect traditional knowledge, language, healing, stories, and relationships.** This requires radical changes to policy and implementation. Deconstructing settler colonialism's influence in education policy requires a paradigm shift. **Respect for Indigenous knowledge and lived experience should be demonstrated and further fostered through integration into day-to-day teaching and curriculum**. Land based programs, camps, recreation and play can provide additional and alternative routes to this integration.

- It is important to build curricula, policy and services alongside Indigenous people. Knowledge keepers and Elders should be in schools on a permanent basis. Relationships matter, teachers need to build respectful reciprocal relationships with Indigenous students. Building healthy relationships enables the creation of programs that can bridge the gap between home, school, and community and can provide Indigenous learners with a variety of healthy platforms in which to engage, learn and grow to reach their full potential.

Foster successful transitions through culturally responsive policies
- Foster successful *transitions* from K-12 to PSE and the labour market through culturally responsive policies: Cuervo, Barakat, and Turnbull's (2015) report aimed at identifying opportunities and barriers for Australian Indigenous youth, proposed that transitions into higher education and

employment should include "culturally responsive policies; accommodation of difference by schools; commitment to community consultation; and culturally relevant curricula". Transition supports would be helpful in buffering differences and culture shock. For instance, secure financial support, access to transportation, housing, food, technology, counselling, mentorship, tutoring, extracurricular. Some recommendations for supporting successful transitions include:

- Inviting off-reserve teachers to visit communities to introduce and build relationships with communities and students and to build better understanding of students' realities and to learn from community members.

- Taking holistic action to address the poverty, unemployment, as well as health and housing inequities to create sustainable positive educational change.

- Ensuring access to technology to help encourage virtual learning. Asking Indigenous families how services and educational experiences can be improved can provide much needed insight and simultaneously, serve to empower families and community.

- Creating a buddy system to help students get to know their new school when entering PSE.

- Offering advanced visits during the year before the transition to PSE, or allow for studying part-time in home communities.

- Ensuring ongoing support from a community liaison worker who could and would connect youth with their parents, families, caregivers, and home community.

- Ensuring educators and service providers have accurate historical understandings of colonialism and take Anti-Racism and anti-oppression training.

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