

Knowledge Synthesis: Underrepresentation of Indigenous Students in Canadian Post-Secondary Institutions

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Received Date 03 July 2024 **Accepted Date** 10 August 2024 **Published Date** 1 September 2024

ABSTRACT

This article will explore barriers for Indigenous students to pursuing and persisting with university education in Canada. Canada has favored a Eurocentric curriculum throughout history discrediting Aboriginal knowledge bases and values including Indigenous languages. As a result of Western assimilation policies which were institutionalized through the 1876 Indian Act and the Indian Residential School System (IRSS), Aboriginal communities have suffered tremendously. The educational journeys of Indigenous peoples are inadequate. Through a compressive literature review, this article will critically examine the relationships between intergenerational trauma (IGT) experienced by Indigenous communities and its' role in students' underrepresentation within Canadian post-secondary institutions. For the purpose of this paper, thirteen literature including peer-reviewed and grey literature were thoroughly examined. Key finding of the review will be presented in this knowledge synthesis paper.

KEYWORDS

Colonialism, Curriculum, Indigenous, Intergenerational trauma

INTRODUCTION

Canada has favored a Eurocentric curriculum throughout history discrediting Aboriginal knowledge bases and values including Indigenous languages. As a result of Western assimilation policies which were institutionalized through the 1876 Indian Act and the Indian Residential School System (IRSS), Aboriginal communities have suffered tremendously. Persistent subjection to violence, exploitation, and cognitive imperialism have led to children becoming shattered in the cognitive and physical aftermath of school (Battiste, 1998). Battiste (1998) argues, "in short, the educational tragedy has been to Aboriginal worldviews, knowledge, languages, cultures, and the creation of widespread social and psychological upheaval in Aboriginal communities" (p. 19). While such knowledge bases serve as necessary components

towards the healing and development of Indigenous peoples, our existing curricula continues to perpetuate a fragmented existence which fails to reflect First Nations people. Therefore, it is not surprising that Indigenous youth and low-income backgrounds are under-represented at post-secondary levels despite “Canada ranking high among the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and development (OECD) countries in terms of advanced education with 66% of Canadians aged 25 to 64 having completed some form of post-secondary education” (Shankar et al., 2013, p. 3910). While advanced education, is associated with positive societal outcomes including higher productivity, innovation, economic growth, stronger communities, and quality of life; sadly, the educational journeys of Indigenous peoples is inadequate (Shankar et al., 2013).

The objectives of the study are:

- (1) explore barriers for Indigenous students to pursuing and persisting with university education.
- (2) examine Indigenous education policy frameworks in response towards advancing reconciliation and will propose solutions to increase Indigenous representation in a Canadian curriculum which upholds Eurocentric knowledge.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the theory of colonization. Colonialism is described as “forced political domination of one nation over another, including administrative, economic, and cultural control (Hick & Stokes, 2017, p. 278). With reference to Indigenous peoples, the act of colonization was demonstrated through the settlers’ attempts to control and annihilate Indigenous culture with legal instruments such as the Indian Act of 1876, assimilationist policies, the IRSS, as well as the sixties scoop (Hick & Stokes, 2017). Such legislations and policies proved to perpetuate the interests of the government while destroying the cultural identity of Canada’s First people.

METHODOLOGY

A comprehensive literature review was carried out for the purpose of this paper. Both peer-reviewed and grey literature was critically studied, although this cannot be considered a systematic literature review. Literature linked to the search keywords "Indigenous Students and Post-secondary", "Intergenerational Trauma", "Indigenous Education Policy", and "Canadian Curriculum" found through search engines such as Google Scholar, Social Work Abstracts, and Sociology, were reviewed. 13 literatures related to the topic were selected to review for this article.

RESULTS

The key findings of this study are: (1) The role of the intergenerational trauma; (2) Barriers to pursuing and persisting with University Education; and (3) Indigenous Education Policy Frameworks.

The Role of Intergenerational Trauma

The awareness of the phenomenon of IGT has long been known to First Nations people by way of the concepts of “blood memory” and soul wound” (Fenton, 2018). Deriving from

colonization, these memories pass between generations resulting in fragmented identities for Indigenous peoples. For the purpose of this paper, a definition of IGT was adopted and noted as “the transmission of the effects of adverse life experiences that influence how the individual appraises the world and can also influence development of ineffective coping skills” (Gaywish & Mordoch, 2018, p. 4). In the article, entitled “The Old Wounded: Destructive Plasticity and Intergenerational Trauma, the impacts of psychological trauma are illustrated beautifully as it relates IGT to the falling of a pebble in a calm pond (Fenton, 2018). The ripples of the pond spread out in all directions and although the water returns to stillness, the event is part of the pond’s history as the pebble remains lodged in the water. Despite Canadians awareness surrounding Canada’s historical past, not everyone is convinced of IGT and its’ lasting impacts.

Fenton (2018) gives recognition to the pioneering works of both Bombay et. al. in 2009 and Yehuda in 2008 along with their contributions into the subject of the “old wounded” (IGT) as their research further identifies the presence of IGT. The work of Yehuda focuses primarily on “empirical evidence which supports an understanding of the biological transmission of the impacts of trauma” (p.6), whereas Bombay et al seeks to explore the unique cultural experiences of the horrors of colonization (Fenton, 2018). Such findings are of inestimable value towards the study of a topic which should not be ignored, especially concerning its’ role towards the educational outcomes for Indigenous peoples.

Canada’s attempt to discredit Aboriginal worldviews and knowledge bases throughout history have certainly contributed towards the lasting effects of IGT. Battiste (2018) refers to this form of cognitive manipulation as cognitive imperialism which continues to pervade our culture and educational curricula. While education has not been an enriching experience for Indigenous peoples, how might the role of IGT account for the underrepresentation of Indigenous students within post-secondary institutions? In the journal, *Situating Intergenerational Trauma in the Educational Journey* (2018), both Dr. Rainey Gaywish and Dr. Elaine Mordoch confirm the impact of IGT on students’ post-secondary educational experience within a qualitative study conducted through interviews in a culturally safe framework. In hearing the voices of the students, perceptions of their educational journeys in relation to experiencing IGT were expressed. Contributing factors towards their lack of success included witnessing lateral violence, family disconnectedness, fragmented identities, and a lack of support from family members. Gaywish and Mordoch (2018) concluded, “Conversation interviews with participants support the supposition that IGT is a significant factor many Aboriginal students experience in post-secondary studies (p.20). Results such as these demand a grave need to improve access to quality education including a trauma-informed approach so Aboriginal people can better understand the effects of IGT and thrive academically.

Barriers to Pursuing and Persisting with University Education

Obtaining post-secondary education (PSE) is fast becoming a requirement for securing employment that can provide young adults with the economic, social and personal resources necessary for improved health and quality of life (Shankar et al, 2013). Unfortunately, many obstacles exist for Indigenous students towards pursuing and persisting with PSE and as a result, this social determinant of health is inaccessible. Within a qualitative study carried out by Shankar et. al (2013) challenges were examined during the participant’s program of studies. Aside from IGT, students were reporting additional challenges such as oppressive financial

schemes. Within state sponsored financial assistance schemes, concerning realities emerged involving inadequacy of funding, conditions placed upon the students, and information control (Shankar et. al, 2013). Also, failure to recognize arising circumstances and students' unavailable resources were not considered. Therefore, what was specifically designed to target financial barriers to education, ironically turned out to be a significant health determinant, thus perpetuating their inability to successfully pursue post-secondary study. Shankar et. al (2013) supports, "all the strain and stress that go into abiding by rules and meeting expectations become extra-localized as students' personal responsibilities to manage (p. 3916). Therefore, the focus is taken off the construction of oppressive conditions and shifted towards the funded students' lack of integrity.

Other barriers which presented themselves involved classroom teaching and learning. Battiste (1998) reminds us, "almost all constative structures of university research or performative discourse in university disciplines have a political and institutional stake in Eurocentric diffusion and knowledge, that is, perpetuating colonization" (p. 23). Students often felt the educators themselves held little knowledge concerning Indigenous worldviews and the course material was not reflective of a respect for diversity. In addition, the ongoing experience of institutionalized racism was expressed among students. Although some institutions consisted of a large multicultural and Indigenous student community, discrimination was not muted among instructors and administration (Shankar et. al, 2013).

Furthermore, through a consultation held in 2016 at the Third Annual Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education Forum, partners within British Columbia identified other significant barriers faced by Aboriginal learners that influence their decision to participate, persist and complete post-secondary education (Aboriginal post-secondary education - gov., n.d.). Existing challenges included low student transitions, a lack of Aboriginal representation within the institutions, geographical barriers, an absence of culturally appropriate services, a need for stronger partnerships, limited financial assistance and a need for enhanced data collection and tracking (Aboriginal post-secondary education - gov., n.d.). Clearly, Indigenous students face many obstacles which impede their success towards pursuing and persisting with PSE.

Indigenous Education Policy Frameworks

Policy frameworks play a vital role in reforming change and the current educational disparities between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada reveals a national crisis (Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020). In response to this state of urgency, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) created a report in 2015 placing schools and education at the heart of processes to advance reconciliation and acknowledge the damaging legacies of previous policies (Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020). Since the release of the report, all jurisdictions across Canada expressed commitments towards reconciliation. The most visible feature among the frameworks emphasized a commitment to integrate Indigenous content and adopt pedagogical strategies to engage Indigenous students, however, despite this notable feature, the authors question whether commitments to reconciliation can be realized in many contexts (Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020).

Wotherspoon and Milne (2020) attempted to review the education policy frameworks across Canada. Despite the recognition of a considerable movement towards greater incorporation of Indigenous content in the school curricula from kindergarten to grade 12, they found that the frameworks had varying approaches, targeted different audiences, provided no

clear directives for educators, made little reference to holistic development concerning education measures, acted as add-ons to curricula and contained uneven responses according to a 2018 KAIROS report card (Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020). For example, regarding the framing of educational policy, both Saskatchewan and Nunavut demonstrated the “possibility to embrace educational orientations to reconciliation in which Indigenous perspectives are deeply embedded within educational organizations and practices rather than simply added on” (Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020, p.8). Whereas other provinces reinforced the supremacy of the Western models in instruction. It is important to note, since education is an area of provincial and territorial jurisdiction, this can prove problematic with respect to perspective and positions concerning how to advance reconciliation as each province possesses different values and objectives.

In 2007, the Ministry of Advanced Education (AVED) implemented the Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education Strategy and Action Plan to improve education and employment outcomes for Aboriginal students. Results from an evaluation of the strategy held in April 2011 informed the new 2020 Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education and Training Policy Framework and Action Plan within British Columbia (n.d.).

Based on the latest 2006 Census data, the most evident disparity found was at the university level, as 7 per cent of Aboriginal people had a university credential, compared to 26 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population (n.d.). Also, a gender trend was recognized, while fewer male Aboriginal students were graduating from high school in comparison to female Aboriginal students. Underlying these statistics were also the social and economic factors known to undermine school success which involved the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children within care (n.d.). Whilst many of these factors intersect and reinforce one another, effective responses involving changes to policies and structural systems will be required to mitigate the underrepresentation of Indigenous students in PSE.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although evidence exists suggesting that formal commitments towards reconciliation offer remarkable solutions in addressing the legacies of colonialism, we need to continue to question the dominant structures and practices (Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020). Afterall, Western approaches continue to be reinforced through methods of teaching. Battiste (1998) cautions, the universities' preservation of Eurocentric knowledge is seen as the universal truth, thus continues to perpetuate colonization. Rather, consider the idea that decolonization of education would grant us the ability to view Indigenous epistemological and pedagogical orientations as significant contributions towards enriching our educational curriculum, as well as help Indigenous people heal and recover from an ongoing fragmented existence.

Positively, Indigenous peoples are reclaiming education as we witness a surge in Indigenous institutes across Canada. In 2017, the Ontario government passed an Act that formally recognized Indigenous institutes (Liza, 2021). The Act effectively designates the institutes as the “third pillar” of education in Ontario, as well as requires the Ministry of Colleges and Universities to fund their core operating budgets (Liza, 2021). Such an example serves as a unique model for the rest of the country. However, according to the Canadian Federation of Students in Ontario, they highlight, “despite the value Indigenous Institutes contribute to Ontario’s post-secondary education, they are vastly underfunded” (n.d.). Again, this lack of

funding will interrupt the goal of becoming independent and perpetuate the vicious cycle of underrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in PSE.

A continual fight for independence is demonstrated by Indigenous groups including the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) and the Adult and Higher Learning Association (IAHLA), as they advocate for First Nations students towards gaining access to relevant and high-quality education at all levels, including post-secondary. While education has been configured through the lens of a White settler society, Indigenous people need to determine their path leading to progress. Battiste (1998) so eloquently states, “Eurocentric scholars may be useful in helping Indigenous people articulate their concerns, but to speak for them is to deny them the self-determination so essential to human progress” (p. 25).

Specifically, self-determination offers a long-term vision for First Nations, but in the meantime post-secondary institutions need to continue to develop and deliver culturally relevant supports, as well as increase Aboriginal representation within the educational environment. If this seems unrealizable, ensuring educators no longer lack the knowledge and confidence in relation to Indigenous cultures should be a high priority. Indigenous students require a curriculum devoid of a fragmented knowledge base.

It is indeed important to regard that within the educational journey, cultural centres “function as ambassadors through the transmission of accurate accounts of First Nation history which nurtures bi-cultural awareness and addresses racism at its root” (FNCCEC, n.d.). Thus, their preservation and promotion are vital in advancing education and healing for First Nations in Canada. It is also recognized that the significance of protecting educational cultural centres and revitalizing the First Nation language in order to avoid misinformation through a narrative burdened with ignorance.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

Evidently, many obstacles exist concerning the underrepresentation of Indigenous people in post-secondary institutions. With respect to the role of intergenerational trauma, the effects of IGT on students acted as a significant barrier and while Canada aims to preserve Eurocentric knowledge bases, casting a light on the long shadow of colonialism will not be easy. Battiste (1998) reminds that every instant Eurocentrism appears we must analyze and challenge it, just as Indigenous people must understand its’ contribution towards their negotiated and manufactured identities. Although, Canada appears to be open to the discussion in advancing reconciliation, progress will be dependent on the involvement of all stakeholders at all levels of education. Intention simply is not enough, and words need to be put into action. “In the traditions of the Anishinabe, the teachings about responsibility describe how actions of one generation resonate into the future for at least seven generations (Gaywish & Mordoch, 2018, p. 7). As a result, adopting this heritage as a long-term vision for the Canadian government and educators is highly encouraged and very necessary, as is providing an education more reflective of Indigenous peoples.

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