

2010

Staying in School: Engaging Aboriginal Students





Congress of Aboriginal Peoples



The Congress of Aboriginal Peoples as a National Aboriginal Organization represents the interest of off-reserve non-status and status Indians, and Métis Aboriginal Peoples living in urban, rural, remote and isolated areas throughout Canada. We are also the national voice for the constituency and their affiliate organizations making up the Congress family of advocates for the off-reserve Aboriginal Peoples of Canada.

This series of analysis papers was made possible with financial assistance from Human Resource and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) under the Policy Collaboration initiative.

STAYING IN SCHOOL: ENGAGING ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

OVERVIEW

Aboriginal Education, notably the inclusion of Aboriginal content in curricula and programs and the success of Aboriginal students, has received focused attention across Canada in recent years. Substantial efforts have been undertaken at the federal and provincial levels to address the differences in rates of achievement by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Youth (e.g. Kroes, 2008; Levin, 2009).

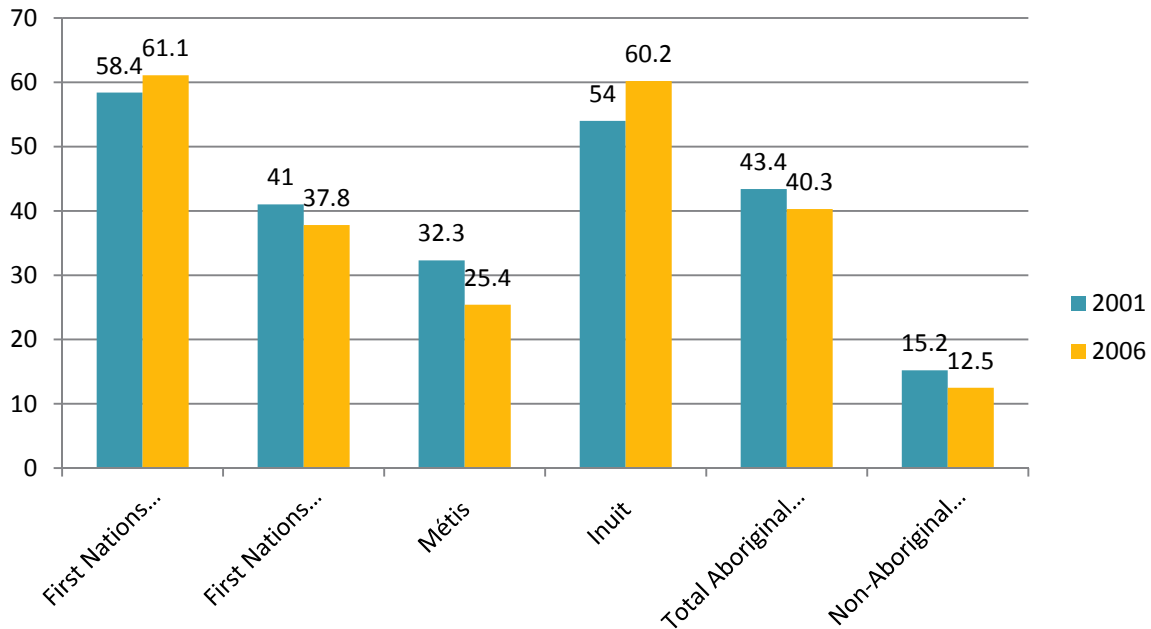
Historically, there have been gaps in measured outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Peoples of all ages, particularly in literacy rates (Statistics Canada, 2005), and enrolment to post-secondary education (Statistics Canada, 2010a). Although enrolment to post-secondary education by Aboriginal Peoples is increasing, it is still below the rates of non-Aboriginal Peoples. Across Canada rates of Aboriginal Peoples completing high school lag far behind non-Aboriginal Peoples.

HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION RATES FOR YOUTH

When examining high school completion rates for youth ages 20 to 24, the earliest age group where all students could be expected to have completed high school, the discrepancies are undeniable. According to Statistics Canada 2006 census data, 40% of Aboriginal Peoples aged 20 to 24 did not have a high-school diploma, compared to 13% among non-Aboriginal Peoples. The rate of non-completion is even higher for on-reserve Aboriginal Peoples (61% had not completed high school) and for Inuit Peoples living in rural or remote communities (68% had not completed high school). Gender differences on the 2006 census are also evident, as 43% percent of male Aboriginal Peoples in Canada between the ages of 20 and 24 had not completed high school, compared to 37% of female Aboriginal Peoples of the same age group (Statistics Canada, 2010a).

FIGURE 1

Proportion of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal young adults aged 20 to 24 with no high school diploma in 2001 and 2006



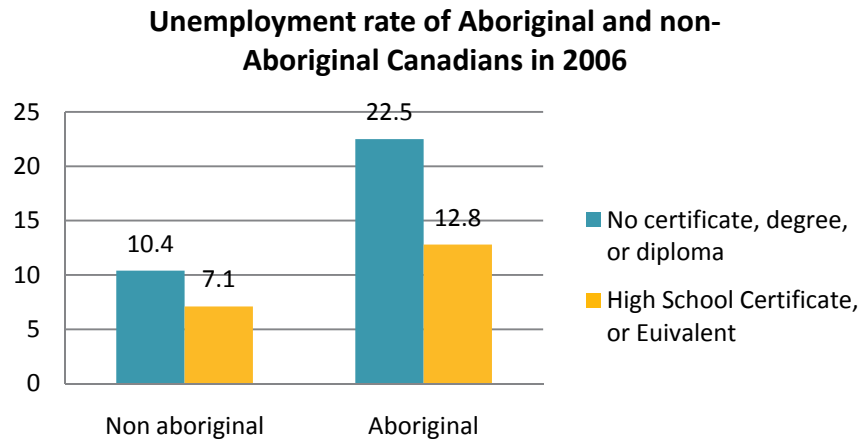
Source: Statistics Canada, 2008a. "Labour Force Activity (8), Aboriginal Identity (8), Highest Certificate or Diploma (14), Area of Residence (6), Age Groups (12A), and Sex (3) for the Population 15 Years and Over of Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2006 Census – 20% Sample Data," Topic-based tabulation, 2006 Census of Population, Catalogue no 97-560-X2006031.

HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION AND UNEMPLOYMENT

Successful completion of high school can have a long-term impact, not only on individual students, but also on their families and communities since the lack of a high school diploma is strongly correlated with a high unemployment rate. According to Richards (2008), the employment rate for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Peoples nearly doubles with high school certification and continues to increase as educational attainment increases. Like high school completion rates, employment rates for the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada have consistently been lower than those of non-Aboriginal Peoples. Census data from 2006 shows a 10.4% unemployment rate for non-Aboriginal Peoples compared to 22.5% for Aboriginal Peoples. This rate is exacerbated for the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada aged between 20 and 24 who demonstrate a 31% unemployment rate. (Statistics Canada, 2010b)

Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution clearly identifies the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada as "Indian", "Métis" or "Inuit"; therefore, CAP does not endorse the use of the term "First Nations" when referring to Aboriginal Peoples living on- or off-reserve.

FIGURE 2

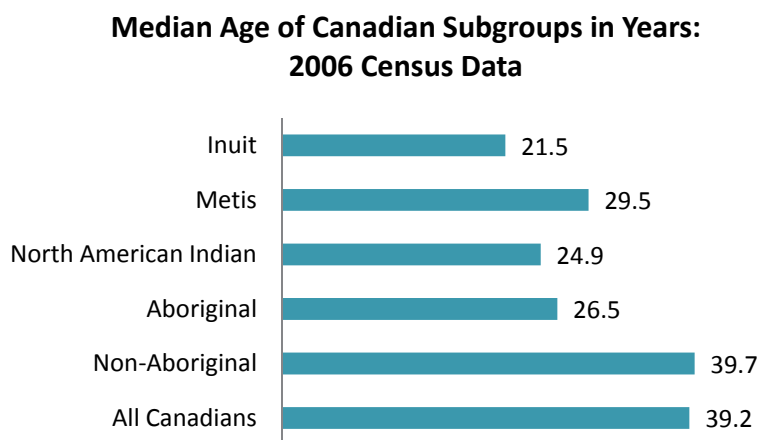


Source: Statistics Canada (2010)a. Aboriginal Identity (8), Highest Certificate, Diploma or Degree (14), Major Field of Study – Classification of Instructional Programs, 200 (14), Area of Residence (6), Age Groups (10A), and Sex (3) for the Population 15 Years and Over of Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2006 Census – 20% Sample Data.” Aboriginal Peoples, 2006 Census. Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Population, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 97-560-XCB2006028.

GROWTH IN PROPORTION OF ABORIGINAL YOUTH

To compound the situation, there is a growth trend in the proportion of youth compared to adults within the population of Aboriginal Peoples.

FIGURE 3



Source: Statistics Canada (2010)c. Aboriginal Identity (8), Area of Residence (6), Age Groups (12) and Sex (3) for the Population of Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2006 Census - 20% Sample Data. Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Population, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 97-558-XCB2006006.

As demonstrated by the median age of various subgroups in Figure 3 (2006), census data indicates that while the Canadian population as a whole is ageing, the median age of Aboriginal Peoples is much younger than the median age of non-Aboriginal Peoples. In 2006, Canadians aged 15 to 24 made up 13.5% of the total non-Aboriginal population, compared to 18.1% of the Aboriginal population. Aboriginal Youth between the ages of 15 to 24 make up 17.9% of those who identified as North American Indians, 18.3% of those who identified as Métis, and 20.9% of those who identified as Inuit (Statistics Canada, 2010c). This has implications for the future employment trends as there will be an increase in demand for a skilled workforce, coupled with large increases within Aboriginal working-age populations over the next decade compared to the non-Aboriginal population (The Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2004).

PROBLEM DEFINITION

Despite understanding the potential repercussions associated with leaving high school, little is known about any proven factors that contribute to or impede youth from staying in school and obtaining a high school diploma, particularly with regard to Aboriginal Youth. Though the body of knowledge is growing, many questions remain unanswered. What are the risk factors and protective factors that affect Aboriginal Youth staying in school? Are there differences experienced by rural, urban and Aboriginal Youth? What efforts are being undertaken at the Federal, Provincial, Territorial and Community levels to ensure that Aboriginal Youth are engaged and empowered in their own education? What changes are taking place to ensure that education systems reflect and support a “different way of knowing” that is the foundation of Aboriginal learning systems? (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009)

This paper outlines a summary of specific risk factors related to completing high school faced by Aboriginal Youth living in urban, rural, remote and isolated areas throughout Canada. Protective factors are also summarized, promising practices and programs highlighted and potential next steps outlined.

METHODOLOGY

The review of literature was undertaken in several phases.

- 1) A web search was conducted to identify information on Ministry websites, Ministry contacts for Aboriginal Education and policy or programming documents related to Aboriginal Education.
- 2) A web-search was conducted to find relevant informational or program-based sites for Aboriginal Youth using the search terms “Aboriginal, Youth, First Nations, Métis and Inuit”.

- 3) A Search was conducted using ERIC, PsychInfo and SCOPUS search engines using the key words “Aboriginal” and “education”. Resources that were Canadian and that were focused mainly on Aboriginal Youth were kept.
- 4) Interviews, conversations and emails were collected from individuals cited as “experts” in the literature, or who were referred by correspondence or word of mouth, and from representatives of programs aimed at helping Aboriginal Youth to stay in school.

DISCUSSION

DEFINITIONS: Throughout the literature and in current discussions, “Staying in School” is most commonly examined by looking at “school leavers”, or “drop-outs”, common terms for those individuals who do not receive a high school diploma. The assumption is that by understanding *who* is leaving, we can better determine *why* they are leaving and what we need to do to help them *stay* and graduate.

Until 1996, the term “drop-out” was used to identify students without a diploma. Around that time, the terminology “school leaver” was adapted to better represent the increasing understanding that “school leaving” results not just from personal failure, but from the interplay of risk factors at the individual, school and community level.

While “drop-out” and “school leaver” continue to be terms used to define the population, several factors complicate the literature around high school completion. School boards continue to struggle with tracking their graduation results and school leavers as definitions are often unclear and inconsistent. For example, a student may leave and re-enter school several times throughout their educational path, or a student defined as a “drop out” may in fact return and graduate.



VOLUNTARY SELF IDENTIFICATION OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS: The lack of reliable student-specific data on the achievement of Aboriginal students adds to the challenge of understanding true predictors and protectors of students at risk of being a “school leaver”. Tracking the success and high school completion of all Canadian students proves to be a difficult and complicated task. To pinpoint the trajectories of specific sub-groups of students, such as Aboriginal Youth, has proven nearly impossible in many cases. Most Student Information Systems in use by school boards (the database used to capture information on each student) do not capture information that would identify students as “Aboriginal” either by design, or through the

inconsistent or incomplete data entry practices within school boards. Currently, ministries of education across Canada are at different points in the implementation of voluntary self-identification policies and practices for Aboriginal students that would allow for better tracking and monitoring of student progress. For example, Ontario launched its voluntary self-identification policy in 2007, with the 2009/2010 school year being the first where accurate data was expected. The ministry in British Columbia has longer, more established partnerships and connections with Aboriginal Peoples and groups which has resulted in the ability to collect more longitudinal data on students who have self-identified as an Aboriginal Person (Aman, 2008). In both examples, there continues to be issues with the completeness and validity of the information collected and, in some cases, skepticism of how the data will be used (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

LACK OF ACCURATE AND COMPLETE DATA FOR ABORIGINAL POPULATIONS: Most existing and available literature on risk and protective factors for Aboriginal Youth is based on research that has been conducted outside of Canada. Frequently, research and literature available for Aboriginal populations and cultures is based out of Australia or Hawaii while Canadian literature, when it exists, is most often focused mainly on Western Canada. Furthermore, there is little research conducted with Aboriginal Peoples living off-reserve in Canada. While efforts were made in the current paper to gather information and talk to experts from various communities and regions, the differences within Aboriginal communities and their varied geographical contexts make it difficult to generalize findings as well as making it important to consider individual contexts and circumstances.

COMPLEXITY OF ISSUE AND INTERPLAY OF FACTORS: Regardless of definition, it is clear that Aboriginal students are less likely to graduate from high school than non-Aboriginal students. Though more research has been conducted in recent years, little is known about specific factors that contribute to both the achievement of Aboriginal students and the significant differences in achievements between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (Baydala, Rasmussen, Birch et. al., 2009). While a number of factors have been proposed, how school completion outcomes are related to student level factors, school level factors or community context are still relatively unknown (Aman, 2008) and require further study.

UNDERSTANDING ABORIGINAL LEARNING: "A DIFFERENT WAY OF KNOWING"

A review of risk and protective factors associated with "Staying in School" by Aboriginal students cannot be completed without acknowledging the potential discrepancies between these traditional measures of student success and the ongoing holistic education of Aboriginal Youth. In a comprehensive review of the *State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada: A Holistic Approach to Measuring Success*, produced by the Canadian Council on Learning (2009), an argument is made that while Aboriginal Peoples share a vision of learning as a holistic, lifelong process, decisions being made by government, organizations and communities continue to rely on an incomplete view of the "State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada". They propose that by assessing Aboriginal educational attainment based on comparisons between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Youth, the specific needs and aspirations of Aboriginal Peoples are often overlooked. Focusing solely on indicators such as "pass rates" or "high school attainment" provides only a superficial view of

complex individuals with many strengths. Instead, the Canadian Council on Learning proposes using a “Holistic Lifeline Learning Measurement Framework” developed by Aboriginal Learning experts across Canada and published in 2007. This framework takes into account the need to measure success differently for Aboriginal populations. Traditional indicators, such as graduation rates, are still included in the lifelong learning frameworks while other indicators and pathways are identified for Aboriginal Peoples throughout the life cycle. A “Lifelong Learning” Framework promotes focusing on a complete understanding of Aboriginal Learning as opposed to a focus on shortcomings and deficits among Aboriginal students.

While the current paper does rely on some traditional measures of educational attainment, it is acknowledged that learning is a lifelong process with other indicators of success and progress.

SCHOOL LEAVERS – THE PROCESS OF DISENGAGEMENT: While students who have left school have been referred to as “drop outs” or “school leavers”, experts have recognized that students who leave school do so because they are not “engaged” in their educational experience. Studies have been conducted both with students who remain in school and with those who leave, leading to an increased awareness that disengagement is not a state but rather a process that unfolds within a student and involves student, school and community factors (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005), and that is associated with unfavourable school experiences, absenteeism and school dropout. (Anderson, Christenson, & Lehr, 2004).

In a research project undertaken on behalf of the Ontario Ministry of Education, three pathways to disengagement are identified (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005):

- 1) Starting from Scratch: These youth have multiple risk factors at the family, community and school level and school posed another risk.
- 2) Mostly protected: These young people had numerous protective factors in their communities, families, schools and within themselves. These students, once leaving school, often had plans to negotiate their way back to finish their high school.
- 3) The in-between: These youth experienced both risk and protective factors at the school, family and community levels, but demonstrated possibilities of success related to their protective factors. For example, some youth may have had a troubled life at home but were supported through a caring community and educational environment.

The study outlined the various pathways experienced by youth, but also the potential for protective factors to help decrease risk and promote the completion of high school.

RISK FACTORS THAT INCREASE DISENGAGEMENT

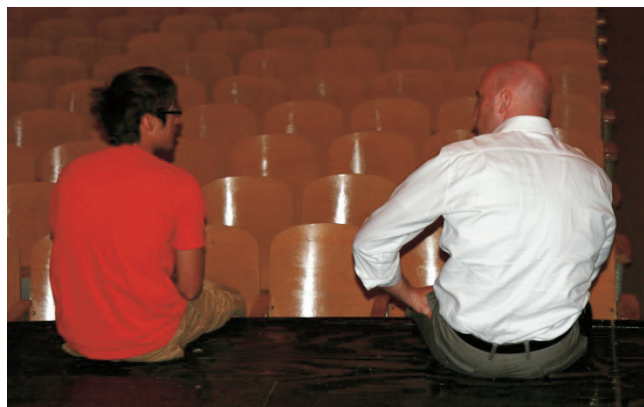
Most students will encounter risk factors that threaten to disengage throughout their secondary education. These risk factors can be experienced on a range of intensity, with heightened risk for disengagement dependent on the presence of multiple risk factors, as well as mitigating protective factors available to the student. These factors can also be considered “push” factors – factors within the school that make it unpleasant or undesirable to be there – and “pull” factors, factors outside of school in one’s home life or community, that pull the individual away (Hammond et al, 2007).

Aboriginal students in particular may need to navigate more complex lives and multiple risk factors, which can increase disengagement from formal schooling.

TRANSITIONS: According to the Canadian Council on Learning (2009), education should be viewed as a lifelong process and through a lifelong learning lens. Part of this learning process includes the transitions between schools that occur for most students in Canada. Transition from elementary to secondary school is an important time for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth, setting the stage for perceptions, experiences and motivations in high school. Students can be at risk for “rocky” transitions. Risk factors which hinder or help the transition are those which help or hinder school disengagement and student success overall (Tilliczek & Ferguson, 2007). As students transition into adulthood, all of the complexities of becoming an adult, coupled with the transition from a typically less demanding institution to a more demanding one, can contribute to an increased sense of confusion about one’s identity and sense of place in the community.

In rural and remote communities, Aboriginal students can face an additional stressor related to transitions. Many rural and remote communities, particularly in the far North, do not have a local high school to attend. While home schooling is an option, many parents do not feel capable of being responsible for their child’s secondary education, resulting in young students being forced to move away from home to attend secondary school, living in a dormitory setting or with a boarder family. As one Senior Administrator at a northern Ontario School Board noted, *“many of these students have never seen a two story building, and you are asking them to move away from home. It’s a complete culture shock, and many of the students have real difficulty managing it.”*

Across the provinces, initiatives have been set up to facilitate smoother transitions from elementary to secondary schools for all students, with extra measures often being taken for Aboriginal youth. Local board initiatives typically vary and include having an Aboriginal education coordinator, setting up advisory committees, establishing transitioning programs, peer mentoring programs and after-school programs, making use of transition kits and expanding services for students and their families.



EARLY SCHOOL CHALLENGES/COURSE FAILURE: In an Ontario study commissioned by Colleges Ontario, King, Warren et. al. (2005) found that students who failed courses early in secondary school were much less likely to complete an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD), citing that 85% of student with no failed Grade 9 courses graduated with an OSSD within 5 years, compared to only 61% with a single failed Grade 9 course. The issue seemed to exacerbate over time and with the addition of failed courses. For example, 89% of students who had no failed courses in Grade 10 graduated within 5 years with an OSSD, compared to 75% of students who had failed one course, 59% who had failed two courses and only 28% of students who had failed three or more courses.

Student characteristics also differentiated performance for those students who were included in the study. Females were more likely than males to be enrolled in Academic or University prep courses, and obtained higher average marks than males in almost all secondary school English, Mathematics and Science Courses. Not surprisingly, more males than females were school leavers, or did not complete an OSSD within 5 years. Males were at a greater risk for early course failure than females.

While the current study was undertaken before initiatives were in place for more accurate data collection through Aboriginal Self-Identification policies, the results were clear. On-reserve Aboriginal Students enrolled in Ontario public, Catholic and private secondary schools and funded by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada were far less likely than other students enrolled in secondary schools to complete an OSSD, to enrol in university and to enrol in college. Early success in secondary school for these students was imperative as early course failure significantly reduces the likelihood of later success. Early course failure, coupled with positive transitions from elementary to secondary school, are important to ensure ongoing engagement and positive perceptions of Aboriginal Youth.

SCHOOL MOBILITY: The progress of students as they move between schools is difficult to track for all students but especially challenging for Aboriginal students. In most provinces, the self-identification practices in schools are in their infancy – meaning that it is difficult to follow the educational path of specific subgroups of students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

The Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-Being and Education Society is located in Edmonton, Alberta, and has implemented “Opportunities, A Stay in School Program” since 1997. During that time, the agency has served over 300 youth and families from three different schools, providing in school and out-of-school supports, resources and recreational activities to help Aboriginal youth remain in school and to achieve increased academic and personal success by providing youth with incentives, opportunities to realize success, positive peer support and role modeling, and above all, commitment to the youth and their futures.

<http://www.aboriginalyouth.ca/>



This is the case in British Columbia, where the self-identification process has been practiced and refined over the past several years. The ability to track educational trajectories has led to some interesting findings. In British Columbia, the study of administrative data of over 1.5 million school census records of students enrolled in public schools over a 13-year period was examined. Findings indicated that school change or student mobility of secondary school Aboriginal students was a prevalent feature in Aboriginal high school trajectories (Aman, 2008). Students, who changed high schools more frequently, often moving back and forth between reserves and urban centres, were less likely to complete high school. There are also reported (and largely undocumented) experiences by Aboriginal Youth and teachers of inconsistencies in curriculum expectations and programming between provincial schools and the schools on-reserve. It has been reported that Aboriginal students moving from schools on a reserve to the public school system are left behind their peers.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT: In the past ten years, there has been a heightened awareness of the role that parental involvement plays in student achievement. Family structure and family life can have an impact on a student's ability to navigate the stressors at school. According to 2006 Census data, the majority of Aboriginal children under 15 lived with both parents (58%) in 2006, while 35% lived in single parent homes [more than twice that of non-Aboriginal children (17%)]. A further 7% of Aboriginal children lived in a house with no parent present, compared to 1% of non-Aboriginal students (Statistics Canada, 2008b). Aboriginal students are at a heightened risk of missing out on parental support.

Research demonstrates that parents who are involved in their child's education through open communication with teachers and administrators can better assist students navigate the educational system, troubleshoot early when issues arise and help guide the student through turbulent times (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). In research that examined Aboriginal retention rates, Mackay and Myles (1995) cited factors that impeded parental involvement for Aboriginal students, including: parents are unfamiliar and intimidated by the educational system, parents consider the formal education of their children the job of trained professionals, lack of participation reflects a deeply rooted ambivalence toward the purpose of school as an institution and the non-Aboriginal principal and teachers may discourage parents from participating as partners.

One informal way that educators traditionally measure parental involvement is through attendance and participation in parent/teacher interviews. Parents of Aboriginal students traditionally have lower participation rates in these types of interviews. While non-Aboriginal educators may see this as disinterest in Aboriginal students' education, it may be a result of historical experiences of Aboriginal Peoples with the school system that makes it uncomfortable for parents of Aboriginal students to participate in parent/teacher interviews (Barnes, Josefowitz, & Cole, 2006). Many parents of Aboriginal children have had experience in the residential school system, and may feel that there is a lack of interest on the educator's part to understand Aboriginal ways of learning. Aboriginal parents are still, for the most part, expected to reach inward to the school for these types of meetings, instead of the school reaching outward to where the parents are.

GEOGRAPHY AND HOME-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION: Home school communication lacks in both quantity and quality for many Aboriginal Youth. Geography can also play a factor in remote communities where parents live in isolated locations far away from towns/cities. Communication that does take place is often initiated only after a problem has arose, in which case the interaction tends to be one-directional: the school tells the parent what is wrong and what needs to be done to correct the situation. There is little effort to build respect and understanding in parent-teacher communication. Often, social education counsellors or education workers in Native Friendship Centres, or local variations, work to strengthen the home-school communication; however, these roles and programs, though increasing in number and quality, are still sporadic by region and are often dependent upon specific individuals rather than being a systematic and sustainable channel upon which all parties can rely (Mackay and Myles, 1995).

TEACHER COMPOSITION: The quality of instruction can make or break any student's educational experience. For Aboriginal students, the lack of qualified teachers who possess a strong degree of proficiency for Aboriginal Languages and Aboriginal studies is a major concern. In many instances across Canada, courses with Aboriginal subject matter are being taught by unqualified teachers outside of their area of expertise. It is a continuing paradox, while Aboriginal teachers are needed in our schools; fewer Aboriginal Youth are graduating from high school and entering post-secondary institutions than non-Aboriginal Youth, further increasing the gap.

QUALITY AND CONSISTENT CONTENT AND PROGRAMMING: Access to resources to aid instruction of courses with Aboriginal content is inconsistent across Canada. While in some provinces there have been substantial efforts to provide resources for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers with lesson plans, activities and resources, in other provinces no such resources exist, and teachers are left to develop their own resources or share with teachers in their own communities.

TEACHER ATTITUDE: Though progress has been made and there has been improved teacher development related to Aboriginal issues and how they teach and interact with children, many Aboriginal students report that they still experience prejudice and discrimination by teachers. In a study of new teachers, Aboriginal students are also left with few Aboriginal role models in their schools and feel that there is "no one like me". It has been argued that by addressing attitudes and behaviour toward minority groups during teacher training, a culture of tolerance and understanding can be developed; however, dialogue with Aboriginal colleagues during teacher's college is limited due to the limited number of Aboriginal teachers in training. In her study of new teacher's attitudes toward Aboriginal students, Bornholt (2002) suggests that opportunities to gain experience with other cultures would reduce stereotyping behaviour, both negative and positive, and could improve the attitudes brought into the educational system with new teachers.



LIVING WITH ADULT ROLES: In a qualitative study conducted on factors affecting school leavers on behalf of the Ontario Ministry of Education (2005), focus groups and interviews were conducted with youth at risk for disengaging from school. One startling difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students was the likelihood that Aboriginal students would be living with adult roles. Aboriginal students were often considered a “bread winner” in their family, so out of expectation or need, many of these youth were leaving school to pursue employment to help support their families. Females in this study were more likely to be pregnant and caring for their own child or caring for a sick parent or relative. Males were much more likely to leave school to work. The added complexity of dealing with these adult roles has been noted in other literature (e.g. Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2004; Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007).

RURAL vs. URBAN – CHOICE AND AVAILABILITY: In King, Warren et. al.’s (2005) study of factors impacting on students’ attendance at post-secondary education, the authors recognized regional differences in application to university and college. University applicants tended to apply to more than one institution, whereas college students typically applied only to a college in their community. In rural and remote communities where there is not a local college where students could apply, nor high speed internet access to facilitate on-line learning, students who are not in a position to leave their community are left without many options. The motivational impetus to complete an OSSD in order to attend a local college are somewhat removed in these circumstances.

In remote communities, students may have to leave home to attend high school in an unfamiliar town or city located many miles from home. While programs are in place to help students with this transition, many struggle with the alien environment due to, among other issues, linguistic, academic and cultural problems and difficulties that might arise from the boarding home situation. All of these factors can significantly decrease students’ chances of completing secondary school.

TECHNOLOGY BARRIERS: Lack of access to Broadband internet services further perpetuates the isolation of rural and remote communities. Broadband internet services are becoming an essential part of the infrastructure connecting organizations, communities and individuals. Access to these services are particularly important to those in rural and remote settings who are beginning to rely on them more and more for lifelong learning and distance education. Many Aboriginal Peoples in such settings continue to rely on slower-dial up services. For example, only 17% of on-reserve Aboriginal Communities had access to broadband services in 2007, compared to 64% of other cities and small towns in Canada (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: Students with special needs, including physical or mental disabilities or mental illness, have increased risk for poorer outcomes throughout their educational career, and are at increased risk for becoming early school leavers (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). There is a paucity of literature specific to Aboriginal students with special needs; however, there is an over-representation of minority students in special needs classrooms, and a higher proportion of school leavers have emotional and mental health problems.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

To date, there have been relatively few empirical studies with Aboriginal students on protective factors that promote and encourage youth to stay in school. While this may be due to an overall lack of research or evaluation of programs with all students, it might also speak to the lack of ability to identify who Aboriginal students are; as well as, a potential mistrust of traditional institutional research by Aboriginal Peoples. Regardless, there are a number of factors that can be promoted to help protect Aboriginal students from school disengagement and “dropping out”.

RESILIENCY: Research on resiliency, typically defined as the ability to recover in the face of adversity, has suggested a number of factors that may increase student academic success in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. Baydala et. al (2009) suggests that correlations between leadership and study skills and academic achievement show promise for developing school-based intervention programs, since *“culturally appropriate interventions that focus on the development of leadership and study skills may provide children with the tools they need to achieve academically. If such programs are implemented, care must be taken to ensure their content supports the ways in which leadership and study skills are defined within the Aboriginal community”* (p 18). Aboriginal students who are provided with leadership opportunities and empowered to contribute to their school and local community may continue to be engaged and have a better chance of completing high school.

POSITIVE SELF IMAGE: Students who believe they can, can. According to Steinberg (1999) as cited in Barnes, Josefovitz, and Cole (2006), students who believe in their ability are more likely to be intrinsically motivated and concerned with mastery, leading to academic success. Conversely, children who are exposed to environments that hold negative stereotypes of their race in relation to academic success tend to devalue academic achievement and disengage from school (Schmader, Major, & Gramzow, 2001). Students who are provided with opportunities to explore their identities and culture in a positive light, with the guidance and help of people they can identify with, are more likely to experience success in school. Positive experiences can occur either at school or in the community and can involve modeling by staff members, support from case workers, work opportunities or volunteer experiences in the community.



“Engagement by family is important as it can build parental confidence about formal education in institutional settings, and can also bring children closer to their teachers.”

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT: If parental involvement is a risk factor, it can also be a protective factor for students. Engagement by family is important as it can build parental confidence about formal education in institutional settings and can also bring children closer to their teachers and help dispel cultural stereotypes (Corson, 1998). According to Aboriginal educators, there are opportunities to build on Aboriginal parents’ interest in their child’s education which will help support the educational pathway of the student. Ministries of education recognize the importance of engaging parents authentically in their child’s education. With this in mind, schools and school districts are making more efforts to reach out to the parent to ensure involvement in their child’s education. As well, schools and school districts are finding ways to overcome parents’ misgivings resulting from past experiences with the formal education system.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT: Within all communities, but particularly Aboriginal communities, students who are involved in their communities fare better in school (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). For Aboriginal students who may experience high mobility by changing schools and leaving the reserve, there is an importance of encouraging connections and relying on the knowledge and understanding of Elders in the community.

RELEVANT PROGRAMMING: Students are engaged when their work is interesting and relevant (Wilms, 2008). Aboriginal students, like all students, benefit from highly engaging and relevant programming in their courses. Because the culture and world experience of many Aboriginal students is unique, there is benefit from courses and curriculum structured to reflect Aboriginal language, culture and learning needs. At this point, in many regions across Canada, delivery of Aboriginal content based courses depends very much on the availability of teachers to offer the course. Resources to assist teachers in delivering the curriculum are available in some provinces and not in others.

CONNECTIONS TO ABORIGINAL ROLE MODELS AND SUPPORTS: Increased Aboriginal counsellors, liaison workers and role models in schools have had a positive effect and contribute to making students feel more comfortable in the school environment. In rural communities or on reserves, contact and involvement with Elders and community members is more common. In urban centres, and in larger schools, Aboriginal Youth have fewer examples of “people like me” who they can go to for advice and guidance, which can contribute to a lack of a sense of identity.

(Canadian Council on Learning, 2009) Connections to Elders who can help provide advice and encouragement is important for Aboriginal Youth throughout the lifespan.

EARLY INTERVENTION: With all students, early intervention is a key to ensuring later academic success (Tilliczek, & Ferguson, 2007). Research tells us that students who do not succeed early on in secondary school are more likely to drop out of school. With Aboriginal students, there is an opportunity to build a network of support with teachers, parents, community members and Elders to help guide the student toward success. Interventions can be provided at the school level or through a number of programs for Aboriginal Youth that exist across Canada. Regardless of the approach to intervention, the key is to connect with the student early and often to promote engagement and stop disengagement.

NEXT STEPS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

The urgency of keeping Aboriginal youth in schools has not been lost on Federal or Provincial governments. In 2004, the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada declared Aboriginal Education a priority, and an Action Plan was developed to define objectives that would be met through consultation and collaboration with Aboriginal Communities and education stakeholders. In 2005, Prime Minister Paul Martin and the provincial Premiers and National Aboriginal Leaders met in Kelowna, B.C., and committed to close the Aboriginal / non-Aboriginal high-school completion gap within a decade. Provinces and Territories have undertaken initiatives and developed action plans to decrease achievement gaps for Aboriginal Students. Despite the acknowledgement that there is an issue, Provinces and Territories are at very different places along the continuum, with even more variances demonstrated in Provinces and among school districts.

With knowledge of the discernable patterns that surface related to early leaving of high school, the ultimate challenge faced by organizations and individuals hoping to improve high school completion rates of Aboriginal Peoples is in coupling the understanding that each individual has a unique pathway to becoming a school leaver. Patterns can be uncovered by tracking various factors through a students' career. Progress will be made through efforts made by Ministries of Education to strengthen partnerships between schools and communities in order to collect data. With the collection of more precise and specific information, local programs can be targeted toward Aboriginal Youth in need. Furthermore, because of the vast differences in geography and circumstance, it is necessary to undertake sound data collection and assessment of issues across subgroups, regions and locations (Hammond, et. al, 2007). Broad brush strokes can be applied to "Aboriginal Education", but ultimately, communities will need to assess their own needs and react accordingly.



The following recommendations come from both the literature and conversations with educators who work with Aboriginal students. These recommendations summarize good practices that will promote student engagement with Aboriginal students across Canada:

1. **RECOGNIZE THE LIFELONG LEARNING PATH OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS:** The histories and cultures of Aboriginal Peoples are unique, and do not always coincide with modern educational curricula. Ministries, school districts and individual educators must recognize that there is a forced assimilation of Aboriginal students into existing educational institutions, which leads to a focus on negative images of Aboriginal students instead of focusing on the strengths and unique lifeline path of learning for each student.
2. **MONITOR TRANSITIONS AND EARLY INTERVENTION:** Though it is never too late to provide support, a pivotal time for intervention with students is during the transition years. Schools and school districts are required to follow students who might be at risk for “disengagement” or dropping out and intervene early before several failures have taken place. Interventions must involve a community of supports and Aboriginal role models. Students from rural and remote communities who are required to move away from home to attend high school require special attention and support.

Winnipeg, Manitoba’s “Children of the Earth” High School is a school for Aboriginal students that has been listed amongst McLean Magazine’s Top 10 Canadian Schools. Here, Aboriginal teachers are the norm, and mandatory Cree and Ojibwa language classes are used to help instil pride while turning would be school-leavers into future doctors and lawyers.

<http://www.wsd1.org/cote/welcome.html>
3. **PROMOTE ALTERNATIVE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES:** Students are not interested in curriculum that is not meaningful to them. Aboriginal students at risk of leaving school may fare well in Alternative Educational Settings, which often have smaller class sizes and more “hands on” or practical application opportunities. These settings provide opportunities to undertake curriculum of interest but still allow students to work toward earning high school credits required for completion of a high school diploma. Co-op experiences and apprenticeships with the opportunity to learn workplace skills will help keep students engaged while helping them toward graduation.
4. **PROMOTION AND RETENTION OF ABORIGINAL TEACHERS AND EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANTS:** Aboriginal students can clearly identify that there are not “people like me” in schools. Federal, provincial and local districts have a responsibility to promote Aboriginal teachers and to provide every opportunity for them to receive quality professional development. Aboriginal teachers and Educational Assistants should be involved specifically in courses with Aboriginal content but also in other courses, such as literacy based courses and mathematic to foster these teachers as leaders and encourage them to take on leadership roles.

5. **PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING AND AWARENESS IN NON-ABORIGINAL TEACHERS:** Non-Aboriginal teachers require professional development to help them understand Aboriginal issues and learn how to be sensitive to Aboriginal students' needs. Many non-Aboriginal teachers have requested this type of training and information, but there is a wide variance in training available across Canada.
6. **PROVIDE RESOURCES FOR ALL TEACHERS:** Ministries are at different places in the development and provision of resources for teachers of Aboriginal content courses. In Manitoba, resources, lesson plans, assignments and tests can be found on the Ministry website. In a province like Ontario, no such resources exist. Such resources would benefit teachers who are often teaching outside of their area of expertise, and would offer some consistency to content.
7. **AUTHENTIC INTEGRATED CURRICULUM:** Aboriginal students and teachers alike often complain that the efforts to integrate Aboriginal content into curriculum feels like "tokenism". Books and references should be inclusive of Aboriginal students not just in Aboriginal studies programs but in all courses. The number of Aboriginal language and Aboriginal studies programs and courses should be increased for all students.
8. **ENCOURAGE YOUTH LEADERSHIP FOR ABORIGINAL STUDENTS:** Aboriginal students who are involved through active student council, involved on Steering committees and involved in extracurricular activities will have a genuine voice on issues pertaining to them. Aboriginal students who are involved will have a higher potential to graduate.
9. **IMPROVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT:** Family engagement is a protective factor for Aboriginal students. Schools and school districts need to be willing to find ways to engage a parent population that has been disenfranchised with educational institutions. Schools and Districts need to meet parents where they are and find ways to give them a voice. This will require deviating from conventional methods to bring parents to the school and will require cooperation between the educational and Aboriginal community.
10. **BUILD COMMUNITY WITH ABORIGINAL LEADERS:** Collaborative work is occurring at every level of government. At the local level, there are opportunities to work with the Band Education Committee or Band Educational Counsellor, involving Elders who are willing to assist local schools and provide perspectives on the curriculum, raising the expectations for Aboriginal students, providing encouragement, direction and support for those at risk of dropping out, but also providing encouragement and praise for those doing well.
11. **PROMOTING GRASSROOTS SOLUTIONS:** While good work is underway, it is at different stages across Canada. Promising practices are abounding. Much of the promising work being undertaken is in local, grassroots community agencies who work "on the ground" with the communities they serve. Promoting and empowering communities to support their Aboriginal students has the potential for many outcomes reaching beyond improved graduation rates. Opportunities exist to further develop partnerships between Community Organizations and school districts. Ministries can open restrictions on budget spending to

allow existing organizations dealing with Aboriginal Peoples and issues to support their students.

- 12. EVALUATION OF EXISTING INITIATIVES AND EMPIRICAL STUDIES:** Quality research conducted with the help of Aboriginal students and populations is limited due to historical difficulty with identification of Aboriginal populations. Initiatives that have been put in place to assist with Aboriginal Youth staying in school have gone largely unmonitored with only anecdotal evidence suggesting success or failure. Increased attention is required to better understand effective practices with Aboriginal Youth and communities.
- 13. IMPROVE BROADBAND SERVICES TO RURAL AND REMOTE COMMUNITIES:** Many rural and remote communities in Canada are still without access to high speed internet services, contributing to the isolation experienced in many communities. Resources that are available to teachers and students remain inaccessible, and opportunities to continue education using distance education models are untapped.

CONCLUSION

Ministries, school districts and communities across Canada are aware of the need to encourage more Aboriginal Youth to *Stay in School*. Efforts are underway at all levels to help “close the gaps” in achievement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. While progress is being made, there is still room for more authentic dialogue between Aboriginal Leaders and educational institutions and for creative solutions that recognize the success of each individual.



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4/1/2010



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