



ACHIEVING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY THROUGH PROVINCIAL INDIGENOUS EDUCATION POLICIES IN CANADA

A thematic analysis of Indigenous Education Policy
Frameworks

Abstract

This research examines to what extent Indigenous education policy frameworks (IEPFs) in three Canadian provinces meaningfully address educational equity in the K-12 public school system for Indigenous students. Despite an effort to increase equity for Indigenous students, significant gaps remain. This research draws on literature to define educational equity and proceeds to a thematic analysis to identify how policies could be enhanced. The findings indicate that the provinces selected contain measures of achieve Indigenous equity in education, however a lack of details in increasing teacher competence is a gap that left unaddressed may allow for inequities to continue.

Introduction

Historically, education has been a principal vehicle for assimilation of Indigenous peoples in Canada with a history of residential school systems, which tore children from their families and forced them to assimilate (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, n.d.). Today, per Battiste (2013), although Indigenous¹ students look to education as a form of liberation, they are faced with a colonial education system that does not reflect their needs (Layton, 2023).

As part of a class-action settlement against the Canadian government for residential schools, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was created (Government of Canada, no date). The Commission created a list of calls to action to advance reconciliation between Indigenous Peoples and Canada which included identifying strategies to eliminate educational inequities for Indigenous students (Government of Canada, no date).

In Canada, all off-reserve public schools from kindergarten to grade 12 (K-12) fall under Provincial jurisdiction via a Ministry of Education (MOE)². In response to the TRC calls to action, many provincial MOEs aimed to eliminate educational inequities for Indigenous students by creating Indigenous education policy frameworks (IEPF). Although this was a positive step forward, low educational attainment levels for Indigenous students remain persistent (Layton, 2023), indicating remaining gaps in achieving educational equity.

Research on Indigenous theories of education emphasize educational equity through education grounded in Indigenous worldviews of relationality. Other bodies of literature emphasize the more urgent need to address systemic racism within schools to achieve educational equity. This study will add to the literature by conducting a thematic analysis of IEPFs pertaining to K-12 off-reserve public schools in three provinces with the highest percent of Indigenous populations to assess how effectively Indigenous educational equity is incorporated. The aim of this study is to develop insights into where provinces can improve educational equity for Indigenous students.

¹ Indigenous peoples include Canadians of First Nations, Metis and Inuit descent.

² First Nations have control over the education system on-reserve schools via a federally funded system and are not under Provincial jurisdiction.

Research Question and Objective

To what extent are Indigenous education policy frameworks in Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Newfoundland and Labrador meaningfully addressing educational equity in the K-12 public school system for Indigenous students?

Objective: To improve educational equity for Indigenous students, analyze IEPFs to determine whether gaps exist that could be part of the persistent inequities.

Theoretical Background

To analyze IEPFs, two schools of thought were examined to understand what literature deems as equity in education for Indigenous students.

Indigenous education theorists such as Glen Coulthard, Marie Battiste and Matthew Wildcat, champion educational equity as education grounded in worldviews of relationality and reciprocal relationships with nature (Furrey, 2024). Indigenous worldviews incorporate four domains of well being: spiritual, intellectual, physical, and socio-emotional (Toulouse, 2016; Papp, 2020).

To incorporate Indigenous worldviews, Deer & Heringer (2023), Simpson (2014) and Papp (2020) identify teaching practices that incorporate different ways of knowing to resonate with Indigenous students. Deer & Heringer (2023) discuss that inviting elders into the classroom improves cultural identity and Simpson (2014) emphasizes land-based experiences to foster the cultural commitment and connection with nature. In a 2013 study by Preston & Claypool, Indigenous students also highlighted Indigenous worldviews as important to their learning. The term culturally appropriate pedagogy³ (CAP) will be used to refer to the integration of culture into teaching practices.

Other literature from St Denis (2007), Hare and Pigeon (2011) and Gebhard (2018) stress that educational equity cannot be achieved without acknowledging systemic racism in schools. Gebhard (2018) argues that educational equity initiatives for Indigenous students have been overly focused on CAP and that without cultural understanding from educators, this integration often results in reinforcing cultural differences (Gebhard, 2018; St Denis, 2007).

According to Papp (2020), the teacher-student relationship is the “foundation of successful pedagogy” (p.35). Whitley (2014) describes the impact that systemic racism and unconscious bias can have on the student-teacher relationship through low expectations from teachers for Indigenous students which affects student self-concept and academic aspirations. Other literature by Wotherspoon & Milne, (2024), Purdie, (2000) and Walton, (2009) reinforces these findings.

Although literature did not provide a clear roadmap for educational equity, there is demonstrated success through specific case studies. Papp’s (2020) study for example, showed dramatic increases in equity evidenced by high school graduation rates when teachers transformed their teaching styles to a non-hierarchical style to build positive relationships with the students. Success was accomplished through weekly professional development for teachers over four years, using pedagogy deeply rooted in Indigenous worldviews.

³ Pedagogy is the way topics are taught and assessed

The above findings are echoed in a 2001 report by the British Columbia Human Rights Commission which claimed that to achieve educational equity, Indigenous children must not feel discrimination, be able to see themselves in the curriculum and feel belonging in the school system.

Methodology

Ontological and Epistemological Approach

Achieving educational equity for Indigenous students requires an understanding that the realities of the Canadian education system have been significantly impacted by historical colonial interactions and capacities to learn are impacted by culture and individual student experiences. Therefore, this study is bound by a relativist ontology where realities change based on cultural and historical impacts on interpretations of reality (Moon & Blackman, 2014;Crotty, 1998). The appropriate epistemological approach is constructivism as it is vital to achieving educational equity to acknowledge that learning needs vary with the student's understanding of the world which "is based on their cultural, historical and social perspectives" (Moon & Blackman, 2014, p.1172;Crotty, 1998).

Data Collection Methods

The method used for this study was document collection. Data sources consisted of Provincial IEPFs addressing provincial strategies for Indigenous education in grades K-12 in publicly funded off-reserve schools in Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Newfoundland and Labrador. These three provinces were chosen for evaluation as they have the highest percentage of Indigenous peoples in their population of Canadian Provinces (Government of Canada, 2023) and have accessible school districts in major population centers.

Analytical Methods

Data analysis was completed via thematic analysis. As a non-Indigenous Canadian, the author cannot represent the views of Indigenous peoples in assessing their educational needs. Therefore, aligned with Braun & Clarke (2022) initial coding was conducted inductively by reading each IEPF and coding data in each policy. This was followed by grouping data with similar fundamental qualities together to come up with themes. Themes were then appropriately named to reflect data captured to complete the thematic analysis. A summary of the themes and codes developed from the document analysis is in *Figure 1* below.

Results

Through thematic coding of three policy documents, four themes were revealed that reflected educational equity for Indigenous students: Culturally Responsive Learning, Belonging, Empowerment and Educator Competence (see *Figure 1*).

Culturally Responsive Learning

All three documents strongly emphasized educational equity through culturally responsive learning rooted in Indigenous worldviews. The Newfoundland and Labrador IEPF states "A holistic approach supports the physical, mental, social, emotional and spiritual aspects of the learner"(Government of Newfoundland and Labrador (IEPF), no date). Specific pedagogical approaches that were present in all

three documents included authentic involvement of elders and knowledge-keepers and land-based learning that “... provides students with opportunities to connect with the natural world, including physical and spiritual connections” (Government of Saskatchewan IEPF, 2018,p.9).

Belonging

Belonging is reflected in all three policies as each was completed with significant involvement from Indigenous communities. Different ways of knowing and learning are acknowledged by emphasizing the need to teach all students about Indigenous culture as one way to address systemic racism. Manitoba and Saskatchewan IEPF’s include significant historical details, emphasizing the need for a holistic community-led collaboration with parents, elders and others to support students, per the (Government of Manitoba IEPF (2022)“the space created is one of learning not assimilation” (2022, p.52).

Empowerment

Both Manitoba and Saskatchewan emphasize a student-centric learning approach by respecting and listening to student needs, giving students more control over their own learning, time to reflect on learning and empowering them to make decisions. This theme was not present in the Newfoundland and Labrador IEPF.

Educator Competence

All three policies had some mention regarding the importance of the competence of educators in the successful execution of the policies but varied in the depth of details and guidance given. While the Newfoundland and Labrador IEPF gives only a brief mention, Saskatchewan and Manitoba provided more emphasis on “the responsibility ... for all teachers and administrators to transform teaching practices, individually and collectively, through continuous learning and professional development.” (Government of Saskatchewan IEPF, 2018). Manitoba’s IEPF was the only policy that included links to toolkits and suggestions on specific actions to incorporate culturally responsive learning accountability at several levels including district leaders and educators. Suggested actions include “Learn about and honour Indigenous community protocols” and “Incorporate oral history, storytelling...in learning activities” (Government of Manitoba IEPF, 2022), p.24). However, none of the policies provide details around how to increase knowledge of indigenous culture.

Figure 1

Theme	Codes
Culturally Responsive Learning	Culturally appropriate pedagogies, land-based learning, storytelling, community involvement in learning, Indigenous worldviews (medicine wheel)
Belonging	Respect for Indigenous identities, truth about our past, educating all students on Indigenous culture, culturally appropriate supports for students
Empowerment	Student independence, reflective learning, student involvement in their own learning (removing hierarchies),
Educator Competence	Encouraging professional development, acknowledging the educator’s role in executing the policy, suggestions for educators

Discussion

The creation of IEPFs is a positive step forward in achieving Indigenous educational equity by acknowledging that the current Eurocentric education system “falls short in treating Indigenous and non-Indigenous students equally” (Meston *et al.*, 2024).

Through the lens of Indigenous education theorists, each policy document contained measures identified in the literature to achieve Indigenous equity in education. The documents focus on incorporating Indigenous worldviews through CAP, however, they also recognize other supports are necessary for student success such as creating a sense of belonging and empowerment through less hierarchical learning structures for students which were all essential in Papp’s (2020) successful study.

However, Canada’s colonial history and Eurocentric education system make achieving educational equity a complex challenge. Integrating Indigenous educational theories on their own leave endemic racism unaddressed (Gebhard, 2018). For example, while measures for belonging such as applying CAP to all students are a well-intentioned approach to combat racism in student bodies, unconscious biases in teachers must also be addressed.

Although educator competence was a theme in the documents, the lack of details and accountability in the IEPFs on increasing knowledge of Indigenous culture among teachers is a gap. Educators execute policy directives and the quality of instruction is heavily reliant on the competence of educators and their understanding of Indigenous cultures (Milner IV, 2008). All of the IEPFs claimed professional development was important while providing little guidance or parameters around what that looks like. Per a well-known scholar in culturally relevant pedagogy Gloria Ladson-Billings, superficially integrating Indigenous lessons and pedagogy may do more to reinforce differences than increase equalities (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

It is therefore essential to provide consistent and quality training on Indigenous culture to teachers. Understanding and respecting Indigenous cultures will allow teachers to “...see themselves as agents for change, empowered to engage in liberatory educational practices that will empower their students.” (Tatum, 2001, p. 48). Continuous learning was also a key element of Papp’s 2020 study.

This research could be improved by having thematic coding cross-referenced by Indigenous researchers and including IEPFs from each province and territory for a complete view of Indigenous educational equity in Canada. Nonetheless, this study demonstrates progress is being made on improving educational equity for Indigenous students. However, teacher competence on Indigenous culture is a gap in the current IEPFs. Frameworks for professional development including parameters regarding frequency and type of training should be integrated into IEPFs.

Conclusion

As part of reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and Canada, IEPFs are becoming increasingly important to provincial MOEs. Despite these policies, significant inequities remain for Indigenous students. Therefore, this study asked to what extent are IEPFs meaningfully addressing equity in the K-12 public school system for Indigenous students? A thematic analysis was conducted that revealed four key themes among the IEPFs examined which include culturally responsive learning, belonging, empowerment and educator competence.

The results showed provinces studied have included many of the elements identified in the literature to improve educational equity for Indigenous students. Culturally responsive learning was the most prevalent tool to increase student equity throughout the documents, with several elements of CAP such as land-based learning included. Culturally responsive learning was complemented by empowering students through involvement in their own learning and fostering belonging utilizing CAP as learning opportunities for all students, demonstrating consideration of the four domains of well-being in Indigenous worldviews.

However, the presence of endemic racism makes successful implementation of culturally responsive learning complex. As literature points out, the knowledge of educators and their relationships with, including expectations of students can have a significant impact on equitable outcomes. In this regard, the IEPFs are lacking in detail on increasing teacher knowledge and competence to effectively implement the IEPFs. Overall, the IEPFs are a solid beginning to meaningfully addressing educational equity for Indigenous students, however, the lack of details regarding educator competence is a gap in that without addressing leaves inequalities likely to continue.

References

Battiste, M. (2013) *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit*. Reprint. Saskatoon: Purich Publishing.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022) 'It's almost time to depart - getting ready for your thematic analysis adventure', in *Thematic Analysis: a practical guide*. Sage Publishing, pp. 3–32.

British Columbia Human Rights Commission (no date) 'Pathways to Equality: Hearings on Access to Public Education for Aboriginal People'.

Crotty, M. (1998) *The foundations of social research : meaning and perspective in the research process*. London: SAGE.

Deer, F. and Heringer, R. (2023) 'Indigenous Perspectives at the Cultural Interface: Exploring Student Achievement through School/ Community-Based Interventions', *Canadian Journal of Education*, 46(1), pp. 33–55. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.53967/cje-rce.5707>.

Furrey, G.M. (2024) 'Pedagogical and strategic blind spots: Critical and Indigenous theories of education in dialogue', *Policy Futures in Education*, 22(4), pp. 692–723. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14782103231181244>.

Gebhard, A. (2018) "'Let's make a little drum": limitations and contradictory effects of cultural approaches in Indigenous education', *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21(6), pp. 757–772. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2017.1377172>.

Government of Canada (2023) *An update on the socio-economic gaps between Indigenous Peoples and the non-Indigenous population in Canada: Highlights from the 2021 Census*, Government of Canada. Available at: <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1690909773300/1690909797208> (Accessed: 12 April 2025).

Government of Canada (no date) *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Available at: <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1450124405592/1529106060525> (Accessed: 18 April 2025).

Government of Manitoba IEPF (2022) *The Wonder We Are Born With An Indigenous Education Policy Framework*. Manitoba. Available at: <https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/iee/index.html> (Accessed: 18 April 2025).

Government of Newfoundland and Labrador (IEPF) (no date) *Indigenous Education Framework Government of Newfoundland and Labrador*.

Government of Saskatchewan IEPF (2018) *Inspiring Success First Nations and Métis PreK-12 Education Policy Framework*.

Hare, J. and Pidgeon, M. (2011) 'The Way of the Warrior: Indigenous Youth Navigating the Challenges of Schooling', *Canadian Journal of Education*, 34(2), pp. 93–111. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/canajeducrevucan.34.2.93>.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995) 'But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy', *Theory into Practice*, 34(3).

Layton, J. (2023) *First Nations youth: Experiences and outcomes in secondary and postsecondary learning*, Statistics Canada. Available at: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/81-599-x/81-599-x2023001-eng.htm> (Accessed: 19 April 2025).

Meston, T. et al. (2024) 'The Sisyphean continuum: countering the racial-colonial challenges of Indigenous education', *Oxford Review of Education* [Preprint]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2024.2320361>.

Milner IV, H.R. (2008) 'Critical race theory and interest convergence as analytic tools in teacher education policies and practices', *Journal of Teacher Education*, 59(4), pp. 332–346. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487108321884>.

Moon, K. and Blackman, D. (2014) 'A Guide to Understanding Social Science Research for Natural Scientists', *Conservation Biology*, 28(5), pp. 1167–1177. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi>.

National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (no date) *Residential School History*, National Center for Truth and Reconciliation. Available at: <https://nctr.ca/education/teaching-resources/residential-school-history/> (Accessed: 18 April 2025).

Papp, T.A. (2020) 'A Canadian study of coming full circle to traditional Aboriginal pedagogy: a pedagogy for the 21st century', *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*, 14(1), pp. 25–42. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15595692.2019.1652587>.

Preston, J.P. and Claypool, T.R. (2013) 'Motivators of Educational Success: Perceptions of Grade 12 Aboriginal Students', *Canadian Journal of Education*, 36(4), pp. 257–279. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/canajeducrevucan.36.4.257>.

Purdie, N. et al. (2000) *Positive self-identity for indigenous students and its relationship to school outcomes*. Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Simpson, L.B. (2014) *Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation 1, Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*.

St Denis, V. (2007) *Aboriginal Education and Anti-Racist Education: Building Alliances across Cultural and Racial Identity Coalition Work in Indigenous Educational Contexts*.

Tatum, B.D. (2001) 'Professional Development: An Important Partner in Antiracist Teacher Education', in S.H. King and L.A. Castenell (eds) *Racism and racial inequality : implications for teacher education*. Washington: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, pp. 48–55.

Toulouse, P. (2016) *What Matter in Indigenous Education: Implementing a Vision Committed to Holism, Diversity and Engagement*. Toronto.

Walton, F. et al. (2009) *Promoting educational success for Mi'kmaq learners on Prince Edward Island*. Prince Edward Island.

Whitley, J. (2014) 'Supporting Educational Success for Aboriginal Students: Identifying key influences', *McGill Journal of Education*, 49(1), pp. 155–181. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1025776ar>.

Wotherspoon, T. and Milne, E. (2024) 'The role of cultural supports for Indigenous students: spaces for and impediments to decolonizing education', *Race Ethnicity and Education* [Preprint]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2024.2328268>.