

Practices to Support Improved Educational Outcomes for Indigenous Youth



EVIDENCE
BRIEF

This Evidence Brief summarizes how educational outcomes for Indigenous youth can be improved through increased confidence, strengthened cultural identity, cooperative learning and mentorship programs, and the enhancement of critical thinking skills.

FOUR KEY MESSAGES

01. Indigenous youth experience disproportionate outcomes in the education system.

In 2016, 40% of 20-24-year-old Indigenous youth and 33% of Indigenous people aged 25-54 had not completed secondary school;¹ in contrast, the remainder of the Canadian population had an 89% graduation rate. Fewer Indigenous youth enter and complete post-secondary school.¹

Disproportionate outcomes in the education system can be partly attributed to the impacts of oppression and trauma, both historical and ongoing, as psychological trauma can be experienced intergenerationally in numerous ways.² Although disparities have been recognized in educational research, the social, environmental, political, and cultural aspects of Indigenous youth's educational pathways have yet to be given serious consideration.¹

02. Public education curricula lack cultural relevance for Indigenous youth.

Public education curricula in Canadian schools are predominantly Western and Eurocentric, reinforcing the knowledge and experiences of white, middle-class students.³ Consequently, there is a lack of cultural

relevance for Indigenous youth.⁴ Indigenous students struggle to find representation of their histories, values, perspectives, and worldviews in the education system, which discredits, ignores, and erases their communities.^{3,4} Studies infer that graduation rates for Indigenous youth may increase if education curricula begin to incorporate culturally sustaining pedagogies (the methods and practices of teaching), such as [British Columbia's First Peoples Principles of Learning](#).¹

03. Indigenous youth experience violence in the education system.

Indigenous youth encounter many forms of violence in the education system.³ This varies from low expectations from educators and mentors, and policies and procedures that limit education and employment opportunities, to verbal or psychological abuse and overt racism in their interactions with peers and teachers. Moreover, there are a limited number of support programs specifically available to Indigenous youth.⁴ As a result, some Indigenous youth have found that alternative schooling options centred to meet their needs enable them to experience a sense of confidence and accomplishment, community, and identity, as well as engage with flexible and relevant programming.³

04. Historical thinking enables students to engage critically in how knowledge is made and remade.

Historical thinking involves the use of critical thinking skills to understand that stories told about the past are “constructions arrived at through imperfect human processes of interpretation.”⁶ This approach supports the interrogation of whose stories are told and how, and whose stories are obscured or erased and why. The application of this framework comprises six procedural concepts:⁶

i) Establish historical significance.

For example: Asking why an historical event is relevant or important.

ii) Use primary source evidence (immediate, first-hand accounts of a topic, from those with a direct connection).

For example: Ensuring that you are accessing testimony from a member of an Indigenous community.

iii) Identify continuity and change.

For example: Exploring how the ways we understand ‘history/ies’ are relevant to how we construct our interpretations and perspectives (political, social, antiracist, etc.).

iv) Analyze cause and consequence.

For example: Asking what may have caused the event and what the ramifications were of the event.

v) Take historical perspectives.

For example: Understanding the social, cultural, intellectual, and emotional settings that shaped people’s lives and actions in the past.

vi) Understand the ethical dimension of historical interpretations.

For example: Recognizing how we judge different circumstances of the past, how various interpretations of the past reflect different moral stances today, and how crimes of the past bear consequences today.

Due to differences in their origins, there has been little overlap between the Indigenous education and historical thinking reform movements.⁶ However, both “aim towards enhancing student exposure to ways of thinking that they can engage from their own position, for their own purposes.”⁶

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE:

Three Practices to Support Improved Educational Outcomes for Indigenous Youth

01. Integrate Indigenous content and approaches to learning into curricula.

Educators must create space for Indigenous histories, values, perspectives, and worldviews to enrich learning opportunities for all youth.³ Adopt a *holistic pedagogical approach*; integrate the teaching of social, cultural, and spiritual wellbeing in education curricula as a means of contributing to the preservation of Indigenous peoples’ cultural identities and ways of knowing.⁴

For instance, Indigenous peoples have always had, and continue to generate, **effective and culturally sustaining approaches to learning**, such as weaving, wood carving, dancing, drumming, and singing.¹ Including these educational approaches can support Indigenous youth in fostering a sense of identity, confidence, and belonging. Moreover, **offering a variety of alternative pathways to higher education and allowing for flexibility in program choices** has resulted in a higher likelihood of course completion, and increases

in self-confidence, self-efficacy, satisfaction, motivation, inner strength, and self-knowledge among students.⁴

Multicultural education can support *all* students to view each other differently and fear each other less in school,⁵ teaching youth to critically analyze complex social issues and regard this ability as a basic skill.

02. Implement cooperative learning models.

Cooperative learning models are teaching models that involve students working together in groups or with a partner on clearly defined tasks. These models are grounded in building peer-to-peer and peer-to-mentor relationships,⁴ which support developing and strengthening interpersonal relationships between:

- **teachers and Indigenous students**, which can contribute to student retention in school and consequently increase academic success; and
- **Indigenous students and their peers**, building trust, respect, and value for Indigenous peoples' cultures and promoting culturally relevant mentoring initiatives to foster a sense of belonging among Indigenous youth.

Educators should make use of **diverse teaching methods**, valuing experience as knowledge, with open-ended discussions and opportunities for active learning and peer teaching. These approaches should be guided by cultural sensitivity that fosters an authentic and personal rapport with Indigenous youth – and with *all* students in the classroom. Most importantly, engaging Indigenous youth as leaders and decision-makers will support a positive educational journey for students who most often do not feel seen or heard.

03. Foster historical thinking.

Indigenous peoples have always educated youth about their pasts, and the people, places, and traces that belong to those histories.⁶ However, education in Indigenous history is only recently being institutionalized by being named, described, and taught in formal curricula and in academic terms and contexts.

Historical thinking can engage students in a critical understanding of how knowledge is generated. Educators should design powerful and authentic questions for students to explore in relation to one or more of the historical thinking concepts (as outlined above),⁶ followed by activities that support students to develop an understanding of the past informed by primary sources and reasoned judgements about the meanings of historical events. This approach not only teaches students about the diverse histories that make up the past, but also gives them the necessary tools to navigate contemporary issues in a complex world.

HOW DID WE COMPILE THIS EVIDENCE?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "Indigenous youth", "education", "mentorship", "cultural identity", and "critical thinking".

ENDNOTES

1. Wager, A. C., Ansloos, J. P., & Thorburn, R. (2022). [Addressing structural violence and systemic inequities in education: A qualitative study on Indigenous youth schooling experiences in Canada](#). *Power and Education*, 14(3), 228-246.
2. First Nations Information Governance Centre. (2020). [Factors associated with school outcomes among First Nations youth](#).
3. Hare, J., & Pigeon, M. (2011). [The Way of the Warrior: Indigenous youth navigating the challenges of schooling](#). *Canadian Journal of Education*, 34(2), 93-111.
4. Chichekian, T., & Bragoli-Barzan, L. (2021). [Challenges encountered by Indigenous youth in postsecondary education](#). *McGill Journal of Education*, 55(2), 463-485.
5. Spraggins, T. (2004). Multicultural education. In J. Kincheloe & D. Weil (Eds.), *Critical thinking and learning: An encyclopedia for parents and teachers* (pp. 171-175). Greenwood.
6. McGregor, H. E. (2017). [One classroom, two teachers? Historical thinking and Indigenous education in Canada](#). *Critical Education*, 8(14), 1-18.