

EDUCATION AS A SOCIAL DETERMINANT OF FIRST NATIONS, INUIT AND MÉTIS HEALTH



Educational attainment influences health throughout the life span. People with higher levels of education have better access to healthy social and physical environments, more job and income security, and a greater sense of control over life circumstances.¹ Education is also associated with health literacy, health awareness and self-care – all of which can contribute to improved health and wellbeing.² Supporting opportunities for educational attainment, particularly for Aboriginal³ populations who have rates of high school graduation and attendance at post-secondary institutions well below that of other Canadians, is critical to reducing health disparities.

Indigenous Concepts of Learning

For Indigenous peoples, education is “a lifelong learning process that requires both formal and informal opportunities for learning of all ages.”⁴ Mainstream skills such as literacy and numeracy are important in ensuring that Aboriginal people are able to compete in the labour market and thus improve their socio-economic circumstances. Equally important for Aboriginal people, “land, the knowledge and skills in and from place, language and culture are integral parts of the learning and education process...”⁵ The incorporation of these values into education have been clearly linked to the determinants of health, or

“being and becoming a healthy person, family member, community member, and member of society.”⁶ It is seen as a means of recovering “a sense of positive Indigenous identity” and recovering from the colonial trauma of the past.⁷ Children must thus have the opportunity to understand Indigenous knowledge in order to develop a firm foundation of who they are. Although Canada’s education system has failed to meet the needs of Aboriginal students in the past,⁸ new holistic approaches to education have attempted to strengthen Indigenous worldviews, facilitate the coexistence of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, and increase educational opportunities for Aboriginal students.⁹





Growth Trends of Aboriginal Populations

The Aboriginal population in Canada is young, increasingly urban, and growing at a rate nearly six times faster than the non-Aboriginal population.¹⁰ In 2006, the Aboriginal population surpassed the one million mark, reaching 1,172,790, which is 4% of the total population of Canada.¹¹ Approximately 698,025 people identified themselves as First Nations (an increase of 29% from the 1996 census), 50,485 people identified as Inuit (up 26% from 1996), and another 389,785 identified as Métis (an increase of 91% from 1996).¹² The Aboriginal population is increasingly urban, with approximately 54% residing in urban areas in 2006. Almost half of the Aboriginal population (48%) consists of children and youth under the age of 24,¹³ the majority of which are currently in the education system or have made the transition to the workforce. This profile translates into an urgent need to address educational practices for Aboriginal people in Canada.

Gaps in Education Outcomes

Although Aboriginal people have made considerable gains in secondary and post-secondary education in the last decade,

significant gaps remain compared to the non-Aboriginal population. For example, while only 23.1% of non-Aboriginal people age 15 and older failed to attain high school graduation, 43.7% of all Aboriginal people failed to do so.¹⁴ For Inuit, the education gap is particularly striking. Approximately 60.7% failed to graduate from high school.¹⁵ More Métis graduate from high school than other Aboriginal groups, and Aboriginal women are slightly more likely to graduate than men.¹⁶ In addition, the 2006 Census data also revealed that urban Aboriginal people age 15 and older are more likely to graduate than rural and on reserve Aboriginal people (36.3% compared to 44.1%, and 59.5% respectively).¹⁷ The gap in high school graduation rates translates into fewer Aboriginal people with a post-secondary education.

According to the 2006 census, only 4.1% of Aboriginal people have an undergraduate degree compared to 11.9% of the non-Aboriginal population.¹⁸ Again, urban Aboriginal people are more likely to attain an undergraduate degree compared to rural and on-reserve Aboriginal people (5.5% compared to 3.0% and 2.2% respectively).¹⁹

Barriers to Post-Secondary Education

The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs provides financial assistance for post-secondary education through its Post-Secondary Education (PSE) Program. This Program is comprised of three elements: the Post-Secondary Student Support Program aimed at providing funding for First Nations and Inuit learners to attend post-secondary institutions, the University and College Entrance Program aimed at assisting First Nations and Inuit learners in obtaining the necessary qualifications to gain admission into post-secondary institutions, and the Indian Studies Support Program aimed at providing support to First Nations and other post-secondary institutions to develop programs tailored to meet First Nations and Inuit student needs.²⁰ However, this Program has been capped at 2% annual growth since 1996, despite the increase in Aboriginal populations.²¹ It is also not accessible to Métis and Non-Status First Nations learners. This funding cap poses one significant barrier to Aboriginal access to post-secondary educational opportunities.

Other barriers faced by Aboriginal peoples to post-secondary educational opportunities include historical, social, geographic, demographic, cultural and individual barriers.²² The legacy of Canada's assimilationist policies have generated many social problems that are difficult to surmount and, in many cases, has generated feelings of "distrust and hostility to education in many parts of the Aboriginal community."²³ Social barriers can include unequal access to resources for reserve and remote schools, lack of role models, discrimination, high levels of unemployment, and poverty, resulting in inadequate academic preparation for post-secondary education. Geographic barriers can include those stemming from a need to relocate to access post-secondary educational opportunities. These barriers can impose additional costs on Aboriginal

students, including cost of transportation, lack of supportive networks, and affordable housing.

The majority of Aboriginal students are women.²⁴ They may face barriers related to family responsibilities or lack of access to day-cares. Aboriginal students are also more likely to be older and lacking basic academic skills.²⁵ When Aboriginal students do go on to post-secondary education, they are thrust into a world that is “substantially different from Aboriginal reality.”²⁶ In this non-Aboriginal dominated learning environment, there is little recognition and understanding of the different culture, needs, and learning styles of Aboriginal students. Finally, individual barriers such as self-esteem and motivation, “manifested in a sense of powerlessness, apathy, poor mental and physical health, anger and frustration”²⁷ can be immense.

Strategies to Improve Educational Outcomes

Article 14 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People states:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.

3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.²⁸

To ensure higher success rates for Aboriginal students, educational curriculum must incorporate language, cultural values and ways, and traditional knowledge as well as contemporary skills and knowledge. Approaches to improving educational outcomes must involve the participation of parents and community in order to build a successful learning continuum and healthy resilient communities.²⁹ Programs must begin at the early childhood development stage, to foster school readiness and a desire for lifelong learning, and target all levels of education. Strategies to improve education outcomes for Aboriginal students should:

- Embody and support the strengthening of Aboriginal identity through an emphasis on language, cultural and traditional knowledge, and the effective reincorporation of Aboriginal elders and women in educating younger generations

- Ensure adequate and sustainable funding and investment in education as a means to healthy, prosperous Aboriginal communities and economies

- Support resources for on-going research, culturally appropriate policy development and program evaluation that is sustainable

- Establish long-term, multi-year funding to meet the growing population and needs of Aboriginal students, institutions, and communities

- Ensure adequate and sustainable education infrastructure that will meet the needs of Aboriginal learners across the life span.³⁰

Central to the success of educational reform is Aboriginal jurisdiction over all facets of education.³¹

Conclusion

The links between education and health are evident. Improving education is crucial to improving quality of life and life circumstances, and to ensuring that Aboriginal people are able to interact with health providers and access the full range of services available to them. However, for Aboriginal people, improving educational outcomes requires attention be directed to other social determinants of health as well, such as overcrowded and inadequate housing conditions, living in poverty, and loss of language and culture. These act as barriers to providing a healthy environment conducive to learning.³² While these challenges are not unique, they are on a scale that far exceeds that faced by non-Aboriginal people. A healthy future for Aboriginal people is also embedded in Aboriginal ways of knowing and being from which Aboriginal people cannot be separated if they are to survive and thrive. Only through Aboriginal development and control over all aspects of their own education can this be assured.



Endnotes

¹ Winkleby, M., Jatulis, D., Frank, E., & Fortmann, S. (1992). Socioeconomic status and health: How education, income, and occupation contribute to risk factors for cardiovascular disease. *American Journal of Public Health* 82(6): 816-820.

² World Health Organization (1998). *Social determinants of health: The solid facts*. Geneva: WHO.

³ 'Aboriginal' throughout this fact sheet refers collectively to the Indigenous inhabitants of Canada, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples (as stated in section 35(2) of the Constitution Act, 1982). Wherever possible, we provide names and data for distinct groups/communities.

⁴ Battiste, M. (2005). *State of Aboriginal learning: Background paper for the 'National Dialogue on Aboriginal Learning*, November 13 and 14, 2005, Ottawa: Saskatoon, SK: Aboriginal Education Research Centre, University of Saskatchewan, prepared for Canadian Council on Learning, p. 4.

⁶ Smylie, J., Williams, L., & Cooper, N. (2006). Culture-based literacy and Aboriginal health. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 97(2): p. S22.

⁷ Ibid. (2006). p. S23.

⁸ Ibid. (2006).

⁹ Smith, M. (2001). Relevant curricula and school knowledge: New horizons. In: *Aboriginal education in Canada: A study in decolonization*, K.P. Binda and S. Calliou (eds.), pp. 77-89. Mississauga, ON: Canadian Educator's Press.

¹⁰ Statistics Canada (2008). *Aboriginal peoples in Canada: Inuit, Métis, and First Nations, 2006 Census*. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 97-558-XIE, p. 6.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Statistics Canada (2006). *2006 Census*. Ottawa, ON: Catalogue no 97-560-X2006028 (March 4, 2008 Tabulations).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., Catalogue no 97-560-X2006036 (October 28, 2008 Tabulations)

¹⁸ Ibid. Catalogue no 97-560-X2006028 (March 4, 2008 Tabulations).

¹⁹ Ibid. Catalogue no 97-560-X2006036 (October 28, 2008 Tabulations)

²⁰ Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development (2007). *No higher priority: Aboriginal post-secondary education in Canada*.

Ottawa, ON: 39th Parliament, 1st Session, p. 4.

²¹ Ibid, p. xi.

²² R.A. Malatest and Associates (2004). *Aboriginal peoples and post-secondary education: What educators have learned*. Montreal, QC: Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, pp. 11-16.

²³ Ibid., p. 11.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁸ Article 14, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/drip.html> [accessed January 16, 2009]

²⁹ Battiste (2005), p. 4.

³⁰ Assembly of First Nations (2005). *First Nations education action plan*. Ottawa, ON: Assembly of First Nations, May 31, 2005.

³¹ Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (1996). *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Volume 3: Gathering strength*, Chapter 5: Education. Ottawa, ON: INAC; Assembly of First Nations (2005). *First Nations Education Action Plan*.

³² R.A. Malatest and Associates (2004).



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