Barriers and Facilitators for Accessing Indigenous Supports Literature Review

By Nicholas St. Germaine

Chippewas of Rama First Nation

About Indspire

Indspire is an Indigenous national registered charity that invests in the education of Indigenous people for the long-term benefit of these individuals, their families and communities, and Canada. With the support of its funding partners, Indspire disburses financial awards, delivers programs, and shares resources with the goal of improving educational outcomes for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students. Through Indspire's education offerings, we provide resources to students, educators, communities, and other stakeholders who are committed to improving success for Indigenous youth. In 2021-2022, Indspire awarded over $23 million through 6,612 bursaries and scholarships to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth, making it the largest funder of Indigenous post-secondary education outside the federal government.

About Research Knowledge Nest

The Indspire *Research Knowledge Nest* is the first Indigenous research program of its kind in Canada. With data analysis skills rapidly becoming critical to economic success, the *Research Nest* is poised to seize this exciting opportunity to foster Indigenous engagement and leadership in quantitative research and data science roles. The program will be guided by an Advisory Committee of researchers, leaders, and key stakeholders who will provide direction and input on the development of this important initiative.

Founding Supporters

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Introduction

Purpose

Having support is essential for Indigenous students making their way through post-secondary education (PSE). Indspire's goal is to support students through every stage of their education to ensure that they have a successful career. To do this, Indspire provides funding to thousands of students per year, however, it is also essential that they feel supported by the education institutions they are attending. Through helping institutions to improve the supports they can provide to Indigenous students, Indspire can ensure that students find academic success. Therefore, it is important for the Rivers to Success (R2S) team to identify which services are available to students in PSE, and what barriers may impact how accessible and effective these supports are. Identifying areas for improvement will help the R2S team collaborate with Indigenous student support centres to improve the support they can provide their students. The insights gained from this study will also aide in developing program content to help provide support to Indigenous students in their journey through PSE.

Method

This literature review examines what on-campus Indigenous supports are available to students in PSE. For the purposes of this literature review, Indigenous supports were defined as those that are either developed or delivered by Indigenous people using Indigenous ways of knowing. To examine the accessibility of Indigenous supports this literature review not only examined what on-campus Indigenous supports students tend to have access to, but what barriers are impacting the quality or accessibility of these supports. This includes both the barriers organizations within educational institutions may have to providing accessible and quality services, as well as the psychological barriers Indigenous students may face when deciding whether or not to utilize accessible services. Understanding these barriers will provide a useful insight into how the supports available to Indigenous students can be improved. This process discovered two organizations within educational institutions responsible for providing support to Indigenous students, which are impacted by separate barriers:

1) **Mental Health Services:**
   Provides services such as mental health counselling. They face barriers such as structural inaccessibility and mental health stigma.

2) **Indigenous Student Services (ISS):**
   Organizations designated to supporting Indigenous students. They provide access to community culture, and academic support, but are limited by staffing issues and institutional support.

Literature Review

Historical Background and Context

A range of historical factors such as the lingering effects of colonization and various attempts at cultural genocide by the Canadian government greatly impact Indigenous people today. This was made possible by the Indian Act of 1876, which gave the federal jurisdiction over the Indigenous Peoples of Canada and their land (Coates, 2008). Under the Indian Act, the federal government made many attempts to eliminate the "Indian problem" by placing bans on cultural practice, limiting self determination, and taking away traditional land (Bombay et al., 2013).

Residential Schools and the Sixties Scoop

Over the course of 160 years, more than 150,000 children were forcefully separated from their families to attend the Indian Residential School System (Barkan, 2003). These schools were created to "Christianise" the children and assimilate them into the wider Canadian culture, however, many children were physically and sexually abused by staff members while many more were killed (Aboriginal Affairs Northern Development Canada, 2015). A further 20,000 children were also forcefully taken from their families and put into the foster care system between the 1960s to the 1980s in a time predominantly known as the "60s Scoop" (Manitoba Association of Friendship Centres, 2018). Many of these children also experienced physical and sexual abuse before being adopted predominantly by white families or becoming old enough to leave the foster care system (Manitoba Association of Friendship Centres, 2018). These government-led policies have caused traumatic experiences that still influence Indigenous citizens today.

Intergenerational and Historical Trauma

Nearly all Indigenous Canadians today are influenced by the trauma caused by the government's attempts at forced assimilation, even those who have not suffered from these experiences directly. This is because trauma can be transferred to younger generations through intergenerational trauma. Intergenerational trauma occurs when a parent's past trauma negatively influences their parenting in such a way that they inflict a similar type of trauma to their own children (Bombay et al., 2009). For example, a parent who suffered from physical abuse while attending a residential school is more likely to physically abuse their own children, transferring their own trauma to their child. For this reason, it is also referred to as "the cycle of trauma" (Gagné, 1998). The effects of intergenerational trauma on the individual compound with those of historical trauma, which describes the culminative effects of oppression on a group of people (Spicer et al., 2011).

The concept of "historical trauma" is another way researchers have described how people can be indirectly impacted by trauma. Spicer et al. (2011) describe historical trauma as a process in which every member of an oppressed group is impacted by cumulative effects of their oppression. Thus, it is a more encompassing concept by emphasizing trauma as being shared by a group of people, rather than being passed down from individual parents to their children. Evan-Campbell (2008) elaborates on historical trauma by describing its impact at three levels.

First, it impacts the individual by causing mental health problems such as anxiety, grief, or depression. Second, it impacts families by increasing stress in parents, leading to the transfer of intergenerational trauma. Third, it impacts the culture through the breakdown of traditions and values. These influences are then compounded by the effects of current-day racism (Bernards et al., 2018; Evans-Campbell, 2008). Overall, colonization greatly impacts Indigenous students through its impact on their connection to culture and mental health.

The Need for Supports

Many studies have shown that Indigenous students have specific needs related to mental health, connection to community and culture, and finances which may negatively impact their success in PSE. Today, Indigenous students are far more likely to suffer from a mental health disorder than non-Indigenous ones (Hop Wo et al., 2019). Another study found that 42% of Indigenous residents in urban areas suffer from a mental health disorder (Firestone et al., 2015). This could negatively impact Indigenous student retention as higher mental wellbeing is associated with higher grades, and a lower likelihood to leaving college early (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Marmolejo et al., 2022). This is partly because students who have worse mental health tend to have lower motivation to achieve academic success (Mahdavi et al., 2021). Other evidence also suggests that it is because students with lower mental wellbeing tend to be more dissatisfied with their education, which in turn influences their decision to leave college (Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018). The impact of mental health on academic success means access to mental health supports is essential for students in PSE.

The disconnection from students' culture and community caused by students moving away from their homes to pursue education may also impact their academic success. Indigenous students believe that both a strong connection to their culture and high mental wellbeing are both essential for academic success (Bighead, 2008). However, students across studies have described these feelings of disconnection as well as culture shock, with some stating that it contributes to feelings of loneliness (Bazemore-James & Dunn, 2020; Erwin & Muzzin, 2015; Hasan, 2020). This feeling of disconnection from culture is further exacerbated by a disconnect between Indigenous and Western ways of knowing (Charbonneau, 2017; Erwin & Muzzin, 2015). Cultural connection also impacts Indigenous students' mental wellbeing, as some say that their cultural connection gives them resiliency (Erwin & Muzzin, 2015; Snowshoe et al., 2017). Despite the importance of a strong connection to culture and community, many students still feel that their educational institutions do not meet their cultural needs (Hasan, 2020).

Moving away from one's home community to pursue PSE also takes financial resources that many Indigenous students may not have. While all students must contend with this barrier, it is especially harmful for Indigenous students because the Indigenous community has a lower income than non-Indigenous communities (Henning & Wheeler, 2021). So, they are more likely to lack the financial resources required to attend PSE. Many Indigenous students receive funding from their communities; however, many do not receive enough to fully fund their education, and others do not receive any funding at all (Hasan, 2020). This not only impacts those attending in-person programs, but online ones as well, since 30% of Indigenous students did not have the financial resources to complete their online classes (Walton et al., 2020). Consequently, across multiple studies, financial supports have also been found to be helpful for Indigenous students (Nelson et al., 2018; Walton et al., 2020).

Types of Support

Indigenous supports are those that are delivered or developed by an Indigenous person using Indigenous ways of knowing. This literature review identified two types of organizations within educational institutions which can provide Indigenous supports to their students. The first are mental health services which mainly function by providing counselling, and are present in 91% of Canadian public universities (Jaworska et al., 2019). The other providers of support are Indigenous Student Services (ISS). These take many forms such as Indigenous student affairs offices or Indigenous student centres, and are present in most educational institutions (Greenfield, 2020). These organizations are tasked with providing a connection to Indigenous culture and community, and in some cases, additional academic support. The mental health services and ISS organizations suffer from different barriers to providing quality support to Indigenous students.

Mental Health Services

With the importance of high mental wellbeing to Indigenous success, mental health services are essential because they provide students with mental health counselling. Indigenous mental health supports are those that deal with culturally specific issues such as the impact of historical trauma and a loss of culture. A counsellor who understands their client's culture can have a very positive impact on the counselling process. For example, Black students stated during an interview study that Black counsellors have a better understanding of, and connection to, their own experiences (Wallace, 2021). For Korean Canadian Immigrants, this connection meant that they did not have to worry about explaining culturally specific issues to their mental health service providers (Salam et al., 2022). A study on the effectiveness of mental health referrals in refugees helped to inform the importance of culturally relevant supports, as it found that successful treatments were characterized by culturally responsive care (Shannon et al., 2015).

People from three First Nations communities also reported that culturally informed or Indigenous-led supports were important for reinforcing their sense of strength and resilience (Ninomiya et al., 2022). This was because participants felt a stronger bond with their counsellor, they could receive both traditional and non-traditional supports, and they trusted that their counsellors would respect their confidentiality (Ninomiya et al., 2022). In a similar study by George et al., (2019), Indigenous men said cultural practices such as sweat lodge ceremonies, drumming circles, and traditional healers were particularly effective. This was because they addressed the impact of colonization and loss of culture, while non-traditional mental health treatment did not. Despite the impact of mental health on academic success, there still exists many barriers for Indigenous students seeking out mental health services. The two main barriers for students accessing mental health care identified in academic literature are structural accessibility (Baik et al., 2019; Bighead, 2008; McCann & Lubman, 2012; Moreland et al., 2018; Priestley et al., 2022; Wallace, 2021) and stigma (Cage et al., 2019; Gilliver et al., 2018; Moreland et al., 2018; Priestley et al., 2022; Tuliao, 2021).

Structural Accessibility

Issues related to structural accessibility occur when aspects of the campus environment make it difficult for students to utilize mental health services. A panel study involving 73 post-secondary students defined service capacity limitations and long wait times as structural barriers, citing them as some of the main barriers to accessing mental healthcare (Priestley et al., 2021). Further studies agree that structural accessibility is a major barrier because, while 91% of public Canadian universities have counseling services, they often lack the capacity to accommodate all students (Jaworska et al., 2019). Many other studies also agree that unawareness about the services is also a barrier (Baik et al., 2019; Bighead, 2019; George et al., 2019; McCann & Lubman, 2012). Consequently, students recommended that their educational institutions increased the capacity and publicity of their mental health services (Baik et al., 2019; Bighead, 2019).

For students who want to access culturally relevant counselling, the barrier of structural accessibility is worsened due to further staffing limitations. For instance, a study examining Canadian public universities found that while Indigenous and international students were the most targeted by mental health outreach programs, they lacked a roster of ethnically diverse counsellors (Jaworska et al, 2019). This lack of diversity was also cited as an issue in interview studies with Black students and the general student body (Lewis, 2018; Priestley et al., 2021). Concerningly, studies examining mental health service utilization in immigrant Latinx youths and Asian students found that this lack of culturally informed care causes some to go without any care at all (Han & Pong, 2015; Tenenbaum & Singer, 2018). So, while there is no research on the barriers faced by Indigenous students, this body of research suggests that the largest barrier to accessing Indigenous mental health supports may be a lack of Indigenous counsellors.

Stigma

Stigma surrounding mental health and seeking help also deters students from accessing mental health services by causing feelings of shame. Corrigan (2004) distinguishes between public and private stigma, stating that public stigma is the negative stereotypes about a specific group of people that are believed by the public. For instance, the public might believe that mental health problems are a sign of weakness. Public stigma often leads to private stigma, which occurs when a member of the stigmatized group believes these negative stereotypes and applies them to oneself. So, a student suffering from a mental illness may feel a sense of shame or unworthiness.

Evidence indicates that both forms of stigma reduce one's likelihood to seek help for mental health issues across cultures (George et al., 2019; Han & Pong, 2015; Martinez et al., 2020; Tuliao, 2021). In college athletes, negative peer norms around seeking help decreased students' likelihood of using mental health services (Moreland et al., 2018). However, studies comparing the influence of public and private stigma on help-seeking behaviour found that private stigma has a much larger effect. This is because while private stigma consistently reduces help-seeking behaviour, public stigma has been found to have a lesser effect or no effect at all (Cage et al., 2018; Eisenberg et al., 2009).

Indigenous Student Services

ISSs provide a variety of supports to Indigenous students including providing opportunities to engage with their community and culture, as well as providing some academic supports. Whether they exist at an educational institution as an Indigenous student affairs office or an Indigenous student centre, ISSs exist to make Indigenous students feel more comfortable and succeed in their educational journey (Bazemore-James, 2018). These services are very helpful for Indigenous students, as ISSs tend to increase student retention in PSE (Bazemore-James, 2018; Bazemore-James & Dunn, 2020). Specifically, an employee at an Indigenous Student Affairs office reported an increase in Indigenous student retention during the office's first year of operation (Bazemore-James, 2020). However, the services are limited by both staffing issues and support from their educational institutions.

Connection to Community and Culture

ISSs main responsibilities are creating and sustaining an Indigenous community on campus, as well as connecting students with cultural practices (Bazemore-James, 2018; Bazemore-James & Dunn, 2020; Greenfield, 2022; Lorens, 2022). The main way they do this is by providing gathering spaces for students to interact with each other and participate in cultural practices (Bazemore-James & Dunn, 2020; Erwin & Muzzin, 2015). Additionally, all students in a study by Greenfield (2020) said that the Indigenous student centres on campus provided access to cultural events. Two recent studies also found that some ISSs within educational institutions provided elders within their gathering spaces for students to receive guidance and support (Hasan, 2020; Lorens, 2021). As a result of being able to connect with a community of Indigenous students and participate in cultural practices, many students reported feeling more comfortable on campus, as well as being more engaged and successful in classes (Erwin & Muzzin, 2015; Kristoff & Cottrell, 2021; Nelson et al., 2018; Walton et al., 2020). Thus, being able to engage with Indigenous communities and cultural practices has been greatly beneficial to the academic success of Indigenous students

Academic Support

While this is a limited body of research, some ISSs provided students with additional academic support along with cultural supports. Offering academic support is important because Indigenous students' struggles in academia often make them feel like they do not belong in PSE (Bazemore-James & Dunn, 2020). The academic support provided by ISSs usually take the form of pairing a student with an Indigenous mentor. (Nelson et al., 2020; West et al., 2014). However, in some cases, elders provided to students may also act as mentors to Indigenous students. In addition to culturally relevant academic supports, some ISSs also provide more generic forms of academic support to their students such as extra tutoring, which has been helpful to Indigenous students (Hasan, 2020; West et al., 2014). In New Zealand, Māori student support services in some institutions provide group workshops in which student tutors can explain content in ways that are more understandable to Māori students in a non-lecture setting (Curtis et al., 2014).

Lack of Indigenous Staff

Having Indigenous staff working in ISSs or in other positions on campus helps to give students a sense of community and has been seen to increase their academic success (Nelson et al., 2018; Walton et al., 2020). However, there is often a lack of Indigenous staff and faculty working in ISSs and on the wider campus (Bazemore-James & Dunn, 2020; Greenfield, 2020). Additionally, there's little opportunity for faculty and staff to learn about Indigenous history (Greenfield, 2020), leading to most faculty outside of ISSs not understanding why reconciliation is important (Guinan, 2016). ISS workers also report that they are limited by the number of staff positions available (Bazemore-James, 2018). This lack of staffing positions also means that ISSs often rely on Indigenous students to organize and secure funding for their own events (Windchief & Joseph, 2015). Overall, this may greatly impede their ability to fulfill their responsibilities to their students.

Lack of Institutional Support

In addition to a lack of Indigenous staff, ISSs also suffer from a lack of support by their educational institutions. In many cases, Indigenous students are not given permanent spaces to hold events by their institutions, or simply given their own space to gather (Bazemore-James, 2018). This is especially important given that directors in ISSs feel that giving Indigenous students their own space to gather is essential for building a community (Bazemore-James & Dunn, 2020). Participants in multiple studies have also identified a lack of funding provided by their institutions (Bazemore-James, 2018; Greenfield, 2020). This lack of funding may also contribute to their inability to attain more staff and a permanent gathering space for their students. Thus, the ability of ISSs to provide quality support to Indigenous students is partly limited by funding and space on campus.

Conclusion

Summary

This review has provided many insights for the Research and Impact Unit (RIU) which can be used to direct further research projects on the access to Indigenous supports for students. The lingering effects of colonization still greatly impact the mental health of Indigenous students today. Additionally, having to move away from home to pursue education makes them feel separated from their community and culture, and requires financial resources that many students may not have. Unfortunately, many students are dissuaded from seeking mental health counselling because of stigma around mental health. Another barrier faced by both mental health services and ISSs is a lack of Indigenous staff, which may have a large impact on both organizations' ability to provide quality, culturally relevant support. In addition to a lack of Indigenous staff, ISSs also suffer from a lack of support from their institutions, causing a lack of funding and places for Indigenous students to gather and hold events. The perspectives of Indigenous students and the employees providing support may provide the insight required for the R2S team to collaborate with educational institutions to improve the supports available to Indigenous students.

Further Research

Although much is known about the barriers students of ethnic minorities face when accessing culturally relevant mental health support, no studies have examined the unique barriers than Indigenous students may face (Jaworska et al., 2016; Lewis, 2018; Priestley et al., 2021; Tenenbaum & Singer, 2018). Understanding the unique barriers Indigenous students face is important because it will give the R2S team the knowledge required to collaborate with educational institutions to improve access to Indigenous supports. In a similar vein, no studies have examined the how a lack of Indigenous supports impact Indigenous students. It would be of interest to the R2S team to examine whether Indigenous students with no access to Indigenous supports go without any support at all or settle for non-Indigenous supports. If they accessed non-Indigenous supports, were they satisfied with the support they received? Additionally, in studies examining the importance of having access to one's own ethnic background, students stated that an understanding of the students' culture and its history were key benefits (Salam et al., 2022; Wallace, 2021). However, no studies have determined whether Indigenous students would also be comfortable with seeing a non-Indigenous counsellor who was trained to address Indigenous issues. This could be a useful alternative if educational institutions find it difficult to hire Indigenous counsellors.

This literature review has also revealed gaps in the literature about the services offered by ISSs. Many studies have found that ISSs mainly provide academic support or access to community and culture (Bazemore-James, 2018; Bazemore-James, & Dunn, 2020; Greenfield, 2022; Hasan, 2020). However, little is known about the other useful services they may be able to provide. For example, a lack of funds is detrimental to Indigenous students' educational journeys (Hasan, 2020; Nelson et al., 2018; Walton et al., 2020; West et al., 2014). It would be

important to determine if ISSs would be useful for helping students secure funding by aiding them in finding and applying for scholarships or bursaries. Additionally, all studies examining the supports have interviewed students who have engaged with the services provided by ISSs. There may be a considerable amount of students who choose not to engage with these services, but this topic has yet to be examined. So, it would be beneficial to determine why some students do not engage with these services. Understanding why students choose not to attend gatherings provided by ISSs will help outreach programs increase student participation in these events. By further researching these questions, the R2S team will be better able to collaborate with educational institutions and create program content to better support Indigenous students.

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