

Indigenous Learners Mental Health Needs

Literature Review

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Wabaseemoong Independent Nations



Indspire

Indigenous education,
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Cover Design
Bears
by Emily Kewageshig

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 Knowledge 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.

Cover Design – *Bears by Emily Kewageshig*

Emily Kewageshig is an Anishinaabe artist and visual storyteller from Saugeen First Nation No. 29. Her work captures the interconnection of life forms using both traditional and contemporary materials. Her work is centred around themes of birth, death, and rebirth, as they are closely intertwined in both her cultural teachings and personal lived experiences. Emily celebrated her first solo exhibition titled *Mooshknemgog Bmaadziwin: Full Circle (2020)*, which was shown at the Tom Thomson Art Gallery in Owen Sound, Ontario. She continues to create artwork for various organizations to highlight Indigenous knowledge and culture. She graduated from Sheridan College’s Visual and Creative Arts Diploma program with Honours in 2017, receiving the Best in Show award at the final graduate exhibition. She attended OCAD University in the BFA Indigenous Visual Culture program (2017–2020).

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Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to understand the factors that impact the mental health of Indigenous learners and to identify the mental health needs of Indigenous learners in order to develop innovative program content to support the wellbeing of Indigenous learners.

In this literature review, the focus will be on Indigenous groups in Canada, including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis populations. However, due to the lack of research on each specific population, it is difficult to assess the variations of each group. As a result, this review will discuss the generalizations of Indigenous populations in Canada.

The average onset of most common mental illnesses occurs in late adolescence and early adulthood (Ennals et al., 2014). Most post-secondary students are considered in their early adulthood, which is a demographic that is more likely to experience mental illness (Ennals et al., 2014). Additionally, Indigenous people overall experience poorer mental health outcomes compared to non-Indigenous people (Williams et al., 2018). Consequently, this puts Indigenous learners at a greater risk of experiencing poorer mental health outcomes, which results in a higher prevalence of mental health and related issues across Canada for Indigenous people (Wo et al., 2020).

Furthermore, there is a lack of existing research on Indigenous mental health in Canada, which creates significant gaps in the understanding and development of mental health interventions and strategies geared to Indigenous people (Nelson et al., 2017). This is pertinent to Indigenous learners as they tend to reside in urban areas to pursue education; however, there is a scarcity of research done on urban Indigenous populations for mental health (Nelson et al., 2017).

This establishes the importance of why mental health is still relevant for Indigenous learners, as they are an underserved group in Indigenous mental health research.

Key Topics

Key topics covered include impacts on mental health for Indigenous learners, promotion of wellbeing for Indigenous learners, and meeting Indigenous learners' mental health needs.

Impacts on mental health for Indigenous learners contain the following sub-topics: individual influences, socio-cultural influences, and systemic influences.

Promotion of wellbeing for Indigenous learners contain the following sub-topics: cultural identity, cultural connectedness, and sense of belonging.

Meeting Indigenous learners' mental health needs contain the following sub-topics: physical health programming, cultural programming, Indigenous-led programming, financial programming, social programming, mental health programming, and programming via social media.

Methods

This review looked at literature from 2012 to 2022. This review prioritized peer-reviewed journals; however, one piece of grey literature was included.

Due to the lack of relevant research conducted involving Indigenous populations, this review looked at Indigenous populations in Canada, the USA, New Zealand, and Australia, with prioritization of Indigenous populations in Canada. As discussed in the Gaps and Limitations section of this review, most of the information gathered is generalized and inferred.

While this review examined the mental health needs of Indigenous learners, it is important to acknowledge that there are additional factors beyond the scope of this review that may impact the mental health of Indigenous learners.

Impacts on Mental Health for Indigenous Learners

Individual Influences

There are low utilization rates of mental health services by Indigenous people across Canada, and this is apparent by the fact that mental health services have not adapted to serve the needs of Indigenous people (Tu et al., 2019). However, this is not only apparent in Canada; internationally, Indigenous populations experience higher health disparities overall compared to non-Indigenous populations (Kitching et al., 2022).

Within Canada, mainstream health and mental health services are not adapted to Indigenous peoples' needs, which results in a lack of Indigenous-specific services available in Canada (Tu et al., 2019; Kitching et al., 2022; Montesanti et al., 2022). In addition, the health needs of Indigenous people in Canada are lacking considerably (Montesanti et al., 2022). This results in Indigenous people receiving less health care overall and is most prominent among Indigenous youth (Carrier et al., 2022).

The low utilization of mental health care services among Indigenous people stems from various factors. The most notable are systemic factors and individual factors. In this section, individual factors will be the focus. Systemic factors will be discussed in a later section.

In a study by Nelson and colleagues (2017), it was found that mental health stigma is a barrier to accessing mental health care services for Indigenous people. Experiencing mental health stigma decreases the rate of accessing mental health care services, even when it is needed (Williams et al., 2018). This was found to be the case even in Indigenous youth (Williams et al., 2018). When mental health stigma is coupled with experiences of racism and discrimination in a health care setting, the rate of accessing mental health care services decreases significantly (Nelson et al., 2017).

As a result of the historical and current issues that Indigenous people face, Indigenous people overall tend to have less trust towards the health care system (Nelson et al., 2018). Not trusting the health care systems results in a decreased rate of accessing health care services, which creates a negative feedback loop (Nelson et al., 2018). Similarly, a lack of quality of care received makes Indigenous people more reluctant to access health care services (Nelson et al., 2018).

Based on whether an individual lives in rural or urban areas, health care services can vary. Accessing mental health care services in rural areas is tougher due to fewer resources available (Nelson et al., 2018). However, accessing mental health care services in urban areas is easier, yet there are more reported experiences of discrimination by health care providers (Nelson et al., 2018).

It is important for Indigenous learners to access mental health care services when considering the possible detrimental factors that they face. At educational institutions, this is particularly important as it was found that only 73% of post-secondary institutions across Canada provide any sort of mental health supports or services (Jaworska et al., 2016). It can be inferred that due to the lack of Indigenous-specific services in Canada, the number of Indigenous-specific mental health services in educational institutions are alarmingly low as well.

Due to most educational institutions being in urban areas, it is likely that Indigenous learners experience higher levels of racism and discrimination. Experiencing racism and discrimination by a health care provider increases the level of psychological distress by five times (Srivastava et al., 2019). This puts Indigenous learners at a higher risk of experiencing poorer mental health outcomes.

Socio-Cultural Influences

The most notable socio-cultural factor that this review will focus on is racism, which is a determinant of Indigenous peoples' health (Paradies, 2018). It is so because racism has been linked to higher levels of psychological distress and lower levels of mental wellbeing (Srivastava et al., 2019; Paradies, 2018; Shankar et al., 2013; William et al., 2018). It is important to note that Indigenous people globally experience racism in all sorts on a regular basis, which then increases the risk of psychological distress and their wellbeing (Paradies, 2018).

Racism and discrimination have many health implications for Indigenous people. For instance, accessing health care and mental health care services decreases when experiencing racism and discrimination (Tu et al., 2019). This is most prominent when racism and discrimination is experienced from healthcare providers (Nelson et al., 2017). Racism from a healthcare provider increases levels of psychological distress and rates of unmet needs significantly (Paradies, 2018; Kitching et al., 2022). Regardless of whether an individual is at risk or not of a medical issue, it was found that people still do not access healthcare services due to the risk of experiencing racism and discrimination (Kitching et al., 2022), which can further harm those already living with mental health issues (Tu et al., 2019).

When experiencing racism and discrimination, it was found that experiencing it in a healthcare setting results in the most detrimental effects to mental health when compared to experiencing racism and discrimination in non-health care settings (Paradies, 2018).

In a study, Indigenous youth identified the negative impact that racism has (Goodman et al., 2019). Indigenous youth recognized that racism is detrimental to their mental health, identity, and wellbeing, and can adversely affect self-esteem and sense of belonging, factors that contribute to overall mental wellbeing (Goodman et al., 2019).

Systemic Influences

Colonialism is an important systemic factor that negatively affects the health of Indigenous people in various ways (Nelson et al., 2017). Colonialism has also been identified to be a determinant of Indigenous peoples' health all around the globe (Nelson et al., 2017).

Indigenous people suffer from disproportionate health disparities compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts due to the deeply embedded colonialism within the healthcare systems in Canada (Nelson et al., 2017). For Indigenous youth, systemic factors are detrimental to the development of a healthy wellbeing (Liebenberg et al., 2019).

Systemic factors are embedded within the economic, social, and political domains, which sets Indigenous people up for poorer outcomes overall (Montesanti et al., 2022), especially mental health outcomes.

The education system in Canada is based and built from colonialism, and as such, the teaching pedagogy of Canadian educational institutions are based on Eurocentric models of learning (Shankar et al., 2013). This results in teaching models that are culturally irrelevant to Indigenous learners and can create oppressive learning environments for students (Shankar et al., 2013). As such, Indigenous learners face negative impacts to their wellbeing and overall psychological health by simply attaining education based on Eurocentric models (Shankar et al., 2013).

To be an Indigenous learner completing an education in an urban area is detrimental to one's overall mental health. Regardless of the innumerable factors that negatively impact Indigenous learners, it is still to be reckoned that Indigenous youth pursuing an education at the various levels show a unique resilience. Even while positioned in a Eurocentric-based educational institute, there are many ways to enhance the resiliency and promote a positive mental wellbeing for Indigenous learners.

Promotion of Wellbeing for Indigenous Learners

Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is critical to mental health as it incorporates personal aspects of who you are, who you become, and how you are shaped by your experiences (Srivastava et al., 2019). From an Indigenous lens, cultural identity plays a critical role in positive mental wellbeing (Heid et al., 2022).

A strong cultural identity is related to a decrease of depressive symptoms, improved wellbeing, and is a significant protective factor against mental health outcomes (Williams et al., 2018). A strong cultural identity can be formed by involvement in one's cultural activities and traditions, practice of the language, and connection with the land (Toombs et al., 2016; Gall et al., 2021).

Additionally, a strong cultural identity has been found to be correlated with a healthy sense of belonging and having positive social groups (Williams et al., 2018), both of which contribute to an increase in mental wellbeing.

A study conducted in Western Canada showed that when Indigenous patients experienced a connection with an Elder, this helped to reclaim their cultural identity (Tu et al., 2016). In strengthening their cultural identity, there was a decrease of depressive symptoms and suicide risk in more than 50% of Indigenous patients (Tu et al., 2019).

It can be inferred that maintaining a secure and positive connection to one's culture and cultural identity plays a significant role in mitigating against negative mental health outcomes. For Indigenous youth and students, findings have found similar results in that Indigenous youth tend to have better mental health and wellbeing when they have a secure cultural identity (Srivastava et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2018). Having a secure cultural identity is tied to preservation of Indigenous culture and knowledge, which is further linked to identity empowerment and a positive mental wellbeing (Li et al., 2022). It is important to understand the significant role that cultural identity plays in mental health for Indigenous learners, considering the impact it has on the connection to others, sense of belonging, and mental wellbeing.

Cultural Connectedness

Cultural connectedness can be defined as the connection to one's own culture, understanding of one's own culture, and engagement with one's own culture (Snowshoe et al., 2017). Cultural connectedness has been found to be a valid social determinant of health for Indigenous populations, specifically a social determinant for mental health (Masotti et al., 2020).

Being culturally connected to one's cultural background is associated with positive mental health outcomes for Indigenous youth (Lund et al., 2022; Snowshoe et al., 2017). Cultural connectedness has been shown to increase mental wellbeing, which Indigenous youth have demonstrated by having higher levels of happiness and positive attitudes (Srivastava et al., 2019; Snowshoe et al., 2017).

Additionally, cultural connectedness is associated with higher academic success and having positive relationships with peers and family (Snowshoe et al., 2017; Toombs et al., 2016). It is also important to note that cultural connectedness includes connection to not only culture, but also family, land, and spirituality (Gall et al., 2021), all of which contribute to mental wellbeing.

Conversely, cultural connectedness is a strong protective factor against poor mental health outcomes such as suicide and suicide risk (Tu et al., 2019). Therefore, it can be inferred that creating strong ties to one's own culture is vital to a positive mental wellbeing. It is especially important to foster cultural connectedness for Indigenous youth due to the high risk of mental health outcomes and inadequate mental health care that young Indigenous people face (Carrier et al., 2022). Notably, culturally appropriate mental health interventions have been found to be most effective for Indigenous youth (Carrier et al., 2022).

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging has been shown to be associated with positive mental health outcomes (Ironsides et al., 2020; Burnett et al., 2022). Sense of belonging can be defined as the level to which an individual feels connected to their community and their place within it (Kitchen et al., 2012).

In a study, Indigenous youth themselves identified that to maintain a healthy sense of mental wellbeing, it is important to have a strong social support (Li et al., 2022; Heid et al., 2022). Having a strong social support that is positive provides youth with a sense of belonging (Goodman et al., 2019). However, this can only be achieved when the social support is comprised of the right people and can provide the youth positive influence (Goodman et al., 2019).

Forming a connection with an Elder has been found to promote a sense of belonging as well (Tu et al., 2019). Additionally, Elders promote connection amongst families, peers, and community whilst including cultural aspects in connecting with others, all of which contribute to a positive mental wellbeing (Tu et al., 2019). It can be inferred that for Indigenous youth, being able to connect with an Elder can improve overall mental wellbeing and promote a sense of belonging. In an educational institution, having a sense of belonging is important in building self-esteem and self-efficacy to succeed academically.

For mental health outcomes, maintaining a sense of belonging decreases the risk of suicidal ideation (Tu et al., 2019), anxiety, and depression (Burnett et al., 2022). Any disruption made to an individual's sense of belonging in their community disrupts the individual and the community (Gall et al., 2021).

Meeting Indigenous Learners' Mental Health Needs

In looking through the literature, there were a few commonalities that were suggested by both researchers and Indigenous youth and communities for programs that aim to support the overall mental wellbeing of Indigenous people. To note, maintaining the overall health needs is critical to improving overall mental health outcomes for Indigenous learners (Lonsdale, 2013).

Physical Health Programming

To start, there is a need for programming that targets the physical health of Indigenous youth (Goodman et al., 2019). Indigenous youth and researchers have recommended programming that include cultural activities and land-based activities, as they could be beneficial to not only meeting the physical needs of Indigenous youth, but also help to foster positive self-identity and community belonging (Toombs et al., 2016; Watson et al., 2022; Goodman et al., 2019), as well as incorporate cultural aspects.

Cultural Programming

Furthermore, Indigenous youth have identified the importance of culture to their overall health and wellbeing (Goodman et al., 2019; Smallwood et al., 2021), and as such, culturally relevant programming would be beneficial. As mentioned prior, cultural and land-based activities are beneficial as Indigenous ways of knowing are embedded in them. Additionally, it is important to involve Indigenous Elders and knowledge holders within cultural programming for Indigenous learners, as it would help foster a positive cultural identity and resilience (Tu et al., 2019; Toombs et al., 2016; Smallwood et al., 2021).

Indigenous-led Programming

Programming that is Indigenous-led and community-led are essential to Indigenous learners as it incorporates the most relevant needs of the community, it meets the unique needs of the community, and it contributes to the continuation of the community's unique cultural traditions (Gall et al., 2021; Masotti et al., 2020; Toombs et al., 2016; Watson et al., 2022). Having programming developed by and include Indigenous people and communities fosters community connectedness and provides a sense of belonging (Toombs et al., 2016).

Financial Programming

Indigenous students identified financial barriers as the most common reason for not completing their post-secondary degree (Hutchinson et al., 2021). Financial barriers include personal finances, travel expenses, research funding, and research operation expenses (Hutchinson et al., 2021). Considering this, it would be valuable to offer programming on financial education to Indigenous learners. It would be beneficial to offer program content to upcoming graduate students on research funding and related financial concerns. Program content surrounding financial education would be beneficial for Indigenous students pursuing post-secondary education to help in decreasing the stress when transitioning into a new environment, as is the case for many Indigenous learners.

Social Programming

Indigenous youth also recognize the importance of having positive role modelling and developing positive relationships with others (Goodman et al., 2019). Social programming that would be beneficial for Indigenous learners is peer programming (Lund et al., 2022). Peer programming is helpful in that it builds relationships within and between communities (Goodman et al., 2019), and as such provides the opportunity to build meaningful and positive relationships for Indigenous learners in educational institutions.

Mental Health Programming

For mental health, Indigenous communities have expressed a need for more holistic and culturally rooted mental health and wellness services (Montesanti et al., 2022; Watson et al., 2022; Smallwood et al., 2021; Goodman et al., 2019). This is important, as Indigenous frameworks of mental health and wellness are based on holistic approaches (Montesanti et al., 2022). For instance, the Medicine Wheel is an Indigenous framework of health that incorporates the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of health – all of which make up a holistic view of health (Gall et al., 2021; Montesanti et al., 2022). The Medicine Wheel is important as it is a framework that can be used to improve the wellbeing of Indigenous people (Montesanti et al., 2022; Youth Researchers of Spaces & Places et al., 2022), and is culturally appropriate to incorporate in mental health interventions for certain Indigenous communities (Li et al., 2022).

However, it is important to note that the inclusion of the Medicine Wheel is not culturally appropriate for all groups of Indigenous people throughout Canada. There are likely many Indigenous groups throughout Canada that view mental health through their own unique frameworks of health.

Programming via Social Media

In today's day and age, there is potential in providing programming via social media. In a study done regarding tele-mental health services, Indigenous communities have expressed interest in adopting technology to create further outreach of Indigenous services and programming (Li et al., 2022).

As many Indigenous learners must leave their communities to pursue education at various levels, social media is useful in that it is often used to maintain connection to family and the community (Li et al., 2022). Additionally, social media is useful in targeting Indigenous students and is helpful in the integration of culturally appropriate services (Li et al., 2022). This is notable because Indigenous youth are much more likely to frequent social media and digital technology, and thus using social media is a good means to target Indigenous youth to improve mental wellbeing (Li et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Gaps and Limitations

Although the literature review provided useful insights on the mental health needs of Indigenous learners, there are gaps and limitations that require addressing:

- Due to the lack of research on specific populations, this review focused on Indigenous populations throughout Canada with the inclusion of New Zealand and Australian Indigenous populations due to the sharing of similar experiences. As a result, much of this literature review is based on generalizations.
- Most of the research included in this review was done on First Nations people, with very little research on Inuit and Métis populations of Canada.
- There is a considerable lack of research material on Indigenous students in Canada. As a result, this literature review had to make inferences from literature based on Indigenous youth and adults.
- Many educational institutions are in urban areas. Additionally, research on urban Indigenous people is lacking despite the rate of the urban Indigenous population increasing in recent years. Thus, there is a big gap in knowledge on urban Indigenous people in educational institutions.
- All research and research projects were conducted in the English language. As a result, research that discusses Indigenous values and traditions may have not been communicated or understood as it would have been in the respective Indigenous language(s).
- This literature review does not delve into the experiences of intersectionality of Indigenous learners due to lack of research and information on this topic (e.g., sexuality, gender identity, disability, being of mixed ethnicity).
- It would be helpful to know the statistics of utilization of mental health services at educational institutions for Indigenous students, as it would provide more insight for developing programming directed at Indigenous students.
- There needs to be more investigation into the connection between mental health and cultural connection in Indigenous learners, specifically within urban areas, as most educational institutes are in urban areas.
- In the literature assessed, there was a lack of specificity on whether the mental health services and other services were accessed from educational institutions or external sources.

Future Directions

This literature review has provided valuable insights for Indspire's Research and Impact Unit (RIU) on the mental health needs of Indigenous learners. This literature review has identified several gaps and limitations in the field, which Indspire has the capacity to fill in through its own research projects. This would allow for more insights into the specific mental health needs of Indigenous learners throughout Canada, and thus allow for the development of programming and program content to meet these needs. Furthermore, it would allow for the development of a recommendations list that could inform educational institutions across Canada on the mental health needs of Indigenous learners.

While there is more research emerging on the importance of Indigeneity in mental health services in recent years, there is still limited research that is specific to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis populations in Canada. Notably, most of the research was done on First Nations populations, and there exists limited research on Inuit and Métis populations. As a result, much of the research can only be generalized. Regardless, being able to look at the nuances of each population would be useful in assessing the gaps and mental health needs of each population.

Furthermore, there is a considerable lack of research on Indigenous learners in Canada, specifically on mental health. With the increase of Indigenous learners attending post-secondary institutions and the greater need of mental health access, it is imperative to understand the mental health needs of Indigenous learners. It is more so important to listen to what Indigenous learners themselves have to say regarding their mental health needs because including Indigenous people in the research process is the first step to Indigenous knowledge and empowerment.

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