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Literature Review on Indigenous Youth Experiences with Education and Employment

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Native Women's
Association of Canada



L'Association des femmes
autochtones du Canada



Generation
4 Equality

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Introduction

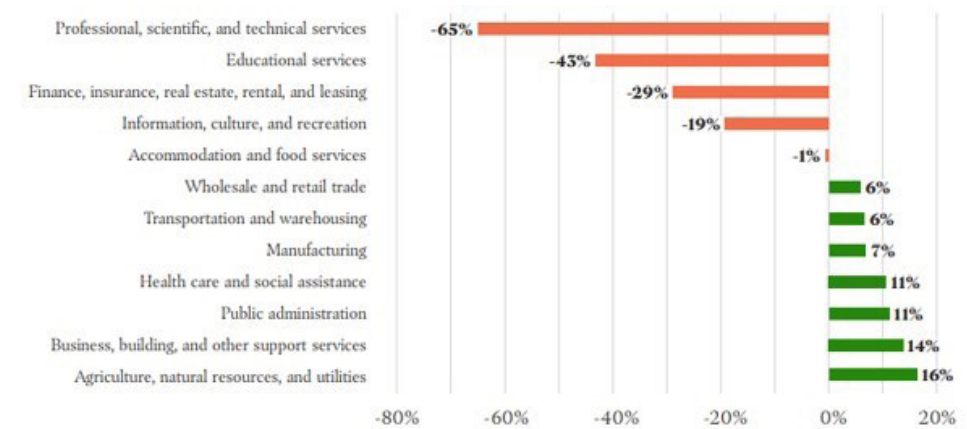
The Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) is a national Indigenous organization that has defended the rights of, delivered programming to, and amplified the perspectives of Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, transgender and gender-diverse people in Canada since its incorporation in 1974. NWAC is inclusive of First Nations – on- and off-reserve, status, non-status, and disenfranchised – Inuit and Métis. As a grassroots association guided by Indigenous women’s organizations from across the country, NWAC was founded on a collective goal to enhance, promote, and foster the social, economic, cultural, and political well-being of Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, transgender and gender-diverse people in their respective communities and Canadian societies.

Indigenous youth face distinctive challenges, including systemic barriers in education and employment, unequal opportunities in areas such as housing and health, and limited access to culturally appropriate education resources. For example, they may encounter financial and geographic obstacles when pursuing higher education, face discrimination in the job market, and struggle to find affordable, culturally relevant housing. To address these challenges facing Indigenous youth, NWAC created the Generation for Equality (G4E) project aimed at supporting the academic and professional aspirations of Indigenous youth aged 15 to 30. During the first phase of G4E, NWAC focused on gender equality and diversity, developing an online platform for Indigenous Youth to ask questions and connect with their peers. Under the second phase of the G4E project, NWAC will develop resources, informed by Indigenous youth, that addresses the aforementioned barriers to post-secondary opportunities.

Background

In Canada, disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations have emerged throughout research and literature. Specifically, disparities in education and employment, as demonstrated in Figure 1, show that Indigenous youth face significant disparities in employment across various sectors. Indigenous youth are notably underrepresented in key industries, with a 65% lower likelihood of employment in professional, scientific, and technical services when compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts. This trend extends to educational services (-43%), finance and insurance (-29%), and information and culture (-19%). Conversely, Indigenous youth have greater representation in sectors such as agriculture, natural resources, and utilities (16% higher), business and support services (14% higher), and public administration (11% higher). The accompanying text highlights that many jobs are often filled through informal networks, which Indigenous youth typically lack access to, further limiting their opportunities (Deloitte,2023). This disparity in employment opportunities underscores the ongoing challenges Indigenous youth face in achieving equitable employment outcomes in Canada.

Figure 1: Employment of Indigenous Youth (age 14-24) relative to non-Indigenous youth by industry (highest and lowest proportion)

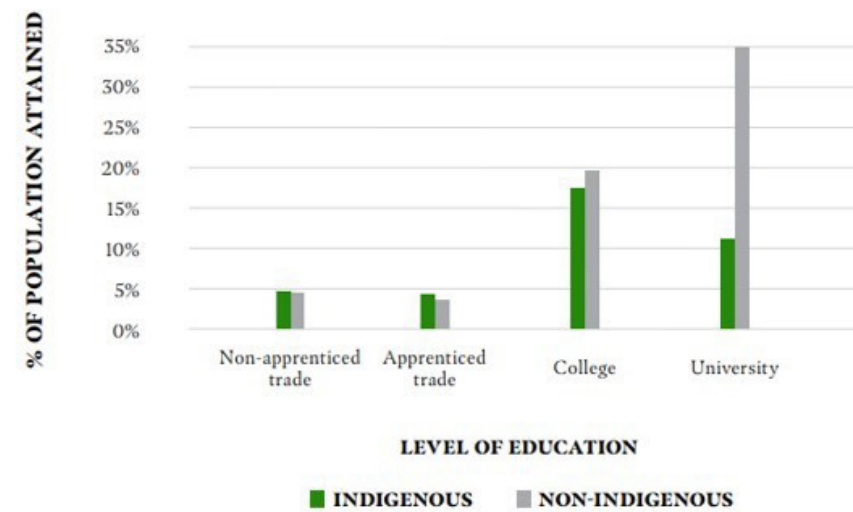


Proportional Employment Relative to Non-Indigenous Workers (%)
Source: Statistics Canada 2021, as cited by Deloitte. (2023). p. 18

These disparities are further compounded by the differences in educational attainment among Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. As illustrated in Figure 2, the educational attainment of Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations is significant at the post-secondary level. Although both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations showed similar rates of education in non-apprenticed and apprenticed trades, with each being approximately 5% of the total population, disparities emerge at the College and University level. This disparity can first be seen at the College level, where approximately 20% of non-Indigenous youth had completed college, compared to approximately 15% of Indigenous individuals. The gap widens further at the university level, with about 30% of non-Indigenous individuals attaining a university degree, compared to only about 15% of Indigenous individuals. This educational divide perpetuates the cycle of inequality, limiting Indigenous youth’s access to well-paying jobs and professional growth.



Figure 2- Level of post-secondary education obtained Indigenous youth (ages 20-34)



Source: Statistics Canada 2021, as cited by Deloitte. (2023). p.11

Challenges Facing Indigenous Youth in Employment and Education

It is important to discuss the systemic and societal barriers experienced by Indigenous youth across Canada that create barriers to opportunities. Indigenous youth face multifaceted challenges in their educational and career journeys, shaped by historical colonization and ongoing systemic issues. In 2021, Heritage Canada found that Indigenous youth in northern and remote communities experience significant gaps in their academic development. In many northern and remote communities, Indigenous communities lack choices in K-12 and degree-granting institutions, which forces Indigenous youth to relocate to attain their education, often resulting in them being far away from their community and support network. In a study by CIRNAC (2022), respondents from Northern communities discussed various challenges they faced during their early years in post-secondary education. The participants of this study noted that, in addition to language barriers, they felt a sense of displacement and struggled to navigate urban settings (CIRNAC, 2022). Feelings of isolation and cultural disconnection were also common, which significantly impacted an Indigenous youths' ability to stay engaged in their studies (Ibid). These issues played a crucial role in their decisions to withdraw from their programs. In addition, D'Antimo (2021) highlighted challenges facing Indigenous youth which include cultural isolation, power imbalance, legacy of trauma and navigating two worlds.

Cultural isolation within educational environments often perpetuates feelings of alienation and inadequacy among Indigenous youth (Ibid). Moreover, many Indigenous students find themselves in institutions where their cultural backgrounds are not represented or valued, resulting in a disconnection from their Indigenous identities. This experience can be particularly daunting for those who have relocated from their home community to an urban centre to access education, as they may struggle to adapt to unfamiliar cultural norms and practices while feeling detached from their own heritage (MacKinnon, 2015). These issues are intricately linked, as cultural isolation not only affects individual identities but also contributes to the broader power imbalances and systemic barriers that Indigenous youth encounter.

Power imbalances in predominantly non-Indigenous settings also contribute to discrimination and limit opportunities for advancement among Indigenous youth (Ibid, 2021). The legacy of trauma from colonization, including through colonial institutions such as the residential school system, continue to affect mental health and well-being of Indigenous youth, creating additional barriers to academic and professional success. Moreover, navigating between Indigenous cultural identities and Western (colonial) systems, institutions and norms complicates an Indigenous youth's path to finding and maintaining suitable employment (Crooks, 2009). Addressing these issues requires integrating Indigenous knowledge into education, fostering supportive workplace environments, and implementing policies that promote cultural awareness and equity (Crooks, 2009). A clear example of these broader systemic issues can be seen in Nunavut's education system, where colonial influences continue to overshadow Indigenous knowledge and practices (McGregor, 2015). While initiatives like the Qikiqtani Truth Commission and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have begun the process of decolonizing education, they are not able to action long-term solutions (McGregor, 2015). McGregor (2015) stress that true decolonization requires continuous and reflexive engagement with the past and present, along with active inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in decision-making. Educators must recognize that knowledge is historically conditioned and constantly evolving, much like a river that changes with time and environmental conditions (Ibid). Similarly, the barriers to employment faced by Indigenous youth in urban centers reflect a continuation of these systemic challenges. Per Bach and Fayant (2022) these barriers include difficulties in finding meaningful job opportunities, insufficient work experience, discrimination from employers, limited access to safe and convenient transportation, and the lack of accommodations for neurodivergent individuals. This is further compounded by language barriers and the inflexible nature of work schedules which fail to accommodate Indigenous youth in their employment pursuits. Particularly noteworthy are the amplified challenges faced by Indigenous youth, where childcare responsibilities emerge as a significant barrier (A7G, 2022). These barriers necessitate a multifaceted approach that integrates Indigenous knowledge and supports cultural identity while addressing the unique needs of Indigenous youth, ultimately paving the way for their success in achieving educational and career aspirations.



Despite the range of challenges discussed, there remains a notable gap in the literature that specifically examine the distinct experiences of Indigenous WG2STGD+ youth in education and employment. While studies on Indigenous youth often highlights systemic barriers such as historical trauma, cultural disconnection, and educational inequities, there is a lack of focus on how these issues are compounded by intersecting factors including gender identity, sexual orientation, and race. Indigenous WG2STGD+ youth may face unique forms of discrimination in educational institutions and workplaces that differ from the experiences of their peers due to these intersecting identities.

Factors influencing Success

The academic and career success of Indigenous youth is shaped by various interconnected factors. A central aspect is the decolonization and Indigenization of workplaces, which involves embedding Indigenous cultural practices into workplace policies and fostering the empowerment of Indigenous youth through inclusive decision-making processes. Addressing systemic disparities and promoting cultural understanding among non-Indigenous colleagues are also crucial for creating environments where Indigenous youth can thrive. Key factors that contribute to their success include:

- Decolonizing and Indigenizing Workplaces
- Teaching non-Indigenous perspectives of colonial harm and trauma
- Inclusion of Indigenous traditional and cultures to support identity and wellness
- Addressing unique Indigenous youth needs
- Acknowledging and working to support unique Indigenous youth's strengths
- Fostering strong relationships (family, community, friends, land and spirit)
- Financial resources to support Indigenous Youth in their academic and career path
- Creating culturally responsive education & workplace environment (Haytt, 2019; CHiXapkaid et al., 2011; Durmush et al., 2024)

One of the most significant factors influencing the success of Indigenous youth is the process of decolonizing and Indigenizing workplaces. This involves integrating Indigenous cultural practices and knowledge into workplace policies, such as accommodating ceremonies like smudging and providing access to sacred medicines (Hyatt, 2019). Moreover, empowering Indigenous youth through inclusive decision-making processes and board representation ensures their voices are heard in policy discussions and fosters a sense of agency and ownership (Ibid, 2019). Addressing systemic disparities in employment opportunities and promoting cultural understanding among non-Indigenous colleagues are crucial steps

towards creating inclusive and respectful work environments (Ibid, 2019). These efforts not only support the well-being and cultural identity of Indigenous employees but also contribute to broader organizational effectiveness and societal equity.

The legacy of colonialism continues to impact Indigenous youth, particularly in employment settings. The factor of "colonial harm and trauma" within the context of decolonizing and Indigenizing workplaces underscores significant barriers faced by Indigenous youth in employment (Hyatt, 2019). Historical and ongoing colonial oppression, coupled with systemic discrimination and a lack of culturally safe policies, profoundly impact mental health, educational attainment, and identity (Ibid, 2019). According to the literature, issues such as reluctance to implement effective employment policies, pervasive racism and sexism in the workplace, and the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge and practices further prevent Indigenous youth from achieving their career goals. (CHiXapkaid et al.,2011 & Durmush et al., 2024). These challenges reflect a critical need for policy reforms that prioritize Indigenous inclusion, respect cultural protocols, and address systemic biases to foster equitable and supportive workplaces for Indigenous youth.

Another factor that influences the academic and career development of Indigenous youth is financial resources. CHiXapkaid et al., (2011) highlights that providing adequate funding and financial aid for Indigenous students significantly impacts the decision to pursue post-secondary education. The financial support includes, but is not limited to, providing equal access to well-resourced schools, access to technology and providing support for transportation and financial assistance with accommodation and living costs (ChiXapkaid et al., 2011).

Lastly, providing cultural appropriate curriculum and a culturally safe workplace environment is another factor discussed across the literature. For example, Durmush et al., (2024) found that "Western styles of teaching are often based on requiring students to learn individually, which can be a barrier for some Indigenous students who learn better collectively as Indigenous culture and teachings and ways of knowing, being, and doing depend on collectivity, rather than individual means" (p.11). CHiXapkaid (2011) emphasizes on the importance of using a culturally sensitive pedagogy that build on Indigenous students' linguistic, cultural, cognitive and effective strengths. This approach helps students see the relevance of their education to their lives and futures, fostering a sense of belonging, pride, honor, and respect within the entire educational system (Ibid).

In summary, the academic and career success of Indigenous youth hinges on several interconnected factors, including the decolonization and Indigenization of workplaces, financial support, and culturally responsive curricula. Empowering Indigenous youth through inclusive decision-making and promoting cultural understanding among non-Indigenous colleagues are crucial for creating equitable environments. Addressing these factors through thoughtful policies and practices is essential for creating supportive environments where Indigenous youth can thrive.



Solutions

Several solutions were identified across the literature to support Indigenous youth in their academic and career development. These solutions include:

- Focus on Indigenous sources of strength through cultural knowledge and practices.
- Provide appropriate support for the school-to-work transition.
- Emphasize cultural integrity, connection, and relationship-building.
- Adopt a holistic approach to education and employment.
- Utilize reconciliation as an institutional tool.
- Create more inclusive learning environments.
- Ensure accessible support for Indigenous youth.
- Indigenize workplaces to reflect Indigenous cultures and practices.
- Implement mandatory training and policies to foster cultural awareness.
- Encourage employers to educate themselves and their employees about Indigenous issues.
- Collaborate with Indigenous businesses and organizations to promote economic opportunities. (D'Antimo, 2021; Deloitte, Hyatt 2020; Bach & Fayant, 2022; Pidgeon, 2019).

Adopting these strategies can create a more equitable and supportive environment for Indigenous youth, enabling them to overcome systemic barriers and thrive in their educational and career pursuits.

One approach towards addressing institutional racism and inequality is the "integration of Indigenous ways of knowing and being across all aspects of education (Brandt, 2007; Kulig et al., 2010, cited by Pidgeon, 2019 p.5). Including Indigenous languages and knowledge in education system provide significant benefits for Indigenous students, families and communities. Access to Indigenous languages in school increases sense of belonging and motivation in school, which can lead to improved academic outcomes for Indigenous youth (Angelo et al., 2022). Language is deeply connected to cultural heritage, and studies have shown that learning Indigenous languages fosters a stronger sense of identity, self-esteem, and pride (Ibid). This connection helps students build resilience and maintain a positive outlook on the future. In Māori-medium education in New Zealand, for instance, students are immersed in both their language and cultural practices, which leads to a deeper understanding of the material and higher levels of engagement (Ibid). Research shows that students in Māori-language immersion programs are more likely to stay in school longer, achieve higher literacy and numeracy levels, and develop critical thinking skills at a pace

like or better than their peers in English-medium education (Ibid). This approach not only improves academic performance but also reduces dropout rates, as students feel more connected to their schooling experience. (Ibid). Additionally, the integration of Indigenous languages and knowledge into academic and work settings can have a profound impact in creating a more conducive work environment for Indigenous youth. By improving education levels among youth has been found to improve employment opportunities, career stability, and other socio-economic factors (Pidgeon, 2019).

By enhancing educational attainment, the gap in inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can be reduced. In addition, through academic and career development, Indigenous youth can contribute to the decolonization and Indigenization of workforces and empower and inspire future generations (Ibid, 2019).

Wholistic Approach

Several crucial steps for supporting Indigenous youth in their academic and career development have been identified throughout the literature. These solutions emphasize a wholistic approach that emphasizes the importance of leveraging Indigenous cultural knowledge and practices, providing appropriate support during the school-to-work transition, and fostering cultural integrity, connection, and relationships. According to D'Antimo (2021, p. 10), a wholistic approach considers "the unique gifts and addresses the mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical aspects of wellness." This approach advocates for academic curriculum and career pathways that are culturally appropriate and considers the challenges that Indigenous students face along with the value of Indigenous strengths.

Further, Absolon (2010) states that Indigenous people view the world as interconnected, encapsulated in the belief that "we are all related" (p. 74). This approach is also multi-layered, encompassing various elements of well-being, including the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical areas of life (Absolon, 2010). Proper education today emphasizes the importance of a wholistic approach, meaning that "students have successfully completed a process of intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual development which enables the learner to contribute to the cultural/linguistic, social, political, and economic development and sovereignty of their communities and nations" (CHiXapkaid et al., 2011, p.6). In addition, Pidgeon (2019) states that employers need to take into consideration wholistic ways to support Indigenous youth employees. This involves recognizing the value of connections with other Indigenous people in their field and fostering development of such cultural network (Ibid, 2019).

Unique Indigenous Youth Needs

The concept of "Unique Indigenous Youth Needs" evolved from participant conversations, stressing distinctive requirements that set Indigenous youth employees apart from their non-Indigenous colleagues (Hyatt, 2019). Key needs identified included honoring



Indigenous culture and worldviews to prevent harm, offering enough development chances to improve career paths, and enhance access to educational and vocational training to address systemic hurdles (Hyatt, 2019). Participants in the study conducted by Hyatt (2019) emphasized that Western businesses frequently neglect these demands, underlining the importance of organizations adapting and effectively supporting Indigenous youth to attain positive employment outcomes. Furthermore, cultural demands that contribute to wellness and health were recognized as vital components of helping Indigenous kids in the workforce.

Incorporating Indigenous traditional knowledges and cultures into a workplace context is critical for boosting the emotional well-being and identification of Indigenous youth employees. Participants in the reviewed studies stressed the significance of combining these elements in healing from colonialism and fostering a sense of safety among non-Indigenous populations Hyatt, 2019). The participants in Hyatt's study (2019) advocated for the preservation of traditional customs and cultures within workplace cultures, practices, and legislation. Hyatt (2019) also emphasized the importance of incorporating a diverse range of Indigenous perspectives when integrating traditional knowledges, as well as the need for non-Indigenous employers to develop a thorough understanding of Indigenous diversity to effectively adapt workplace practices and policies in a meaningful and appropriate manner. Moreover, Vocational training and apprenticeships must be tailored to address the unique needs of Indigenous youth, emphasizing accountability for discriminatory behaviors and fostering safe workplaces (CHiXapkaid et al., ,2011). Employers are urged to provide living wages, flexible work arrangements, and mental health support to ensure economic stability and overall well-being (Ibid, 2011). Collaborative efforts with Indigenous organizations to develop training programs and policies are essential, alongside implementing comprehensive cultural awareness and anti-racism training for all employees.

Unique Indigenous Youth Strengths

Throughout the literature, the unique strengths of Indigenous youth and their communities were often highlighted to demonstrate their ability to enhance academic and work environments that facilitate healing. The strengths-based approach shifts the focus from deficits to identifying and building upon the positive qualities, resources, and resilience of individuals, families, and communities (Saleebey, 1996. Ac cited by Prehn, 2022). This approach emphasizes self-determination and recognizes people's capacities, talents, and aspirations, even in the face of adversity (Prehn, 2022). By focusing on what is working well, it fosters empowerment and growth. Prehn (2022) proposed an Indigenous strengths-based theoretical framework which is rooted in an Indigenous standpoint. The key principals of this framework incudes:

- Celebrate diversity: Honour Indigenous communities' cultural wisdom, resilience, connections to land, and traditions.

- Embrace growth: Recognize the strength and potential for growth in adversity, transforming challenges into opportunities.
- Empower aspirations: Support personal and collective growth by valuing the aspirations of Indigenous individuals and communities.
- Foster self-determination & collaboration: Strengthen self-determination with resources and respect for Indigenous expertise, fostering meaningful partnerships.
- Utilise resources: Leverage Indigenous cultural knowledge, land, networks, and traditions to address challenges together.
- Cultural grounding: Ensure interventions align with Indigenous worldviews, values, and cultural safety, respecting knowledge systems and protocols (Prehn, 2022).

A strength- based lens also acknowledges the Canadian historical context of colonization (Crooks et al., 2009). Instead of framing high rates of violence, substance abuse, and poverty as individual failings, Crooks et al., (2009) suggest reframing these issues as reflections of broader historical and systemic forces, while emphasizing the resilience of Indigenous youth. CHiXapkaid et al., (2011) state that Indigenous students need to have opportunities to learn about their identity and the strengths they can share with other students. Hyatt (2019) similarly emphasizes that it is important to include Indigenous youth perspectives in all decision makings as this has positive effect in revitalizing both community, academic, and workplace settings through their specialized knowledge. Effective implementation of Indigenous youth knowledge, they suggested, hinges on fostering collaboration and meaningful engagement.

Therefore, to integrate Indigenous traditional knowledge and cultural practices, these strengths serve as tools for healing from colonial harms and improving academic and workplace environments. By focusing on what is working well within Indigenous communities, this approach fosters empowerment and opens pathways for growth.

Relationship

The theme of relationships emerged prominently across the examined literature, highlighting the crucial role of employers and workplaces in fostering connections with the Indigenous community (Hyatt,2019). For example, the literature emphasized that establishing and nurturing authentic relationships with Indigenous youth employees is equally vital to fostering a supportive, inclusive work environment (Hyatt, 2019; Crooks et al.,2009). These relationships were seen as essential for promoting mutual understanding, facilitating knowledge exchange, and building trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups (Crooks et al., 2009). Moreover, participants noted that fostering strong relationships enhances employers' accountability and responsibility in creating safer and more inclusive workplaces that acknowledge colonial histories and support Indigenous peoples effectively (Hyatt, 2019).



One of the more prominent relationships that emerged throughout the literature was the role of mentors and role models in academic and work environments. Mentors and role models are crucial in encouraging Indigenous students to pursue post-secondary education (Banch, Fayant, 2023). According to the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation (NAAF), after family, role models are the greatest source of encouragement for NAAF scholars (Ibid, 2023). Urban Indigenous peoples value formal education for both them and the broader Indigenous community. However, they also view education as encompassing teachings from Indigenous schools and life-long learning from Elders (Ibid, 2023). Despite cultural and historical differences, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples in Canadian cities share common values and aspirations (Hyatt, 2019). However, there are differences in the importance placed on maintaining a strong connection to one's Indigenous identity and traditional ways, with Inuit and status First Nations peoples more likely to emphasize this compared to non-status First Nations peoples (Environics, 2010).

The academic and professional development of Indigenous youth faces significant challenges rooted in systemic racism, inadequate culturally relevant education, and limited support systems. Barriers such as lack of experience, discrimination, and insufficient resources impede their transition from education to meaningful employment. The integration of Indigenous education into curricula and increased Indigenous representation among educators are crucial steps toward creating supportive learning environments. CHiXapkaid (2011) emphasizes the importance of culturally sensitive pedagogy that builds on Indigenous students' linguistic, cultural, cognitive, and affective strengths. This approach helps students see the relevance of their education to their lives and futures, fostering a sense of belonging, pride, honor, and respect within the entire educational system (Ibid, 2011).

Conclusion

Indigenous youth in Canada confront a range of complex challenges that stem from historical injustices and ongoing systemic barriers. These challenges—ranging from disparities in education and employment to cultural isolation—highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions and support. Yet, amidst these difficulties, Indigenous youth demonstrate remarkable resilience and possess unique strengths rooted in their cultural heritage and community values. Addressing these challenges effectively requires a comprehensive approach that honors and integrates Indigenous perspectives and practices. By embracing decolonization in educational and professional settings, fostering supportive relationships, and ensuring culturally responsive support, we can create environments where Indigenous youth not only survive but thrive. This approach not only aids their individual growth but also enriches the broader community, reflecting the deep interconnection between personal success and collective well-being. Ultimately, the

commitment to addressing the specific needs and leveraging the strengths of Indigenous youth is essential for creating a more equitable and inclusive society. It is through these concerted efforts that we can build a future where Indigenous youth are empowered to reach their full potential, contributing positively to their communities and beyond.



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