Chapter 2

Approach, objectives and methodology of the study on Indigenous students and education

This study aims to understand the experiences of Indigenous students and to identify successful strategies, policies and practices to support their success. Four Canadian provinces and two territories participated in the study, and New Zealand and Queensland (Australia) provided data and other information to enrich the study. The report looks beyond student attainment and achievement to include well-being, participation and engagement. Well-being is a very prominent consideration from an Indigenous perspective, and it is of key importance to any approach to student success. Indigenous perspectives need to be genuinely recognised and not be considered as simply an add-on to the main goals of education. In fact, those perspectives fit closely with aims informing educational development around the world, including the major global objectives for education, of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. While we have sought policies and practices underpinned by evidence of success, the lack of evaluation is problematic regarding education for Indigenous populations.

This history of Indigenous people's experiences is not universally understood, as the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has so powerfully stated. The Commission was established with the mandate to inform all Canadians about what happened in Indian residential schools, as part of a process of reconciliation and renewed relationships based on mutual understanding and respect.[1] In its review of the negative impacts of Canada's residential schools, the Commission recommended that the education achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students be closed in one generation. This recommendation has provided further impetus to provinces and territories to work together to make faster and more certain progress. Education provides hope and builds agency and voice. It supports students to lead the lives they wish and to pursue and achieve their chosen goals, for themselves, their families and their communities.

Indigenous peoples represented 4.3% of the total Canadian population in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2016), 3% of the total Australian population in 2014 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015) and 15.6% of the total New Zealand population in 2013 (Statistics New Zealand, 2015). The Indigenous populations in the three countries are each growing at a faster rate and have a younger age structure than non-Indigenous populations. In Canada, for example, the number of people self-identifying as Indigenous increased by approximately 20% between 2006 and 2011, compared to 5% for those self-identifying as non-Indigenous (Statistics Canada, 2015). Thus, in addition to other compelling reasons to improve Indigenous students' outcomes, if educational outcomes for Indigenous students do not improve and the proportion of Indigenous students continues to increase, the overall education performance of each country will decline. And this will have negative flow-on effects to both social and economic outcomes at a societal level.

Objectives

This study aims to understand and frame the experiences of Indigenous students and to identify successful strategies, policies and practices to support improvements and their success. Four Canadian provinces (Alberta, Manitoba, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia) and two territories (Northwest Territories and Yukon) took part in the study, demonstrating their strong commitment to improving educational experiences and outcomes for Indigenous students.

In addition, the participating provinces and territories invited New Zealand and Queensland (Australia) to contribute to the study as a means to further enhance peer learning. They each have significant Indigenous communities, and both systems have their own histories and strategies addressing the life situations and educational outcomes of Indigenous students. The aim is not to compare directly, but to compile relevant information and inspiring examples to shed further light on the situation of Indigenous students.

The study takes a three-tiered approach. First, acknowledging the heterogeneity of Indigenous students, the study seeks to understand the complex challenges Indigenous students face in education and what success really means for them. It examines well-being, health and poverty; the presence or absence of quality approaches to teaching and student engagement; differences in basic provision that inordinately affect Indigenous students; recognition of Indigenous cultures; and engagement with Indigenous communities. The study's outcomes are related to all of these, as well as to student learning and achievement.

Second, the study examines and discusses promising policies, strategies and practices submitted to OECD by the participating jurisdictions and identifies positive conditions and drivers for success. The data and strategies cited for Canada refer only to education systems funded by provinces and territories; they do not include data and policies for First Nation schools located on-reserve.

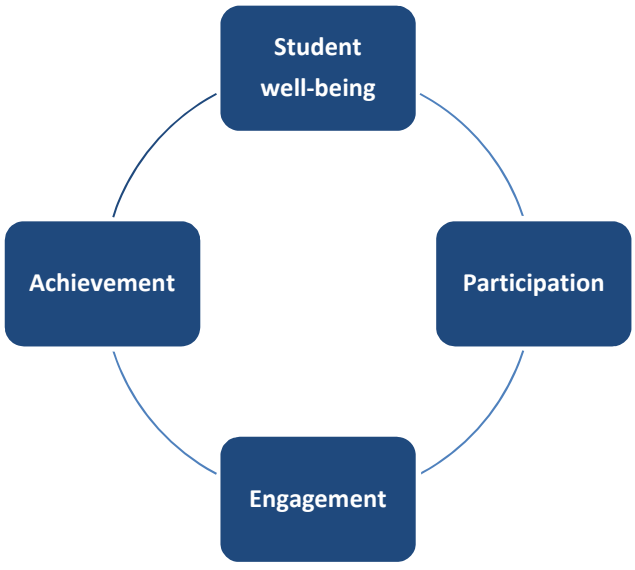
Third, the study highlights strategies, policies and practices for which there is positive evidence of effectiveness in achieving improvements and enhancing success (although policies and practices in relation to Indigenous education are not widely evaluated, an issue discussed later in this chapter). These strategies, policies and practices, where positive impacts are evident, are termed "promising practices" in this report. The overall aim of the study is to identify approaches that might be transferable, sustainable and scalable.

Given the diverse sources and methodologies involved, and the very different states of data availability in the participating Canadian jurisdictions, this does not lead to comparative analysis placing each jurisdiction side by side on common indicators. It aims instead to show broad trends and approaches and gather insights on the different strategies, policies and practices being implemented.

Our approach is holistic. Patterns of educational success are not to be understood as simply the outcomes of narrow school variables. They also bring in a rich set of social, cultural and educational factors. What happens in one aspect of students' lives influences the other aspects.

We have sought to capture this breadth and the multifaceted nature of the issues in the analytical framework. It is important to note that the framework is circular, with achievement influenced by well-being, participation and engagement and, in turn, influencing them. At the same time, we see a natural progression, considering student well-being through educational participation, through engagement in learning, and through enhanced achievement. Each component frames the conditions and opportunities for the component that follows, providing the structure and the sequence of the report, with chapters on well-being, participation, engagement and achievement (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. Analytical framework



Methodology

Analytical components of the study included: 1) an analysis of data from each participating jurisdiction on the well-being, participation, engagement and achievement of Indigenous students; 2) a synthesis of the strategies, policies and programmes being used that may benefit Indigenous students and evidence relating to these efforts; and 3) a literature review of evidence on improving education for Indigenous students, supplemented by evaluations and other research provided by participating jurisdictions.

The study used a mix of methodologies to clarify key developments and issues and structure the report:

- Compilation of materials and data original to the study from each of the participating jurisdictions and comparator systems, through specifically-designed questionnaires in three areas: 1) data on participation and enrolment, engagement, and achievement; 2) policy on pertinent strategies, initiatives and policies; and 3) relevant research undertaken in those systems and jurisdictions.
- Discussions at meetings between the lead Canadian jurisdiction (Alberta) and the OECD team, between Alberta and the other participating provinces and territories, and between those responsible for the study from these different groups. Two face-to-face meetings were held:
  - Edmonton, Alberta (2-3 February 2016) to clarify the aspirations, objectives, context and concerns of each province and territory, to shape the design of the study and to clarify the approach of the OECD.
  - Winnipeg, Manitoba (2-4 November 2016) with the participating jurisdictions (including a representative from New Zealand), primarily to give feedback on an initial draft of the report and to discuss finalisation of the report and options regarding further work in this area.
- Discussions with a selection of key stakeholders and on-site visits in each participating Canadian province and territory (May and June 2016). For each field visit, the OECD research team visited schools and met with Indigenous students and their parents, Indigenous teachers and support workers, Elders, school leaders and teachers, and other education stakeholders. The team met with more than 220 people in the course of the field visits, of whom 30%-40% are Indigenous (the team did not ask interviewees to self-identify as Indigenous or not).
- Additional commissioned research (Dreise and Perrett, forthcoming), in addition to literature identified through conventional research scanning and relevant OECD data, analysis and research.
- Synthesis of the material and analysis, the draft report, and recommendations.

The study involved the original collection of material from each participating jurisdiction, as well as a specially-commissioned research review by the Indigenous Research Unit of the Australian Council for Education Research. Through the discussions, iterations and protocols, we were able to develop confidence in the data sets. The study, designed and undertaken within a single calendar year, is intended as a relatively rapid exercise to capture the contemporary situation and developments, as is

typical in OECD reviews. OECD procedures also call for on-site visits and discussions with a range of stakeholders, which of necessity are highly selective. Finally, by incorporating experience from two additional systems as well as more general literature and OECD analysis, the study is informed by international experience and perspectives.

The concurrent, mixed-method strategy enabled the collection and synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data to deepen the analysis, using multiple sources. A literature review, data questionnaires, field visits, interviews, group discussions and dialogues among representatives from all stakeholders have all been drawn on for data collection and analysis. We first explored the quantitative data and then sought to explore the qualitative field data through replication, identifying programmes that were thought to be successful and seeking replication of those characteristics of success elsewhere (Lloyd-Jones, 2003).

The questionnaires

We developed specific frameworks and associated questions for each of the three questionnaires, including questions about definitions and data availability. For the policy questionnaire, jurisdictions were invited to introduce their detailed responses with an overview, so as not to lose main strategic lines in the detail of specific initiatives. A further occasion to elaborate on the replies to the questionnaires came with the face-to-face meetings in each of the participating Canadian provinces and territories in May and June 2016.

Compilation and analysis of existing jurisdictional data

A basic part of the field work involved gathering data on and related to Indigenous students in all jurisdictions and comparator systems. Specifically, the purpose of the data questionnaire was to gather information to identify: 1) what data are available relating to Indigenous students; 2) progress and success of Indigenous students; and 3) whether the data are comparable across jurisdictions. The questionnaire covers information on participation and enrolment; engagement (attendance, expulsion, early school leaving, well-being); and achievement (jurisdiction test results, completion). As well as comparing Indigenous students with non-Indigenous students, it offers insights on differences in gender, socio-economic status and school characteristics, (including school type and geographic location), as well as students identified as having special learning needs and the learning settings for them. The questionnaires only cover existing data. Jurisdictions were not asked to gather new data or to extrapolate from data that were not immediately available.

Relevant research and evaluation

The purpose of the research questionnaire was to identify existing evidence related to Indigenous student outcomes, including significant research undertaken in participating jurisdictions or at a national level, as well as policy or programme evaluations. The questionnaire focuses on Indigenous students' educational experiences in a broad sense, at different levels. It covers large-scale or small-scale research conducted within the past 20 years, as well as research (ongoing or about to start) designed to evaluate policies or resourcing and aimed at improving the learning outcomes of Indigenous students, or to shed light on their experiences or perspectives.

Compilations of current policies and approaches

The third questionnaire aimed to identify the policies and initiatives that shape the educational experiences of Indigenous students in each jurisdiction, and influence their learning outcomes, directly or indirectly. It includes any evaluations of these policies and initiatives (although some of these may have been captured in the research questionnaire). It is divided into an overview and a request for more detailed information on the same policies and initiatives. These policies and initiatives may be in the form of laws and statutes, rules and regulations, ordinances and orders, or in the form of strategies, programmes, projects and initiatives. They may be organised by government or by stakeholders at the classroom, educational institution, school board/district, jurisdiction or national level. Those implemented since 2000 are all viewed as relevant, not just those that are very recent.

The questionnaire focuses on the following areas: 1) lifting Indigenous student achievement; 2) data and monitoring at different system levels; 3) leadership; 4) quality standards, support and development; 5) teacher policies; 6) curriculum frameworks and materials; 7) parent and family support; and 8) community engagement. It was specified that our interest was not only in programmes and initiatives specifically targeted at Indigenous students, but also those that affect all students and also have significance for the outcomes and experiences of Indigenous populations.

Defining success, closing gaps

Educational systems frequently define success in relation to education and Indigenous students and communities in terms of closing gaps, using various educational performance indicators (such as attendance, retention, transitions and academic assessments, often in literacy and numeracy or success on examinations). These are all important diagnostic measures to keep track of the progress of Indigenous students. However, the literature and debate (especially from Indigenous scholars and representative organisations) highlight distinct and broader criteria of educational and learning success, such as positive self-concept, strong cultural identity, happiness and confidence.

Indigenous communal values in family (clan/nation/tribe), history, nature, country and environment are often highlighted, both as central tenets of Indigenous communities and in contrast to the more individualistic, meritocratic mainstream values of many education systems. There is a widespread concern among Indigenous scholars and community advocates about loss of language, the importance of language and cultural preservation and revitalisation, and a desire to see greater social harmony, anti-racist sentiment and cultural respect (Dreise and Perrett, forthcoming; CCL, 2007). Indigenous research also points to identity, wisdom and traditions as critical in shaping identity and character, and sustaining deep relationships between kin, land and water.

In the face of such contrasts, it might be supposed, that a clear choice needs to be made between them – to endorse a focus either on attainment gaps or on broader and more humanistic, holistic concerns. This is not a view we share. It is necessary to focus strongly on measurable gaps, disparities and progress, using mainstream attainment and assessment measures, and also to widen perspectives to reflect Indigenous cultures and community priorities. It is also important that young people from Indigenous

communities be able to walk in both worlds and be global citizens, as well as to be enriched through full recognition of and access to their own cultures, perspectives and traditions.

Avoiding deficit thinking

A point that is repeatedly stressed in the literature is the need to avoid deficit thinking, which infers that Indigenous cultures and students are lacking and assume that the task is to rectify their shortcomings and failings. However, focusing on important disparities and shortcomings when they occur should not be mistaken for deficit thinking (the superficial idea of avoiding negatives while concentrating exclusively on good news). This point was underlined in the OECD report *Doing Better for Children* (OECD, 2009), concluding that it is very important to address inequalities while also focusing on strengths:

> [The] ... divide in the child well-being literature is between those who place a focus on poor child well-being outcomes and those who prefer to conceive of child well-being as a positive continuous variable. The latter group sometimes describe the former approach as a "deficit approach" and their own approach as a "strengths-based" one (Ben-Arieh and Goerge, 2001; Pollard and Lee, 2003; Fattore, Mason and Watson, 2007) … A focus on deficits is often criticised in the academic literature. Taking a "deficit approach" is used pejoratively. However, there are some very good reasons why policy makers may choose to focus on well-being for children in terms of so-called deficit measures. These policy reasons encompass both efficiency and equity rationales.
>
> […]
>
> However, it certainly remains the case that relying only on deficit measures misses the positive strengths and abilities that children possess, and on which society must build to enhance child well-being. (OECD, 2009, pp.25-26)

This report sees it as crucial to include a focus on disparities and progress in order to overcome them, although we would not call that deficit thinking. The important point is to avoid analyses that assume that the challenges reside primarily or exclusively with the Indigenous populations themselves, do not have implications for the non-Indigenous populations and do not recognise the diverse rights, strengths and positives of the Indigenous communities. The point of departure cannot be that of blaming students and their families, as opposed to systems and structures. Similar problems arise with the term "closing gaps" in that it risks not questioning the dimensions on which gaps are being measured, and ignoring that many non-Indigenous students are also struggling in relation to the same indicators.

In addressing the meaning of success, we would emphasise that it is not about privileging one world view at the expense of another, but rather of properly recognising Indigenous cultures, values and perspectives while laying the foundations for young Indigenous students to be able to participate actively in the wider society and economy and the global world (to walk in both worlds). We have stressed the need to address the harsh and often stubborn gaps in such dimensions as participation, engagement and achievement, while at the same time problematising these gaps and focusing on positive measures that build on strengths. Inequalities reflect deep-seated social and historical patterns, rather than being understood as characteristics that attach to individuals and groups as flaws to be compensated for. We recognise the extent to which problems can be related to poverty or providing quality education in remote areas rather than assuming that they are specific to Indigenous populations *per se*.

Indigenous approaches integral to global reform and innovation

We can go further than this. Far from being marginal to mainstream concerns, Indigenous values and approaches are increasingly being pursued as global directions for educational policies in the 21st century, although such alignment is rarely recognised in mainstream debate. If it were, approaches would automatically shift from deficit thinking towards strengths. In fact, approaches and perspectives associated with Indigenous communities are in the process of being integrated into global contemporary discourse as defining the way ahead.

A good example is the pursuit of lifelong learning. This is integral to Indigenous cultures, including through non-formal learning. Governments around the world have long espoused the principles of lifelong learning, even while struggling with major policy challenges in converting the rhetoric into reality. The seminal 1996 UNESCO Commission report on lifelong learning (the Delors Report) still stands as one of the most ambitious and impressive statements (UNESCO, 1996). It maintained the primacy of four fundamental pillars of learning: 1) learning to know; 2) learning to do; 3) learning to be; and 4) learning to live together. This holistic agenda, which is so consistent with the philosophies of Indigenous populations, was thus recognised two decades ago as setting the terms for learning in the 21st century. Lifelong learning enjoys a prominent place in the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goal on education.

Sliwka and Yee (2015) recently analysed the extent to which innovative education, including alternative education, is already reshaping mainstream policy, examining alternatives that place high priorities on recognition of place, relevance, emotions and engagement. They suggest that principles that align with those of Indigenous peoples have been increasingly adopted in mainstream reforms, in Germany and Canada and beyond. They see this as entirely consistent with what is known from research about what makes for powerful learning:

> In line with research on human development, schools in public school systems across the OECD are increasingly broadening their philosophy of teaching to create settings for learning, which aim at the integration of cognitive, metacognitive and social-emotional development of learners at the same time. (p.175)

Their thinking finds a strong echo within the educational concerns of the OECD. The learning principles identified in the influential volume, *The Nature of Learning: Using Research to Inspire Practice* (Dumont, Istance and Benevides, 2010), include the important role of emotions, the social nature of learning, and the horizontal connections between the learning that goes on in school and that which takes place out of school. The importance of social and emotional learning is increasingly recognised and features strongly in OECD reflections on Education 2030. The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), is increasingly extending towards global competence, moving away from being narrowly cognitive or focused on basics:

> Global competence is the capacity to analyse global and intercultural issues critically and from multiple perspectives, to understand how differences affect perceptions, judgments, and ideas of self and others, and to engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions with others from different backgrounds on the basis of a shared respect for human dignity. (OECD, 2016, p.4)

In short, there is increasing recognition of the need for everyone to move beyond the simpler summaries and proxies of attainment and achievement to those in which the relational dimension and respect for dignity are critical.

In looking towards the future, the major recent global event, in education, as in other fields, has been the adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These define key global targets to be achieved by 2030, replacing the Millennium Development Goals that ran to 2015. The SDGs, adopted in September 2015, aim to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all, as part of a new sustainable development agenda. Each goal has specific targets to be achieved over the next 15 years.

SDG Goal 4 is on education: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". Target 4.5 explicitly refers to Indigenous peoples and the need to close gaps and eliminate disparities. But it also and critically includes Target 4.7, which is about creating the glue that binds all 17 of the large goals together – sustainable development – and the role that education can and should play to achieve this:

> By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development. (United Nations, 2015)

This again emphasises that the focus on sustainability which so imbues the culture and thinking of Indigenous peoples has become mainstream and indeed an urgent and prominent objective. All governments around the world have endorsed it, and they have also recognised the critical role of education to achieve it.

The weak evaluation evidence base

Evaluations in Indigenous education are especially problematic, as recognised by researchers and advocates in Indigenous education around the globe. Raham (2009) in Canada, for instance, notes that Indigenous educational research tends to be scattered, uneven in rigour, largely qualitative and often small in scale. Raham also suggests that the wider applicability of the available research is often limited due to the highly diverse range of contexts in which educational services are delivered. The lack of evaluative evidence is widely seen as a fundamental weakness when seeking to redress the manifold inequities. As summarised by Dreise and Perrett (forthcoming):

> Purdie and Buckley (2010) in Australia have also outlined an extensive case for improving the nature of the data collected in Indigenous education, including through rigorous and independent evaluations of education programmes. They cite a number of Indigenous education initiatives in Australia that have not been subjected to independent, publicly available or longitudinal evaluations. Further, they propose a key question for researchers and policy makers to address: "What constitutes reliable evidence to evaluate programmes and initiatives so that good policy and actions can be formulated to effect change?" Similarly, Friesen and Krauth (2012) in Canada have reached a general conclusion that limited evidence (especially in the form of quantitative evaluation) is holding back improvements in Indigenous education (p.6).

We confronted the lack of evaluative evidence in our study, as the evaluation questions in our questionnaires were largely left unanswered. It has constrained our ability to attain the third aim of the study, to highlight strategies, policies and practices for which there is evidence of making improvements and enhancing success.

We would not, however, underestimate the challenges confronting such evaluations, quite apart from the expertise and resources needed to undertake them. Each of the areas covered by this report is complex. The goals for learning extend well beyond simply raising achievement levels, and this is especially important as regards Indigenous education, as discussed above. The embracing concept of well-being is multidimensional and complex. Collecting data or undertaking research must be done in partnerships to avoid being viewed negatively by Indigenous groups/organisations, as such data have so often been used against their interests. Moreover, jurisdictions are implementing diverse approaches, targeted directly to Indigenous students or to all students, and that limits the transferability of conclusions regarding the impact of specific initiatives or policies. In these circumstances, the sheer number of relevant dimensions and criteria that might be used and the diversity of measures taken sets an imposing challenge for evaluation, as does the challenge of measuring those that are retained.

In working towards frameworks on how evaluation might be carried out, and in line with the strong emphasis placed on dialogue in Indigenous education, we can draw on clarification work on evaluation and innovation completed for the OECD (Earl and Timperley, 2015). They see educational evaluation as involving the systematic collection and analysis of the information needed to make decisions and identify the effects of educational initiatives and call this "evaluative thinking". This is essential to successful innovation as a disciplined process of problem definition, horizon scanning, situation analysis, monitoring of progress, creation of contingency plans and feedback for improvement throughout the innovation process. They see it as a constant process rather than a one-off, and one that actively involves the different stakeholders.

Note

1. For further information on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, see: www.trc.ca.

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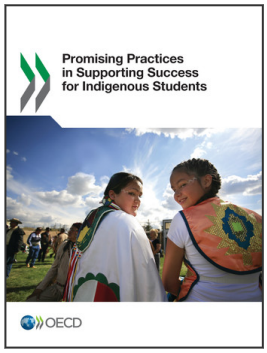

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