

Abstract

This capstone emerges from my experience as an Indigenous educator working in a First Nation school in Canada, where student attendance and engagement are ongoing concerns. Within the broader context of Indigenous education shaped by colonization and the legacy of residential schools, understanding how classroom environments influence student participation is important for educators. This study argues that positive, relationship-centred classroom environments play a key role in improving attendance among Indigenous students in Canada by fostering teacher-student relationships grounded in cultural understanding, respect, and trust. This capstone recommends prioritizing relational teaching practices, integrating culturally responsive and Indigenous-informed pedagogy, and acknowledging the historical impacts of colonization and residential schools within classrooms. The findings suggest that when Indigenous students experience strong teacher-student relationships and culturally respectful learning environments, they develop a greater sense of belonging and engagement, which supports more consistent school attendance and improved educational outcomes.

Keywords: Relationship-centred classrooms, Indigenous education, student attendance, teacher-student relationships, culturally responsive pedagogy, First Nations students.

Introduction

Position Statement

As an Indigenous educator teaching in a First Nations school in Canada, my understanding of education is connected to my experience as a teacher. My positionality informs how I view the role of education, the responsibilities of educators, and the ways in which educational systems can either support or marginalize Indigenous learners. These experiences have shaped my belief that meaningful learning occurs within environments grounded in respect, trust, and strong relationships. I believe that relationship-centred classrooms play a crucial role in improving student engagement and attendance among Indigenous learners.

Significance

This research must be understood within the broader social, cultural, and historical context of Indigenous education in Canada. The relationship between First Nations communities and schooling has been shaped by the legacy of colonization and the residential school system. The effects continue to influence Indigenous peoples' experiences with education today, including levels of trust in school systems and feelings of belonging within classroom environments (Archibald, 2008; Battiste, 2013; Charbonneau, 2016-2017; Little Bear, 2009; Toulouse, 2013).

Thesis Statement

A positive, relationship-centred classroom improves attendance among Indigenous students in Canada by fostering strong teacher-student relationships grounded in cultural understanding, respect, and trust; by acknowledging the ongoing impacts of colonization and residential schools; and by creating supportive, inclusive learning environments that enhance academic success and engagement for Indigenous learners.

Guiding Questions

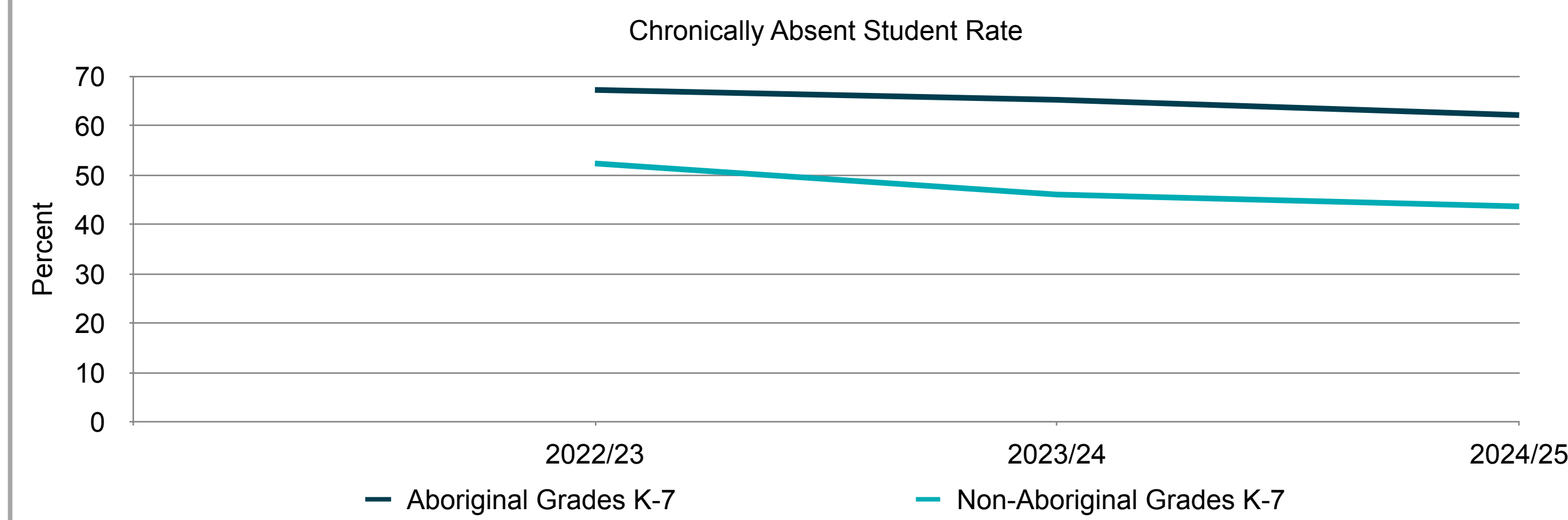
- How does a positive, relationship-centred classroom influence attendance among Indigenous students in Canada?
- How do teacher-student relationships influence students' sense of belonging and engagement in the classroom?
- How do Indigenous students perceive the role of trust, respect, and cultural understanding in the relationships with teachers?

These questions reflect a relational understanding of education that views student engagement as connected to the quality of relationships and the learning environment rather than solely individual motivation or behaviour.

Literature Review

Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism among Indigenous students in Canada remains a significant educational concern, reflecting the lasting impacts of colonization, residential schools, and culturally disconnecting classroom environments, conditions that underscore the need for relationship-centred approaches grounded in trust, respect, and cultural understanding (Harris, 2019; FNEESC, n.d).



Aboriginal Report: How Are We Doing?
2024/2025 School District: 073 Kamloops/Thompson
(Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2025)

Inequalities Within Schooling

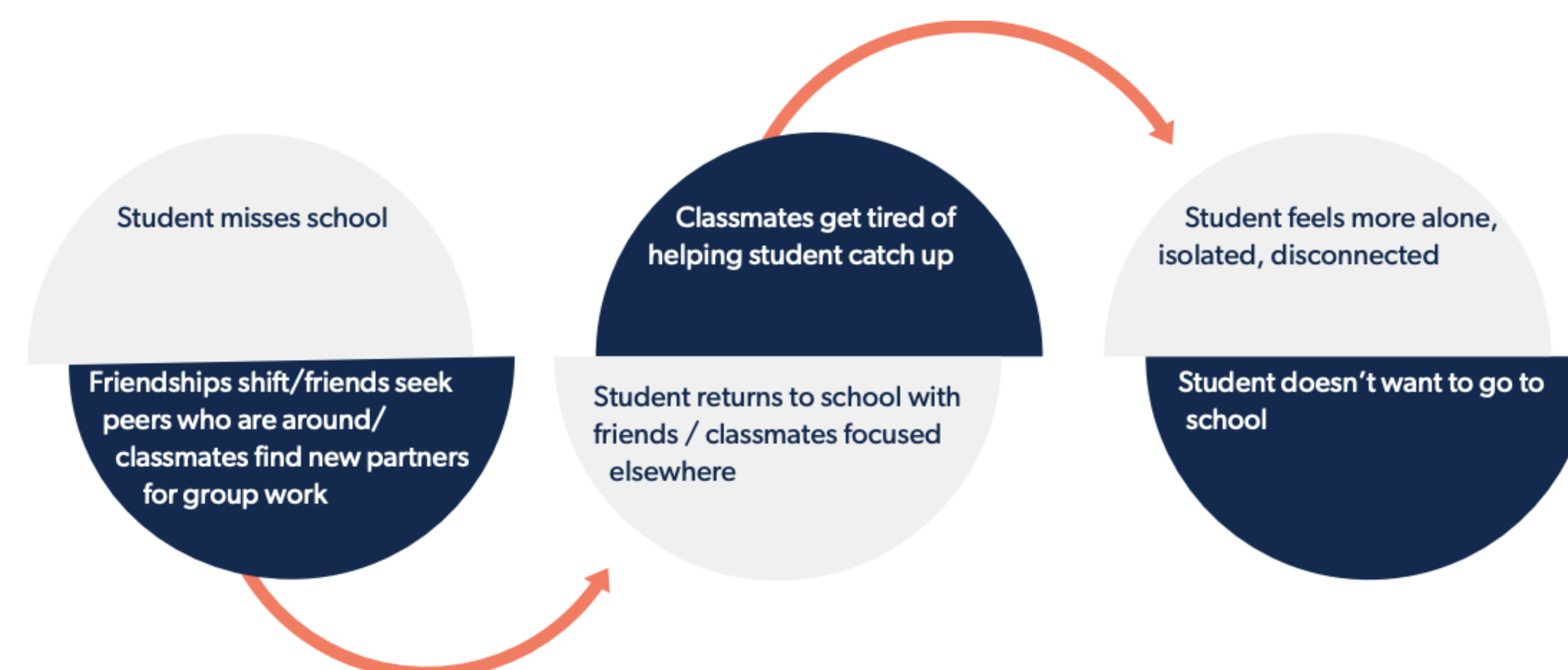
- Charbonneau (2016-2017) situates educational disparities in Canada within Eurocentric curricula, teaching methods, and the effects of the Residential School system, arguing that the achievement gap is rooted in historical and structural forces.
- FNEESC (2020) identifies unwelcoming school environments as a key barrier to attendance.

Teacher-Student Relationships

- When students perceive their teachers as supportive, they experience motivation, improved behaviour, and greater social and academic benefits (Davis, 2006; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).
- Davis (2006) found that students worked harder for teachers with whom they had positive relationships, and teachers, in turn, felt more confident encouraging students to engage in challenging academic tasks.

Indigenous Cultural Connections

- "If teachers are able to successfully traverse the bridge between knowledge systems, they will be able to better understand the expectations of Indigenous students and their families" (Woodroffe, 2016, p. 90).
- By grounding classrooms in Indigenous cultural values and histories, educators can create the trust, belonging, and engagement necessary for students to thrive, laying the foundation for improved academic success and achievement.



(FNEESC & FNSA, 2024a, p. 23)

Recommendations

Education is what got us into this mess and education is key to getting us out of it
- Justice Murray Sinclair, 2017

Prioritize Relational Teaching Practices

- * Create opportunities to learn about students' experiences, interests, and cultural backgrounds
- * Implement regular check-ins, collaborative classroom activities, and respectful communication practices

When students feel that they belong within the classroom, they are more likely to engage with learning and attend school consistently (Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2003).



Circle of Courage
Brokenleg, et al. (2022)

Integrate Culturally Responsive and Indigenous Informed Teaching Practices

- * Incorporate Indigenous perspectives, knowledge systems, and cultural practices into classroom instruction
- * Engage thoughtfully with Indigenous pedagogies across subject areas, using storytelling, inviting Elders or community members to participate in learning and to share knowledge

Meaningful inclusion of Indigenous perspectives requires educators to move beyond token representation and instead engage thoughtfully with Indigenous pedagogies and ways of knowing, creating learning environments that honour Indigenous identities and support reconciliation in education (Chrona, 2022).

Acknowledge Indigenous Histories

- * Acknowledge the historical impacts of colonization and the residential school system
- * Prioritize professional development opportunities focused on Indigenous education and culturally responsive teaching methods

Teachers who receive training in Indigenous perspectives are better prepared to create welcoming and inclusive learning environments. Policies that support culturally responsive teaching and relational practices can help schools address attendance challenges while fostering meaningful engagement for Indigenous learners (FNEESC, 2020).

Conclusion

1. Attendance patterns are shaped by historical, cultural, and systemic factors, including the ongoing impacts of colonization and the residential school system.
2. Relationship-centred classrooms create learning environments where Indigenous students feel valued, safe, and connected.
3. Incorporating the perspectives of parents, Elders, and community members will contribute to a more holistic understanding of how relationships between schools and Indigenous communities influence student attendance and engagement.

References

As Justice Murray Sinclair (2017) reminds us, education played a role in creating the challenges faced by Indigenous communities today; however, through relationship-centred and culturally responsive classrooms, education can also play a critical role in rebuilding trust and supporting the success of Indigenous learners.

