Understanding School Attendance: Perspectives from Educators Supporting Inuit Youth in a Culturally Sensitive Learning Environment

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Table of Contents

Abstract

School attendance is essential to the biopsychosocial development of youth. Consequently, frequent interruptions to school attendance places a youth's academic achievement, mental and physical health at risk. Within existing Canadian literature, there is a significant dearth of research exploring attendance among Indigenous student populations. Further, existing conceptualizations to attendance primarily consider research that comes from Western colonial perspectives, leaving a further gap in developing culturally inclusive interventions for attendance. Indigenous peoples have resisted through long-standing historical injustices and deficit research approaches within Western colonial educational systems. Their perspectives are crucial to exploring, diversifying and furthering our understandings of attendance issues in Canada. This case study sought to contribute towards literature incorporating Indigenous views of attendance. I, in partnership with an Inuit non-profit organization explored conceptualizations of attendance through a sample of educators in a culturally sensitive learning program for urban Inuit youth. The data was primarily collected through a sharing circle and from my experiences conducting this research and volunteering within this learning program. A thematic analysis, guided by Indigenous and Inuit frameworks, identified that the educator's viewed attendance as holistic and relational and used strengths-based approaches when working with their students and families. Three main themes were created to summarize the educator's conceptualization and approaches to addressing attendance within their program: a) *Recognizing Barriers to Attendance* b) *Sense of Community* and c) *Representing Students*. The culturally sensitive aspects of their program were also identified as contributing towards positive attendance for their students. Our discussion highlights how these findings connect to existing factors related to student attendance; emphasizing the significance of cultural inclusivity and recommending holistic models of attendance that reflect responsible practices for working with Inuit youth.

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List of Figures

Introduction

This thesis concerns the conceptualization of school attendance and related issues among a sample of educators of urban Inuit youth in Southern Canada. Issues and contexts surrounding the increasing rates of school attendance problems in Canada are poorly researched and consequently, poorly understood. For Indigenous students in Canada, this lack of understanding is further detrimental, as they are already more likely to experience factors that contribute to negative educational outcomes due to historical injustices and colonialism. These disparities have in many ways disrupted relationships between Indigenous communities and different schooling environments. Initiatives exist to address these disparities; they typically focus on developing culturally sensitive practices to develop safe and supportive learning spaces for Indigenous students. However, these initiatives are also poorly understood in how they relate or influence student attendance. Therefore, efforts to contextualize school attendance among Indigenous populations are imperative for creating policies and practices that aim to address the additional challenges that Indigenous students may face in educational settings.

To address this problem, our research team developed and conducted this project through a partnership with an Indigenous non-profit organization who service Inuit students and their families in the Greater Ottawa Area. This study was co-developed to assist the organization in further understanding the needs of their students within a culturally sensitive alternative learning program they piloted during the COVID-19 pandemic. When creating this program, the organization intended to increase school attendance and engagement among Inuit youth they serviced; as the pandemic and other factors had disrupted their youth's relationships with traditional schooling environments. The program allows the students to work towards their secondary school diploma but also offers the students opportunities to engage with their Inuit language and culture. It was also designed to provide students with various needs access to services that may have previously hindered their ability to attend school (i.e. transportation, physical or mental health care and access to food etc.).

This thesis specifically explores the educator's understanding and conceptualizations of school attendance in the program, drawing on their experiences working with their students and their families. Their experiences were gathered through a group sharing circle interview and are also based on the main researcher's observations, who volunteered with the program throughout different phases of the project. To organize the educators' experiences and results, this project

was guided by several frameworks. Firstly, the Inuit Societal Values (see Government of Nunavut, n.d.), which are the guiding principles for Inuit; the organization follows these as their model for working with Inuit children and families. The second framework is the Indigenist Ecosystems Model for Indigenous youth, as adapted by O'Keefe and colleagues (2022). This model re-examines Bronfenbrenner's developmental ecological systems theory through the contexts of Indigenous youth. It allows for additional considerations of cultural, Intergenerational and other factors that may influence an Indigenous youth throughout their development. This model was used to help analyze the results of the study, to distinguish and organize the layers of factors the educator's identified their student's experienced.

Personal Statement and Positionality of the Researcher

Qualitative research requires the researcher to articulate their identity, as it has a direct influence on how one is immersed in their methodologies (Holmes, 2020). Additionally, as a part of an Indigenous research approach, it is also important for the researcher to provide a brief personal background to further define one's position and worldview as it relates to how one comes to understand and approach their research work (Kovach, 2021). With respect to both practices, I am choosing to share parts of my story as it explains my intentions and motivations for pursuing this research project and partnership.

I am of mixed European and Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) ancestry, my Indigeneity comes from my father's family, and we hold our First-Nation status with Michipicoten First Nation located in Northern Ontario along the coast of Lake Superior. I grew up off-reserve in Sault Ste. Marie Ontario. Growing up, I was aware of my Anishinaabe identity and learned some of our language (Anishinaabemowin) and culture from my family. I became disengaged from my Indigenous family and culture in my early adolescence due to familial issues related to generational trauma and addiction. Due to this disconnect, I was raised mostly by my mother's family and many of my later lived experiences occurred within a predominantly white colonial settler lens. During these times, school was a second home to me, I loved learning, and it served as a distraction from some of the hardships we were facing as a family because of our trauma. Encouraged by my mother, I followed the narrative that getting a traditional education was the key to life success which led me to obtain an Honours Bachelor of Science in neuroscience and mental health and a Bachelor of Education.

In teacher education, we are told to acknowledge the person we are while standing in front of our students, recognizing that our identity impacts the classroom environment. This prompted me to reflect a lot on my past. I began to heal, reclaim and reconcile my Indigenous identity as well as reconnect with some of my family. I also reflected on the advantages I had throughout my life in the role of a student. Academic work came naturally to me; I rarely struggled and was the "ideal" learner for our education system. In addition, despite my mixed heritage, I am visibly white. This meant that while attending my primarily white settler schools, I did not experience racism or a strong sense of cultural disconnect within them.

Presently, I have the privilege of being a master's student in a counselling psychology program within a faculty of education. I chose this program as a dedication to improving school-based mental health practices; to help all students feel included and to create a school that they could love, just as I had. I also had a special interest in working with Indigenous students and improving their educational outcomes which stemmed from my teaching degree and my experiences of reconnecting with my Anishinaabe culture. So, when my research supervisors presented me with the possibility of working alongside an Inuit organization on a project concerning student attendance for my thesis, I saw it as an opportunity to fulfill this dedication.

I chose to include these reflections and experiences as they have guided me throughout my journey of completing this thesis. I present myself to this research as a graduate student, a newly trained therapist, a teacher, and a reconnecting Anishinaabe. These roles uniquely position me for this research as my experiences in education and counselling allow me to consider the intersections of school attendance and mental health in Indigenous student communities. I also have a greater understanding of the significance of the program involved in this study's culturally sensitive programming, both from my experiences of reconnecting and from what I have witnessed as an educator with some of my own students. I do, however, wish to acknowledge that the tension of my mixed identity and worldview differs from traditional Indigenous views, and additionally, I am not of Inuit descent. As a result, I have identified myself as an Indigenous ally to my participants and am careful not to claim that I am an expert on Inuit knowledge and experience. Instead, I present myself to this research project as a learner and co-collaborator with my Inuit partner organization and participants, acknowledging their expertise, ownership and control of all knowledge gathered from this study. In this research project, I am using my voice and experiences as a vessel to amplify the thoughts of my

participants and their community. I aim to do this by engaging with respectful and responsible Indigenous research approaches to help serve Indigenous views. I also aimed to execute this research by learning from the Inuit community I am working with and being transparent about the limitations of my interpretations of their data to my readers.

Considerations of Terminology with First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples

The term *Indigenous* throughout this thesis follows the Canadian definition, which refers to the original caretakers of the lands we now call North America (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2024b). The government of Canada recognizes *Indigenous peoples* as representing First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations collectively (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2024b). I am also following its use to describe *Indigenous Research*; "…research in any field or discipline that is conducted by, grounded in or engaged with First Nations, Inuit, Métis or other Indigenous nations, communities, societies or individuals, and their wisdom, cultures, experiences or knowledge systems, as expressed in their dynamic forms, past and present" (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2024). While Indigenous peoples share some collective experiences, it is important to recognize that all First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations are distinct peoples with their own distinct languages, cultures and traditions (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2024b). Although some research considers voices from Indigenous groups together to frame an issue, others will identify the specific group they are working with to highlight differences in their epistemologies and experiences. To maintain this distinguishment, wherever possible in this thesis, I will distinguish between First Nation, Métis and Inuit populations.

Distinguishing a Strengths-Based Approach

Kovach (2021) describes a tendency for research concerning Indigenous peoples as coming from a deficit approach. This deficit approach begins by highlighting poorer outcomes in Indigenous individuals when compared to others with little to no recognition of the injustices that caused and maintain these deficits, encouraging negative stereotypes and stigma within these populations (Kovach, 2021; Mashford-Pringle & Pavagadhi, 2020). Consequently, in education research, contextualizing barriers or "gaps" that have been identified among Indigenous learners is crucial. For example, Indigenous youth living in the North or on-reserve experience high school drop-out rates (Canadian Council on Learning., 2007). In framing the problem, it may be common to describe this and compare it to the rates of non-Indigenous students which may limit

the issue through a colonial lens and fails to frame the problem with factors that contribute to these differences in the first place. Namely, students in these areas often have low accessibility and proximity to schools (Canadian Council on Learning., 2007). Many of these students chose to drop out so they did not have to leave their communities to attend school, forcing them to feel they must choose between their education and their families, a decision that many non-Indigenous learners would not have to face (Canadian Council on Learning., 2007). Deficit-based approaches often also draw upon Western colonial approaches to improve the disparities among Indigenous populations, perpetuating colonialism as superior systemic models and suppressing Indigenous approaches (Kovach, 2021). In education, this may further encroach settler colonial perspectives on Indigenous students, forcing them under definitions of success that may not align with their values (Ewing et al., 2023; Milne & Wotherspoon, 2023). A strengths-based approach is favored when considering Indigenous issues and should instead seek to draw on community strengths and promote justice and equity for Indigenous peoples (O'Keefe et al., 2022).

The Inuit in Canada

This project specifically concerns Inuit living in Southern Canada. The Inuit are Indigenous people who originated in the northern parts of the world. In Canada, their populations extending across the northern colonial territories and provinces. As of 2021, the Inuit population in Canada was around 70,545 individuals (Statistics Canada, 2022). They are much younger than the non-Indigenous population in Canada, with an average age of 28.9 years and continue to see consistent population growth (Statistics Canada, 2022). There are four main Inuit land regions in Northern Canada, collectively known as the Inuit Nunangat; the Inuvialuit Settlement region (Northwest Territories), Nunatsiavut (Labrador), Nunavik (Quebec) and Nunavut (ITK, n.d.). Inuit also live across multiple jurisdictions in Southern Canada, with around 30% living outside the Inuit Nunangat notably in large urban centers such as Ottawa, Edmonton and Montreal (Statistics Canada, 2022).

Colonization of the north placed severe injustices for the Inuit. The federal government previously forced many Inuit to relocate from their ancestral homelands to the harsher lands of the high arctic and committed a mass slaughter of their sled dogs (Karetak et al., 2017). These practices, alongside the other colonial injustices faced by Indigenous populations described later in the literature review drastically altered Inuit's livelihood and ability to practice their cultural

values (Karetak et al., 2017). Consequently, Inuit communities have faced some of the worst longstanding inequities among Indigenous peoples, having some of the lowest graduation rates, socio-economic factors and poorer health outcomes (Indigenous Services Canada, 2023; Smylie et al., 2018). Although, despite these standing injustices and inequities, the Inuit are some of the most culturally resilient Indigenous communities in North America (ITK, n.d.). Around 60% of their population report the ability to have a conversation in one of their main languages, Inuktitut and their people continue to harvest country foods to sustain their communities (i.e. seal, narwhal and caribou, ITK, n.d.). Additionally, they are leaders in land-back initiatives among Indigenous peoples in Canada. In 2024, they signed the Nunavut Lands and Resources Devolution Agreement with the Canadian federal government, beginning steps towards their communities' self-determination over their ancestral lands (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2024c). To improve the challenges faces by the Inuit there are large numbers of social services and economic initiatives in Northern Canada built to support Inuk individuals and communities (Smylie et al., 2018). Many initiatives include the improvement of education infrastructure, as educational attainment has been closely linked with well-being, socio-economic status and income security for Inuit (ITK, 2014b, 2014a). Although these policies and initiatives for improving infrastructure in Northern Canada, the Inuit still face significant barriers to accessing culturally situated and effective education, health care and social services (Patrick & Tomiak, 2008; Smylie et al., 2018). As a result, Southern urban Inuit populations are growing, as Inuit travel to obtain those services, (Patrick & Tomiak, 2009; Smylie, 2018).

Ottawa, the location of our study, houses one of the largest southern urban Inuit populations in all of Canada (Patrick & Tomiak, 2009; Smylie et al., 2018). Many Inuit come to Ottawa for educational opportunities for youth in public institutions (Patrick & Tomiak, 2008). There even exists a post-secondary program offered by Nunavut Sivuniksavut, which attracts many youths to the area (Patrick & Tomiak, 2008). A study concerning urban Inuit in Ottawa described some barriers they may face when transitioning to life in urban centers: low access to affordable housing, language skills, education level, racial discrimination and a general lack of other's understanding of the northern experience (Patrick & Tomiak, 2008). This suggests that urban Inuit students may experience a wide variety of issues that may influence their school attendance including adapting to their southern schools, struggling to maintain their Inuk identity

or having access to cultural and native language supports (Patrick & Tomiak, 2008; Watson, 2017).

Literature Review

Building upon the considerations of Indigenous research and the background of the Inuit in the introduction, there are many subsets of information that is important to frame for the research problem. The literature review of this thesis will therefore outline conceptualizations of student attendance problems and related biopsychosocial outcomes for students. I will also be reviewing the current climate of attendance research in Canada and how this area of research concerns Indigenous students in Canada. Finally, this literature review ends with describing the importance of culturally sensitive programming for Indigenous students and how it may relate to promoting positive educational outcomes and attendance for Indigenous youth in Canada.

Student Attendance Problems and Chronic Absenteeism

The school environment provides a context crucial for students' academic, social, emotional, and behavioral development (Heyne et al., 2019). Youth who are frequently absent from this environment may therefore experience various issues related to these aspects of their development. In literature, prolonged or sustained absence has been traditionally referred to as chronic absenteeism and is defined as missing 10% of school days within a school year (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Attendance, however, is extremely complex, and research is only beginning to contextualize the interwoven variables involved in determining whether a child attends school and how it affects their outcomes in life. For instance, some lapses in attendance may be expected and normalized throughout the school year, typically termed excused absences, which may occur for several reasons (Henderson & Fantuzzo, 2023; Heyne et al., 2019). These absences are excused because they are communicated to the school and/or authorized by the student's caregivers. This differs from their counterpart, unexcused absences, where the caregivers are often unaware of the child's lack of attendance (Henderson & Fantuzzo, 2023; Heyne et al., 2019). Distinguishing between excused and unexcused absences may be important to the categorization of attendance problems, as each may affect academic outcomes for students differently. Namely, unexcused absences have been more strongly linked to risk academic achievement for students (Gottfried, 2009; Henderson & Fantuzzo, 2023). However, the categorization of school attendance problems (SAPs) is a complex endeavor and there is a

general lack of consensus among academics; the binary of excused and unexcused absences may not represent the full spectrum of SAPs (Kearney & Gonzálvez, 2022; Smith et al., 2022).

This lack of consensus can make it more difficult to fully understand the factors surrounding school attendance. Some research makes the distinction that overall, prolonged absences are of concern. This has led some to argue for a differentiate between *problematic* and *nonproblematic* absenteeism (Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney, 2003). In this conceptualization, nonproblematic absences are those which are commonly approved by caregivers *and* students are more likely to make up for the loss of class content (i.e. illness, Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney, 2003). In contrast, problematic attendance is where the risk of issues for the student's academic and personal outcomes would arise, specifically, this concerns prolonged absences that interfere with the child's or family's daily routines (i.e. skipping, anxiety about going to school; Heyne et al., 2019). Some recent efforts of conceptualizing absenteeism are looking to converge SAPs into defined categories to focus on the differentiation of specific reasons for absences. Notably, Heyne and colleagues (2019) categorized SAPs into four subcategories; school refusal (i.e., anxiety or fear of attending school) truancy (i.e. unexcused absences), school withdrawal (i.e., parent-driven absences) and school exclusion (i.e., justified school suspensions or expulsions). The argument to distinguish these categories is to assist in streamlining the process of addressing absenteeism for school administration and the development of interventions for addressing the various negative outcomes associated with SAPs (Heyne et al., 2019). The categorical model has gained some traction in recent literature; however, there remain inconsistencies in the conceptualization and operationalization of attendance and absenteeism.

Factors Related to School Attendance Problems

Despite the existing lack of consensus on defining SAPs, research agrees that SAPs are associated with several significant negative outcomes in youth. SAPs are associated with many factors including early drop-out (Christle et al., 2007; Gubbels et al., 2019), lower academic achievement (Gottfried, 2009; Klein & Sosu, 2024), and poorer mental health (Gase et al., 2014; Rogers et al., 2024). Current research on SAPs is vast and explores many facets of the subject including identifying risk or protective factors on attendance issues, the consequential effects of prolonged absences and strategies to increase attendance and school completion (Kearney & Gonzálvez, 2022). Existing works contextualizing this facet of absenteeism indicate that students may fail to attend longer periods of school for various reasons. Aside from obvious absences

related to physical illness or religious holidays, children are also more likely to demonstrate SAPs when they experience issues related to their mental health (Gottfried, 2014). Higher rates of SAPs have been related to symptoms of anxiety (Finning et al., 2019), depression (Fornander & Kearney, 2020; Gase et al., 2014) and substance use (Gubbels et al., 2019; Ingul et al., 2012). Moreover, youth who have negative attitudes toward their schooling and a lower perceived engagement or support from their teachers experience higher levels of SAPs (Ewing et al., 2023; Gase et al., 2014; Gubbels et al., 2019; Ingul et al., 2012).

Factors beyond the child have also been studied and associated with a higher risk of SAPs. These include family characteristics such as low socioeconomic status (Klein & Sosu, 2024), issues accessing transportation to school (Ewing et al., 2023; Ingul et al., 2012), poor parental health conditions (Ingul et al., 2012) and low parental involvement or engagement with their child's teachers or school (Gubbels et al., 2019; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Studies concerning school intervention programs aimed at improving attendance rates have also indicated some of these factors may be important in influencing absenteeism. Impactful factors highlighted from a meta-analysis of these programs included interventions for attendance that also encouraged students' academic achievements, reduced their behavioural issues and fostered family-school partnerships (Eklund et al., 2022). Another external factor that has drastically affected attendance was the COVID-19 pandemic, where absenteeism began to increase among students of all ages across several jurisdictions (Carman & Wesley, 2024; Dee, 2024; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023). There were also notable increases in mental health issues among youth during the pandemic which may be an indicator of the increase in absenteeism rates, but this relationship requires further research and understanding (Dee, 2024). The ongoing effects of the pandemic only further highlight the complex nature of attendance problems and their related factors.

Research exploring the factors involved in school attendance problems has mostly considered measured data based on students' physical presence (Smith et al., 2022). Quantitative measures are likely more common since attendance data collection is a standard practice in most schools worldwide, making secondary data accessible for researchers. However, the high representation of quantitative data may hinder a deeper understanding of attendance issues. As a result, mixed and qualitative methods are encouraged to further our understanding (Heyne et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2022).

Attendance Research in Canada

Current research on absenteeism consists of data predominantly from the United States and European countries (Birioukov, 2021). Consequently, Canadian perspectives are scarce, leaving a gap in understanding the SAPs of Canadian students (Birioukov, 2021). In the existing Canadian literature, SAPs are rarely given sole research attention and are typically presented as one of many variables in a study (Birioukov, 2021). Additionally, a recent scoping review focused on measuring and conceptualizing SAPs in elementary-aged students failed to identify any Canadian studies (Smith et al., 2022). Regardless, absenteeism remains a relevant issue in Canada and has received large media attention in the last several years. Many articles and commentaries published urge for more actions to address absenteeism, especially given the recent focus on understanding how the COVID-19 pandemic affected schooling (Carman & Wesley, 2024; McCullough, 2022; Rogers, 2022). Hamilton Wentworth District School Board in Ontario released that their absenteeism rate went from 3-4 percent in 2020 to 8-14 percent in 2022 (McCullough, 2022). Furthermore, a Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) analysis of attendance data from school boards across the country found that absenteeism rates more than doubled in some regions since 2018 (Carman & Wesley, 2024).

There are several challenges to conducting attendance research in the country. No country-wide source of data on attendance or absenteeism exists. Instead, data sources stem from individual school boards or government agencies, however, it can be difficult to find and access this information (The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2019). Additionally, many publications that do exist are individual reports from these agencies and it is often unclear how their data was originally collected (The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2019). These challenges may also reflect the current lack of consensus on measuring or conceptualizing attendance issues, which can plague the understanding of SAPs across any jurisdiction (Heyne et al., 2019; The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2019).

Indigenous Student Attendance in Canada

While this research concerns Inuit students, a vast majority of existing research considers students from many Indigenous backgrounds and communities collectively. As a result, I will be discussing the state of research on Indigenous student absenteeism overall in Canada. Research on SAPs in Canada concerns predominantly Western Colonial participants and perspectives (Ewing et al., 2023). As a result, a clear divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students'

experiences with SAPs has emerged (Education Connections, 2017; Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2011; Raham, 2009). Overall, problems related to school attendance affect Indigenous students disproportionately, with Indigenous students experiencing more absenteeism than their non-Indigenous counterparts (First Nations Information Governance Centre [FNIGC], 2020; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami [ITK], 2014a). Most studies describing these disproportionalities focus on describing achievement and attendance gaps experienced by Indigenous students. The disparities differ based on region and living situations, with much evidence indicating that students who live on reserve experience higher levels of SAPs (Fowler & McDermott, 2020; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023). In one analysis within an Alberta school board region, absence rates for non-Indigenous students were at 21% in contrast to Indigenous students who experienced 30% if they were off-reserve and 80% if they were on-reserve (Fowler & McDermott, 2020). Interestingly, on-reserve schools were documented as receiving federal funding for education which may not be on par with provincial funding on a per capita basis (Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2013). This lack of funding may explain the reason for on-reserve and off-reserve divides as it reduces the capacity to create meaningful support for on-reserve schools (Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2013). In recent years however, efforts from the federal government to address educational Calls to Action have increased the funding to programs aimed at eliminating these funding and achievement gaps (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2024a). Despite these changes, there are still existing challenges being identified for First Nation led schools including a lack of resources and qualified educators (Ouellette & Peyret, 2024). Chiefs of Ontario also released a report indicating that First-Nation elementary students in Ontario are more likely to be affected by SAPs than other Ontario students (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023). They found that 40% of Ontario's First Nation elementary students attended school at least 90% of the time compared to the 67% overall provincial average (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023). They warn that the prolonged effects on attendance witnessed after the COVID-19 pandemic public-health procedures are predicted to worsen these numbers (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023). These existing differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students can be detrimental to Indigenous student's success given the relationship between attendance and academic success (Heyne et al., 2019). Additionally, although these discuss a "divide" or "gap" between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, perpetuating a deficit-approach, it also defines a clear

need to address SAPs for Indigenous students and families. It is therefore crucial that we begin to unpack the reasons for these gaps as an effort to increase educational attainment and success factors among Indigenous youth.

In their recent rapid review, Rogers and Aglukark (2024) explored the literature concerning SAPs in Indigenous youth populations. They argue that there is a lack of community-based understanding of SAPs among Canadian Indigenous youth. The studies they identified were primarily government, non-profit or school board reports that consisted mostly of data focused on rates of absences (e.g., Raham, 2009). Few studies explored factors that predict or contextualize SAPs among Indigenous youth (Rogers & Aglukark, 2024). Furthermore, fewer studies attempted to investigate issues related to attendance among Indigenous youth from a larger community approach which would include perspectives from parents, educators, Elders and other community members (Rogers & Aglukark, 2024). This is problematic given the fraught history of maltreatment and attempts at systematic erasure of Indigenous peoples in our country because of imposed systems of colonization. Notably, the impacts of the residential school system, the Sixties Scoop and harm from past research practices on their populations which were often unethical, exploitative and deficit-based (Kovach, 2021; Mashford-Pringle & Pavagadhi, 2020). Consequently, factors influencing SAPs among Indigenous students are poorly understood and require further investigation (Rogers & Aglukark, 2024). Proximity to educational institutions has been identified as a likely factor in impeding school attendance since Indigenous people in Canada are more likely to live in remote areas than non-Indigenous individuals (Layton, 2023a). Other current theories suggest that absenteeism in Indigenous youth is likely explained by inter-generational trauma, and social and economic factors relevant for many of these families (Fowler & McDermott, 2020; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Raham, H., 2009; Rogers & Aglukark, 2024; Whitley, 2014).

Considerations in Conceptualizing Indigenous SAPs

In general, Indigenous students and their families face specific and unique issues in our education systems. When considering the needs of Indigenous students in education, it is first important to critically reflect on the historical and current climates of Indigenous issues in Canada that contribute to negative outcomes for Indigenous student achievement. Before colonization, Indigenous peoples had their own established education systems that best served their way of life. However, currently, many aspects of our education systems were built from a

primarily colonial settler lens, omitting the presence of Indigenous epistemologies, languages or cultural values. This can potentially lead to a mistrust and disengagement with educational institutions for Indigenous students and families (Berger et al., 2006; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Milne & Wotherspoon, 2023; Raham, 2009). In contrast, schools that integrate Indigenous cultures and foster relationships with Indigenous students have demonstrated positive outcomes with the students and their families; this is common for on-reserve schools as they often have close ties to the community (Louie & Prince, 2023; Wotherspoon & and Milne, 2024). Additionally, the legacy of Canada's residential school system continues to affect Indigenous communities through intergenerational trauma, negatively impacting their outcomes in education and physical and mental health (Feir, 2016). For example, Indigenous students with a parent who attended residential school are more likely to experience SAPs and have lower graduation rates (Feir, 2016). Overall, these historic injustices have predisposed some Indigenous youth in Canada to negative outcomes that are known to be linked to school attendance, such as lowered academic achievement, graduation and post-secondary enrollment (Layton, 2023b; Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2011).

These structural barriers and injustices are ongoing issues among our education institutions and broader society, reflecting a disservice to Indigenous peoples in our country among these systems, even today. Moreover, education has been identified as an important social determinant of health in Indigenous populations, emphasizing the need for decolonized practices in education that encourage success (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami [ITK], 2014b; National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, 2017). As such, there is a clear need to support and increase educational success and the factors that mediate it among Indigenous students across the country. These supports could include access to cultural teachings, ancestral languages and teaching or support staff who share their identity and experiences (Layton, 2023b). This need was made clear in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC; 2015) Calls to Action, where education was listed as a priority in the reconciliation process. They called upon the government to devise a strategy that strives to eliminate the existing educational achievement gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the country (TRC, 2015). To avoid perpetuating the traumas related to these wrongdoings, research must move towards being done *by* or *with* Indigenous individuals, alongside methodologies that reflect Indigenous epistemologies and cultural values (Kovach, 2021; Mashford-Pringle & Pavagadhi, 2020).

Therefore, research on SAPs in Canada among Indigenous youth must instead focus on gaining direct Indigenous perspectives through respectful approaches that are rooted in Indigenous voices, culture, and experiences.

Culturally Sensitive/Relevant Educational Programming

Culturally relevant/sensitive programming is one approach to improving Indigenous student outcomes (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Crooks et al., 2015). Though often used interchangeably, the term culturally *sensitive* will be used in this study, as I feel that it better acknowledges the encompassing of Indigenous epistemology into education practice as opposed to the term *relevant*. Culturally sensitive programming in education strives to develop instruction and learning environments that are interwoven with Indigenous culture and principles (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Culturally sensitive programming has been applied mostly to increase connectedness and trust within the learning space, leading to increases in academic performance, engagement, and attendance among Indigenous students (Crooks et al., 2015, 2017; Good et al., 2021; Wilson & Gobeil, 2018).

Components of culturally sensitive programming have been adopted into several Provincial or Territorial Ministries of Education policies and programs to increase the achievement and graduation rates of their Indigenous students (Canadian School Boards Association - Indigenous & Education Committee, 2018; Ministry of Education, n.d.; Nunavut Department of Education, n.d.a). Fowler and McDermott's (2020) investigation interviewed students and families to investigate ways of addressing these disparities within their district; in their discussion, they remark that "shifting a colonial system to become entwined with Indigeneity offers an opportunity to redress attendance concerns for First Nations students to a relational approach of attendance with the acknowledgement that the system excludes some students over others" (Fowler & McDermott, 2020, p. 24). They describe a project where Indigenous scholars and educators came together to incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing into their classrooms which led to the report *Weaving Ways: Indigenous Ways of Knowing in Classrooms and Schools* (ARPDC, 2018; Fowler & McDermott, 2020).

In Ontario, the location of our study, the Ministry of Education has developed some strategies to support Indigenous students, including mandated Indigenous Education Councils, Graduation Coaches, and the offering of Alternative Secondary School programs, often developed in partnership with a local Friendship Centre (Ministry of Education, n.d.). The goal

of these programs is to increase knowledge of Indigenous cultures and histories for all students and address the achievement gap among them (Ministry of Education, n.d.). A framework identifying Ontario's Indigenous Education Policy was published in 2007 and since then, many Indigenous community organizations have engaged with the government to strengthen resources for FNMI student needs (Ministry of Education, n.d.). As a response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, the province released their new Journey Together framework, where they developed new culturally responsive curriculum content, Indigenous language support and expanded relations with Indigenous communities across the province. This included their first partnership dedicated to supporting urban Inuit students in the province, aligning with Tungasuvvingat Inuit, an Ontario Inuit organization (Ministry of Education, n.d.).

Studies investigating culturally sensitive initiatives and programming are mostly small-scale and qualitative, which has allowed for some in-depth understanding of their success with academic outcomes (Crooks et al., 2015; Crooks et al., 2017; Good et al., 2021; Wilson & Gobeil, 2017). However, very few of them have attendance at the forefront of their work. As previously mentioned, absenteeism is complex and involves understanding factors from and surrounding the child, including family and school perspectives. This research problem is further complex given the ongoing trauma of Indigenous peoples and historical mistreatment in research and educational settings. This project aims to address this gap and further our understanding of the factors involved in Indigenous student absenteeism among a group of urban Inuit students attending a culturally sensitive education program, as understood by their educators.

The Present Study

In partnership with an Inuit non-profit organization, our research team developed a case study with a sample of staff from a culturally sensitive alternative learning program for urban Inuit students in the greater Ottawa area. The learning program was developed by our partner organization in 2020 as a response to the educational disengagement and decreased mental well-being from traditional schooling that they witnessed among their clients because of the COVID-19 pandemic. They developed the program to be culturally sensitive, where students receive simultaneous mandated Ontario curriculum in addition to cultural education to foster their success. The students in the learning program (aged 6-18) are enrolled with a local public school but attend their schooling in person at the organization's facilities. The classes of students are divided into smaller cohorts by grade range; primary (grades 1-4), juniors (grades 5-8) and high

school (grades 9-12). Each cohort is staffed with three educators including a teacher, educational assistant, and cultural educator. A social worker and counsellor are also present to support all cohorts. Staff are overseen by a coordinator and manager of youth programs for the organization. Staff members comprise a mix of individuals who come from Inuit and non-Inuit ancestry.

The students receive their credits through the partnership between on-site teachers and their partner schools. Students receive lessons from on-site teachers and/or through online instruction with their enrolled school board. In addition to their curriculum instruction, students are provided with cultural programming that they may not have access to in a traditional school setting, which includes Inuktitut language learning, traditional skills, arts, and sports throughout the week. Their cultural programming is also blended into their curriculum instruction whenever possible. They foster a community dedicated to serving both the academic and personal needs of their students, guided by Inuit knowledge and cultural principles. The students come from many backgrounds of needs, with some of their families experiencing a variety of hardships, requiring assistance with social, economic and physical or mental health. As such, the program also provides daily transportation and food for the students, including breakfast, snacks and a hot lunch. Upon creation and implementation of the program, the staff reported a noticeable improvement in attendance and engagement with their students. The program has continued since major lockdowns lifted and allows Inuit youth to work on their education in this alternative setting, especially students who struggled to succeed in a traditional school environment. The culturally inclusive aspects of their environment and the organizations' philosophy for working with youth and their families provide a novel context to explore issues related to absenteeism.

The current model of the alternative education program explored in this study relies on strong relationships and shared resources between the non-profit organization and a school board. This model is representative of a push for increasing the number of partnerships and involvement of Indigenous communities and organizations with school boards in Canada (Canadian School Boards Association - Indigenous & Education Committee, 2018). As mentioned earlier, in Ontario school boards having an Indigenous Education committee is mandatory; these committees often act as mediators for these relationships and programming (Ministry of Education, n.d.). These partnerships involve specialized programming aimed at increasing academic success for Indigenous learners.

Research Questions

My research seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How are school attendance and participation of Inuit students understood and conceptualized by educators at the culturally sensitive learning program? (2) What factors may encourage student engagement and attendance in the alternative learning program from their educators' perspective?

Conceptual Framework

In this study, the youth involved are urban Inuit youth attending a culturally sensitive learning program in the greater Ottawa area. Their history and culture have been delivered to them intergenerationally and stem from traditions in what is now known as Northern Canada. Their cultural principles have been developed into a framework by Inuit elders and are considered the Inuit societal values, known as *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (IQ). IQ is often characterized as the traditional knowledge of health and well-being that characterizes Inuit culture (Tagalik, 2012a). It can be translated as "that which Inuit have always known to be true" (Tagalik, p. 1, 2012a). IQ is often described as Inuit epistemology, it encompasses the Inuit ways of knowing; how they interact with themselves, each other, and the world around them (Tagalik, 2012a). The IQ principles have been embedded into the governance of Inuit issues throughout government and public agencies in Nunavut (Government of Nunavut, n.d.; Tagalik, 2012a). The framework identified by the Inuit elders who helped conceptualize IQ consists of four big laws, *maligait* (Tagalik, 2012a). These include "working for the common good, maintaining balance and harmony, respecting all living things and continually planning and preparing for the future (Tagalik, 2012a). Tagalik (2012a) describes that "all cultural beliefs and values are associated with the implementation of these *maligait*, ultimately contributing to 'living a good life' which is described as the purpose of being (p. 1)". The framework is also divided into guiding principles which are as follows (Government of Nunavut, n.d.):

- *Inuuqatigiitsiarniq*: Respecting others, relationships and caring for people.
- *Tuunganarniq*: Fostering good spirits by being open, welcoming and inclusive.
- *Pijitsirniq*: Serving and providing for family and/or community.
- *Aajiiqatigiinniq*: Decision making through discussion and consensus.
- *Pilimmaksarniq/Pijariuqsarniq*: Development of skills through observation, mentoring, practice, and effort.
- *Piliriqatigiinniq/Ikajuqtigiinniq*: Working together for a common cause.

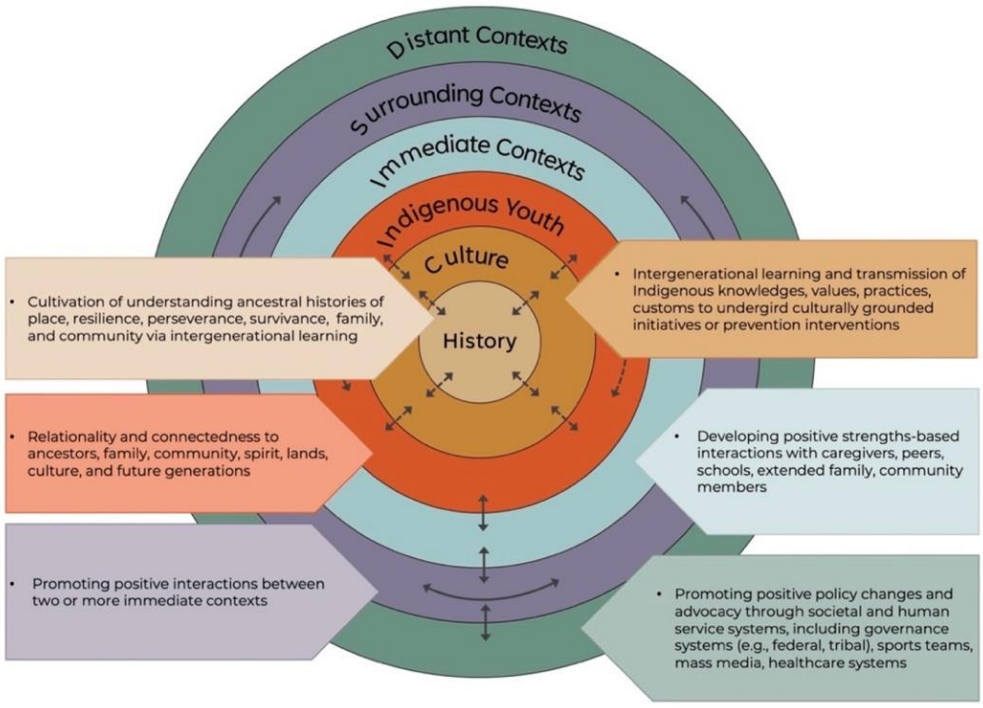
- *Qanuqtuurniq*: Being innovative and resourceful.
- *Avatittinnik Kamatsiarniq*: Respect and care for the land, animals, and the environment.

This study also utilizes the Indigenist Ecosystems Model (Fish & Syed, 2018), an extension of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (2007) for youth development as a main framework. This model was originally developed to incorporate Indigenous epistemology into Bronfenbrenner's (2007) widely used and accepted theory. Specifically, it was developed to shift understanding of Indigenous higher education student's experiences away from the deficit-based approach typically used among these populations (Fish & Syed, 2018). Since its original development, it has also been used in counselling psychology within a group therapy setting (Fish et al., 2022) as well as in research and programs involving Indigenous youth (O'Keefe et al., 2022). For my research intents, the adapted model described by O'Keefe and colleagues (2022) for working with Indigenous youth will be applied; this is captured in Figure 1 below.

Bronfenbrenner's theory and current models typically posits the child at the center (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007, O'Keefe et al., 2022). The child is understood to learn by

Figure 1

The Indigenist Ecosystems Model as adapted by O'Keefe and colleagues (2022) for use with Indigenous youth.



engaging with their external environmental influences, which are often represented by concentric circles, deeming them the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; O'Keefe et al., 2022). Fish and colleagues' adaptation (Fish et al., 2022, p. 202; Fish & Syed, 2018) "…reconceptualizes the order and meaning of the environments to better account for the influence of historical and cultural contexts on Indigenous peoples' beginnings and outcomes." (O'Keefe et al., 2022). In the adapted model, the chronosystem (historical factors) is placed at the center, followed by the macrosystem (cultural factors), situating that any consideration of the current experiences of Indigenous individuals should be rooted in the past (Fish & Syed, 2018). At the core, historical contexts consider the histories that "affect Indigenous peoples' health and well-being in the past, present and future" (O'Keefe et al., 2022, p.6). This places Indigenous people's histories and culture, at the core, emphasizing their influence on Indigenous youth rather than minimizing them which is more reflective of current Western colonial frameworks (Fish & Syed, 2018). The youth is the third layer, this includes their core identifies, self-efficacies and self-understandings. The youth is intentionally situated between culture, history and external contexts as their developmental outcomes should be considered related to "connections to their communities' histories and evolving cultures" (O'Keefe et al., 8). Immediate contexts (macrosystem), surrounding contexts (mesosystem) and distant contexts exit beyond the youth (exosystem; Fish & Syed, 2018; O'Keefe, 2022). These consider the relationships and environments that the youth may come in contact with, directly or indirectly throughout their development.

Immediate, Surrounding and Distant Contexts

In the culturally sensitive learning program, the students regularly engage in many activities related to their well-being and learning. The program follows its own theoretical underpinnings concerning student attendance and engagement; where culture, health, academics, and recreation contribute to the whole child's development. The program is also built on the IQ principles, to guide educators and students. Additionally, the educators consistently engage in respectful and reciprocal relationships with the parents of their students, fostering multiple levels of care for the youth involved. All these aspects relate to the outer layers of the Indigenist Ecosystems Model, which are further described below.

The immediate contexts surrounding the youth are described as environments with which they have regular and direct interactions (O'Keefe et al., 2022) In the learning program, this

would include their peers, families, educators, and the program itself. The next level, surrounding contexts, consists of the interactions between two or more of the immediate contexts (O'Keefe et al., 2022). Within my study, this may appear as any interaction between parents and educators, or even the organization with their partnered school board. Distant contexts, which is the final layer of the model "depicts social and political contexts that affect Indigenous peoples and their communities." (O'Keefe et al., 2022, p.10). This level describes environments that the youth may not directly be involved with but can still be impacted by (O'Keefe et al., 2022). O'Keefe and colleagues (2022) describe government, healthcare systems or Indigenous visibility in media as examples. As mentioned earlier, the students centred in this study are in an urban context and have been impacted by ongoing disparities faced by governing bodies in Northern Canada, this may be considered as a part of distant contexts for the youth. The Indigenist Ecological Systems model, the philosophy of our partner organization and the Inuit IQ principles will serve as a guide for data collected and analyzed in this project. As this study explores perspectives from the youth's educators, the framework will serve as an aid in guiding and organizing their responses to a context relevant to the youth.

Methodology

Overview

This thesis utilized a combined qualitative case study and Indigenous research approach. Qualitative methodology is appropriate as its very essence is to offer "insight into human experience *from* human experience" (Kovach, 2021, p. 34). It allows the researchers to develop the knowledge and understanding of the factors involved in urban Inuit student's absenteeism and highlights the unique perspectives of their educators. We adopted both Western and Indigenous research methodologies to incorporate the values, beliefs and experiences of the Indigenous peoples that are involved in the project. Though I am using a blended approach, my research intent is devout to the values of responsibility, respect, relationality, and reciprocity of Indigenous methodology (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). I recognize our responsibility to respect the Inuit community we are partnered with and the ownership of their experiences and cultural knowledge. I also understand the importance of building trust in the research relationship and knowing our position as collaborators within this partnership. Our methodology was intentionally fluid as I am learning to "unlearn" as a part of my dedication to engage in

decolonizing practices, it also reflects my position as an ally to the Inuit community with which I am completing the study (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021).

All research decisions and materials were co-developed by myself, my thesis supervisors and the partner organization as a part of a Community-Based Participatory Research approach that allows the staff involved to have more agency in the project's conduction and use of results (Simpson & Mendenhall, 2022). This included the consistent involvement of the researchers to work with organization partners throughout the research process, including during development, recruitment, collection, analysis, and results. It also involved the research team's active engagement and participation in some of the program's operations, including during instructional times and activities (Simpson & Mendenhall, 2022).

Research Partnership and Ethical Considerations

Given the history of extractive and exploitative past research on Indigenous populations described earlier in this proposal, we had extra considerations and responsibilities to follow when engaging with our partner organization for the study. This project began several years ago with the development of a working professional relationship with our partner organization and members of our research team, who represent a larger research partnership, the Canadian School Attendance Partnership (CSAP). CSAP is a research partnership comprised of academic researchers at the University of Ottawa and Carleton University, and community youth mental health-based organizations in the greater Ottawa area (CSAP, n.d.). CSAP's goal is to engage in research that helps situate and address attendance issues among youth in a Canadian context (CSAP, n.d.). After initial engagement and contact with the Inuit organization, which consisted of meetings with staff and participating in activities within the learning program, the Inuit organization became integrated into the CSAP.

Our relationship-building mirrors the beginning of an Inuk research model developed by the Arviat Aqqiumavvik Society (n.d.), a process known as the *Aajiiqatigiingniq Research Model (Arviat Aqqiumavvik Society, n.d.)*. *Aajiiqatigiingniq* is one of the IQ principles and translates to "building agreement together through a group process" (Arviat Aqqimavvik Society, n.d.). The research model is considered a form of consensus-building and requires the researchers to demonstrate respect and trust throughout the research process with a commitment of "...supporting outcomes that will seek to improve the common good" (Arviat Aqqimavvik Society, n.d.). The first two steps of this process follow other IQ principles: *piliriqatigiingniq*, or

building relationships and meaningful community engagement and *inuuqatigiitsiarniq*, building understanding (Arviat Aqqimavvik Society, n.d.). These steps represent a strong and trusting relationship-building process between communities and researchers to ensure that projects reflect the needs and values of the Inuit involved (Arviat Aqqimavvik Society, n.d.).

Since our early contacts and official partnership, several meetings between researchers and staff were focused on the development of a possible research project on attendance within their alternative learning program (which has now become the content of this thesis). Project meetings began in mid-October of 2022, where one of my thesis supervisors, Dr. Maria Rogers, and I introduced ourselves as researchers to the staff and our shared interest in the alternative learning program. These meetings were intended to develop mutual research goals, following the community engagement requirements as outlined in chapter nine of the TCPS2, which defines the ethical responsibilities for working with Indigenous individuals in Canadian research (Canadian Insitutes of Health Research et al., 2022). In maintaining our respectful and responsible approach, these meetings were also used for co-constructing the methodology for the study. We also outlined our professional experiences that were relevant to the project and defined our position as allies to their organization, acknowledging their rights to the First Nation-developed principles of ownership, control, access, and possession of any data that is collected in our partnership (OCAP®; FNIGC, 2024). I also completed the OCAP® course to demonstrate my dedication and further develop my understanding of these principles (FNIGC, 2024).

Early decisions saw that data collection among the alternative learning program would begin first with staff members as participants. The community organization recognized that the researchers should participate in more community engagement and relationship-building with the students and parents before they were considered for participation. This partnership is active and ongoing. Over the 2023-2024 school year, I was present and assisted in the program one day a week to continue building the research relationship and engage with the program's operations and elements. We engaged in our first set of data collection in the program with a sample of staff that occurred in early June 2023; this thesis focuses on secondary analyses of the perspectives of that sample of educators.

Recruitment and Data Collection

The selection of participants for this study was based on the existing research relationship that was built between the Inuit organization and university researchers which is best described

as a relational approach to sampling as described by Margaret Kovach in her work on Indigenous research methodologies (Kovach, 2021). In Western methodology, it would be best described as purposeful sampling for our exploration of educator perspectives of the culturally sensitive alternative learning program (Kovach, 2021). After developing our initial research relationship with managerial staff, subsequent meetings were held with all staff members at the program to develop a mutual research intent. According to *Aajiiqatigiingniq* research model*,* the participants should understand the intent of the research before collection and are "willing to engage because they share the goals of the project and have lived experiences and personal data they wish to contribute" (Arviat Aqqiumavvik Society, n.d.). Through one of these meetings, our data collection date was set collectively. This date was chosen as it was a professional development day where all staff were present, but no students were on site at the program that day to not interfere with daily programming. After meeting once more with the research team and sharing a lunch that we provided, all staff were invited to participate; we aimed to have as many staff as possible involved in the study. This meeting also sought to provide participants with the consent information and an explanation of the restrictions around group data, where typically participants are not allowed to withdraw their data from the group as this would limit the analysis of the data set and therefore limit meaningful results and interfere with information shared by other participants in the group (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). Participants were told that still had the option to withdraw throughout the conversation but were made aware that what they already shared would not be removed from the study. The conclusion of these meetings marked the transition from the *inuuqatigiitsiarniq* stage of the *Aajiiqatigiingniq* Research Model's process towards *aivaqatigiit* and *uqamangatigiit,* the data collection phase (Arviat Aqqiumavvik Society, n.d.). During *uqamangatigiit,* on the day of data collection I read over the consent information again, paused for any questions and after understanding was confirmed, participants verbally consented one by one (see Appendix A for the consent form).

A blended focus group and sharing circle approach were used for data collection. Sharing circles, as opposed to Western-based focus groups are more culturally sensitive and responsive, allowing the researcher to co-facilitate with participants, promoting and establishing a rapport for trust and comfort (Hunt & Young, 2021). Recommendations for blended sharing circles as proposed by Hunt & Young (2021) were followed. Traditionally, sharing circles are meant to reflect the cultural practices of the Indigenous community involved in the research and

encompass their traditions during data collection (Hunt & Young, 2021). As the learning program has its unique values situated within Inuit culture, our sharing circle protocols reflected how the program staff typically operate and collaborate. This led to a request from the staff for the sharing circle to take place over lunch, where the interviewers and participants shared a meal that we provided, over the discussion. The food and beverage options made available to participants were the choice of the program staff. Additionally, only one sharing circle was chosen to take place to maintain and reflect the community-driven environment they already have in the learning program, where all staff often discuss issues collectively. While this request increased the number of individuals in the circle, it helped the staff feel more comfortable to share and as a result, may encourage more meaningful findings, aligning with general principles for sharing circles (Hunt & Young, 2021).

The length of the circle was loosely capped at an hour but provided the option to continue past this timeframe if participants wanted to continue sharing (Hunt & Young, 2021; Tachine et al., 2016). Semi-structured questions, which were co-developed by the research team with input from an Inuk research assistant during the early phases of engagement with the Inuit organization guided the circle discussion (see Appendix B). These questions focus on aspects surrounding school attendance and engagement that keep in mind the cultural framework in which the program operates. A narrative open-dialogue approach was encouraged by the prompts and facilitator throughout data collection as it aligned with the cultural norms of the program and practices of sharing for the participants (Tachine et al., 2016). The sharing circles were audio-recorded. A designated notetaker research assistant was also appointed as a second form of data collection. The notetaker was involved in circle introductions and clarified her position as a note-taker to the participants, describing remarks she may include in her observation notes.

The sharing circle was held on-site at the learning program, a sensitive and familiar location for all participants. A total of nine participants were present on the day of data collection. They were a mix of Inuk (n=5) and non-Inuk educators (n=4). The conversation within the sharing circle began with a detailed review of research intents, consent and personal introductions to demonstrate the passive role of the research facilitator. The group data limitations and restrictions to consent were also explained once more (alongside the consent descriptions), and participants were allowed to withdraw immediately before data was collected (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). The sharing circle lasted for an hour before I delivered closing

remarks to the conversation, re-explaining the next steps of the research process. Participants were also given a gift card to thank them for their participation.

Data Analysis

This thesis comprises a secondary analysis of the staff data collected in early June 2023 which continued to follow the blended Western and Indigenous methodological approach set in my recruitment and data collection. I have conducted an inductive thematic analysis to allow key themes to emerge from the stories and experiences of the educators in the learning program (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For trustworthiness, I followed Braun and Clarke's established model for thematic analysis, carefully listening to the recording and reviewing the transcript multiple times to familiarize myself with the conversation and engage thoroughly in the coding process. This non-Indigenous approach to data analysis was chosen as it is a reliable tool to organize conversational data. It should be noted that with Indigenous research, there is no current overarching model for thematic analysis. Several scholars have identified processes that share similarities to thematic analysis, with an emphasis on Indigenous frameworks or epistemologies being used as the guiding way if interpreting the data (Kennedy et al., 2022; Kovach 2019; Kovach, 2021). Other scholars have attempted to avoid thematic analysis or develop other analytical approaches, stating contrasting differences in the Western approach to Indigenous analysis (Kennedy et al., 2020; McGaw & Vance, 2023). The *Aajiiqatigiingniq* Research Model for our methodology does not specify an analysis method – but emphasizes the importance of conversational data and collaboration. Due to time constraints, a true collaborative analysis was not performed, but I made sure to maintain consistent communication on the process with the organization and had conversations about the process with staff throughout my time volunteering in the center which helped me organize my codes into the themes that were developed.

The data analysis took place over several months – and throughout my time volunteering weekly at the program. For my analysis, the data from the focus group/sharing circle was transcribed verbatim and I used Lumivero's (2023) *NVivo 14* qualitative data management software for my coding. Using *NVivo* software, I highlighted sections of the transcript and assigned them a code, this way, I could visibly check for overlaps in ideas. I did not have predetermined codes, but rather, I centered my codes around the different aspects of our conversation that could be relevant to my research questions. I also used the notes taken during data collection to assist in creating codes, which organized key points of responses from

participants according to the interview questions (see Appendix C). An initial 36 codes were identified then later reshuffled into 18 distinct codes. For the reshuffling process, I wrote each code on cue cards and physically rearranged them together in groups which were based in similarities from each code. These "similar groups" were informed by the Indigenist Ecosystems Model – which I was using to identify how each code from our conversation related to various factors that influence the students in their program. I reshuffled the cards several times before reducing the number of codes, most of my changes reflected the experiences, conversations and observations I had working with staff and students in the program. The final 18 codes were the original groups created through this shuffling and reflection process. After reducing to these 18 codes, I re-read and listened to the transcript a few more times then used my physical cue-card shuffle method one last time to organize each code into three main themes and 5 subthemes. Afterwards, I checked for overlapping with codes on the transcript on *NVivo* to iron out similarities between them. I also reflected on how each code may relate to the Inuit IQ principles based on how I witnessed them being applied in the program itself. In addition to these processes, I created a spreadsheet that listed the frequencies with all codes, themes, subthemes and IQ principles and matched it to the colour codes on NVivo so I could better visualize the separation of the emerging themes (see Appendix D). My thesis supervisors reviewed the codes and themes generated for consistency. The final themes that emerged from these various conversations were also translated into a figure, which can be found in the results section of this thesis. The figure was developed as it was considered a possible useful tool for the management staff to use to explain, promote and advocate for their program.

In addition to the themes that were unveiled from our sharing circle conversation, my analysis of the data was also informed and shaped by the observations I gained when volunteering with the program. As a result, some of my observations are reflected in my discussion to highlight and support the themes that were developed. These observations are reflective of participant observation methodologies in research. Where the researcher immerses themselves into the operations of their population of interest (in this case, the alternative learning program; Jorgensen, 2015). Primarily, participant observation allows researchers to deepen their understanding of their community of interest through their participation and further encourages their reflexivity throughout the research process (Jorgensen, 2015). The researcher may participate in the community in a more active or passive capacity; in my case I was more active

as this was a crucial part of developing a respectful relationship with the organization during the research process (Roque et al., 2024). Participant observation may also involve additional data collection from the researcher, such as field notes, pictures or videos (Jorgensen, 2015). However, my position as a participating observer was meant to be secondary and complimentary to our sharing circle data, therefore, no concrete data was collected during my time volunteering – only reflections of the experiences I was allowed to be a part of. This is why my observations present themselves in the discussion and not the results of the paper, as they contributed to my interpretation of the themes we developed. This participant observation approach also compliments our collaborative research approach with the Inuit organization, reflecting the Indigenous research methodologies in this thesis (Roque et al., 2024).

Finalization of Results and Member-Checking

After these final themes that emerged from these various conversations, reflections and processes with the staff and data, I, as the primary researcher met once more with the program staff, including participants, where possible, to discuss the findings as a form of member checking and continuing our responsible Indigenous research practice (Kovach, 2021). This member-checking process is also important in increasing the credibility and trustworthiness of the results found in the study (Kovach, 2021). During the member-checking process, the participants are typically allowed to clarify or alter some of the results content from the study (Kovach, 2021; Simpson & Mendenhall, 2022). For the member-checking process, any choices to alter or clarify data are decided by the group collectively, this is necessary for both Western and Indigenous research practices as a final process of validation and maintaining integrity with sensitive Indigenous research practice (Simpson & Mendenhall, 2022). It is also important to note that this alternative program and research partnership is ongoing. In addition, the organization contains other programs concerning urban Inuit education and well-being outside of this alternative learning program. As a result, these data meetings included new parties that the partnership organization wished to share the result finalization process including some new staff members and stakeholders from other parts of the organization). In continuing with and respecting the OCAP® principles (FNIGC, 2024), these new voices were welcomed into the discussion, building on the integrity and co-collaborative nature of the Indigenous research approach throughout the member-checking process.

In continuation of following the *Aajiiqatigiingniq* Research Model, the member-checking process calls upon the *qanurtururangniq* principle to review, assess and validate the data (Arviat Aqqiumavvik Society, n.d.). This was completed through a final set of meetings with the program staff and organization partners, where I shared the themes generated for a final approval. The meeting occurred outside of a regular school day to not interfere with the daily operations of the program. Since these meetings were completed at the end of a school day, some staff were not able to attend. Any staff who could not be present for the meetings were provided with a summary of the results and were allowed to contact me, the lead researcher, if they had any thoughts questions or concerns about the results of the project. The summary provided included a figure depicting the themes as well as describing the main elements of each theme.

I began the results-sharing meetings by re-introducing myself to the team members and providing a recap of the intent behind the research partnership and the current project for any new staff present. During the meetings, I presented a summary of the themes, providing details on their relevance to attendance and my research questions. Any staff present were encouraged to share their thoughts about the results and project overall. Sharing the results ended up feeling like a full-circle moment for us all. Some staff who were present for the entire project ended up reflecting on how much progress they have been able to make with their program in the last couple of years. We all shared excitement for what the future holds, as the program continues to run with the same intent to improve academic and personal growth among Inuit youth. There was a consensus made in favor of the original themes – as staff agreed they encapsulated the central ideals of their program in terms of student engagement and success. As a result of this consensus the themes were not changed from the initial analysis process.

These meetings concluded with a discussion of the next steps of the research dissemination, enacting the final process of *Aajiiqatigiingniq*; *isumaliuqatijiitsinirningniq,* "a way of arriving at collective decisions that can be used to improve the common good" (Arviat Aqqiumavvik Society, p. 4, n.d.). It was agreed that upon completion of this thesis, the results of this project will also be developed into a report with the partner organization. This report will be owned by the organization and written in a format that enables them to use the research to support and advance the development of their educational youth programs. Until this thesis and the report are complete, I refined the summary that was provided as a preliminary tool for the program to immediately access and use in meetings with stakeholders or funding applications.

These meetings took place while I was compiling quotes and preparing to write the results and discussion sections of my thesis, which have taken longer than I had originally planned. While writing this thesis, I am also currently completing my first full year as a high school teacher – which has been more difficult to balance than I originally thought. Us educators tend to prioritize our work and the needs of our students before other aspects of our lives; we are often incredibly dedicated to our profession and service. I was guilty of this, which led to delays in the writing of this thesis, although this happened to be something the partner organization staff understood well. Throughout the delays, I remained honest and open about the writing process with our research partners, and thankfully, they have been very patient and trusting of this process. Our intent in developing this project was always to build on these shared dedications as educators – to highlight how this program has contributed to understanding attendance and engagement for their students. We revisited this vision in our results meeting – which shifted my approach for the rest of this thesis. While the original themes from my analysis did not change – the way I approached writing and represent them in the results and discussion were greatly influenced by our final conversations. I aimed to ensure that I am representing the results with the same dedication the program has for its students and families. In the next section, each theme will be explored through the context of our conversation and my observations and experiences from volunteering with the program.

Results

The conversation within the sharing circle was dynamic; participants shared their thoughts and understandings, drawing on their roles as educators and from experiences in their own lives. Even during this conversation, I began to understand that for these educators, every factor relating to their students' attendance is connected, and addressing attendance is to address the students themselves. These impressions remained as I completed analysis and we closed-out our results finalization meetings for the member-checking process.

For organizational purposes, I have numbered the themes in the list below. However, this numbering should not be interpreted as a hierarchy, with one theme being more important or involved than another. Each theme equally contributes to both research questions. They speak to the educator's overall conceptualization and approaches towards attendance in the alternative learning program:

1. Recognizing Barriers to Attendance

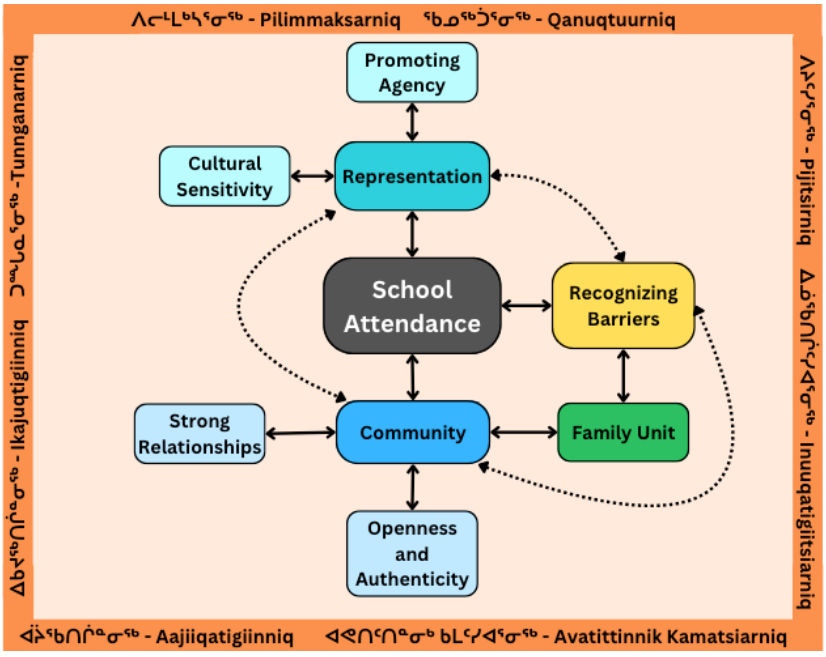
- The family unit

2. Sense of Community
    - Building strong relationships
    - Openness and authenticity of educators
    - The family unit
3. Representing students
    - Promoting agency
    - Cultural sensitivity

Three primary themes emerged organically from the codes with each encompassing at least one subtheme that elaborated on these concepts. Additionally, one subtheme was designated as belonging to two main themes, as it holds a place among each of these findings (The family unit). Though these themes are listed and described separately, they are not meant to be

Figure 2

A visual representation of the themes surrounding the conceptualization and influences of attendance for Inuit students in the alternative learning program.



understood as separate elements. Instead, each theme intertwines and converges to contribute to the program's approach to understanding and addressing student attendance. Each theme and subtheme should be understood as being interconnected with all other themes and subthemes. Moreover, as I considered each code and began to merge them into general ideas, I found that the

Inuit Societal Values were valued throughout the script. Therefore, each theme should be understood as existing within these values, which ultimately guide the program staff's philosophy in working with their Inuk students and their families.

Figure 2 (as seen above) was created to represent the results visually. As mentioned earlier this figure was created so that program staff may use it to help promote or explain their program to key stakeholders. The figure depicts the themes and their relationships to attendance within the program. Attendance is at the core of this figure, as it is the main topic of this thesis. However, the themes speak beyond the concept of attendance and represent the overall environment and elements of the program, which, in turn, contribute to student attendance. Themes are not numbered in this figure, instead, they are listed only by their given names. These names are abbreviated to one or two words in the figure for simplicity. The figure separates the concepts of *identifying* and *addressing* challenges in student attendance by colour. *Recognizing barriers to attendance* is presented separately in yellow and reflects identifying challenges in student attendance. *Representing students* and a *sense of community* are both presented in variations of blue as they both concern *addressing* challenges in student attendance. The subtheme, *the family unit*, is the mixture of these colours to reflect the two main themes that share it. The main themes are connected to their respective subthemes with bold lines. Each main theme is also connected to the other main themes through a dotted line that indicates their connectedness. As mentioned earlier, the themes are all surrounded by the Inuit Societal Values that guide the program in working with their Inuit students and families.

Recognizing Barriers to Attendance for the Child and the Family

The first theme, *Recognizing Barriers to Attendance,* relates to the idea of engagement as a form of attendance, which was relevant throughout our conversation. This theme captures the elements of the conversation where educators described identifying and responding to the needs of students as a necessity for encouraging attendance and understanding students' issues related to absenteeism. While this theme could have also been identified as *Responding to Needs*, *Recognizing Barriers* was selected as it is the prelude to response. For the educators to respond to student needs – they must first identify the factors that have contributed to them. While they discussed responding to student's needs, the educator's dedication to identifying and understanding these needs were central to our conversation and to the program overall. *Recognizing Barriers to Attendance* also nods to the program's origins, as its creation was rooted

in the organization's response to the challenges faced by the families they supported during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns: "… we started (the program) because of COVID with the hopes to re-engage students who weren't engaged at home and maybe had a history of not being engaged, even before the pandemic." Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted challenges in attendance through concerns with access to technology at home due to online learning. They "…provided a space for all grades to access computers, Wi-Fi…" with additional supportive elements in their program "…to help the kids with their academics".

Across our conversation, the educators described a variety of issues their students face when trying to attend school. For students in their program, educators identified that these potential barriers included transportation, housing, and other issues connected to physical and mental health (sleep, hunger, exercise, etc.). Even students who were identified as not having any issues with their basic needs were still described as having some barrier preventing them from wanting to attend school; "In some cases, we have kids where their parents want them to come, they have secure housing, but they just don't want to come". The educators made efforts to recognize these barriers for every student, no matter the perceived severity.

Barriers were also identified as being related to cultural or identity aspects for the student. For instance, some educators identified that their students' experiences in mainstream schools[1] also caused some barriers to their willingness to attend or engage with school.

> In the high school program, for some of them, it's trauma from their main school experience. That they didn't have an identity, that they couldn't speak their own language, that people questioned them, and that people didn't recognize their identity. They were misidentified. Lots of things have hindered them from ever wanting to go back into the main school setting.

They linked the concept of attendance with recognizing barriers as a key factor in whether students could engage or learn on a given day.

> A lot of times, they (the students) missed their bus, and they walked in on their own accord, so I'm not going to hold it against a child who's trying. And if they are disengaged, usually, it's only because of sleep or hunger. Those are the two things: they're either

[1] The use of "mainstream" in this context is to describe a traditional school as opposed to alternative programming.

> hungry, or they're tired. Well, no one can learn if you're hungry, and no one can learn if they're tired.

Additionally, educators highlighted the complexity of these barriers, aligning with the idea of "meeting the students where they are at" each day, recognizing that barriers can affect a student's attendance or engagement in varying ways from day to day.

> Sometimes, they only need a 20-minute power nap, and then they work super hard the rest of the day. On other days, they need to sleep the whole day. But they're there, and they're safe. So that's how we view attendance, at least in our program.

In my time volunteering at the program, I witnessed the educators' reflections on their students' needs constantly. Identifying and anticipating the needs of students acted as feedback for educators, who used these insights to adjust their daily or weekly plans. Overall, recognizing barriers seemed to be tied to a goal of creating a safe environment for their students that addressed their basic needs and well-being:

> I think it's important that we're offering the kids the space to be safe, and I feel like that's the bottom line, that and understanding their hierarchy of needs. All of us have an approach where we understand that their basic needs and their well-being need to come first, and I think that is a big part of attendance.

The Family Unit (and beyond)

The subtheme, *the family unit*[2], is shared with another main theme. In the context of *Recognizing Barriers to Attendance,* this subtheme highlights the educator's understanding that factors beyond the students themselves can also contribute to the barriers affecting school attendance. The educators described that they "…see the students as part of a family unit…". Throughout the discussion, the educators reflected on the experiences they had with their students' family units. Much like their students, the families involved in their program have diverse needs. Educators nodded at issues some of the families experienced including finding accessible housing and how this may further affect food instability, sleep and hygiene for the students. The educators expressed an understanding of how familial barriers affect students' abilities to be physically or mentally present at school: "That's going to impact the child

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[2] For this paper, a *family unit* refers to a broad range of individuals that may be directly responsible for the student's basic needs outside of school. This may include parents, grandparents, other caregivers, siblings, etc.

drastically and their attendance because they're just not going to be awake or in a good headspace to learn". Additionally, in their understanding of attendance, the educators identified that these barriers would affect each student differently, depending on the severity of their families' experiences.

> Some of the families are in a difficult situation, so the fact that the kids are coming somewhere to attend school, rather than just staying at home or not wanting to be engaged, they're here in a safe place. We have a holistic approach, too, since we have a good understanding of where our families are at. We know that sometimes they might just come and sleep because that's what they need, and that's okay. So, we're understanding and just trying to do whatever is needed on a student-by-student basis to help them.

This understanding went beyond the concrete needs or struggles of the families. They viewed the students as a part of a larger cultural body, discerning that the barriers that affect student attendance are largely influenced by factors in their lives outside of the school:

> It doesn't just go nine to three, right? We're looking at their entire lives, their entire year, their next five years, ten years. I think that seeing that the child is part of a bigger family unit, which is part of the bigger cultural community. I think that's very important; I think that gives us a lot of strength.

Aligned with this understanding, educators also emphasized the need for awareness and comprehension of the impacts that intergenerational trauma may have on the Inuit families they serve: "…maybe not only the students (trauma), the parent's trauma as well, that can come into play".

Overall, the educators described *recognizing barriers* as an essential element for how they understood attendance in their program; they anticipated what their students and their families needed to attend the program, both physically and mentally. However, in the intent to promote mental engagement, attendance went beyond just recognizing the needs of students and families; it also concerned *addressing* the barriers through developing an environment that encouraged a *sense of community* and *represents students*.

> Getting them here is the initial step; we recognize that there's still work to be done after that in terms of getting them where they're most comfortable, where they can start learning, and as they come in, having some of their other needs met… I think we recognize what the value of it is in a global sense.

Sense of Community

As a main theme, a *sense of community* highlights the discussion surrounding the value of collaboration and community during our conversation. Community was credited as a main driver for their student's attendance in their program, "…I feel like community and love is a really big part of why they come". They discussed this further in examples on how some of their students were experiencing issues with school attendance before opening the program and the observable changes they have witnessed in these students since.

> … We have a few guys that were not attending at all (before entering the program). That creates a lot of issues within the school system but now they're attending every day, they are smiling, and they are coming out of their shell. And that's because they want to be here.

In these instances, each member of the sharing circles nodded their heads and were quick to agree on community as a central element to their practices. To them, having and developing a sense of community was evidenced through describing the creation of a school environment that the students felt comfortable attending. This theme also encapsulates the educator's capacities for building strong relationships, including those between the student and the school, as well as between the family and the school. While not directly from the conversational data, I had the pleasure of attending family night with their program for the last couple of years, as well as the graduation ceremony in June 2024. At each of these events, promoting the program through community was at the forefront. Interactions occurred between students, siblings, parents, teachers and Elders. These events celebrated community and the strengths of the individuals within it. As a result, community was an obvious theme from observations and conversational data. From the data, one quote stood out as it captured the purpose of this main theme.

> All the classes support each other… it is a very family school. All the students are looked after and assisted in every way…. and the students have support from people like counsellors. It's quite a wonderful place for Inuit children.

In general, they stressed the significance of their role in fostering community throughout the program, crediting this as a key factor in improving student's attitudes towards attending school.

> I think the sense of community that we have here is valuable. I feel that it is one of the best things about our program, is that they (the students) come here and they're home, and we're

> all family and we all go above and beyond to make sure that they feel heard and understood and comfortable and safe.

Sense of community is a larger main theme, but it is all-encapsulating to the many elements that operate within it. Therefore, it is best explored through its subthemes, building strong relationships, openness and authenticity of educators and the family unit.

Building Strong Relationships

The need to build strong relationships with their students to encourage attendance was discussed often throughout our circle and highlights their student-centred approach. When asked about the key takeaway values of their program, educators voiced the importance of having an approach that is "youth/student-centred" involving, "developing common goals and building relationships". Building relationships reflects the sense of community and care the educators have worked to cultivate within the program, aiming to foster connections between all students and staff. They work towards teaching students that "they are valued", emphasizing that "…they are our future leaders, and they need the best, to have education." This was also conveyed by showing students they are cared for at school, "…showing the students that you love them so much, that when they come in, we are genuinely happy to see them every day".

Additionally, they encouraged positive interactions and relationships between the three classes of differently aged students. They noted the uniqueness of having different-aged classes in the same program, discerning it from the main school system, where interactions between elementary and high school students are rare:

> …They are constantly with younger groups of children. That sort of sense of normalcy to it, that showing love or affection to a young child can be revered. And there's all this interaction too, and not being a "snobby teenager" ... I think there's a little bit more authenticity with our students.

This provided their students with additional "opportunities for socialization, like building social skills and confidence and resiliency, and all of those kinds of learning themes that may slip through the cracks in a mainstream school setting". Furthermore, one of the educators extended building relationships in their classroom environment, where all students are responsible for daily tasks that keep the space clean and organized; it adds a "sense of community by having roles in your classroom, everyone takes responsibility for maintaining the space and working together". This level of encouraging healthy relationships has directly

attributed to a sense of community among their students, "…some of them will come over and read…they are saying hello to each other, and they are giving hugs, they are helping each other out… there is a lot of love between them".

For educators, building strong relationships or rapport with students also meant offering consistent academic support and helping students feel more engaged in their learning, "once we started making it engaging and more tailored to them, and building that rapport, that helps remove other barriers as well." To them, engagement went hand in hand with offering a supportive environment, "I think that's what we specialize in, re-engagement… by creating that supportive network". Under this perspective, engagement also fostered a positive relationship between the students and their education, "when we make things engaging and fun, that changes our perspective for them to be capable, confident learners". This extended to the additional opportunities they have in their program.

> The kids have opportunities that they wouldn't normally, like going bowling recently, we went to a sugar shack, and they love it. The kids always behave so well. I'm always proud to take these guys to different museums and stuff like that, because they represent us well.

Developing strong relationships between educators and students, as described above, also highlights a key factor related to the educator's approach to their work. Throughout our conversation and through my time volunteering at the program, educators consistently demonstrated a sense of *openness and authenticity*.

Openness and Authenticity of Educators

Educators described their approaches to creating meaningful relationships with their students. Often, they referenced how they brought honesty into their role, "I think that from my role, especially as the teacher in the classroom, is my openness, just based on rapport." They also described openness as related to a growth mindset, "openness in the sense that if I don't know something, I tell them "I don't know" or "It's okay not to have the answer". Openness was further associated with decentring themselves as educators by not being the expert but being seen as someone who is helping guide their learning, "they don't necessarily see us as, like, authoritative…we don't have that approach with them…". Furthermore, it included the teacher's willingness to bring their authentic selves into their teaching as it opened an environment for

students to do the same: “We don't belittle; there are no silly questions. All of us are just real. We're all just ourselves, we are goofy, a little off-brand sometimes and they love it…”.

This openness and authenticity are something that I witnessed often as a volunteer and was encouraged to demonstrate when I was working with the students. Every educator had an approach with their students that distinguished their authentic selves. This exemplified how educators’ authenticity influenced their relationship building and community. However, their *openness and authenticity* also reflected moments where the educators demonstrated their commitment to the success of their students. One group member mentioned that being a teacher in the program meant “…being willing to unlearn and question your positionality and approach to things, constantly being reflective on that and constantly adopting it. It's okay to make mistakes … it is an accident, but I'm going to learn from it”. This perspective extended to how the educators felt about working with students in general, referencing the need to “unlearn” when working with students who face issues related to attendance and engagement.

> If you are not willing to unlearn you get stuck in your ways… not just unlearn, with cultures, but unlearn with approaches; behaviour management etc.., especially when you're dealing with students who have any kind of exceptionality or they’re ESL (English as a second language learner), anywhere there is a barrier in place.

Openness and unlearning were also displayed in the educator’s dedication and approach towards making students feel represented.

> Even as someone who is of southern descent, I'm trying to speak Inuktitut, it is probably the most of any other language I know and it's very limited, but I'm trying to do that regularly. And if I know a word I will say it regularly, so if I have the option of going English or Inuktitut, I'm going Inuktitut.

This idea extended to a moment in our discussion where the educators sensed the feeling of community and belongingness they strived to create; “this education program for our Inuit students feels like it's a big family-oriented place for our students and our staff. It kind of feels like you are up North.”

So far, fostering a sense of community has been described as involving the development of strong relationships between students, schooling and educators, including the role of engagement and the educator’s attitudes toward teaching. However, community extend beyond the student, bringing us to the next subtheme, *the family unit*.

The Family Unit

The *family unit* was previously explored as *recognizing barriers to attendance*, where students were understood as "being a part of their family unit" by educators when identifying factors that may influence student attendance. Through the context of a *sense of community, the family unit* refers more specifically to the role of school-family relationships in influencing attendance. From this, it can be understood that supporting trusting relationships with families is a factor the educators considered towards student attendance in their program. This aligns with educators' perspectives on supporting students as a means of fostering trust with their families.

> And from parents, I have heard that they are happy with the fact that we are a supportive program. We are supporting every aspect of the child's well-being, not just their academics. They are happy that their kids are happy, and that they are coming, that they want to come.

They also discussed addressing parent's curiosity and involvement in programming to establish this trust.

> Parents want to come and check out and see what we're doing and want to be a part of it too, which is amazing…there seems to be a lot of trust and when we want to implement new things, we always get full consent from all the families… for field trips that have been more spur-the-moment, we seek consent to do that. So, there's a lot of trust in the programming that we're doing, and they want to see that continue.

Moreover, this subtheme highlights the program's enhanced capacity in engaging with and supporting families in their student's education. In discussions of supporting the "whole child," the educators emphasized their breadth of resources through their partnership between a school board and a social services organization; "Every classroom is so abundant in resources for each child. Everything from snacks to clothing. Food, clothing, hygiene products, everything provided everything is there for them in any way, shape or form." These supports addressed the child but also addressed the needs of the family, "…there's a family wellness program, and there's a justice program, and there's help with housing., that whole idea of wraparound supports". A wider community-school relationship further enhanced the school-family relationship. Specifically, the educators highlighted the organization's history and reputation for building strong relationships with their families and the larger urban Inuit community in Ottawa; "… there's that shared trust as an organization". All of these are mechanisms that enhanced

familial engagement with the program, which, in turn, helped develop a strong sense of community.

Representing students

Within attendance, the main theme *representing students* describes any elements of the conversation that addressed student's sense of belonging within their school environment. The need for students to feel represented within their environment was relevant throughout my conversation with the educators and is directly related to all other themes and subthemes. Educators in the program demonstrated their value in making their students feel represented; "we've worked hard in each class to create a space that has a sense of belongingness, and they can see themselves in the space… I think it helps with having the kids feel like they want to be here". Representing students also speaks to inclusivity, describing it as a school-wide responsibility to maintain; "we put that accountability on all people to make the space inclusive and welcoming, not just the students". Like *sense of community, representing students* is meant to be an overarching theme, therefore most of its content come from the subthemes.

Promoting agency

The core of the subtheme *promoting agency* lies in promoting students' sense of control over their learning environment and the ability to maintain their individuality. *Promoting agency* entails maintaining a space where students could "just be themselves, they don't have to put on anything else to be able to come to school". This mirrors how the educators described bringing their own authenticity into their work. The educators described some negative experiences their students had in their previous school environments, where their students "felt that they had to layer up to go to school" so they strived to foster an environment where students are "…just themselves, there is no extra pressure, they can be silly, they can be goofy, they can be grumpy." This point was connected to encouraging their attendance, "…they can be whatever they need to be that day, we're still going to walk them across the threshold of the door, right?". One educator also described their co-collaborative approach to allow students to voice their opinions and have choices in their education, "It is their space". This included facets related to their physical environment; "at the beginning of the year we asked them 'what do you want to see in here?', somebody said 'LED lights'… so we put LED lights". Another educator noted that their classroom expectations were created alongside their students, but also included developing expectations for educators in the room:

> We set class expectations, we develop them, and it's not just expectations for the students but for the teachers. “What do you guys expect from the adults?” That we're considerate, that we're kind, that we give you guys second chances, whatever the case may be whatever they came up with, and we work together.

Promoting agency also encapsulates the educator’s role in advocating for their students within their partnership with the local school board. In describing relationships, the educators also acknowledged efforts from staff at their partnered school board in engaging with the program, “I think most of the educators we are collaborating with, are understanding the value of our program and what we do… they are partnering well, and they do support”. They collaborated with the main school educators on assessment and reporting, ensuring that their “…students get that fair shot, that we can collaborate” to provide their students with the best chances for success.

Cultural sensitivity and connections

The subtheme *Cultural sensitivity and connections* refers to educators’ approaches towards developing practices and environments that center the student’s culture. It connects to *promoting agency* as together; they worked to promote an environment where students feel they are capable of learning. As a part of *representing students*, it embodies promoting an environment where students feel welcomed by providing them with access and exposure to their culture and language; “…it is a space for the Inuit students to come and stay connected with their culture and offer them cross-curricular activities to help support their online teachers with assessments and stuff like that.” Representation of culture was present in their staff population, the physical environment and among their students. This also likely contributed towards positive school-family relationships, as educators expressed that families are “…happy there is an Inuk in the classroom with the kids”.

The educators voiced that this especially important because, in an urban setting they acknowledged that students may feel even more disconnected from their culture.

> I feel like it's crucial to have a safe place for them. I think especially being in an urban setting and being outside of your community, I think it's so important to be around our peers who are also Inuk and going through a similar experience of living down South and not necessarily being as connected to your culture or language. So... I feel like we create a safe space here. We have Inuk staff here as well, we get to have country food, and they get to learn their language.

Educators nodded to the cultural programming opportunities they offer and described their role in connecting the curriculum to students' culture to enhance their engagement and understanding. Much of the discussion on representation focused on how the educators incorporated Inuit culture into their teaching and reflected it in the physical classroom environment.

> Everything within the program and the space is geared towards the culture; having the letter lines on the wall of the syllabics, the IQ principles posted where they are visible in the classroom, the art projects that we do are printmaking, beading or sewing or things that are important within Inuit culture.

> While also meeting the expectations of the curriculum, we find ways of connecting it. So, like, it's learning but it doesn't feel like learning. Candle making can be connected to the Qulliq [Inuit oil lamp] and, you know, sustainable shopping... it's one of the IQ principles, caring for the land and the environment and being a steward of the environment and being aware of our impact and things like that. We try to integrate those teachings as much as we can.

Their relationship within the larger Ottawa Inuit community also allowed them to offer culturally related workshops to further engage students with different models of learning.

> We also do a lot of collaboration in the community; we have partnerships that come in for cultural lessons, for example, we have some of the boys working on making Ulus. They go down to the workshop (at a community partner), and they work there and teach them methods on how to make Ulus. That's just an example, there's so many workshops that we had soapstone carving workshops come in, that are all hands-on experiential learning, and our kids love doing that.

Furthermore, they used and encouraged language as another important aspect of building cultural representation for their students. To them, "language is crucial", and connected directly to their cultural learning; "when they work together as a team I try and inspire them to say words like Piliriqatigiingniq, which means to work together. I try to inspire them with the IQ principles, try to remind them." They described their general Inuktitut lessons but also explained how they tried to use Inuktitut throughout their daily programming; "even basic everyday things like, can you pass me the kakiak? (Inuktitut for fork), or, where's your nammagaaq? (Inuktitut for

backpack) just using everyday words in conversation so that the repetitiveness is there, and they remember". The importance of culture being a part of their lives and education was central to our conversation. Bringing their culture into their learning intended to remind students of the value of bringing their worldviews to their learning and education and the strengths it can hold. One of the Inuk educators noted:

> We Indigenous people have science we learn right, in our own language. We survived with the Qulliq [Inuit oil lamp], with the oil and the wick… We are awesome, we survived on this harsh land. We were very oral, we didn't write, we told storytelling. Everything was always hands-on, with our learning. And watching, and oral.

For educators, cultural representation through languages and their teaching was crucial to student attendance and engagement as it instills a great sense of belonging for their students. They demonstrated this in how they incorporated the IQ principles, the program's guiding framework, and the Inuktitut language into their daily operations.

Discussion

Research exploring SAPs has often described its importance for aspects of biopsychosocial development for youth (Heyne et al., 2019). However, in Canada, there is a dearth in absenteeism research, especially among our Indigenous youth, leaving a gap in our understanding and approaches to this issue. This project is intended to contribute to the literature on the specific issue of contextualizing and understanding absenteeism among Indigenous populations of Canada. The goal of the current study was to explore school attendance from the perspective of educators of urban Inuit youth in a culturally sensitive alternative learning program. Their program, grounded in their own cultural practices (IQ principles) inclusivity and holistic approaches, has seen an overall increase in attendance and engagement among the youth they serve, offering a unique context to examine issues related to attendance. The research questions guiding this study sought to understand the educator's conceptualizations of attendance and the factors in their program that may have encouraged the successes they witnessed with their students. Our sharing circle and my volunteer experience within the culturally sensitive program yielded three main themes that address the research questions. Our conceptual frameworks, the *Indigenist Ecosystems Model* and the *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* principles were used to guide the organization of our data into these themes, building the conceptualization of attendance through the of thoughts and experiences of the educators in the program.

These themes can best be understood through the divide of *recognizing* and *addressing* barriers to attendance, where addressing barriers captures the elements of developing a *sense of community* and *representing students*. *Recognizing Barriers to attendance,* one of the main themes identifies educators' efforts to get to know and understand their students' and families' needs that may hinder attendance. Addressing barriers to attendance reflects the other two main themes: a *sense of community* and *representing students. Sense of community* considers references to the types of relationships that exist within the overall program and the community surrounding the Inuit youth. This encompasses the educator's role in fostering Inuit youth's relationships within the school, including those with their educators and their peers. It also considers the program's relationships with the families and the larger Inuit community. Finally, the theme of *representing students* connects to creating a learning space routed in developing a sense of belonging, where students have agency and feel connected to their culture. The data suggests that staff members' conceptualization of attendance also goes beyond addressing factors that may hinder physical presence. Student's engagement with their learning space was deemed equally as crucial, as physical presence was not considered by the educators to guarantee comfort or academic or social readiness for the students. Finally, the educators believed that to gain a deeper understanding of student issues related to attendance, students' needs needed to be considered individually, involve the influence of their family units and other external factors on the child, such as their culture and its history. While there currently stands an extant source of literature that considers Indigenous and Inuit student attendance specifically, my discussion will also draw on possible factors that mediate attendance in the program. My discussion will therefore also extend into a conversation of success factors for Inuit and other Indigenous youth in educational settings, developing these factors as promising practices to consider for attendance and absenteeism.

A Holistic Conceptualization of Attendance

The Inuit worldview is incredibly holistic and strongly grounded through interconnectedness and relationships. For Inuit, "all people have mind, body and spirit. The Inuit way of being is built on the relationships between these areas of the individual's life and the rest of the human and natural world" (Tagalik, 2012a). In this thesis, the educator's overall understanding of attendance was complex and holistic, reflecting these values from Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ). In her work with Inuit elders, Shirley Tagalik's described that for Inuit,

IQ focuses on personal wellness as it contributes to the overall collective cultural health and wellness of the community (Tagalik, 2012a). When working with their students, they considered not only the student as an individual, but who they were in relation to their peers, families and other educators in the program. Their understanding of attendance considered the wellness of their students, families and community. This holism is also reflected through the various factors considered in the *Indigenist Ecosystems Model* – the model used to help organize our resulting themes, this model also closely embodies relationships as a part of the development of Indigenous youth.

This complexity in defining school attendance problems is reflected throughout the research literature by the lack of consensus on a universal conceptualization of the topic (Kearney & Gonzálvez, 2022; Smith et al., 2022). While unifying a definition for attendance is not the goal of this paper, making note of its complexities is important. In general, this complexity highlights the numerous factors influencing students' lives regarding attendance and acknowledges the individual differences of these influences that exist for each student. The interactions of these factors have been referred to as a "push" and "pull" – pushing students away from school or pulling them towards home (Boaler & Bond, 2023). The educators in this study acknowledged the pushes and pulls of these influences among their students and used them to inform their approaches to attendance within the learning program. These pushes and pulls reflected a broad, holistic perspective on attendance, as the educator's understanding of attendance centred more on *why* students attended or engaged with their program rather than just their daily physical presence. Heyne and colleagues (2024) recent article defend a broad approach. They argue that thinking of attendance strictly as physical presence (what they deem "seat time") provides only a narrow understanding of the topic – especially when considering increases in online learning environments. Instead, they argue for "unlearning attendance", a shift that considers attendance more broadly to focus on students' *engagement* with their learning (Heyne et al., 2024).

Further, in our conversation, academic success was not a central driver of the reasons for increasing attendance. In absenteeism research, the importance of improving attendance is often grounded in highlighting academic factors related to student success, like academic achievement (Gottfried, 2009) or educational attainment (Christle et al., 2007; Gubbels et al., 2019). However, Instead, the educators emphasized other factors like well-being, strong relationships and

inclusivity as their main reasons for encouraging attendance among their students. In a recent review on absenteeism, Heyne and colleagues (2024) encouraged future academic discourse to reconceptualize attendance as being "…in the service of engagement with learning, which is in the service of learners readiness for adulthood" (p. 4). They align their conceptualization of readiness for adulthood with Kearney and colleagues' (2022) views, where readiness refers to skills students require to be successful in their education and future employment. This reconceptualization includes academic successes as a benefit to increasing attendance rates but also emphasizes other skills important for a student's future outside of academics. This broad approach argues for a change in perspective behind the intent of increasing attendance rates. In this study, the educators' adaptation of this broad approach demonstrates a more holistic conceptualization of attendance. Their intent of increasing student engagement and attendance considers several success factors important to their student's biopsychosocial development, going beyond academic factors. They view supporting their student and their families' basic needs as a prerequisite for encouraging school attendance, further highlighting their holistic conceptualization of attendance. Relatedly in literature, Shankar and colleagues (2024) argue that chronic absenteeism can be used to identify students who are experiencing unmet health and social needs, emphasizing its connection to factors outside of academics and supporting a holistic perspective (Shankar et al., 2024). Interestingly, they argue for an increased role for health systems in addressing absenteeism, further emphasizing this connection (Shankar et al., 2024). This holistic conceptualization of attendance also aligns with the previously described research that situates SAPs as being directly related to well-being factors of students (Eklund et al., 2022; Fornander & Kearney, 2020; Gottfried, 2014; Rogers et al., 2024).

The *Indigenist Ecosystems Model* considers all possible internal and external factors of an Indigenous person's development. In their adapted model for youth mental health, O'Keefe and colleagues (2022) purposefully structured their model broadly and holistically. They defended this model with numerous Indigenous led strength-based case studies. Restructuring their model identifying diversified multi-level approaches to addressing Indigenous youth health and mental health. In our study, the educator's described approaches to attendance that were also diversified, and addressed various sections of the model, mirroring the holism that exists within it. This holism was evidenced by their descriptions of caring for their students and their families' various needs as a precursor to promoting attendance. The needs that the educators recognized and

addressed represent multiple levels of the Indigenist Ecosystems Model framework including culture, history, the youth and immediate contexts. Taking care of these needs was a central aspect to their program. It was presented throughout access to community supports, increased extra curriculars, daily food programs and culturally responsive social work services.

Their holistic understanding of learning is also central to the program as it is reflected through Inuit epistemologies. For Inuit, *Inunnguiniq* is the socialization and education involved in the development of a capable human being (Tagalik, 2012b). *Inunnguiniq* describes a holistic approach to child development, it is the understanding that "every child needs to be made able" (p.1. Tagalik, 2012b).

> Outside of the mainstream diaspora of "holistic" ideologies, holistic learning in the Inuit worldview is deeply embedded within their pedagogical framework. Holistic learning has the intention of building human beings that are whole–that is, someone who from birth is given the physical and emotional tools to become a capable, good, and helpful member of society. This training is taken on by various members of the community and continues throughout the individual's life (Inutiq et al., 2024, p. 5)

This process is understood as being a shared responsibility between anyone who is connected to the child (Tagalik, 2012b). In following this principle, and other IQ principles, the educators demonstrated their responsibility to supporting factors that positively contributed to the healthy development of their Inuit students. This is embodied in how the educator's approached servicing their students and their families. They provide not only academic supports for their students but also provided food, daily physical exercise, eased access to mental and physical health care and allowed them to sleep or rest if they require. They also provided social services to their student's families if needed, recognizing that supporting their students' families allowed their students to thrive as a result. Some supports described in our conversation were related to various aspects of familial well-being such as food, housing and mental or physical health. Additionally, in providing meals and transportation to the school it can lessen the burden on families who are struggling financially.

Strengths-based Perspective and Cultural Awareness of Educators

The educator's conceptualization of attendance relied on how they understood their role as educators for Inuit youth, especially in how they understand the factors that influence their students, and families' views of education. These qualities are deeply routed in the IQ guiding

principles which guides the program's approaches with students and families. Several IQ principles highlight working in service and out of respect for others, representing how educators embodied their role in understanding and working with their student's and families. Namely, *Inuuqatigiitsiarniq* (respecting and caring for others and relationships), *Tunnganarniq* (being open, welcoming and inclusive) and *Pijitsirniq* (serving and providing for community; Tagalik, 2012a). Although, as I am placing my understanding of these principles based on my own experiences and my research, more of them could likely represent the educator's approaches.

In the Indigenist ecosystems model for youth, O'Keefe and colleagues (2022) posit *historical* and *cultural* contexts at the centre to opposed deficit-approaches to research that have previously harmed Indigenous youth. As previously explored, deficit-approaches neglect to identify the historical reasons for which Indigenous youth may experience disparities in success outcomes. Instead, strengths-based models that acknowledge the colonial origins of existing disparities are required when considering the creation of practices and policies meant to improve Indigenous youth well-being. In this study, the educators' approaches to working with their students and families face can be described as strengths based. The educators acknowledged the historical and cultural influences that may have contributed to their student's prior disengagement and poor attendance from school and demonstrated an understanding of these factors. These influences were often included when considering their cultural programming. When I volunteered with the organization I witnessed and participated in lessons and activities surrounding the awareness of Indigenous issues including Every Child's Life Matters movement and for Murdered and Missing Indigenous Woman as well as the importance of Indigenous resilience. Each of the days exploring these issues were filled with reflection from the educators, Inuk and non-Inuk and how they affect Indigenous peoples alike.

Strengths-based approaches are highly present throughout IQ principles. For Inuit, Tagalik's (2012a) outline of IQ, describes strengths-based views as being the heart of their epistemology. She extends this idea, explaining that "…every individual is recognized for strengths he/she possesses, and each family or community group is also recognized for the contributions they make to enhancing the common good" (Tagalik, 2012a, p. 5). It is through learning and embodying of the principles where Inuit can grow into capable individuals who also take care of their community. In working with Inuk Elders, she stressed that the creation of policies meant to improve Inuit livelihoods should focus on cultural proficiency, resilience and

strengths (Tagalik, 2012a). She speaks to IQ as a source of resilience for Inuit, that it is "…grounded in strengths that have sustained Inuit through the many challenges to their cultural beliefs brought through contact, colonization and policies of forced relocation and assimilation. It is these strengths which directly contributed to the wellbeing of Inuit over thousands of years (Tagalik, 2012a, p. 7).

Research seconds this need for a strengths-based lens when working with Indigenous youth. Its necessity is grounded through the notion that Indigenous students and their families have justifiable apprehensions to engage with educators and their schooling as exhibited through the legacy of Residential Schools, racist occurrences in educational settings (Berger et al., 2006; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Louie & Prince, 2023; Milne & Wotherspoon, 2020). Even in the current school system, Indigenous parents have described negative experiences with their children's school and general feelings of being unwelcomed in these environments (Milne & Wotherspoon, 2020). Researchers have therefore identified the need for schools to make meaningful changes in their approach with Indigenous learners (Louie & Prince, 2023; Milne & Wotherspoon, 2020). A strengths-based approach is synonymous to education systems demonstrating an understanding of the issues that their Indigenous families may face. This includes the need for individual administrators and educators to develop cultural awareness in their work with Indigenous youth (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). This cultural awareness and sensitivity of educators (and institutions) have been largely explored as a positive mediating factor in the educational success and well-being of Indigenous youth in school systems (Louie & Prince, 2023; Wotherspoon & and Milne, 2024). Berger and colleagues (2006) study involving Nunavut schools argues that increased awareness and cultural training for non-Inuit educators would likely increase attendance for their students. Educators who demonstrate culturally responsive teaching are suggested to contribute to successful learning for Inuit students (Lewthwaite & McMillan, 2010). Likewise, Inuit who attended post-secondary studies identified that having teachers with knowledge of the North was valued the most during their educational experiences (Rodon et al., 2015). The demand for increasing cultural awareness (or competencies) of Indigenous issues among educators is also reflected in recent curriculum changes in teacher training programs across Canadian institutions (Gorecki & Doyle-Jones, 2021). These programs have aimed to increase educators' competencies in understanding Indigenous issues and working with Indigenous students. (Gorecki & Doyle-Jones, 2021). A recent report highlighted these changes;

Indigenous teacher candidates in Canada described that most of their programs engaged with Indigenous pedagogy to various degrees (Indspire's Research Knowledge Nest, 2024). Unfortunately, as with holistic conceptualizations, there exists little research exploring strengths-based approaches with Indigenous student attendance directly, limiting conclusions that can be made. Generally, a strength-based approach details that schools should support Indigenous students through an intergenerational lens, recognizing the historical and systemic factors that may contribute to the challenges they face in education.

A Multi-Relational Approach to Encouraging Attendance

The educator's understanding and approaches to attendance from this study could be described as multi-relational. Specifically, the educators clearly identified their belief that focusing on fostering positive relationships between their school (staff, peers etc.) and the students (and their families) was a factor of increased attendance since moving to their program. Throughout our conversation, the educators described many ways in which they foster the relationships between these contexts across the program. Students are encouraged to have strong relationships with their peers and the educator's focused on maintaining respectful relationships with their students. Both were observed greatly in my time spent volunteering in the program. Students from different cohorts would often visit one another and participate in whole-school activities with excitement to see each other. Further, the teacher's dedication to their student's well-being as a precursor to their learning, which I have described throughout this thesis, is also an example of this (i.e. taking a nap if needed, being provided food etc.). In the results for this study, the main theme *sense of community*, directly relates to the multi-relational aspects of Inuit student's attendance and engagement and concerns their interactions with their peers, educators, families and community. Relationality is described as a core element of IQ and central to the concept of development for Inuit, *inunnguiniq*. Relationships are seen as essential for respecting stewarding for all living things, they are a driver for Inuit to care for their families and community; "being in relationship relies on respect for the value and place of every other living thing and our mutual interdependence with our past, present and future environments" (Tagalik, 2012a, p.3). This idea of relationality is common throughout many Indigenous epistemologies, and as such, is also represented in the *Indigenist Ecosystems Model* where the well-being of Indigenous youth is understood as mainly holistic *and* relational (O'Keefe et al., 2022). Specifically, the model understands Indigenous youth's well-being as dependent on the

relationship they have with several interconnected factors in their life (i.e. internal, cultural, family, community, environment etc.). Within the framework, this concerns the immediate, surrounding and distant contexts for students (O'Keefe et al., 2022).

General attendance research can extend on these findings, as attendance has been linked to multiple types of positive relationships in educational environments (Heyne et al., 2024; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). These positive effects on attendance from relationships includes having good student-teacher relationships (Anderson, 2022; Ewing et al., 2021) and strong parent/family engagement (Anderson, 2022; Gase et al., 2014; Gubbels, 2019; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Teachers, to some extent, have been directly linked to positively influencing student attendance. Quin's (2017) systematic review correlated strong and positive student-teacher relationships as a factor in promoting student engagement and attendance. Research has suggested that this influence goes beyond a teacher's efficiency in academic delivery and reflects the diverse competencies required for their career (i.e. behaviour management, relationship building, etc.; Gershenson, 2016). These factors are all thought to contribute towards a positive school climate, which increases student's sense of belonging and therefore likely also increases attendance (Ewing et al., 2021; Heyne et al., 2024).

Indigenous (FNIGC, 2020; Louie & Prince, 2023) and Inuit (Anderson, 2022; Arim et al., 2016) youth also thrive in a positive, safe and welcoming school environment. The school climate from these studies is also characterized by healthy relationships between the students, families and their school (Arim et al., 2016; FNIGC, 2020; Louie & Prince, 2023). In a study with post-secondary students from Nunavut, students' relationships with their families, communities and teachers were considered a major determinant of success in high school (Sallaffie et al., 2021). Specifically, authors described the role of these relationships in providing support for the student. According to the Inuit developmental perspectives, the teaching and learning relationship is viewed as a partnership between the child and their educators. The strength of this relationship is interpreted as a vital driver for the effectiveness of the student's learning (Tagalik, 2012b). This relationship also relies on the teacher for providing support to the student for their various learning needs. Relatedly, perceived support was found to be one of the main values for Inuit students in their post-secondary experiences. This support was linked not only as from academic sources, but also from their families.

The relationship between the learning program and the student's families was also deemed important in the results of this study and supporting this relationship another way in which they addressed school attendance. In our conversation, the educators recognized that their families' struggle could cause non-attendance but did not blame them for these instances. Instead, they aimed to support the families to encourage student attendance. The educators discussed involving families in experiences, decisions and were equipped with the capabilities of providing a variety of supports including medical or social services through other departments in their organization, if needed. The inclusion of family engagement and support for addressing SAPs is highly supported through research. As highlighted earlier in this section, family engagement with schools is a contributing factor to school climate. Boaler and Bond's (2023) systematic review highlights the values of school-based approaches to encouraging attendance, with an emphasis on the school's roles for family engagement. This is supported by other studies that consider family engagement as having an influence on attendance (Boaler & Bond, 2023; Eklund et al., 2022). Lenhoff and Pogodzinski's (2018) exploration of school-based approaches for absenteeism in identified that schools who highly involved families experienced lower chronic absenteeism. Increasing parents' involvement in decision making and teacher-parent trust were specifically identified as promising practices (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Research considering Indigenous populations seemingly support family engagement as a promising practice for attendance as well. Parental engagement is suggested as an important aspect of culturally sensitive schooling (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Within Indigenous populations, an emphasis is placed on fostering positive relationships between the school and families as ongoing colonial legacies in schools and cultural issues were identified as factors that hinder Indigenous parents' engagement with their children's schools (Sianturi et al., 2022). The same researchers highlight the support of both students' health and the whole family in improving success factors among Indigenous youth (Sianturi et al., 2022). Strong family-school relations were also identified in studies that investigated success factors for Indigenous students (FNIGC, 2020; Fulford et al., 2007) Among Inuit, parents have expressed a desire for stronger engagement with their children's schools (Ives & Sinha, 2016) and high parental involvement is linked to positive school outcomes for students (Anderson, 2022; Arim et al., 2016). Parent engagement was also identified in the National Strategy on Inuit Education Report as an initiative in their education system. In the report's introductory address, Mary Simon described

its importance; “when parents create a home environment that encourages and supports learning with expectations of success, and schools provide a supportive school environment, achievement in school rises” (ITK, 2014a, p.5).

The Significance of Culturally Sensitive Learning Environments

In our conversation, the educators nodded to several cultural elements of their program as being likely factors in promoting student attendance and engagement. Notably, their program’s values and cultural programming, especially the frequency with which they try to incorporate Inuktitut and Inuit teachings into their daily operations and alongside curriculum. At the program the students are constantly exposed to Inuit culture including teachings, crafts and cultural foods. During my time there I was fortunate enough to experience some of these activities with students; I ate cultural food (caribou stew, Bannock and Muktuk – whale skin and blubber) and helped students carve out Qulliqs (traditional oil lamp) from soapstone. I will remember these moments strongly, as I could always tell how special they were for the students; they were excited, engaged and respectful throughout each of them. They reminded me of when I began reconciling my identity and started integrating more cultural practices into my daily life. I began beading several years ago as a part of this process, which I was later able to learn and share with some students in the program.

IQ is a foundation for wellbeing for Inuit; it is essential for the wellbeing of current and future generations of Inuit. In her journey to document IQ with Inuit elders, Tagalik (2012a) refers to the term cultural health, which includes a “… sense of identity, the collective social supports for the individual, and the sense of belonging grounded in loving, healthy and supportive relationships” (p. 3). Cultural health is also described as a basis for every other kind of health for Inuit and stands as the key to nurture healthy individuals. As such, IQ has been suggested to be utilized as a foundation to the creation of health and education policies to better our care systems for Inuit (Canadian Council on Learning., 2007; Mashford-Pringle & Pavagadhi, 2020; Tagalik, 2012a). In education literature, culturally sensitive approaches in education have been linked to promoting Indigenous student attendance in varying degrees (Crooks et al., 2017; Education Connections, 2017; Fulford et al., 2007). In these studies, cultural factors related to positive outcomes in attendance involved the inclusion of Indigenous language instruction, cultural identity/aspects in learning opportunities and having mentors from the same cultural backgrounds as students (Crooks et al., 2017; Education Connections, 2017;

Fulford et al., 2007). The *Indigenist Ecosystems Model* posits cultural contexts as an influence stemming from within the Indigenous youth and describes the need to embed cultural knowledges and values to interventions for them (O'Keefe et al., 2022). Given the earlier described potential cultural clash between Indigenous experiences and mainstream schooling environments, culturally sensitive programming mirrors the need for a holistic, strengths-based conceptualization of absenteeism as presented in this thesis. In this context, culturally sensitive approaches integrate Indigenous knowledges, community and education in schooling environments for Indigenous youth (Overmars, 2010) Overall, the integration of Indigenous knowledge systems into schooling practices has found positive outcomes for students (Overmars, 2010; Wotherspoon & and Milne, 2024). It is also outlined in the TRCs Calls to Action for education as a means towards reconciliation by decolonizing school systems (TRC, 2015).

The educator's culturally sensitive practices reflect the program's culturally sensitive approach to working with their students and exhibits likely reasons for the success they have had regarding attendance and engagement. Their practices are deeply rooted in Inuit IQ principles. Their aim to create an inclusive environment and respectful relationships with their students and families maintains *tunnganarniq* and *Inuuqatigiitsiarniq*. Their collaborative approaches between families, teachers, cultural educators and mental health workers embodies *aajiiqatigijnniq, ikajuqtigiinniq* and *pijitsirniq*. Finally, their approaches to pedagogy and learning skills reflects *pilimmaksarniq*. Repeatedly, the educators described the need for students to see themselves in their learning and feel what they are learning is relevant to their way of life. Louie and Prince (2023) reinforce these ideals in their work identifying success factors for Indigenous youth in education:

> We contend that Canadian schools should consider: an emphasis on building positive relationships crucial for Indigenous student success, Indigenous students seeing themselves in their learning, teachers and administration participating in ongoing professional development bespoke for their context and continuing growing their skills and knowledge and building an inclusive and welcoming school environment based on equity not equality (p. 28).

While absenteeism research on Inuit and other Indigenous populations is scant, studies that focus on educational attainment within these populations could help explain the factors identified in this study. For Inuit specifically, it has been identified that school systems should

not exist in the absence of IQ principles and its underlying processes (Canadian Council on Learning., 2007). A lack of cultural significance in curriculum is often attributed towards lower educational attainment rates among Inuit (ITK, 2014b). In contrast, inclusions of Inuit context alongside curricula have been demonstrated as an effective practice for engaging Inuit learners (Lewthwaite & McMillan, 2010). Research also details that Inuit high school and post-secondary students have a desire for more culturally grounded teachings alongside traditional curriculum in their school experiences (Rodon et al., 2015; Sallaffie et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2020). Finally, Inuit children who learned their ancestral language in school are more likely to achieve academically and had higher motivations for attending school (Guèvremont & Kohen, 2012).

Models of learning that aimed to integrate Inuit perspectives on schooling further demonstrate the need for culturally sensitive approaches. The *Inuit Holistic Lifelong Learning Model* (Canadian Council on Learning., 2007) and the *Qaujigiartiit Model of Holistic Learning* (Inutiq et al., 2024) are two learning models that were developed as a holistic pedagogical approach to Inuit education. Both were developed alongside Inuit communities and centre the belief that embedding culture into mainstream education will increase the chances for Inuit students to succeed in school environments (Canadian Council on Learning., 2007; Inutiq et al., 2024). The educators from this thesis also made direct reference and praise for the *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit Education Framework* written by the Nunavut Department of Education (Nunavut Department of Education, n.d.a). This foundational document for education in Nunavut along with the inclusive education and assessment guidelines were all developed with Inuit epistemology as the base framework for success for their learners (see Nunavut Department of Education, n.d.b for links to each document). These models and educational documents also emphasize lifelong learning and factors for success that extend beyond academic means, indicating the necessity for cultural sensitivity in learning environments. While they do not directly address absenteeism, it is fair to assume that their dedication to developing positive learning environments for students is likely to encourage school attendance.

To the educators in this study, representation was another essential element of their culturally sensitive practices. To them, representation included their cultural programming, but it also involved the presence of Inuit community for the students. This community representation involved the students Inuk peers, educators, Elders and other Inuk individuals who engaged with the program (through workshops, guest speakers etc.). The educators also pointed out how

important representation was for aiding student belonging and safety, stressing that students chose to come to school because it was a space that reflected their identities. Given that previous research that has reported on Indigenous students feeling of discriminated against, alienated or underrepresented in their schools, the positive influence of representation can be interpreted as crucial for school attendance (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Milne & Wotherspoon, 2020).

One notable element of representation the educators in this study highlighted was that each student is surrounded by other Inuk peers: sharing cultural identity and similar experiences of moving to or growing up in the south. Some research has described a critical role for Inuit student's engagement with peers alongside cultural programming in schools (Wood et al., 2020). Being a part of a close learning community with other Inuk learners also contributed positively to the experiences of Inuit in southern post-secondary programs. It allowed them to feel connected to other individuals who could relate to their experiences, views and speak their language (Rodon et al., 2015). Relatedly, this thesis highlighted the importance of representation of Inuit educators and other Inuit staff in the learning program as a positive influence for attendance. Research strongly supports representation of educators or mentors in schools as an indicator for success for all Indigenous students (Canadian School Boards Association - Indigenous & Education Committee, 2018; Crooks et al., 2017; Fulford et al., 2007; Wotherspoon & and Milne, 2024). While not directly named as attendance, it was implied in these studies that teacher representation was a likely reason for students wanting to engage with their schools.

Recommendations for Practice

As outlined earlier in this discussion, shifting perspectives to a more holistic framework for success factors of education may be a more equitable approach to conceptualizing attendance for Inuit students. Holistic approaches to education are often considered as synonymous with Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Canadian Council on Learning., 2007; Toulouse & People for Education, 2016). This is also reflected in the *Indigenist Ecosystems Model* for Indigenous youth that guides this thesis (O'Keefe et al., 2022). As such, there is a need to decolonize understandings of academic success and attendance as graduation or academic success are often operationalized through Western perspectives (Milne & Wotherspoon, 2023). Several initiatives have called for a redefining of what constitutes learning success in educations environments for Indigenous students (Canadian Council on Learning., 2007; FNIGC, 2020;

Tagalik, 2012b; Toulouse & People for Education, 2016). Among Inuit populations, there are strong correlations between educational attainment and well-being, socio-economic status or income security (ITK, 2014a, 2014b). Further, Inuit understand reaching success as a lifelong period, one that is not defined by progress within the school system. Lifelong learning for Inuit details that an "…individual can become skilled and capable at any age" (Inutiq et al., 2024, p. 6). Evidence for redefining success is also apparent through Inuit individuals' reasons for pursuing education. Inuit individuals who had attended post-secondary institutions cited personal goals, enjoyment of learning, becoming a role model and contributing to their communities as the main motivators for pursuing their studies (Rodon et al., 2015). Academic and life skills were also mentioned but were ranked much lower than other factors (Rodon et al., 2015). Additionally, some research describes Inuit students as having a fragmented understanding of the relationship between success and attending school. In some cases, having school success was described as pushing students away from their culture (Garakani, 2016; Wood et al., 2020). Further, Berger and colleagues (2006) research with Inuit and non-Inuit educators in Nunavut described those current conceptualizations on the relationship between attendance and success stem from Western colonial understandings, inadvertently skewing perspectives on educational outcomes of Indigenous students. Unfortunately, most of the research considering a holistic perspective on success factors for Indigenous youth do not directly address SAPs. Although, a set of case studies in schools that have found success among their Indigenous learners specifically highlighted the schools' proactivity's in addressing attendance rates, linking its improvement with other positive outcome factors for Indigenous students (Fulford et. al, 2007). This study also attributed holistic approaches as being a main factor for the school's successes (Fulford et al., 2007). Redefining the lens through which we interpret "academic success" as more holistic is therefore a likely approach to increasing attendance rates for Inuit youth, as current definitions of academic success may erase or harm their cultural identities and aligns poorly with their epistemologies.

The holistic understanding of attendance extends into a recommendation for schools to extend their capacities and supports available for their Indigenous students. These supports are diversified and should consider many cultural and socioeconomic influences that Indigenous students and their families may experience, as described earlier in this thesis. The need for schooling environments that can respond to these potential disproportionate needs for Indigenous

communities is crucial for student attendance and success. This need is demonstrated by the relationship between educational attainment as a strong social determinant of Indigenous health and well-being. Namely, educational attainment is associated with increased positive life outcomes for Indigenous peoples and their communities (The National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2017). The National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (2017) described education as playing a "transformative role in Canadian society" and "critical for advancing reconciliation and improving relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada" (p. 7). The educators' views in this thesis demonstrated that promoting attendance is also promoting educational attainment. To achieve this, their program demonstrated their capacity to support their Inuit learners and families through addressing any barriers they identified as preventing them from wanting to engage with schooling from a strengths-based and culturally aware lens. The "barriers" that the educator's identified and worked to address among their students and their families experience throughout this study played a crucial role in their promotion of attendance within the program. As previously highlighted, their means to address these issues included strong cultural programming (i.e. relating curriculum to cultural practices, access to cultural teachings and workshops, Inuktitut language instruction, Inuk representation of educators etc.), daily food programs for students, provide transportation and access to health and social services. Given this, a holistic approach to working with Inuit students also includes the development of supports in schools that work to address all factors that may impede student attendance, including cultural and socioeconomic influences that affect their families.

These supports and recommendations, however, are not achievable without continued dedication to reconciliation efforts by government and educational institutions, which includes how they address the educational Calls to Action set forth by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). In recent years, the Canadian federal government, alongside provincial governments, have presented some of their efforts to address these Calls to Action, these include an increase in funding and resources for Indigenous students in mainstream and on-reserve schools to address the existing disparities (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2024a; Ministry of Education, n.d.). However, while these changes demonstrate a positive movement towards supporting the education of Indigenous students, systemic inequities still exist. Despite there being some funding increases since the Calls to Action in

2015, there have been some concerns about backloading of promised funds, delays to updating curriculum that reflect Indigenous epistemologies and concerns with access to qualified teachers and resources for special education in First Nation schools (Hodgson-Bautista & Hopson, 2023; Jewell & Mosby, 2020; Ouelette & Peyret, 2024). Further, there exists a concern with data in how government responses have affected Indigenous student success. In a previous report critiquing the government's response to the Calls to Action, the Yellowhead Institute stated that the government failed to provide "the basic data necessary to assess the current status of the funding gap between provincially funded schools and First Nations schools", making it difficult to ensure accountability for their promises (Jewell & Mosby, 2020, p. 10). Their report lists similar concerns with Calls to Action that relate to funding and initiatives for Indigenous languages in schools. This included a case in 2020 where funding inequity for students in Nunavut Inuktitut schools was significant compared to students attending francophone schools in the region (Jewell & Mosby, 2020). This report and their newest update (see Jewell & Mosby, 2023) caution that while some progress exists, there remains significant work to be done as in 2023, eight years after the Calls to Action were introduced, only 81 out of the 94 had been addressed. People for Education made a similar conclusion in their report the on the Ontario's ministry of education's progress in addressing the Calls to Action (Hodgson-Bautista & Hopson, 2023). They also called out poorly executed partnerships with Indigenous partners when developing curriculum and a provincial lack of data for tracking Indigenous student success.

Although these issues do not directly speak to attendance problems, they highlight the existing need for education ministries and schools in the country to continue working towards reconciliation and the Calls to Action. This thesis highlights the power of culture, community and language in the success of Inuit student success. In relation to the concerns described above, I therefore also support the recommendation of governments and educational institutions to continue to dedicating funding, programs and policies aimed at increasing the success of Indigenous students, with full transparency and in collaboration with Indigenous communities.

Limitations and Future Considerations

This project recognizes the existing gap in the literature that explores absenteeism among Indigenous youth in Canada today. This project is only the beginning of explorations of this topic, and while this is an important milestone, it sets the tone for more research to contribute to our understanding of Indigenous student attendance issues. Despite the novelty and contributions

of this study towards Indigenous student attendance issues, several limitations should be noted. The first considers the context of this case study that led to the development of this research. When our research partnership developed, the program had already identified their successes in improving attendance rates and engagement for their learners. It should also be noted that the program was created out of necessity for students who were already struggling with issues related to engagement and absenteeism. This allowed our study to have insight into students who were experiencing attendance issues and while this provides context into factors likely contributing to promoting attendance, it does not allow a complete understanding of absenteeism among urban Inuit students and may be subject to positive biases.

Further, given that the program is operated by an Indigenous non-profit, it is more likely that educators involved in our study have strong prerequisite knowledge and interests in improving outcomes among Inuit learners. Similarly, as some educators are Inuk themselves, implementation of their cultural programming vastly differs from the capabilities of other schools or programs that have urban Inuit learners. While this is a benefit to the program itself, it does limit our conceptualizations generalizability as not all educators who work with urban Inuit youth are likely to have the same prerequisite cultural knowledges or interests as the educators involved in our study. Additionally, this study considered urban Inuit students within a small alternative learning program. Within this program, students have small class sizes and access to several resources such as daily food programs and cultural programming opportunities. Mainstream schools may be more limited in their funding and ability to provide access to the same level of resources and specific-cultural programming. Mainstream schools are also often more diverse and require several special education initiatives for various student populations with equitably needs. As a result, these findings and recommendations may not translate easily towards urban Inuit learners in mainstream schools.

Future research in this area should consider the conceptualizations of absenteeism from other groups of Indigenous students to allow for diversification of policies aimed to address absenteeism. For Inuit students specifically, future efforts should focus on urban Inuit students who are in mainstream schools and are currently experiencing school attendance problems to further identify areas of support for these students. Additionally, while educators' perspectives are valuable in research and often a source of understanding issues relevant to students, it also limits our conceptualization. To further the understanding of attendance among urban Inuit

communities and other Indigenous student populations, future research should involve more community members who are involved in student's lives such as parents/caretakers, Elders, and the students themselves. Compiling perspectives from across Indigenous communities would help develop a deeper understanding of the topic and provide evidence that could be used towards more meaningful policies and practices for these students. It would also be interesting to pursue studies for contextualizing absenteeism among Indigenous students in within-community schools (also referred to as on-reserve), where Indigenous students are often much of the student body and educators are more likely to have a higher understanding of the student's culture and community. Finally, as there is a limited set of research available on Inuit student attendance in Canada, this study drew on research from other facets of education (academic success, attainment etc.) and from other Indigenous populations to assist in our conclusions. As discussed earlier, current measures of academic success are often considered through the perspective of western colonial worldviews, which may further limit findings when these perspectives are placed on Indigenous student success. Additionally, while diverging research from across Indigenous populations is common, as many government and educational policies are developed to address all Indigenous students collectively, this diverging also identifies an issue across research and policy as treating Indigenous peoples as a monolith, which does not properly situate the views of diverse Indigenous nations. Future research and policies should therefore focus on preventing a monolith view to addressing educational practices with Indigenous student's and focus on collecting various viewpoints so that it may serve all Indigenous students equally. Specifically, future research aiming to conceptualize attendance within Indigenous populations should aim to diversify findings by working with different Indigenous nations.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

This case study conceptualized attendance from the perspective of educators of urban Inuit youth in a culturally specific program. The findings from this study aimed to add to the literature of understanding the needs of Inuit youth in urban educational spaces, as understood by their educators. The educator's conceptualizations of attendance are strengths-based holistic, and culturally driven, reflecting the inclusion of Inuit ways of being and knowing. Their conceptualization involves the understanding of historical and cultural influences that their students experience. Furthermore, their perspective on outcomes related to school attendance encompasses more than just the academic achievements typically prioritized in Canadian

schools. This is essential given that this school system still largely consists of practices that use a western colonial approach with Indigenous students, which has demonstrated a history of negative experiences for Inuit and other Indigenous families in Canadian schools (Canadian Council on Learning., 2007). The educators from this study considered these negative experiences their students had in previous schools to inform their approach, experiences which are also demonstrated in research, suggesting that cultural conflicts in school systems can be a barrier to school attendance for Indigenous students. The aspects of the program the educator's suggested to encouraging attendance therefore involved culturally sensitive practices. Though there is a lack research that focuses specifically on Inuit student attendance, promising practices with these students share similarities to the conclusions made in this study. This includes the representations of culture and language throughout their instruction and the presence of Inuit educators and staff within the learning space. This is consistent with literature that concerns Inuit and other Indigenous students, where these factors have demonstrated relationships with academic success (FNIGC, 2020) and attendance (Rogers & Aglukark, 2024).

Given the results of this study, practices aimed at increasing attendance for urban Inuit youth may therefore also require a strengths-based, holistic and culturally sensitive approach to encourage student engagement and positive success outcomes. Therefore, approaches informed through these conceptualizations of attendance within this study may be a promising approach to addressing high rates of absenteeism among Inuit youth. These practices may also potentially extend to Indigenous youth given that holistic underpinnings of development are consistent among Indigenous populations. The National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health's (2017) report on education as a social determinant for Indigenous peoples mirror this implication; "for many Indigenous people, learning is holistic, lifelong, land-based, experiential, rooted in Indigenous languages and cultures, spiritually oriented, and a communal activity, involving family, community and elders" (p. 7). However, I do acknowledge each school's capability to provide this approach for each Indigenous student depends on their funding, educators and relations to Indigenous communities. As such, another focus should be placed on the responsibility of teacher education programs and school boards to promote and provide cultural awareness training for their staff as well as foster strong relationships with their Indigenous communities and partners. Altogether, a framework addressing SAPs for Indigenous students should consider the relational, intergenerational and historical factors that exist among

these populations. Moreover, this framework should also aim to conceptualize learning from their cultural worldviews; encouraging holistic determinants of learning that also include the well-being of their families and communities.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

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Staff Focus Group

STUDY NAME: Exploring Intersections of School Attendance and Mental Health among Children and Youth

WHO ARE WE AND WHAT ARE WE DOING?
Our names are Jess Whitley, Maria Rogers, and David Smith, and we work in the Faculty of Education and School of Psychology at the University of Ottawa. We are partnering with mental health agencies and school boards in the Ottawa region in order to better understand school attendance and participation in school. This study has received funding through a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Partnership Development grant.

WHO CAN TAKE PART?
You can take part if you are a staff member employed by either (a) a mental health agency serving youth and families in Eastern Ontario, (b) the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, or (c) the Ottawa Catholic School Board.

WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?
You will be asked to share your thoughts and feelings about, and experiences with, school attendance, participation, and mental health during a 40-minute focus group. More specifically, you will be asked to discuss the ways that school attendance and participation are understood and measured within your agency/school, and your perspective on the presentation of school attendance/participation issues among your clientele/students who seek mental health care.

The focus group will be conducted via Zoom and will be audio recorded.

HOW DOES TAKING PART HELP?
Some people enjoy having a voice and sharing their personal experiences and stories. What you share will help us better understand school attendance and participation so we can try to improve services for youth.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO TAKING PART?
During the conversation you may choose to share some difficult experiences which can be upsetting. You are welcome to take a break, skip questions or end the conversation at any time.

DO YOU GET ANYTHING FOR TAKING PART?
Everyone who takes part will receive a $15 gift card as a small thank you for their time.

WHO WILL KNOW YOU TOOK PART AND WHAT YOU SAID?
Everything you say during our conversation will be kept private. However, because there will be other people in the focus group, they will know what you have said. We would ask you and the other people in the group to keep everything that was said in the group private, and not to share who was in the group. Outside of these participants, no one from your agency or school board will know you took part. The information you share will only be used for reports and presentations. We will never use your name, specific location or any other identifying information you provide (for example, the name of a school) in any

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report or presentation. If something you say is used in a report, a fake name or a descriptor like "a staff member in Ottawa" would be used. By participating in an online or telephone focus group, someone around you may overhear what you are saying. It is therefore important that you plan well for the focus group in a place that provides you with a minimum of privacy.

HOW DO WE KEEP YOUR INFORMATION SAFE?

The audio recordings and transcripts will be kept on a password-protected laptop belonging to Jess Whitley. Transcripts will also be stored securely using encryption on Microsoft OneDrive. The audio recordings and transcripts of our conversation will be given a code instead of using your name. Only Jess Whitley will have access to the password protected file that links the code with your name.

HOW LONG DO WE KEEP YOUR INFORMATION?

The information you share along with the audio recordings and transcripts of our conversation will be kept indefinitely.

CAN YOU CHANGE YOUR MIND ABOUT TAKING PART?

You do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you choose to take part, you can skip questions or end the conversation at any time. You will still receive a $15 gift card if you decide to stop taking part. If you do choose to stop taking part, we will not be able to remove what you've shared so far because it will be part of the group conversation.

QUESTIONS?

If you have any questions about taking part, let us know by getting in touch with one of our team members listed below. If you have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, you can contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, Tel.: (613) 562-5387, Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

Please print or save a copy of this consent form for your personal records.

YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT IS INVOLVED AND WANT TO TAKE PART.

You have read and understood what is involved and agree to take part in the above study led by Jess Whitley, Maria Rogers, and David Smith of the Faculty of Education and School of Psychology at the University of Ottawa. *(Participant will provide verbal consent or write a note indicating agreement in the video chat box once they have reviewed the consent form with the researcher.)*

THANK YOU ON BEHALF OF OUR TEAM.

Jess Whitley Principal Investigator Faculty of Education University of Ottawa jwhitley@uottawa.ca 613-562-5800 (ext. 4963)	Maria Rogers Co-Investigator School of Psychology University of Ottawa Maria.Rogers@uottawa.ca 613-562-5800 (ext. 4131)	David Smith Co-Investigator Faculty of Education University of Ottawa David.Smith@uottawa.ca 613-562-5800 (ext. 4344)	Natasha McBrearty Co-Investigator Crossroads Children's Mental Health Centre nmcbrearty@crossroadschildren.ca 613-723-1623 (ext. 222)	Amanda Krause Research Assistant School of Psychology University of Ottawa mentalhealthtogether@uottawa.ca	Julie Aalders Research Assistant Faculty of Education University of Ottawa mentalhealthtogether@uottawa.ca

Appendix B: Research Assistant's Notes from the Sharing Circle

Survey

How would you describe the program to someone who has never heard of it before? Can you describe how you work with students in your program?

- Goal to support students in accessing technology in response to COVID-19
- Alternative school with supportive network of professionals
- Space for students to stay connected with their culture and language
- To help students feel valued, support learning and engagement with school, and empower them as future leaders in society
- Inclusive space where student and teacher expectations are co-created (collaborative approach to teaching and learning). Everyone takes care of the space together.
- Cross-curricular approach (Ontario education but culturally responsive)
    - Curriculum from the Inuit Perspective ("Bible" for teaching)
    - Emphasis on working with IQ principles
- Community collaboration
- Different from mainstream schools such that hands-on experiential learning through workshops and activities is central to learning as much as possible

Feedback from students and families

- Parents have provided positive feedback in that the program support all aspects of child's well-being (not just academic) and kids are happy
- Kids genuinely love being at the hubs (e.g., attendance rates are impressive even on snow days)
- Family members expressed interest in joining field trips
- Staff always receive full consent from families for new activities added to the curriculum

School Attendance

How do you understand attendance?

- Being physically present at school = attendance
- Even if students come in late, as long as they show up this is celebrated and considered a full day of attendance.
- Prioritize basic needs and well-being (safety) within the school environment (e.g., providing a space to take naps and offering snacks)
- Attendance as the foundation and gateway to engagement and building relationships

Relationships with partner schools

- Teachers have been understanding, flexible, and willing to make accommodations.

- Teachers feel limited in their roles (constricted by the Ontario educational curriculum) and do what they can to center experiential learning and prioritize relationship building between peers and students and staff members.

What encourages students to attend your program?

- Working with IQ principles
- Sense of community ("home") and loving relationships
- Staff members are like parents to the students
- Students can be themselves and their voices are prioritized and centered
- Teacher openness and transparency, collaborative
    - Family-oriented relationships
    - Not mainstream authoritative relationships

What are some of the issues that children and families face?

- Trauma from mainstream schools (identity and cultural erasure)
- Intergenerational trauma
- Accessible housing concerns (jumping b/w shelters)
- Food insecurity
- Hygiene
- Underlying exceptionalities

All these factors interfere with school attendance.

What can other programs and schools learn from you?

- IQ principles
- Prioritize relationships
- Student-centered approach that's collaborative
- Support "whole-child" approach (e.g., staff and resources that support all aspects of child's health and well-being)
- Seeing students as part of family unit
- Mainstream educators should "learn to unlearn", question your positionality and approach and dominant narratives, and be willing to adapt and learn new things (be student-centered in approach to education)
- Normalize showing love and affection to students

Appendix C: Interview Guide

General Questions

- How would you define **school attendance** to someone who didn't know what it meant?
- Do you think school attendance is important?
- What are some ways in which school attendance affects the students/families you work with?
- What do you think is the source of school attendance problems for the Inuit students/families that you work with?
- In general, and based on your experience, what do you believe encourages the Inuit students you have worked with to attend school more?
    - What do you believe discourages or prevents Inuit students from attending school?

Program Specific

- How would you describe your program to someone who has never heard of them before?
    - Can you describe your role at the program?
- Have the students/families that you work with given you feedback about the program? If so, what have they told you?
- Can you describe how you work with the students at your program?
- What makes your organization's approach similar or unique from other programs?
- Can you describe how you work with the families/parents of students in your program?
- To the best of your knowledge, does participating in your program affect (improve/worsen) students' attendance in school?
    - If improves: what specific elements do you feel helps to improve students' attendance?
    - If no effect: why do you feel that there is no effect on students' attendance?
    - If worsens: what specific elements, do you feel are negatively affecting students' attendance? Is there anything you believe is missing that needs to be provided?
- Is there anything you believe your program can do differently to help Inuit students attend school more?

Appendix D: Table of Codes and Themes

Codes	Sub-Theme	Theme	Represented IQ Principles	Frequency	Total
Aknowledging Past Harms	The Family Unit	Recognizing the Barriers to Attendance	Tunnganarniq, Inuuqatigiitsiarniq, Pijitsirniq	3	31
Barriers to Education				16	
Recognizing Needs of Students				12	
Advocating for Students	Open and Authentic Staff	Creating a Supportive Community	Inuuqatigiitsiarniq, Tunnganarniq, Pijitsirniq, Aajiiqatigiinniq, Ikajuqtigiinniq, Qanuqtuurniq	3	42
Authenticity				3	
Educator's Dedication to Students				20	
Team of Supportive Staff				7	
Learning Supports				9	
Supporting the Students (Hollistically)	The Family Unit			17	42
Community-Mindedness				13	
Showing and Teaching Caring				12	
Cultural Elements	Cultural Sensitivity	Representing Students	Inuuqatigiitsiarniq, Tunnganarniq, Pijitsirniq, Aajiiqatigiinniq, Pijariuqsarniq	20	31
Language				7	
Using Inuit Resources				4	
Engaging the Students	Promoting Agency			6	31
Sense of Belonging				10	
Extra-Curricular Elements				8	
Encouraging Their Voice				7	