
SECONDARY SCHOOL AND POST-SECONDARY RETENTION AMONG INDIGENOUS STUDENTS:

More Favourable Conditions in the Essipit Community?



Alexandra Mansour, Social Worker

Danielle Maltais, Full Professor, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi

Mathieu Cook, Professor, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi

To cite this article >

Mansour, A. et al. (2019). *Secondary School and Post-Secondary Retention among Indigenous Students: More Favourable Conditions in the Essipit Community?* Journal of Perseverance and Academic Achievement for First Peoples, 3, p. 86-89.

The portrait of school attendance in Indigenous areas often highlights its negative aspects. For example, in 2001, in Canada, 48% of Indigenous adults had not completed high school, while the rate was 31% for all Canadian (National Council of Welfare, 1998; 2007). Similarly, we note that the graduation rate of young people from various First Nations communities in Quebec is lower than the Quebec average (Lévesque & Polèse, 2015). Thus, in 2011, 37.7% of Indigenous students had not graduated from high school, compared to 21.6% for the entire Quebec population (Statistics Canada, 2011). Moreover, the Quebec government is concerned that “in 2008–2009, out of every 100 [First Nations] students

who have left general education, only 14 had obtained a diploma or qualification [and that] the annual drop-out rate was close to 92%” (ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2013, p.17). In addition, according to the National Council of Welfare, there are several “push factors” that would encourage these students to drop out of school—such as the exclusion and racism experienced in non-Indigenous educational institutions. School drop-out rates of First Nations students would also result from pull factors—such as financial need and the attractiveness of employment.

Few studies in Quebec, however, focus on persevering or "returning" Indigenous students (Joncas, 2013), despite a trend towards higher enrollment rates (Lévesque & Polèse, 2015). Moreover, according to Joncas, "the educational success of First Nations people, which were disastrous, is improving at all levels of education" (p. 2). Again, although many advances and initiatives are being implemented within First Nations communities, the dimensions related to school perseverance in this part of the population remain poorly documented (Perron & Côté, 2015).

However, the picture of student retention seems rather encouraging in the Essipit Innu community. This Indigenous reservation, located along the St. Lawrence River and 155 kilometres from the City of Saguenay, is enclaved by the Municipality of Les Escoumins. In 2011, there were 247 individuals, 26% of whom were 25 years of age or younger (Statistics Canada, 2012). In 2016, only 10.1% of the population aged 15 or older was not in paid employment or looking for a job (Statistics Canada, 2018).

The community offers various services to its members and owns several businesses. However, there is no primary or secondary school. The youths of Essipit must therefore pursue their studies in the surrounding municipalities of Les Escoumins or Les Bergeronnes.

According to data provided by the Band Council, the 47 young people in this community, aged 12 and 29, attended, in 2015, either a secondary school, a vocational training centre, a CEGEP or a university. The authorities in place claim that the last cases of school drop-out date back eight or nine years.

In order to better understand the reality of Essipit's youth, a qualitative descriptive study was conducted, in the fall of 2016 and winter of 2017, to answer the following research question: *What are the personal, family, school and social reasons and factors that promote school perseverance among Indigenous youth in the Essipit community?*

Methodology

Nine youths over the age of 13, including eight women and one man, participated in a semi-structured interview (Royer, Baribeau, & Duchesne, 2009). All the young people were interviewed in French since it is their language of use, both school and at home. Among them, four respondents were in secondary school at the time of data collection, two were attending a CEGEP and three were enrolled in a Quebec university.

Three different interview guides were used depending on the level of education of each respondent (secondary, college or university). The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and the interviewer made every effort to rephrase the questions to the respondents when necessary. The majority of the interviews were conducted at the participants' homes

to make them feel more comfortable. The material collected was then subjected to a thematic analysis (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2012).

Results

Reasons for perseverance

Analysis of the respondents' comments revealed elements that encouraged them to pursue their studies. These reasons for perseverance can be grouped into four broad categories: 1) employability, 2) acquiring new knowledge and graduation, 3) practising sports and 4) influence of significant people.

First of all, employability remains the main reason encouraging respondents to remain in school. They continue their education to find jobs that will please them, which will meet their personal and professional expectations, and will offer them optimal salary and working conditions, while intellectually stimulating them. As such, they have the desire to be competitive in the labour market, which is often recognized as one of the reasons for school perseverance (Dubet, 1994; Timmons, 2009). Obtaining a job that meets their aspirations seems to encourage respondents to complete their current studies, or even to pursue them at the college or university level.

Moreover, many of the respondents like to acquire new knowledge that will serve them in the long term, that is, for the duration of their academic and professional career. For them, this is a goal in itself: obtaining the diploma for which they study and accessing higher levels of education. This perspective is therefore a source of motivation.



Sports also play an important role in school perseverance for many of them. Indeed, being physically fit contributes to the success of their studies. Moreover, practising a team sport, within a sport-studies program or during extracurricular activities, motivated one of the respondents to pursue higher education. In this regard, Action Réussite (2013) considers that sport-study programs allow young people to persevere in their school careers, increase their motivation, create a sense of belonging and positively change their perception of school.

Finally, the presence of significant people allowed respondents to feel supported, encouraged and led them to pursue their education. For example, these people are teachers who, through their attitudes, their way of teaching and their availability, have played a significant role in the educational path of these young people. In other situations, professionals from the Essipit community offered them valuable advice and unconditional support. Parents and friends, with their attentive presence and continuous encouragement, have also been identified as sources of inspiration. These individuals have played a role of "resilience tutors", which means that they have adopted positive behaviours towards youths, such as encouragement, listening and help. They therefore contributed to their development (Anaut, 2006) by encouraging them to excel in their studies.

Protective factors

In addition to these reasons for remaining in school, various protective factors were identified in respondents' comments, whether they were personal, family, school or social protection factors. On the personal level, respondents consider that certain traits of their personality, lifestyle and personal values contribute to their ambition to obtain a qualifying degree. For example, having good social skills, good self-esteem, being able to assert oneself, and good physical health encourages them to continue their studies. In addition, not having paid employment while studying, having values related to academic success and perseverance, not consuming alcohol or drugs, and finally positive self-image as students are also among the personal protective factors observed by the respondents.

With respect to family protection factors, Essipit Indigenous youths believe that adequate cohesion and proper management of disagreements or conflicts within their families facilitate their continued education. Parents' commitment to their children's academic success is concretely translated into homework help, moral support, encouragement, healthy communication, establishing a routine and defining and respecting disciplinary rules. All these elements are factors that influence school retention and success.

As for academic protection factors, a positive experience of transitions between different levels of education, assistance received during acts of bullying, as well as support from school staff for the completion of the work were highlighted by the responders. Mechanisms for consultation between schools and professionals in the Essipit community, the offer of extracurricular activities and the presence of teachers with whom it is possible to develop positive and meaningful relationships are also among the protective factors mentioned by the students interviewed.

Finally, for the social protection factors, the youths stress the importance of quality relations maintained with the members of their entourage, particularly with friends attentive and available in case of need.

The positive perception that Indigenous students have of the social support they have received and the attendance of peers who wish to continue their education until they obtain a qualifying diploma are also elements that seem to positively influence their success and perseverance. At the Essipit community level, academic success is highly valued, and students have access to financial assistance to pursue their studies. This is a significant element, which may explain the high rate of perseverance among these young people.

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Conclusion

As this study shows, it is possible to address the issue of school drop-out in a positive way, particularly by exploring, in communities with more encouraging levels of success, the factors fostering perseverance and reducing the desire to drop out of school. The comments made by the nine participants revealed many reasons and protective factors that foster perseverance at various levels of education, from secondary school to university.

Although this study is useful in reflecting on the conditions for success of First Nations students, the possibility of generalizing the results to all First Nations communities is rather limited. First, Essipit youths attend primary schools managed by the Quebec education system near their community, which can help reduce the cultural shock that they often experience when they leave their community to pursue high school, college or university studies (Lévesque & Polèse, 2015). Furthermore, the sample, because of its relatively small and homogeneous composition,



is not demographically representative. It should also be noted that these young people's mother tongue is French and not an Indigenous language, whereas for other First Nations youths, French is a second language. Finally, Essipit's socio-economic context is rather favourable, compared to that of other more disadvantaged communities.

It is important to continue research on the protective factors relating to academic success and retention among First Nations students, as each community has its own realities and challenges to address. Conducting in-depth studies in many of these communities would provide a more accurate picture of the different protective factors that promote academic perseverance and success. ■

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