IN THEIR OWN VOICES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM OF FIRST NATIONS STUDENTS IN ALBERTA

BY

WENDY SOLLAND-HURLBUT

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SIGNATURE PAGE

This dissertation has been examined and approved.

Dr. Heather Henderson
Dr. Heather Henderson (Jun 16, 2025 16:23 MDT)

06/16/2025

Heather Henderson, Ed.D., Committee Chair — Date

Dr. Leanna Aker
Dr. Leanna Aker (Jun 16, 2025 21:16 PDT)

06/16/2025

Leanna Aker, Ph.D., Committee Member — Date

Dr. Gloria Antifaiff
Dr. Gloria Antifaiff (Jun 16, 2025 16:24 MDT)

06/16/2025

Gloria Antifaiff, Ph.D., Committee Member — Date

Dr. Vicki Butler

06/16/2025

Vicki Butler, Ed.D., Dean — Date

DEDICATION

To my beloved grandmother, Kay Solland —

You were there from my first breath to your last.

My best friend, my mentor, my constant.

Your love, strength, and wisdom shaped who I am,

and your spirit continues to guide me every day.

This work is for you.

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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of chronic absenteeism—defined as missing 10% or more school days in an academic year—can significantly impact students' future well-being (Alberta Government, 2015). Chronic school absenteeism is particularly pronounced among First Nations students, potentially exacerbating unique challenges, such as historical and ongoing systemic inequities, cultural disconnection, socioeconomic difficulties, and inadequate support services (Allensworth et al., 2021; Gallagher-Mackay, 2023; Kearney, 2016). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to investigate the issue of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta's K-12 schools and to identify the barriers to regular attendance. In this study, the contributing factors and long-term impacts of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students are explored. Hermeneutic phenomenology is used to describe and interpret the lived experiences of the participants in order to respond to the research questions. Within the phenomenological design, a six-stage thematic analysis process facilitates an in-depth exploration of the participants' lived experiences, providing insights into the long-term effects of chronic absenteeism on well-being. Grounded in social cognitive theory and the theory of planned behavior, the results of this study provide a theoretical framework to explore the behaviors and motivations related to school attendance, ultimately supporting the development of policies and programs that promote regular attendance and overall well-being for First Nations students in Alberta.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

As children grow into their teenage years and then enter adulthood, it is expected that they listen to the advice of their parents or other guardians, including the advice to stay in school because it is critical to their future (Brooks, 2023). When regular student attendance is not pursued, students are considered chronically absent, which means they have missed 10% or more of the school year (Alberta Government, 2015). Additionally, research shows that this chronic absenteeism can adversely affect their future well-being (Allensworth et al., 2021).

A concerning disparity, however, has also been identified within Alberta's largest school district. In the Calgary Board of Education's (CBE) 2022-2023 Annual Results Report, it was noted that, while the overall student population showed a 3.75% rate of students with attendance below 50%, a significantly higher rate of 18.05% was observed among Indigenous students. These results indicate that, of the 131,215 students in CBE schools, 4,921 students were absent more than 50% of the instructional time, and of those, 1,166 are Indigenous (Calgary Board of Education, 2023). Additional Indigenous student attendance research by Romero and Lee (2007) identified that Indigenous students in all grades are absent from school twice as often as their non-Indigenous peers. Based on these insights, and in an effort to learn more, a critical gap was found to persist in current research. Limited knowledge, particularly in understanding the specific factors impeding positive school attendance for First Nations children in Alberta, has been determined (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023).

The importance of regular school attendance for young people, and therefore the value of regular attendance at school, has been found to impact the development of children transitioning into contributing members of society. The research presented herein delves into the nuanced aspects of school attendance issues for First Nations students in Alberta. This study addresses

chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta by exploring participants' lived experiences with school attendance and absenteeism. Within the study, an examination of attendance factors for First Nations students, completed through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, identifies approaches best suited to informing the Alberta government regarding strategies to increase student attendance rates for First Nations students in Alberta. As a result of these findings, the development of targeted interventions and comprehensive strategies to inform educational attendance practices that meet the needs of First Nations students is considered.

Overall, research shows that chronic absenteeism rates are higher among marginalized populations (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023). Researchers have highlighted the concern of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta, demonstrated by disproportionate rates in K-12 school attendance. (CBE, 2023; Fowler & McDermott, 2020; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023). The identified gap, as described in the research by Gallagher-Mackay et al. (2023), emphasizes the need for a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing positive school attendance for First Nations students in Alberta, as well as identifying and confronting systemic barriers for First Nations students. The purpose of this study is to explore aspects of attendance issues, utilizing research findings and interviews to identify influential factors and improve attendance rates that meet the unique needs of First Nations students in Alberta.

Study Background

Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10% or more of school days for any reason, brings an increased likelihood of students encountering adverse long-term consequences (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023). Even though school attendance for youth between the ages of 6 and 16 is required by law in Alberta, absenteeism is noted to be more significant for First Nations

students (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023). Additionally, researchers have found that students with poor school attendance have lower test scores and grades, are at risk of dropping out of school, have higher odds of future unemployment, are more likely to use drugs, exhibit more significant behavioral issues, are more prone to being disengaged and socially alienated, and are at higher risk of early death (Allensworth et al., 2021; Balfanz & Brynes, 2012; Education Act, 2018; Fuhs et al., 2018; Gottfried, 2014; London et al., 2016;). While there is limited evidence to identify why First Nations students have substantially lower attendance rates, the current research on student attendance in K-12 schools reveals that First Nations students continue to be chronically absent from school (Fowler & McDermott, 2020).

The issue of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta is noteworthy when examining the rates of First Nations school absenteeism compared to their non-Indigenous peers. According to Statistics Canada (2016), only 64% of First Nations students complete high school compared to the national completion average of 91%. Similarly, Romero and Lee (2007) identified that Indigenous students in all grades are absent from school twice as often as their non-Indigenous peers. In support of this research, a quantitative study conducted by Sanderson et al. (2013) discovered that 39% of Indigenous high school students attended less than 75% of their high school classes. Rocky View School District in Alberta confirmed these findings in a mixed-methods study when they identified that 30% of their 800 Indigenous students were found to be chronically absent (Fowler & McDermott, 2020). Furthermore, in another study, 80% of those Indigenous students who lived on a First Nations reserve were found to be chronically absent, with an average of 32 school days missed per year (Fowler & McDermott, 2020).

Overall, the studies reviewed here revealed that First Nations students encounter several barriers to achieving acceptable school attendance. As indicated in the research, barriers to

regular school attendance are multifaceted. The underlying factors contributing to chronic absenteeism, as identified by researchers, include external elements associated with economic disadvantage and health, along with internal factors within the school environment, such as school climate, safety, instructional practices, discipline, and student support (Allensworth et al., 2021; Dee, 2024; Rafa, 2017). Several researchers have also suggested that the barriers First Nations students encounter when attending school encompass cultural displacement and anxiety, socioeconomic inequalities, racial profiling, and disproportionally long commuting distances to school (Allensworth et al., 2021; Fowler & McDermott, 2020). Fowler and McDermott (2020) identified systemic factors as the primary barrier to attendance, resulting in cultural displacement and anxiety. Additionally, other researchers have pinpointed various internal and external influences on school attendance and proposed several attendance intervention strategies for implementation (Allensworth et al., 2021; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023; Kearney, 2016). By examining these barriers to positive attendance for First Nations students, researchers continue to assess why this issue of attendance disproportionality exists and what can be done to improve attendance outcomes for First Nations students (Butler, 2019; Fowler & McDermott, 2020; Gee, 2018; Milne & Wotherspoon, 2020; Sanderson et al., 2013). As noted earlier, the research from this dissertation offers insight into potential barriers that result in chronic absenteeism among First Nations students and information on possible resolutions to the identified problem.

Current State of the Field in which the Problem Exists

In Canada, kindergarten to Grade 12 education is a provincial responsibility, with the notable exception of education for First Nations students living on reserve (Officer, 2016). While school attendance issues are relevant and important to all educational jurisdictions, the problem to be examined in this research is specifically related to First Nations students, both on reserve

and off reserve. Engaging with on-reserve leadership to address the educational needs of First Nations students residing on reserves is a responsibility assigned to Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC) (Fryer & Leblanc-Laurendeau, 2019). Therefore, on-reserve education is overseen by both CIRNAC and the reserve's leadership, such as the chief, council, and educational leaders, in which the schools are located.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an international forum where governments collaborate to address economic, social, and environmental challenges, argued that there are no simple answers for improving school attendance for First Nations students in Canada (OECD, 2017). However, Gallagher-Mackay et al. (2023) argued that since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC) six-volume report was released on December 15, 2015, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) Act came into effect on June 21, 2021, federal, provincial, and First Nations governments and educational leaders have been working together to overcome systemic barriers that result in chronic absenteeism for First Nations learners in K-12 schools. In conclusion, despite the complexities highlighted by the OECD regarding school attendance for First Nations students in Canada, there is an ongoing collaborative effort among federal, provincial, and First Nations governments, along with educational leaders delegated by Chief and Council oversight or the local school board, to address systemic barriers and enhance educational outcomes, including attendance, for First Nations learners in K-12 schools. The commitment to overcoming these challenges has been reinforced by significant milestones, such as the previously mentioned TRC's report and the enactment of the UNRIP Act, ultimately aiming to create a more inclusive and effective educational system for First Nations students.

Historical Background

Understanding the historical context of First Nations schooling is crucial for addressing the current challenges in First Nations education. Before colonization, First Nations education was often community-based, and knowledge was transmitted through oral traditions, storytelling, and experiential learning (Battiste, 2017). The arrival of European settlers resulted in Eurocentric knowledge, values, and education systems being superimposed over traditional First Nations ways of teaching and learning (Benn-John, 2019).

Introduced in 1876 and amended in 1985, the *Indian Act* is the principal statute that governs the education of status Indians in Canada (Fryer & Leblanc-Laurendeau, 2019). Researchers have noted that the *Indian Act* of 1876 did not assign who was responsible for overseeing First Nations education; therefore, the Canadian government appointed the European-based churches responsible for First Nations education (Carr et al., 2017). Christian churches of different denominations operated residential schools to forcibly assimilate Indigenous students into the Canadian settler society and away from their own culture, language, ceremonies, and beliefs (Marshall & Gallant, 2021). Under the *Indian Act*, attendance at residential schools was compulsory for children from the age of 5, with legal consequences for non-compliance (Milloy, 2017). While most of these residential schools closed in the 1970s, the last residential school in Canada did not close until 1997 (Stahl, 2014).

Therefore, the history of resistance and resilience in First Nations education in Canada is deeply intertwined with colonialism and the efforts by Indigenous communities to assert their sovereignty and preserve their cultures (Battiste, 2017). In Canada, Indigenous leaders and communities have engaged in countless forms of resistance (e.g., protests, legal challenges, and cultural resurgence movements) to reclaim control over their education systems and assert their

rights to self-determination (Rowe et al., 2020). Despite a history of systemic oppression, Indigenous communities have demonstrated resilience, drawing on cultural strengths and traditional knowledge systems to decolonize education (Battiste, 2017).

Deficiencies in the Evidence

Although research into chronic absenteeism of K-12 students in all educational jurisdictions has been widely studied, the literature on First Nations students in Alberta and the reasons for the noted disproportionality between groups remains limited. Alberta researchers Fowler and McDermott (2020) identified the prevalence of chronic absenteeism among K-12 First Nations students. While Fowler and McDermott shed light on the extent of chronic absenteeism, Guenther et al.'s (2019) examination delved into the efficacy of existing interventions. Specifically, Guenther et al. (2019) questioned the effectiveness of the attendance strategies studied, citing a lack of evidence to support their efficacy in improving educational outcomes for First Nations students. After critically appraising 45 qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies exploring educational outcomes of First Nations communities, Guenther et al. (2019) argued that there is little evidence and data on which attendance strategies and policies are developed and implemented. As a result, Guenther et al. (2019) concluded that First Nations students' and community members' needs were not understood, leading to deficiencies in the research.

There is limited research exploring the firsthand experiences of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta's K-12 schools, and this scarcity can be attributed to three factors. Historically, Indigenous peoples have been excluded from educational research, resulting in their underrepresentation and thus creating significant gaps in the literature (Battiste, 2016). Moreover, addressing chronic absenteeism among First Nations students necessitates

research methodologies that not only actively engage with the population studied but also demonstrate cultural sensitivity, a quality that is not consistently evident (Restoule et al., 2013; Snow, 2018). Finally, the historical and contemporary impacts of colonialism have created distrust of research institutions having access to Indigenous communities, thereby impeding researchers' access to firsthand experiences (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Consequently, the existing deficiencies in evidence show the importance of incorporating the voices of First Nations students, who can offer personal perspectives on chronic absenteeism based on their lived experiences.

Problem Statement

While the concern about absenteeism among all students has been studied extensively, the general problem this study specifically addresses is the unresolved issue of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta and its impacts on their well-being. Regular school attendance is vital for children's development as they grow into contributing members of society (Rocque et al, 2017). However, due to the unique educational history of First Nations peoples in Canada, students from these communities are more likely to be absent from school than non-First Nations students (OECD, 2017). Chronic absenteeism puts students at increased risk for underachievement, poor social skills, executive functioning difficulties, disengagement from school, and mental health issues (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Fuhs, Nesbitt, & Jackson, 2018; Gottfried, 2014). As Stempel et al. (2017) noted, chronic absenteeism is a public health crisis, leading to adverse outcomes such as chronic diseases, dropping out of high school, and engagement in problematic behaviors like substance abuse, early pregnancy, illegal activities, and premature death (Kearney, 2008; London, Sanchez, & Castrechini, 2016; Malika et al., 2021; Stempel et al., 2017). Furthermore, the transmission of historical and cultural

trauma across generations, along with systemic inequities that First Nations populations face, can worsen mental health and substance abuse issues, negatively affecting overall well-being and future life outcomes (Smallwood et al., 2021). If left unaddressed, chronic absenteeism may lead to negative consequences for these students.

The specific problem to be addressed is the disparity in absenteeism rates, with First Nations students in Alberta experiencing significantly higher levels of chronic absenteeism than their non-First Nations peers (Fowler & McDermott, 2020; Romero & Lee, 2007). This disparity is particularly evident in Alberta's largest school district. The CBE 2022-2023 Annual Results Report discovered that 3.75% of all students within the CBE school district had an attendance rate below 50%. Among Indigenous students, which includes the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit populations (each is defined in Chapter 1), this rate was significantly higher at 18.05%. To summarize the findings from CBE, of the 131,215 students in CBE schools, 4,921 were absent more than 50% of the instructional time, and 1,166 of these students were Indigenous (Calgary Board of Education, 2023). Additional research by Romero and Lee (2007) found that First Nations students across all grades are absent from school twice as often as their non-First Nations peers.

Audience

The results of the study are targeted at a diverse audience who have a shared interest in understanding, addressing, and mitigating attendance disparities for First Nations students within the K-12 educational context. The primary audience includes but is not limited to, educators, school administrators, policymakers, and educational researchers involved in designing and implementing policies, programs, and interventions to improve school attendance.

Addressing chronic absenteeism among First Nations students requires stakeholders to cultivate a heightened awareness and understanding of the complexities faced by First Nations students. Ultimately, by working together, a catalyst for change in educational practices, policies, and community engagement can occur to reduce chronic absenteeism among First Nations students. This change creates an environment where students can achieve positive educational outcomes.

Specific Leadership Problem

Chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta's K-12 schools is a specific leadership problem. Despite legal mandates requiring school attendance for youth aged 6 to 16 in Alberta (Education Act, 2018), First Nations students continue to experience disproportionately high levels of chronic absenteeism. Chronic school absenteeism can have severe long-term consequences, including lower academic achievement, higher dropout rates, increased unemployment, substance use, behavioral issues, social alienation, and early mortality (Allensworth et al., 2021; Balfanz & Brynes, 2012; Fuhs et al., 2018; Gottfried, 2014; London et al., 2016). Although research highlights the higher rates of absenteeism among First Nations students compared to their non-Indigenous peers (Fowler & McDermott, 2020), the root causes remain unclear without further investigation. Various barriers, such as economic disadvantage, health issues, school climate, safety concerns, and cultural displacement, contribute to this issue (Allensworth et al., 2021; Dee, 2024; Rafa, 2017). Additionally, systemic barriers exacerbate cultural displacement and anxiety among First Nations students, making it imperative for leadership to address both internal and external factors. The leadership challenge lies in identifying and overcoming these barriers to improve attendance outcomes for First Nations students in Alberta's educational system.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study aims to (1) identify the barriers to school attendance among First Nations students in Alberta's K-12 schools and (2) inform evidence-based interventions and policy initiatives that support their academic success and overall development. Employing a phenomenological approach, the study gathered and analyzed the perspectives and lived experiences of First Nations people who have faced chronic absenteeism. The insights gained are instrumental in developing strategies that improve attendance rates and cater to the unique needs of First Nations students in Alberta.

The study not only identifies the factors contributing to chronic absenteeism but also offers valuable insights for current and future First Nations students who can learn from the experiences of others. Chapters 4 and 5 present the study's findings and conclusions, offering guidance for First Nations students and educational leaders in advocating for and implementing more effective attendance policies and practices.

Methodology and Research Design Overview

Using a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this study explored the causes of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta. This approach enabled a deep understanding of the individual and communal factors influencing student attendance by centering participants' lived experiences and personal narratives. Hermeneutic phenomenology was selected for its alignment with Indigenist research principles and its capacity to meaningfully engage with First Nations ways of knowing. A six-stage thematic analysis supported an in-depth interpretation of students' experiences within their broader social contexts.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was chosen to investigate chronic absenteeism and capture the complexity of social phenomena through rich, detailed data (Punch, 2009). Unlike quantitative or mixed-method approaches, qualitative research enables the exploration of participants' emotions, perspectives, and lived realities, which are key to understanding the factors behind absenteeism (Feyisa, 2022). This approach also facilitates insights into the experiences of students, families, and communities that numerical data alone cannot reveal (Creswell, 2014).

By prioritizing subjective experience, qualitative researchers can uncover patterns and themes that might otherwise remain hidden, offering a holistic understanding of the issue. As noted by Feyisa (2022) and Creswell (2014), such an approach is especially valuable when addressing complex, culturally embedded challenges like absenteeism in First Nations contexts, as it results in deeper insight into the historical and systemic factors influencing student attendance.

Research Design

Within the qualitative framework, a hermeneutic phenomenological design was specifically selected to identify the causes of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students. Hermeneutic phenomenology is attributed to Schleiermacher, an early 19th-century scholar (Dibley et al., 2020). Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the meaning and understanding the essence of participants' shared experiences and how they make sense of what occurred (Dibley et al., 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Neubauer et al., 2019). Hermeneutic phenomenology involves going back and forth in questioning prior knowledge to understand the deeper meaning of the parts and the whole of lived experiences (Dibley et al., 2020). Unlike other qualitative designs, such as case studies, ethnographies, or grounded

theory, hermeneutic phenomenology prioritizes lived experiences, making it ideal for exploring the factors impacting student attendance (Neubauer et al., 2019). Hermeneutic phenomenology allows for in-depth data collection through interviews and discussions, uncovering both the how and why of school absenteeism (Dangal & Joshi, 2020). By capturing the many voices, experiences, and stories of First Nations students, hermeneutic phenomenology can inform professional practice, policy development, and community action, leading to more effective, relevant, and culturally sensitive interventions (Dangal & Joshi, 2020; Frey, 2018).

Purposeful sampling was adopted where participants met the inclusion criteria and were expected to provide unique and rich information (Suen et al., 2014). To meet study criteria, the participants had to be members of an Alberta First Nations band and living in Alberta at the time of the study. They also had to experience chronic absenteeism at some point in their Kindergarten to Grade 12 years of formal education. Moreover, the selected participants were 18 to 30 years of age to ensure ethical compliance and avoid potential risks associated with vulnerable populations.

Participants were recruited through existing social networks and participating agencies. Overall, the hermeneutic phenomenological design involved interviews with each participant. The interviews utilized the Semi-Structured Interview Guide prepared to answer the research questions. Ten to 15 participants in this study were interviewed face-to-face or online using Google Meet. All materials collected during the research remain confidential and secured in a password-protected file.

Research Questions

The questions posed in this hermeneutic phenomenological study were developed based on what was (1) discovered in the research and (2) indicative of a Canada-wide problem. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1. What meanings and understandings do First Nations students give to the experience of chronic absenteeism in K-12 schools?

RQ2. In the participants' experiences and opinions, what would have helped to improve their attendance while in school from K-12?

Study Limitations and Biases

This section outlines the primary limitations and potential biases that may influence the study's findings on chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta. The limitation of low generalizability is explored, highlighting the challenges of applying study findings across diverse First Nations communities with varying geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts. Finally, the section delves into personal biases stemming from my prior roles in educational settings, which could have impacted each stage of this dissertation's research and writing processes. Methods such as reflexivity and bracketing were used to mitigate these biases, ensuring a more objective analysis of the participants' experiences.

Study Limitations

One limitation of using a phenomenological approach to study chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta is the time-consuming nature of the research process. This method required conducting in-depth interviews to gain a deep understanding of participants' lived experiences, which is particularly time-intensive when establishing trust within Indigenous communities (Kovach, 2021). The data analysis process, involving detailed

coding and thematic interpretation of participant narratives, was labor-intensive and required significant time to ensure their perspectives and stories were accurately represented.

The extended timeframe limited the study's scope and led to a smaller sample size, as scheduling interviews became increasingly difficult over time and participant availability fluctuated. These time constraints also reduced the opportunity to recruit additional participants. Therefore, the collected data might not fully capture the range of experiences and factors influencing absenteeism in Alberta. As a result, while the study may not offer valuable insights into the specific context of First Nations students in Alberta, its findings may have limited applicability to First Nations students across Canada.

Biases

Again, as the researcher and author, I recognize that my positionality, particularly as a white settler and former on-reserve teacher, school counselor, and school principal, can influence all stages of this study. These roles carry inherent authority, and my identity as a white educator may affect how First Nations participants perceive me during interviews. Historical and ongoing colonial relationships between First Nations communities and settler institutions, including schools, can contribute to mistrust or guardedness in sharing personal experiences, especially when the researcher is part of the system that has historically marginalized them (Smith, 2013). This dynamic may lead participants to withhold information or frame their responses in ways they believe are more acceptable or less confrontational to someone in a perceived position of power (Busher, 2006; Andress et al., 2020).

Being mindful of these dynamics is crucial for creating a space where participants feel safe to share their truths. As Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) emphasized, acknowledging and actively mitigating power imbalances can help reduce the risk of participants feeling pressured or

inhibited in their responses. Building trust, ensuring cultural humility, and approaching the research with respect and reflexivity are essential practices in conducting ethical and meaningful research in Indigenous contexts. As Busher (2006) described, power dynamics can inadvertently lead to participants withholding information or presenting their experiences in a way they believe will be more acceptable to the authority figure. By being conscious of power dynamics, they can be mitigated to prevent participants from feeling pressured to disclose uncomfortable information or from fully sharing their experiences (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

Initially presented by Husserl, bracketing can be used to increase recognition and suspension of a subject's personal biases while conducting qualitative research (Husserl & Moran, 2012; Thomas et al., 2023). To minimize the possibility of personal biases affecting the final results, bracketing was used to refrain from forming opinions or conclusions on the information shared, thereby seeking to understand the phenomenon from the participants' viewpoints without preconceived notions influencing the analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Habibullah et al., 2023).

Study Delimitations

Delimitations refer to the boundaries of a study. Clearly stating delimitations constrains the scope of the study so it is feasible and manageable, ensuring that the research is valid and reliable (Akanle et al., 2020). In this study, the delimitation was interviewing only First Nations students between the ages of 18 and 30 living in Alberta who demonstrated chronic absenteeism in their Kindergarten to Grade 12 school years. The interviews were conducted following a pandemic where student attendance was significantly reduced. The study was also bound by participants who self-identified as chronically absent, meaning they personally acknowledged having poor or inconsistent school attendance.

Due to the delimitations, the findings and results of this study may not generalize to other subjects, locations, or future time periods.

Definitions of Key Terms

This section describes the key terms used throughout this document.

Absenteeism. Absence from school encompasses partial or full-day instances, whether it is approved or unapproved by the school or family (Birioukov, 2021).

Chronic absenteeism. In Alberta, chronic absenteeism is defined as a student in Kindergarten to Grade 12 who misses 10% or more instructional days of school (Alberta Government, 2015).

K-12 education. This educational window refers to education from kindergarten until the end of high school (Grade 12).

Band-controlled Education. Band-controlled education means that First Nations can exercise their inherent right to education by developing their own policies and laws to provide linguistically and culturally-appropriate education that meets the individual and collective needs of their learners (Assembly of First Nations, 2016).

Reserve leadership. First Nations governments are composed of a chief and councillors who are responsible for making or delegating decisions on behalf of each First Nation and its members (Indigenous Services Canada, 2022).

Indigenous. Indigenous collectively refers to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, who are the original inhabitants of the land known as Canada (Parrott, 2023).

First Nations. First Nations peoples are autonomous, political, and cultural nations who have lived on the land now known as Canada since long before the arrival of Europeans (Burrows, 2017).

Indigenist. A philosophical approach to research focused on Indigenous ontology, epistemology, and axiology (Wilson, 2020).

Status Indians. Indian status is the legal standing of a person who is registered under the Indian Act (Constitution Act, 1982).

Developmental assets. 40 factors are divided into two: 20 external factors (e.g., family support and school climate) and 20 internal factors (e.g., honesty and cultural competence; Sanderson et al., 2013).

First Nations reserve. A First Nations reserve (or an "Indian reserve" according to the Indian Act) is a tract of land set aside under the Indian Act and treaty agreements for the exclusive use of a First Nations band (Aragón & Kessler, 2020).

On reserve. Refers to the geographical areas that are included in Indian reserves and settlements (Statistics Canada, 2021).

Off reserve. Refers to geographical areas that are not a part of Indian reserves and settlements (Statistics Canada, 2021).

The Crown. The Crown represents the executive power and capacity of the Sovereign (King Charles III) and his government (Firmini & Smith, 2017).

Residential schools. Residential schools were boarding schools for Indigenous children and youth, financed by the Canadian federal government and operated by several Christian religious institutions, including the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, United, and Methodist Churches (Assembly of First Nations, 2022).

Colonization. Colonization is the institutionalized subjugation of a people or area through power and domination, both using physical and socioeconomic violence (Mahboob, 2023). Examples of this include the residential schools in Canada and the Indian Act.

Decolonization. Decolonization is defined as reversing the physical, psychological, economic, and emotional damage to colonized groups, such as Indigenous peoples (Yellow Bird, 2013).

Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report investigates the harm, both directly and indirectly, caused by residential schools (Government of Canada, 2022).

UNDRIP Act. The UNDRIP Act affirms the UNDRIP as an international human rights document and a framework to advance its implementation at the federal level (Government of Canada, 2021).

Hermeneutic phenomenology. The purpose of hermeneutic phenomenology is to describe and interpret the subjective lived experiences and meanings of individuals (Gadamer, 2006; van Manen, 2023).

Reflexivity. Reflexivity is when researchers self-consciously assess how their personal background and worldview influence the research processes (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

Google Meet. Google Meet is a video meeting platform using Google Workspace services.

Social cognitive theory. Adapted from Bandura's social learning theory (1986), social cognitive theory identifies that learning occurs in a social context with internal and external stimuli that impact behavior.

Theory of Planned Behavior. In the theory of planned behavior, behavioral beliefs, normative beliefs, and control beliefs predict human behavior in various environments (Ajzen, 2020; Bosnjak et al., 2020).

Numbered treaties. The numbered treaties contain unique clauses due to negotiations between the British Crown or the Canadian government and Indigenous Nations (Starblanket, 2019).

Suspension. Suspension describes an action by a principal or teacher authorized under the Education Act s. 36, which temporarily denies a student access to class, coursework, school, or the school bus (2019).

Historical trauma. Historical trauma, as experienced by Indigenous populations, is the pervasive, collective, and intergenerational trauma often caused by the traumatic experiences of discrimination, racism, and oppression experienced individually and as a group (Auger, 2016; Brave Heart et al., 2016).

Racial Discrimination. Racial discrimination is defined as any exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race, ethnicity, color, descent, or geographic origin that interferes with human rights and fundamental freedoms (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1965).

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore and analyze the specific problem of the disparity in absenteeism rates, with First Nations students in Alberta experiencing significantly higher levels of chronic absenteeism than their non-First Nations peers (Fowler & McDermott, 2020; Romero & Lee, 2007). Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, data was gathered by interviewing former First Nations K-12 students who attended on reserve or off-reserve schools within Alberta. Participants were aged 18 to 30 to ensure ethical compliance and minimize risks associated with vulnerable populations. Each participant was

interviewed to provide insights into their lived experiences and the factors contributing to chronic absenteeism.

Through the exploration of historical and contemporary issues, the following chapters provide further justification for this dissertation, explain the research study, and present the findings. Chapter 2 explores the literature on chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta. Next, Chapter 3 details the hermeneutic phenomenological design, the population and sample, the instruments, the data collection procedures, and discusses potential limitations. Chapter 4 outlines the analysis of the data collected, and finally, Chapter 5 presents the findings, conclusions, and recommendations to develop strategies to improve attendance for First Nations experiencing chronic absenteeism in Alberta.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The research in this dissertation is intended to uncover the barriers contributing to chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta's K-12 schools. The two research questions that guided this study not only directed the exploration of the causes and impacts of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta's K-12 schools, they also justified the need for continued research in this area. This literature review begins with an overview of First Nations education in Canada. Following the overview, a discussion of the potential barriers preventing school attendance is explored, including student, peer, family, community, and school categories. Building upon the barriers leading to chronic absenteeism, a discussion of internal and external risk factors is included that may be related to chronic absenteeism in K-12 schools.

The previous chapters lead to the exploration of two theories that can provide an additional basis for investigation into the complexities of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students. The two theories discussed in the final section are social cognitive theory (SCT) and theory of planned behavior (TPB). Following an overview of both SCT and TPB, it is demonstrated that these theories offer valuable insights into the problem of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students. The SCT framework emphasizes the influence of social factors, individual beliefs, and self-efficacy on behavior (Luszczynsk & Schwarzer, 2015). As a result, factors such as peer influence, family dynamics, and cultural norms may affect students' decisions regarding attendance. TPB, on the other hand, focuses on attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control in predicting intentions and behaviors (Bosnjak et al., 2020). Therefore, employing the TPB framework revealed how First Nations students' attitudes toward school, their perceptions of social expectations from peers, family, community, and educators, and their sense of personal control over attending school influenced their attendance behavior.

By integrating these two theories into the research approach and the proposed phenomenological approach, an understanding can be gained of the complex interplay of individual, social, and cultural factors contributing to chronic absenteeism among First Nations students.

In summary, this literature review provides foundational support for the research described in this dissertation. Combined with the results (see Chapter 4), it justifies reviewing student attendance processes in both on- and off-reserve schools. Additionally, the information obtained provides a foundational rationale for educational stakeholders, policymakers, and community leaders to implement culturally relevant attendance strategies that meet the needs of First Nations students.

An Overview of First Nations Education in Canada

This study describes First Nations education from two perspectives: traditional First Nations and colonial perspectives. Traditional First Nations education occurred in formal and informal settings characterized by communal participation, observation, connection to nature, and experiential learning (Battiste, 2017). Using ceremonies, traditions, stories, and teachings that connected knowledge from the past to the future, adults were responsible for ensuring every child learned how to live a good life (Battiste, 2017; Wilkins, 2017).

Alternatively, colonial education began following the enactment of two edicts by the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church, referred to as papal bulls. The initial edict, enacted in 1452, endorsed the conquest, colonization, and exploitation of non-Christian peoples, territories, and nations, while the subsequent bull in 1493 acknowledged Christian supremacy in the New World (Battiste, 2017). Consequently, the papal bulls led to dominantly Eurocentric educational systems and practices that impacted First Nations peoples.

In Canada, the initial foothold of a colonial education system for First Nations peoples occurred in 1807 during the first treaty negotiation between First Nations leaders and representatives of the British Crown (Cowan, 2020). During the negotiations, First Nations leaders agreed to the ceding of lands in exchange for various provisions, including access to education (Cowan, 2020). In response to treaty negotiations, the British government implemented the *Indian Act* in 1857 in an attempt to assimilate First Nations peoples toward European values (Bombay et al., 2014). The Indian Act was subsequently replaced by the Indian Act of 1867 following Confederation (Bombay et al., 2014). The Indian Act (1867) created the legal framework for the reserve and the residential school systems (Parks, 2023). Starblanket (2020) estimated that 150,000 First Nations children, 75% of First Nations children between the ages of 7 and 15, were forced into residential schools in Canada between 1883 and 1996.

Residential schools were operated by various Christian denominations under the authority and funding of the Canadian government (Friesen & Jacobsen, 2022). Residential school operators housed and taught students apart from family while attempting to indoctrinate the students into Christian beliefs. Their goal was to assimilate First Nations children into the dominant Eurocentric culture through teachings and mandatory church attendance (Milloy, 2017). Also, students were only allowed to speak English, facing harsh consequences if caught speaking their Indigenous language (Milloy, 2017). The methods used and purpose of the operators of residential schools were in stark contrast with First Nations forms of education, which relied on a deep connection to the land, family, and their Indigenous languages (Milloy, 2017).

The clash between First Nations' traditional education systems and the colonial system resulted in significant problems for First Nations peoples (Wood, 2018). Prior to residential

schools, every member of the tribe was involved in teaching and supporting the development of children from birth (Wilkins, 2017). In contrast, residential schools resulted in the children's forced removal from their families and communities, whom they were required to reject, along with their teachings, languages, and culture (Battiste, 2017). Battiste (2017) argued those who attended residential schools —many of who reject the label "student" because they were denied meaningful education —left with significant trauma from school and a fractured sense of identity, a consequence that would be transmitted through generations.

In the years following the Indian Act, control of education for off-reserve students transitioned from federal to provincial responsibility. In 1969, Jean Chrétien, who was the Minister of Indian Affairs at the time, proposed a policy shift that would transfer the responsibilities of Indigenous peoples, including education, to the provincial governments rather than the federal government (Battiste, 2017). Formally known as the Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy (1869) and informally known as the "White Paper," the policy sought to repeal the Indian Act (1867) and, therefore, terminate the treaties (Taylor, 2020). The provincial governments firmly rejected the White Paper, which did not want the extraordinary responsibilities this policy imposed. The First Nations leaders, on the other hand, needed their treaty rights honored and respected. Ultimately, the policy was denied (Battiste, 2017).

In response to the White Paper, the Indian Control of Indian Education Policy, otherwise known as the "Red Paper," was submitted to the federal government in 1972 and implemented in 1973 (Battiste, 2017). Conceptualized as a way to reinvent First Nations education and revitalize First Nations economy, culture, and language, the obligation to treaty rights was to be upheld with schools being run and operated by First Nations band leadership (Battiste, 2017). The goal

of this policy was that First Nations students would receive an education based on traditional First Nations values and incorporate First Nations language, culture, and traditions (Battiste, 2017).

The Red Paper marked a significant shift in First Nations education. While residential schools enforced a regime of strict isolation, deliberately severing ties between students and their families, First Nations-run schools embraced a structure that prioritized and actively encouraged parental engagement and participation in the educational process (Milloy, 2017). The shift toward an educational system that valued family and community input created a crucial step toward healing and reconciliation in the aftermath of the residential school era (Battiste, 2017).

In acknowledgment of the deep-rooted trauma inflicted by the Canadian residential school system, the federal government took a significant step toward reconciliation with Indigenous peoples through Prime Minister Stephen Harper's formal apology on June 11, 2008 (Battiste, 2017). In his speech, Prime Minister Harper expressed the Canadian government's remorse for the policies and practices that led to the establishment of residential schools, including the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities and mandatory attendance in residential schools (Hough, 2020). This apology marked the beginning of a national effort to address the historical injustices and intergenerational impacts of residential schools, as highlighted by the subsequent establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (Hough, 2020).

The TRC in Canada occurred between 2008 and 2015 to document the history and impacts of the residential school system to increase awareness and education about the residential school experience (Gettler, 2017). While the TRC focused on documenting the experiences of survivors of the residential school system and uncovering the truth about the

harms inflicted upon First Nations peoples, the TRC's recommendations also emphasized the importance of education as a tool for reconciliation and healing (TRC, 2015). One of the TRC's key recommendations was to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for Indigenous students, including efforts to address the historical injustices and systemic barriers that had contributed to low school attendance rates among First Nations children (Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020).

In summary, First Nations peoples' history of education demonstrates a significant difference between colonial and traditional Indigenous and values. Traditional education is deeply rooted in communal participation and intergenerational teachings. It stands in stark contrast to the colonial education system, epitomized by residential schools, which forcibly separated First Nations children from their families and communities, traditions, and languages (Battiste, 2017; Milloy, 2017).

Despite the challenges of the colonial system for First Nations peoples, moments of resilience and resistance emerged, such as the submission of the Red Paper and subsequent efforts toward Indigenous control of their own education (Battiste, 2017). Moreover, significant milestones, including Prime Minister Stephen Harper's formal apology in 2008 and establishing the TRC, signify pivotal steps toward healing and reconciliation (Battiste, 2017). Overall, the TRC's recommendations demonstrate the importance of addressing historical injustices and improving educational outcomes for First Nations students, highlighting the need for a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape in Canada that prioritizes student attendance and engagement (Battiste, 2017).

Barriers Resulting in Chronic Absenteeism

The causes of chronic absenteeism are varied and can be further aggravated and predicted by contextual factors (Allensworth et al., 2021; Kearney, 2016). Contextual factors that influence student attendance include those that impact students, parents, families, communities, peers, and schools (Kearney, 2016). However, as progress, growth, or success is hindered, these factors transform into barriers (Haynes & Loblay, 2024). As each contextual factor increases and several become intertwined, barriers to attendance in school arise, resulting in chronic absenteeism (Kearney, 2016).

First Nations peoples have a unique history of education in Canada. This history has resulted in a higher propensity of young people being absent from school than non-Indigenous students (OECD, 2017). According to Battiste (2017), the legacy of colonization brought about challenging and complex educational barriers for First Nations students. Nevertheless, the OECD (2017) argued that education can instill hope by empowering individuals with knowledge, skills, and opportunities, thereby fostering the potential to reduce barriers and educational disparities. Further, the OECD (2017) noted that by recognizing and responding to the unique needs and contexts of First Nations students, barriers to education can be addressed and reduced. When student needs are met and barriers are reduced, the learning spirit of First Nations students can be nourished (Battiste, 2017).

To be reduced, the barriers first need to be identified. Researchers have suggested that barriers to attending school can be categorized as related to the student and their home, community, peers, and school (Allensworth et al., 2021; Fowler & McDermot, 2020; Kearney, 2016). A closer examination of each category may result in the acknowledgment, reduction, or elimination of identified barriers.

Student-Related Barriers

Student-related barriers that impact school attendance are characterized as either internal manifestations originating from within the body or external behaviors that can be observed by others (Kearney, 2016). Internal factors refer to personal attributes, characteristics, and circumstances that influence a student's academic performance, behavior, and overall well-being (Heyne et al., 2019). In contrast, external factors refer to environmental, social, economic, and systemic influences that affect a student's educational experiences and outcomes (Heyne et al., 2019). There are many internal predictive factors for chronic absenteeism, such as a student's approach to learning, , culture, ethnicity, trauma, and emotional and mental health status (Allensworth & Balfanz, 2021; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Kearney, 2016). Often interconnected with internal factors are the external predictive factors to school attendance, such as gender, first language, prior student attendance, work hours outside of school, grade retention, pregnancy, criminality, access to safe housing, family responsibilities, nutrition, and clean or proper-sized clothing (Allensworth & Balfanz, 2021; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Kearney, 2016).

Kearney (2016) also noted that many student-related factors influencing attendance are associated with the student's age. Overall, older students have more independence and a combination of social, academic, developmental, and environmental factors with less structured support and resources than their younger counterparts (Wood et al., 2018).

Student-Related External Barriers

External barriers such as frequent illnesses, physical symptoms, and injury are other reasons that First Nations students experience chronic absenteeism (Alberta Government, 2015; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). According to Balfanz and Byrnes, 6% of children miss more than 11 days of school due to illness or injury, especially in high poverty areas where medical care may

not be easily accessible. This is true for First Nations youth in Alberta, where inequitable access to healthcare is prevalent, as well as consistently poor health outcomes for First Nations populations (McLane et al., 2021).

McQuaid et al. (2022) also argued that residential schools had direct and intergenerational impacts on First Nations populations, including poverty, poor mental health, substance abuse, child neglect, and removal and placement in foster care settings. These barriers, as well as many other factors, influence trauma and pertain to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), as noted by Hughes et al. (2017). Researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) described ACEs as encompassing a spectrum of adversities, comprising physical, mental, emotional, and sexual abuse, along with instances of neglect, domestic violence, substance misuse within the household, household mental illness, suicide or attempted suicide by a family member, parental separation or divorce, and exposure to household incarceration (CDC, 2018). These experiences were identified as occurring during the formative years of childhood, spanning from infancy through adolescence, between the ages of 0 to 17 (CDC, 2018). Radford et al. (2022) highlighted that ACEs are markedly more prevalent in Indigenous populations, being 2 to 3 times higher compared to non-Indigenous populations. Additionally, Yohannan and Carlson (2019) contended that students who have undergone the traumatic events encompassed by ACEs are disproportionately prone to experiencing poor educational outcomes. Supporting the argument made by Yohannan and Carlson, Stempel et al. (2017) conducted a study involving 58,765 school-age children, revealing a significant correlation between the presence of one or more ACE and chronic absenteeism. Furthermore, Maynard (2018) emphasized the importance of early intervention among various professionals and agencies to effectively support students in initiating positive changes. Without early

intervention measures, Maynard (2018) argued, there is minimal likelihood of substantial improvement in attendance rates.

A lack of trust in education among First Nations students, families, and communities also serves as the primary contributor to chronic absenteeism in Alberta (Fowler & McDermott, 2020). Milne (2016) noted that this trust deficit stems from the enduring impact of residential schools and assimilation policies, leading to intergenerational skepticism toward school systems and educators (Friesen, 2002). Sustainable progress in First Nations students' education will remain elusive until the underlying mistrust is acknowledged, addressed, and resolved through the cultivation of mutual trust and effective relationships (OECD, 2017).

Student-Related Internal Barriers

In research conducted by Kearney (2016), psychiatric disorders, such as anxiety and depression, and disruptive behavior disorders, such as oppositional defiance and conduct disorders, are the most common student-related internal barriers leading students to withdraw from the school environment. Lawrence (2019) found that absences due to mental health, including emotional, psychological, and social well-being, increased from elementary to high school due to a critical period of development where various social, academic, and personal factors converge. Kearney (2016) also noted that a growing amount of data indicating that learning disorders are a predictor of chronic absenteeism. Graham et al. (2023) further expanded this research by showing that Indigenous students who have learning challenges, live in remote areas, or are socioeconomically disadvantaged are at higher risk of feeling excluded from school and, therefore, do not attend. Each of these internal student-related factors can also be demonstrated externally through behavior or physical illness and impact student attendance outcomes (Kearney, 2016).

McQuaid et al. (2022) argued that poor psychological health outcomes for First Nations students can be directly linked to the intergenerational trauma resulting from the residential school experiences of their parents and grandparents. Two studies by McQuaid et al. (2022) found that youth whose parents or grandparents attended residential schools had higher rates of depression and suicidal ideation. According to Nayak et al. (2018), depression is the primary psychological reason that students do not attend school. Without intervention to address the historical trauma inflicted by residential schools on First Nations communities, the cycle of psychological distress—particularly depression and suicidal ideation—is likely to persist, impeding school attendance and overall well-being for First Nations youth (McQuaid, 2022). In addition, internalized shame and stigma resulting from the historical trauma of residential schools may further exacerbate these psychological struggles, serving as internal barriers to seeking support and engaging in healing processes, therefore compounding the impact of external barriers on the well-being and educational attainment of First Nations youth.

Home-Related Barriers

Home life can be observed as a significant barrier to student attendance. Factors such as family dynamics, parental involvement, socioeconomic status, housing stability, and access to resources can all influence a student's ability to attend school regularly (Munir et al., 2023). For example, a supportive and stable home environment with involved parents who prioritize education is more likely to promote regular attendance (Deck, 2017). Conversely, students from homes with high stress levels, financial instability, domestic issues, trauma, or inadequate access to basic needs like food and shelter may face increased obstacles that hinder their attendance (Deck, 2017). Students who are caregivers for family members or who must work to contribute to household income may struggle to attend school consistently (Armstrong-Carter et al., 2024).

Overall, the quality and stability of a student's home life play a crucial role in their ability to attend school regularly.

Home-Related External Barriers

Caregiving responsibilities, whether for siblings, parents, or grandparents, can significantly impact a student's school attendance, as highlighted by Armstrong-Carter et al. (2024). Armstrong-Carter et al. (2022) established a direct correlation between the frequency and intensity of caregiving duties and students' attendance rates. Specifically, as caregiving tasks become more frequent and intense, student caregivers are more likely to experience higher absenteeism rates (Armstrong-Carter et al., 2022). Armstrong-Carter et al. (2022) further point out that child caregivers are particularly prevalent in marginalized populations, including Indigenous communities.

Misuse of substances is another challenge that students can encounter at home. Stempel et al. (2017) highlight the presence of a family member misusing substances as a primary barrier to student attendance. As evidenced by Frederickson et al. (2022), the research conducted by Stempel et al. (2017) iterates how the presence of a family member who misuses substances significantly affects academic performance. In such environments, children are more prone to experiencing poor academic outcomes, chronic absenteeism, and a heightened risk of leaving school altogether. McGovern et al. (2020) further substantiate the findings of Stempel et al. (2017) and Frederickson et al. (2022), revealing that 20% of students living with a family member who misuses substances are chronically absent from school. Thus, it is evident that the actions and behaviors of other household members can have a detrimental impact on the school attendance of students, compounding the challenges they face.

Beyond familial dynamics, Thistle (2017) discussed the pervasive issue of First Nations youth homelessness, which is exacerbated by a multitude of factors, including poverty, racism, substance abuse, family disconnection, violence, and neglect. Indigenous youth aged 15 to 24 who lack permanent housing while not in the child welfare system constitute a significantly disproportionate segment of the overall homeless population in cities such as Ottawa and Vancouver (Patrick, 2014). Furthermore, Patrick (2014) emphasizes the challenge posed by limited access to public support systems due to age constraints, exacerbating the cycle of homelessness among youth.

Home Internal Barriers

The home environment can be an internal barrier that impacts the mental health and well-being of students, thereby influencing their attendance at school (Behere et al., 2017). Behere et al. (2017) cited how family dynamics within the home can significantly impact a student's emotional state, with conflict, dysfunction, or instability, creating a hostile or unsupportive environment that contributes to feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression.

Furthermore, parental mental health issues, such as depression or anxiety, can have a profound effect on children, as living with a caregiver experiencing mental illness can be distressing and may lead to similar mental health struggles for the student (Mphaphuli, 2023). Exposure to trauma or adverse experiences within the home, such as abuse, neglect, or substance abuse, can further exacerbate mental health challenges for students, potentially resulting in symptoms of anxiety, depression, or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that interfere with their ability to attend school regularly (Stempel et al., 2017). Additionally, Wiedermann et al. (2023) noted that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may lack access to essential resources and support systems that promote positive mental health, further exacerbating feelings of anxiety,

depression, and stress. Considering the complexities surrounding the prevalence of mental health issues among students, Wiedermann et al. (2023) argued that addressing the complex and interconnected factors will require ongoing efforts and collaboration among educators, mental health professionals, policymakers, and communities.

Community-Related Barriers

Community-related barriers can have a significant impact on student attendance. Various socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental dynamics within a community can either facilitate or hinder students' ability to attend school regularly (Auger, 2016; First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2020). Economic disparities, cultural attitudes toward education, access to support services, safety concerns, healthcare accessibility, and employment opportunities all contribute to student attendance at school (Nguyen et al., 2020). By examining the areas impeding student attendance, Wiedermann et al. (2023) argued that educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders can collaboratively address barriers to attendance to create community environments to support positive student attendance.

Community-Related External Barriers

Community-related external barriers significantly influence student attendance rates, encompassing a myriad of socioeconomic and environmental factors (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2020). As highlighted by Hardy et al. (2019), economic constraints emerge as a significant challenge, particularly within communities grappling with poverty, posing disruptions to regular school attendance patterns. Katikireddi and Dundas (2017) delineate absolute poverty as severe deprivation of fundamental human needs such as food, safe drinking water, and housing, juxtaposed with relative poverty, defined as possessing at least 60% of the median income of a country. Although poverty may be temporary for some due to improved

opportunities or reduced barriers, Lamman and MacIntyre (2016) contend that Indigenous populations often confront persistent economic deprivation. This assertion is echoed by Brittan and Blackstock (2005), who stated that while the poverty rate for all Canadian children stands at 17%, it soars to 40% among Indigenous children, reflecting the neglect of First Nations poverty issues and its dire implications on meeting basic necessities like nutritious food, healthcare, and education. Compounding these challenges is the systemic underfunding of essential services, programs, and resources, including education, healthcare, housing, and water systems, exacerbated by the limited employment opportunities in Indigenous communities (MacDonald & Wilson, 2016). Moreover, the rates of student absenteeism are, on average, nine additional days per school year for impoverished students compared to those not living in poverty (Goldman, 2024), emphasizing the heightened vulnerability of First Nations students to school absenteeism amid persistent poverty.

In addition to economic and systemic factors, community attitudes toward education further compound the challenges faced by First Nations students in attending school regularly. McCue (2018) highlights how these attitudes can serve as community-related external barriers to student attendance. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (2022) explored the deeply rooted distrust of education among First Nations parents and families in Canada, stemming from the traumatic legacy of residential schools. Furthermore, Milne and Wotherspoon's (2020) study in Alberta uncovered the pervasive fear among First Nations families that school staff may unfairly label them as inadequate parents, potentially leading to involvement with child welfare agencies. Therefore, there are external barriers rooted in community perceptions that hinder the school attendance of First Nations students.

Safety and environment also influence student attendance in school. Burdick-Will et al. (2019) stated communities with high crime rates or unsafe neighborhoods may experience lower attendance due to safety concerns, while inadequate infrastructure, such as poorly maintained roads or lack of public transportation, can hinder students' ability to access education. Mathews et al. (2009) supported this statement with research showing that violence in violence directly impacts student attendance. According to Radford et al. (2022), First Nations peoples are also more likely to be confronted with traumatic experiences such as violence, assault, and homicide. As noted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), trauma impacts overall ACE scores (2023). A study conducted by Radford et al. (2022) revealed that Indigenous populations exhibited ACE scores 2 to 3 times higher than the average, highlighting the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences within this demographic. Furthermore, the research by Radford et al. (2022) also emphasized that individuals who were not attending school demonstrated significantly higher ACE scores compared to those actively attending school.

Additionally, access to healthcare services is another external barrier impacting student attendance rates (Allison et al., 2019). Trent et al. (2019) argued that communities grappling with limited resources, especially those that are marginalized, found that the prevalence of illness or untreated health conditions among students can significantly contribute to heightened rates of absenteeism. The inability to access timely medical care not only affects individual students' well-being but also exacerbates the broader challenges schools face in maintaining consistent attendance levels (Allison et al., 2019). Therefore, a lack of health care can lead to increased rates of adverse effects on health-related absenteeism within communities.

Community-Related Internal Barriers

Community-related barriers such as posttraumatic stress (PTS) are internal responses to external factors (Mathews et al., 2009). In a study by Stempel et al. (2017), students who witnessed neighborhood violence had a higher propensity to exhibit poor school attendance. According to Mathews et al. (2009), the emergence of PTS in students is directly related to being exposed to community violence. Brockie et al. (2015) stated that violent victimization of Indigenous populations, including sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault, is higher than it is for any other ethnic group in the United States for individuals ages 12 and up. Therefore, Indigenous students are more likely to have poor school attendance from PTS due to exposure to community violence.

Peer-Related Barriers

Peers wield a significant influence over school attendance, often shaping students' attitudes and behavior toward regular class attendance (Wang et al., 2018). Havik et al. (2014) argued that, in many cases, peer relationships can either encourage or discourage attendance. Wang et al. (2018) suggest positive peer influences can motivate individuals to prioritize their education, as students may feel a sense of belonging and accountability within their peer group. Friends who value education and attendance can serve as role models, reinforcing the importance of showing up to class consistently (Wang et al., 2018). Conversely, negative peer influences can lead to absenteeism, especially if students feel pressured to skip classes to conform to their peers' behavior or engage in activities outside of school (Sahin et al., 2019). Additionally, Hartnett (2007) argued that social dynamics within peer groups can impact attendance through factors like peer acceptance, popularity, and social status, with individuals sometimes prioritizing social

interactions over academic responsibilities. Therefore, peer relationships can have a tremendous influence over attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors related to school and school attendance.

Peer-Related External Barriers

Peer-related external barriers to school attendance refer to obstacles that students encounter due to interactions with their peers that impact their ability or willingness to attend school regularly (Hartnett, 2007). Children who attend school interact with other children three times more than children who do not attend school (Schmidt et al., 2019). Students can encounter a wide range of challenges rooted in social interactions among students, including bullying, affiliation with gangs, and other negative peer influences (Thomsen et al., 2024). According to Hartnett (2007), when students share the same environment, such as a school, their varying personalities, backgrounds, perspectives, and attitudes can lead to conflicts, creating a challenging atmosphere within the school. Therefore, peer-related external barriers can cultivate a negative environment, impacting student attendance.

Students are inclined to attend school as often as their closest peers (Kassarnig et al., 2019), so students whose peers are chronically absent are more likely to be absent too (Hartnett, 2007). Using qualitative studies, Geven et al. (2017) suggested that boys are at a higher risk of succumbing to external peer pressure to engage in negative school behaviors and truancy because they want to improve their status in the peer group. On the other hand, Geven et al. (2017) argued that girls are more influenced by maintaining peer relationships but have less exposure to negative school behavior. Therefore, poor relationships or negative peer pressure at school can result in school absenteeism. In contrast, strong relationships with peers who are positively engaged in school can result in positive school attendance (Havik et al., 2015).

Bullying is a peer-related barrier that impacts student attendance worldwide (Laith & Vaillancourt, 2022). According to Paul et al. (2022), Indigenous youth experience bullying at higher rates than non-Indigenous populations. Tay (2023) defined bullying as a broad range of behaviors ranging from subtle and covert actions (e.g., teasing and exclusion) to explicit physical aggression (e.g., punching and kicking). Bullying is often embedded within everyday interactions, making them challenging to recognize and address.

Meehan et al. (2023) found that bullying had a significant impact on absenteeism and class avoidance. Likewise, Meehan et al. (2003) indicated that students who are bullied have a higher rate of physical illnesses such as stomach aches, headaches, and sleep difficulties, resulting in increased school absenteeism. Furthermore, Ladd et al. (2017) demonstrated that approximately 24% of students experience regular bullying during their school years. Taken together, these results illustrate the harmful impact bullying has on student attendance.

Gang involvement is another external barrier that can result in chronic absenteeism (Kearse-McCastler, 2020). In Canada, a gang is a criminal organization that consists of three or more people whose main purpose is to engage in illegal activities that have a direct or indirect benefit for the group or a person within the group (Criminal Code, 1985). According to Kearse-McCastler (2020), students who engage in gang participation often displace or replace family and school attendance with gang relationships and activities. In their 2024 study, Foster and Grekel argued that Indigenous youth are still deeply impacted by the effects of colonization and discrimination. Conducted in Alberta, Canada, their qualitative research with gang-involved Indigenous youth revealed that the attraction to gang membership stemmed from colonization and discrimination, leading to an increased desire for survival and connection (Foster & Grekel,

2024). Therefore, Indigenous youth experience the impacts of a unique history that can lead to increased gang involvement and decreased school attendance.

Peer-Related Internal Barriers

Negative or harmful peer relationships, both in person and online, can create internal barriers to school attendance and significantly impact the social and emotional well-being of children and adolescents (Christina et al., 2021). Research by Polanczyc et al. (2015) estimated that, at a given time, 127 million youth across 27 countries are diagnosed with anxiety disorders, while 47 million are diagnosed with depression. Melton et al. (2016) suggested that comorbid anxiety and depression are commonly presented in children and adolescents, showing greater symptom severity and resistance to treatment. Additionally, Gallagher et al. (2014) noted that poor social relationships and anxiety are associated with suicidal ideation. For First Nations students, stress, distress, and suicidal ideation are common responses to in-person and cyberbullying (Paul et al., 2022). Paul et al. (2022) also stated that involvement in culture and traditional practices improves well-being when dealing with bullying. However, if poor mental health is left untreated, the unaddressed issues may develop into psychiatric disorders in adulthood (Sigurdson et al., 2015).

School-related

In examining the complexities of student attendance, it is evident that schools, too, can sometimes pose significant barriers to regular attendance. School-related barriers are experienced by First Nations students attending on reserve and off-reserve schools in Alberta, Canada (Fowler & McDermott, 2020). While schools are meant to serve as inclusive and supportive environments for all learners, various factors within the educational system can unintentionally impede students' ability or motivation to attend classes consistently (Campbell, 2021). From

issues related to school culture and curriculum relevance to challenges surrounding safety, discipline, and socioeconomic disparities, the role of schools in shaping attendance patterns cannot be overstated.

School-Related External Factors

There are several school-related external barriers that can significantly impact student attendance, ultimately affecting academic performance and overall student well-being. One prominent barrier for First Nations students living on reserve is inadequate transportation options (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2020). Students may face challenges in reaching school due to limited public transportation availability or long distances to travel, particularly in rural areas where transportation infrastructure may be lacking (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2020). Therefore, limited or lack of transportation can result in tardiness or absenteeism among students who struggle to commute to school regularly (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2020).

Another external barrier to attending school is the lack of an engaging and relevant curriculum (Battiste, 2017). Battiste (2017) argued that when students feel disinterested or disconnected from what they are learning, they may be less motivated to attend classes regularly. This issue is exacerbated for First Nations students in schools where outdated or irrelevant curriculum was developed and taught from a Eurocentric worldview, which often neglects the accurate cultural heritage and history of Indigenous peoples (Battiste, 2017). Additionally, according to Johnson et al. (2022), inadequate resources and support services, such as counseling or academic tutoring, can exacerbate attendance and academic difficulties. Students facing academic or personal difficulties may be more likely to be disengaged from school if they do not have access to assistance and support (Battiste, 2017).

Suspensions can significantly impact school attendance by disrupting students' learning continuity, fostering disengagement, perpetuating disciplinary issues, and exacerbating educational inequities, particularly for marginalized and disadvantaged students (Allison et al., 2019). When students are excluded from the classroom environment through suspension, they miss valuable instructional time, leading to gaps in understanding and personal skills development, which can hinder academic progress and exacerbate existing academic and attendance challenges (Craig & Martin, 2023). Craig and Martin (2023) also argued that suspensions can contribute to a sense of alienation from school, diminishing students' motivation to attend regularly and participate in their education. Moreover, the cycle of disengagement and exclusion can perpetuate disciplinary issues, as suspensions often fail to address underlying behavioral or social-emotional needs, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds (Bell, 2020; Sanders et al., 2022).

Another external factor present in schools that can impact student attendance is the quality of teaching and instruction (Battiste, 2017). Engaging and effective teaching practices that cater to diverse learning needs, backgrounds, and interests can enhance student motivation and enthusiasm for learning, thereby reducing absenteeism (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2009). Conversely, uninspiring or ineffective teaching methods may fail to capture students' attention and lead to disengagement, increasing the likelihood of absenteeism (OECD, 2009).

Moreover, schools' policies and practices regarding attendance monitoring and intervention also influence student attendance rates (Hartnett, 2007). Childs and Lofton (2021) emphasized that marginalized populations are treated unfairly in the formulation and implementation of attendance policies. Hartnett (2007) provided examples indicating that some

types of absences are deemed acceptable according to policies and procedures, while others related to family circumstances may not be considered legitimate. Hartnett (2007) proposed that clear and consistent attendance policies, developed with input from both students and families, could help alleviate absenteeism. Bellamy et al. (2022) recommended that policymakers listen to the experiences and narratives of First Nations students to implement changes that are responsive to their needs instead of resorting to punitive measures. Given that policies can contribute to increased stress among marginalized students, revising attendance policies could potentially decrease rates of chronic absenteeism in schools (Bellamy et al., 2022; Childs and Lofton, 2021).

School-related Internal Barriers

Schools wield significant influence in shaping student attendance by navigating various factors that impact educational experiences and engagement (Osterman, 2023). St. Amand et al. (2017) argued that a significant internal barrier for students that prevents them from attending school is the lack of a sense of belonging. Maslow (1943) argued that belonging is a basic human need. With a history of dispossession and exclusion from mainstream society, First Nations youth are often trying to carve out their sense of belonging in environments such as school, where social inclusion can be challenging (Waite et al., 2023). Crul (2018) suggested that a significant way schools impact a sense of belonging, or lack thereof, is through their culture and environment. Willms (2003) observed that schools with negative or hostile environments may contribute to a lack of belonging, as students may feel disconnected or unsafe and not want to attend. Conversely, Willms (2003) concluded that a positive school culture can foster a sense of belonging and inclusivity that can motivate students to attend regularly, as they feel valued and supported within the school community.

Risk Factors Associated with Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism during an individual's school years can significantly impact a student's future life and well-being. This impact, as noted by researchers such as the First Nations Education Steering Committee (2020) and Battiste (2017), suggests that chronic absenteeism is an important element to consider when reviewing school attendance for First Nations individuals who may encounter distinct challenges stemming from historical, cultural, and systemic factors. In effect, chronically absent students face a heightened risk of underachievement, deficient social skills, executive functioning difficulties, school disengagement, and mental health challenges (Balfanz & Brynes, 2012; Fuhs, Nesbitt & Jackson, 2018; Gottfried, 2014). As Stempel et al. (2017) described, chronic absenteeism is a public health crisis due to the detrimental outcomes for impacted individuals. Chronically absent students face a heightened risk of underachievement, deficient social skills, executive functioning difficulties, school disengagement, and mental health challenges (Balfanz & Brynes, 2012; Fuhs, Nesbitt, & Jackson, 2018; Gottfried, 2014). Students who do not attend school regularly are more likely to experience chronic diseases, high school dropout, and engaging in problematic behaviors such as substance abuse, early pregnancy, illegal activities, and premature death (Kearney, 2008; London, Sanchez, & Castrechini, 2016; Malika et al., 2021; Stempel et al., 2017). Moreover, the transmission of historical and cultural trauma across generations and systemic inequities in First Nations populations can exacerbate mental health and substance abuse issues, adversely affecting overall well-being and future life outcomes (Smallwood et al., 2021). Hence, if left unaddressed, chronic absenteeism may lead to various adverse future consequences for students.

Internal Factors

Internal factors are characterized as internal manifestations originating from within the body (Kearney, 2016). Persistent absenteeism among First Nations students, interconnected with cultural, historical, and systemic influences, can trigger profound internalized consequences that show up later in life (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023; Fowler & McDermott, 2020). According to Brave Heart (2016) Indigenous populations have experienced historical trauma, which includes pervasive individual, collective, and intergenerational trauma that is compounded by racism, discrimination, and oppression. The sense of detachment from school, exacerbated by historical traumas and ongoing discrimination, can intensify feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression (Battiste, 2017; Kearney, 2007). Kearney (2007) also identified suicidal thoughts and attempts as severe mental health outcomes stemming from chronic absenteeism. Furthermore, Camacho and Henderson (2022) highlighted how socioeconomic disparities restrict access to mental health services, exacerbating psychiatric challenges. Consequently, persistent absenteeism can profoundly impact mental well-being and interpersonal relationships, thereby complicating adult life (Kearney, 2007).

Internal factors such as cultural disconnection, systemic marginalization, and intergenerational trauma, as highlighted by Fowler and McDermott (2020), exacerbate the challenge of chronic absenteeism in global education systems, notably leading to heightened rates of school absenteeism and attrition, especially among vulnerable student demographics (Rahman et al., 2023). Fast et al. (2021) argued that cultural disconnection diminishes students' motivation and perception of the curriculum's relevance, impeding their willingness to attend school. Systemic marginalization encompasses the disparities and biases experienced by Indigenous communities within the education system, resulting in alienation and exclusion

among First Nations students (Deonandan & Janoudi, 2019). Moreover, O'Neill et al. (2016) argued that intergenerational trauma, rooted in historical injustices and colonial policies, presents emotional and psychological hurdles that hinder students' academic success. Collectively, these internal factors cultivate a difficult educational environment for First Nations students, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage within Indigenous communities.

External Factors

As previously discussed, internal factors can manifest as external factors that show up and are visible to others (Kearney, 2016). Chronic absenteeism is a widespread issue globally, notably contributing to increased dropout rates, especially among vulnerable student groups (Rahman et al., 2023). According to Statistics Canada's comparison of the 2016 and 2021 censuses, there has been an improvement in high school completion rates among on reserve status First Nations individuals aged 18 to 24, rising from 41.9 percent in 2016 to 52.2 percent in 2021. Off-reserve, the rate increased from 68.4 percent to 73.3 percent during the same period. Despite these improvements, there remains a significant attendance gap between First Nations and non-Indigenous students. Statistics Canada's census also revealed that non-Indigenous graduation rates in the same age group were 87.7 percent in 2016 and 89.6 percent in 2021. Thus, the data indicate a notable disparity in high school completion between First Nations and non-Indigenous students. The repercussions of chronic absenteeism and school attrition extend beyond academic setbacks for First Nations students, exacerbating the gap between these students and their educational aspirations, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage within Indigenous communities (First Nations Steering Committee, 2020).

While Canadian Census data from 2006 indicates a noteworthy decrease in the proportion of Indigenous individuals lacking a high school diploma, the decrease among non-Indigenous

counterparts was even more significant. Closing the educational disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, as advocated by Howe (2014), could result in substantial fiscal gains for Alberta, estimated at around $8.5 billion, attributed to increased tax revenue from higher earnings. Additionally, students who graduate from college earn, on average, more than $1 million more in a lifetime than students who do not finish high school (Kearney, 2019). Consequently, if left unaddressed, chronic absenteeism among First Nations students will persist in perpetuating personal and community disadvantage as well as hindering the overall socioeconomic development and well-being of Indigenous peoples.

The impact of academic challenges can often extend well beyond the school years, affecting individuals into adulthood (Kearney, 2007). Oba et al. (2022) highlighted that these challenges can result in persistent gaps in learning and lower academic achievement, which in turn may constrain external factors such as an individual's educational and career prospects. Moreover, findings from a longitudinal study by Oba et al. (2022) suggest a concerning correlation between chronic absenteeism during the formative years of Grades 7 to 12 and future unemployment rates. This correlation, outlined by Oba et al. (2022), emphasizes the significance of addressing absenteeism and providing comprehensive support to students throughout their educational journey to mitigate long-term repercussions on their professional trajectories and overall well-being. For First Nations peoples, these challenges are particularly pronounced, as they often face additional barriers stemming from cultural disconnection, systemic marginalization, and intergenerational trauma, as highlighted by Fowler and McDermott (2020) and the First Nations Steering Committee (2020). Discrimination and bias in hiring practices can compound these issues, creating barriers to securing stable employment and perpetuating economic disadvantage (Jamatia, 2023). Furthermore, the lack of culturally relevant support

networks and services tailored to Indigenous needs can contribute to social isolation and difficulties in navigating mainstream institutions (Baskin & Sinclair, 2015).

Chronic absenteeism, particularly prevalent among First Nations populations due to socioeconomic and systemic factors, significantly heightens the risk of future external factors such as substance abuse (Fowler & McDermott, 2020; Henry et al., 2012; Kearney & Graczyk, 2013). Furthermore, Barry et al. (2024) found a notable correlation between discrimination experienced by First Nations individuals and increased likelihood of excessive alcohol consumption, misuse of prescription medications, and engagement in illicit drug use. Barry et al. (2024) highlighted a direct relationship between the intensity of discrimination and the probability of these substance misuse behaviors, particularly concerning prescription and illicit drugs. Furthermore, Kearney (2016) argued that consistent school absenteeism often leads to feelings of disconnection, low self-esteem, and limited opportunities for positive social interaction. These factors, as Allensworth and Balfanz (2019) and the First Nations Steering Committee (2020) have noted, can render individuals more susceptible to substance abuse as a means of coping with stress, loneliness, and a sense of purposelessness. Therefore, crucial educational and social resources that target chronic absenteeism can serve as protective factors against substance abuse (Malika et al., 2021).

Expanding upon the previously mentioned risk factors linked to chronic absenteeism, Kearney (2016) identified criminal involvement, incarceration, and being on death row. Maynard et al. (2015) found in their study that students who did not finish high school had notably higher rates of engaging in larceny, assault, and drug trafficking compared to graduates. Goldman and Rodrigues (2021) contended that there exists a close and mutually dependent relationship between schools and prisons, termed a school-prison nexus, wherein marginalized groups, such

as First Nations and Black populations, face disproportionately higher scrutiny for their behavior compared to dominant cultures. Tetrault (2022) argued that First Nations peoples are excessively represented in prison populations across Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and other countries, highlighting systemic failures to address the enduring impacts of colonization. Maleakieh (2020) supported Tetrault's claim by noting that Indigenous adults in Canada constitute 28 percent of admissions to both provincial and territorial prisons, as well as federal admissions, despite comprising only 5 percent of the adult population. Therefore, there are underlying societal issues contributing to chronic absenteeism and the overrepresentation of marginalized communities in the criminal justice system that severely impact the future well-being of First Nations students.

As previously mentioned, chronic absenteeism poses a global challenge (Rahman et al., 2023). Stempel et al. (2017) emphasized that students who consistently miss school are more likely to face adverse future outcomes, including premature death. Olshansky et al. (2012) revealed that individuals with less than 12 years of education face a significantly higher risk of mortality. Moreover, marginalized communities exhibit lower life expectancies compared to white populations (Olshansky et al., 2012). According to data compiled by the Alberta Government and The Alberta First Nations Governance Center in 2021, it was observed that the average life expectancy for First Nations men dropped from 67 in 2015 to 60 in 2021. Similarly, for First Nations women, life expectancy decreased from 73 in 2015 to 66 in 2021 (Government of Alberta & The Alberta First Nations Governance Center, 2021). In contrast, the life expectancy for non-First Nations people remained steady, at approximately 29 years for men and 84 years for women (Government of Alberta & The Alberta First Nations Governance Center, 2021). The impacts of early death can impact future outcomes of families and communities,

leaving emotional scars, financial burdens, and unrealized potential, altering the trajectory of lives forever (Stempel et al., 2017). Moreover, chronic absenteeism is a global issue linked to adverse outcomes such as premature death and lower life expectancy, particularly evident in marginalized communities, with significant implications for future generations' well-being and potential.

Theoretical Connections to Chronic Absenteeism

Theoretical connections to chronic absenteeism can be interpreted through the lens of SCT and the TPB. SCT posits that behavior is influenced by reciprocal interactions between personal factors, environmental factors, and behavior itself (Bandura, 1986). In the context of chronic absenteeism, individuals' perceptions of their capabilities to attend school regularly (self-efficacy), as well as their observations of others' behaviors and norms regarding attendance, play crucial roles (Allensworth & Balfanz, 2019; Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 2006). Meanwhile, TPB emphasizes the influence of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control on intention and subsequent behavior (Ajzen, 2020). In the case of chronic absenteeism, attitudes toward attending school, perceived social pressures to attend or be truant, and the perceived ease or difficulty of attending regularly are significant (Demir & Karabeyoglu, 2015). Incorporating perspectives from First Nations peoples can signify how cultural values, historical experiences, and community dynamics intersect with these theories, offering a contextual understanding of chronic absenteeism, impacting First Nations students in Alberta.

Social Cognitive Theory

This theory serves as a critical framework for understanding and exploring the pervasive issue of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in K-12 schools in Alberta. Rooted in Alfred Bandura's adaptation of Social Learning Theory from the 1960s, SCT posits that learning

is connected to social interactions, with both internal and external stimuli shaping individual behavior (Bandura, 1999). According to Usher and Schunk (2017) and Bandhu et al. (2024), SCT emphasizes the interplay of behavioral, environmental, and personal factors, forming a reciprocal causality that influences student actions.

In the context of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students, SCT offers a lens through which to examine the multifaceted factors involved, facilitating a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and environmental influences shaping attendance patterns. First and foremost, SCT acknowledges that individual choices do not solely determine attendance behaviors but are influenced by a complex interconnection of social, environmental, and personal factors (Bandura, 2006; Schunk & DiBendetto, 2020). For instance, Schunk and DiBenedetto (2020) recognized that socioeconomic conditions, cultural factors, and historical contexts can all impact personal outcomes, including a student's likelihood of attending school regularly.

Moreover, SCT emphasizes the role of observational learning and modeling in shaping behavior (Bandura, 2006; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). In the case of First Nations students, observing the attendance and engagement patterns of peers, family members, and community members can significantly influence attitudes toward attendance (OECD, 2017). Additionally, the presence of positive community role models who prioritize education and regular school attendance can serve as powerful motivators for students (OECD, 2017).

Furthermore, Bandura (1986) emphasized the importance of self-efficacy beliefs in driving behavior. For First Nations students, Crul (2018) stated that factors such as a sense of belonging, cultural affirmation, and perceived control over their educational outcomes can significantly impact their motivation to attend school regularly. Interventions aimed at bolstering students' self-efficacy and confidence in their ability to succeed academically can thus play a

crucial role in addressing chronic absenteeism (Bandura, 1986; Willms, 2003). In conclusion, SCT provides a framework for dissecting the complexities of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta's K-12 schools.

Theory of Planned Behavior

A second theoretical lens is the TPB, which offers a lens through which to explore the issue of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students across K-12 schools in Alberta. Derived from Icek Ajzen's Theory of Reasoned Action in 1985, the TPB (Ajzen, 2020) suggests that behavioral intentions can be predicted based on an individual's attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived control or barriers to executing the behavior. Ajzen (2020) stated that these elements collectively shape the likelihood of a particular behavior occurring, a behavior that can inform the underlying attitudes, social norms, and perceived barriers that influence attendance patterns.

Behavioral beliefs, in the context of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students, may encompass their perceptions of the consequences of attending school regularly, including its impact on academic success, future opportunities, and personal well-being (Ajzen, 2020; Isaak et al., 2020; Luengen et al., 2022). Normative beliefs, on the other hand, incorporate the expectations and reactions of others within their cultural, familial, and peer networks, which can significantly influence attendance decisions (Ajzen, 2020). Additionally, control beliefs include the factors that may facilitate or hinder regular attendance, such as access to transportation, school resources, and support systems (Ajzen, 2020). By dissecting these components within the TPB framework, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the attitudes, social dynamics, and structural challenges that contribute to chronic absenteeism among First Nations students.

Ultimately, TPB provides a framework for examining chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta's schools. It emphasizes the dynamic between behavioral beliefs regarding attendance consequences, normative beliefs within cultural and peer networks, and control beliefs regarding access and support systems. The TPB lens enables researchers to better understand the underlying attitudes, social influences, and structural barriers shaping school attendance patterns.

Summary

The research explored in this literature review showed that chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in K-12 schools in Alberta is evident due to a number of internal and external factors and barriers previously examined. Romero and Lee (2007) noted that Indigenous students in all grades are absent twice as often as their non-Indigenous peers. As a means to understand the challenges First Nations students face, past researchers revealed that historical impacts, internal and external factors, and persistent barriers continue to negatively impact First Nations students' school attendance (Allensworth et al., 2021; Battiste, 2017; Kearney, 2016).

Past and current researchers also examined the risk factors of chronic absenteeism that can significantly impact individuals' future well-being. To influence change, there needs to be a recognition of the unique historical and current context of First Nations peoples in Canada to begin to eliminate school attendance barriers (Battiste, 2017; Kearney, 2016). Therefore, the implementation of culturally sensitive and contextual interventions that address the foundational causes of chronic absenteeism within First Nations communities will create environments that promote attendance and support students in overcoming systemic obstacles to educational attainment.

This chapter explores the history of First Nations education from both traditional Indigenous and colonial perspectives, recognizing the unique differences between traditional First Nations education and colonial education systems. This chapter also examines how colonial government legislation and policies have impacted First Nations education through assimilation systems such as residential schools. Given the harmful impacts of colonization, First Nations peoples have long advocated for Indigenous control over their own education and a shift toward hearing and addressing historical injustices through reconciliation (Battiste, 2017; Hough, 2020).

Following the overview of the history of First Nations education in Canada, this chapter discusssd the potential barriers preventing school attendance, including student, peer, family, community, and school dynamics. Building upon the barriers leading to chronic absenteeism, a discussion of internal and external risk factors that may be related to chronic absenteeism in K-12 schools is included. It is noted that the history of colonization results in ongoing barriers to education for First Nations students that are challenging and complex (Battiste, 2017; OECD, 2017). Further, the OECD (2017) argued that recognizing and responding to contextual barriers encountered by First Nations students can reduce educational disparities. By examining the areas impeding student attendance in school, Wiedermann et al. (2023) argued that educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders can collaboratively address barriers to attendance to create community environments conducive to positive student attendance.

Building upon the barriers that lead to chronic absenteeism, a discussion of internal and external risk factors that may be related to chronic absenteeism in K-12 schools was examined. Researchers noted that chronic absenteeism during an individual's school years could significantly impact their future well-being (Balfanz & Brynes, 2012; Fuhs, Nesbitt, & Jackson, 2018; Gottfried, 2014; Malika et al., 2021; Kearney, 2008; London, Sanchez, & Castrechini,

2016; Stempel et al., 2017). Additionally, First Nations populations also encounter the transmission of historical and cultural trauma across generations and systemic inequities that adversely impact future outcomes (Smallwood et al., 2021). Therefore, students' future outcomes must be considered when exploring the specific issue of chronic absenteeism.

The third and final part of the chapter describes two theories: SCT and the TPB. Through these two lenses, the issue of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students attending K-12 schools was examined. Based on these theories and previously described literature, it was found that SCT provides a framework for understanding the complex dynamics of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students (Bandhu et al., 2024; Bandura, 1999; Usher & Schunk, 2018). SCT emphasizes the significance of social influences, observational learning, and self-efficacy beliefs in shaping attendance behaviors. Additionally, the TPB clarifies the role of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control in predicting and influencing absenteeism patterns (Ajzen, 2020). Integrating insights from both theories into the analysis considers not only individual motivations but also the social and environmental contexts impacting attendance (OECD, 2017). Also, including perspectives from First Nations peoples can inform how cultural values, historical experiences, and community dynamics intersect with these theories, offering a contextual understanding of chronic absenteeism impacting First Nations students in Alberta. By using a hermeneutic phenomenological design, reasons for chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta will be examined. Further information and details regarding a hermeneutic phenomenological design are presented in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The issue of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students is evident within Alberta's K-12 school environments (CBE, 2023; Fowler & McDermott, 2020; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023; Romero & Lee, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2016). To support this claim, researchers have shown that while the number of non-Indigenous students in K-12 schools is higher than the number of Indigenous students, absentee rates among Indigenous populations are disproportionately higher (CBE, 2023; Fowler & McDermott, 2020; Romero & Lee, 2007). Research also shows that while chronic absenteeism among First Nations students is ongoing and unresolved, this issue compromises the overall health and well-being of impacted students' current and future selves (Allensworth & Balfanz, 2021; Balfanz & Brynes, 2012; Fuhs et al., 2018; Gottfried, 2014; Kearney, 2016; Radford et al., 2022).

This chapter describes hermeneutic phenomenological research, explains the rationale for selecting this methodology, and presents the two research questions guiding this study. These research questions were formulated through a review of existing literature and discussions with the dissertation chair, which are noted. By addressing the following research questions, the problem of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta's K-12 schools and the resultant findings from the research study will be made available to school districts that work with First Nations students. The major research questions that guided this dissertation include;

RQ1. What meanings and understandings do First Nations students give to the experience of chronic absenteeism in K-12 schools?

RQ2. In the participants' experiences and opinions, what would have helped to improve their attendance while in school from K-12?

To answer the research questions and fulfill the identified purpose, this chapter comprises six sections: (a) research methods, (b) research design, (c) participants, (d) data analyses, (e) limitations, and (f) a summary.

Research Methods

Prior to beginning the research process, IRB approval was acquired. The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences, and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (2018) outline the following seven measures for research studies involving human subjects. In particular, researchers must (a) collect informed consent from all participants, (b) protect participants from any harm, (c) maintain and protect privacy and confidentiality, (d) protect vulnerable groups from harm, and (e) establish the equitable selection of participants. Transparent communication ensured participants fully understood the ethical procedures, the IRB process, and the importance of informed consent. Participants were assured that all data collected, transcribed, and analyzed were securely stored in a password-protected file for a minimum of seven years. Once approval was received from City University, data gathering and analysis began, which took approximately two months.

A request for support was disseminated in person to participating agencies, such as the Maskwacis Education Schools Commission (MESC) and the Nipisihkopahk Education Authority (NEA), with the aim of collaborating with agencies serving First Nations populations. This personal approach helped ensure a broad and inclusive outreach. The formal letter sent and delivered to agencies, as included in Appendix A, provided the same comprehensive information about the study that the participants received, including the objectives, significance, and research methodology. Agencies were informed of the importance of their support and involvement in the

study. They were also explained the study's ethical requirements and notification of IRB approval.

I asked the participating agencies to connect with potential participants who met the criteria and who were interested in participating in the research study. Prospective participants were made aware of the phenomenological research study and asked by the agency representative whether they could share the participants' contact information with me. When approval by the prospective participants was granted, the agency shared the individual's contact information with me by email. I then contacted each individual by telephone to discuss both the phenomenological research study and the individual's eligibility for participation.

To be eligible to participate in this study, each participant was required to have attended a K-12 school in Alberta and hold First Nations status. To ensure the process was open to all who may be eligible, the request for participation was also extended by leveraging existing social networks and personal contacts. Once the individuals had agreed to participate in the research study, a formal letter was emailed with information about the study. This letter, which, in essence, was a request for participation, was included in Appendix B. This correspondence provided an overview of the study's objectives, the significance of the study, and the methodology to be employed, thereby clearly outlining the importance of the participant's involvement. The letter also included detailed instructions on how individuals could participate, along with assurances regarding the confidentiality and ethical handling of all collected data. When each participant agreed to participate in this study, I asked them to engage with me in a discussion of ethical responsibility. The value of the required IRB approval was also included in the discussion of ethical responsibility with each participant.

Upon contact between me and the interested individual, typically via email, each participant deemed eligible received and was asked to sign an informed consent document, as found in Appendix C. This informed consent document was returned before each individual could participate in the study. As each informed consent form was signed and returned, the next step was to securely store all collected information and data in a password-protected computer file.

After the participants had been selected, the information disseminated, and the informed consent had been received, the data collection process began. Interviews were the primary data collection method for this phenomenological research study (Yin, 2018). Interviews are the most common method for data collection in qualitative research and were used to capture the participants' views (Jamshed, 2014). For this phenomenological research study, semi-structured interviews were conducted, both in one-on-one sessions and focus groups. The one-on-one in-person interviews were organized to accommodate the schedules of the participants and the researcher. Each participant engaged in a 45-minute one-on-one interview and was invited to opt into one of two one-hour focus group discussions. To ensure content accuracy, each interview and focus group was recorded and transcribed. The focus groups were held after all one-on-one interviews had been completed. Additionally, the first focus group was held in person, and a second focus group was held via Google Meet to maximize participant involvement.

The phenomenological research study interviews followed a consistent line of inquiry with a stream of guided questions, as supported by Yin (2018); however, they resembled a guided conversation rather than structured queries. Based on Rubin and Rubin (2011) and Roberts (2020), the interview guide was a tool for me to explore participants' lived experiences and encourage detailed responses. Following Yin's (2018) guidance, the development of this guide

prioritized avoiding leading questions and carefully attending to the subtleties in the participants' language.

The interviews were conducted following two requirements, as outlined by Yin (2018): (a) to follow a consistent line of inquiry and (b) to verbalize questions in an unbiased manner. Once these requirements were met, additional levels of questioning arose, such as queries about the interviewee's experiences related to the phenomenological research study and questions about noticeable patterns. Further questions prompted the interviewee to delve deeper into their responses and refocus the interview on the established line of inquiry. Furthermore, each interview was recorded and transcribed, supplemented by concise notes taken during the sessions.

To conclude each interview, each participant was asked whether they would be available for a follow-up interview and if they would like to review a draft report. This follow-up process, termed reflexive participant collaboration, recognized potential power imbalances in the initial interview. Reflexive participant collaboration provided a participatory approach to gathering feedback from each participant regarding the collected data, fostering reflection and facilitating deeper conversation (Motulsky, 2021).

Transparency and replicability are crucial in research as they allow future researchers to understand and potentially replicate the study's methodology, contributing to the validation and advancement of current research findings. To ensure transparency and replicability of the phenomenological research study, the Semi-Structured Interview Guide, which can be found in Appendix D, outlines the questions that the interviewer asked. The Focus Group Interview Guide in Appendix E provided questions to prompt discussion and the sequence in which they were addressed, enabling other researchers to replicate the focus group process accurately.

By articulating a clear research design, I outlined an ethical approach to collecting valuable data required for analysis. Through the facilitation of one-on-one interviews and focus groups with participants who meet the eligibility criteria, I was able to collect data that provided answers specific to the established research questions. Finally, as outlined in Chapter 5, the research findings led to recommendations that can be presented to key stakeholders, with the aim to improving school attendance among First Nations students in Alberta. Furthermore, this detailed research design made the study replicable by other researchers, as it provides a clear description of the methodology, thus allowing others to follow the same procedures and verify or challenge the results.

Research Design

In this qualitative study, phenomenology was selected as the appropriate design for working with First Nations populations as it aligns with the core principles of Indigenist research, which emphasizes relationships and the integration of Indigenous ontology, epistemology, and axiology (Wilson, 2020; Wilson et al., 2019). Phenomenology can complement Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, recognizing the importance of understanding and respecting Indigenous knowledge systems (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003). Phenomenology, with its focus on lived experiences and personal narratives, aligns with the Indigenous tradition of sharing stories, which serves as a means of restoring and giving testimony to spirit (Smith, 2013). Non-Indigenous researchers can also engage in Indigenist research if approached with respect and openness to new and unfamiliar knowledge sources (Emmanouil, 2017; Wilson et al., 2019). Given that research is fundamentally about building relationships, phenomenology's emphasis on personal experiences and interconnectedness makes

it a fitting methodology for conducting research with First Nations populations (Wilson et al., 2019).

Specifically, hermeneutic phenomenology, based on Schleiermacher's (1838) introduction to hermeneutics and Heidegger's (1927) methodology, which was later expanded by Gadamer (1960), was selected for this study. There are three main reasons for selecting this design. First, hermeneutic phenomenology can help ensure that the research aligns with the ontology, epistemology, and values of Indigenous paradigms and Indigenist research, respectfully incorporating and recognizing First Nations perspectives and processes (Wilson, 2020; Wilson et al., 2019). Additionally, a culturally appropriate and respectful research method must prioritize Indigenous knowledge and methodology (Simonds & Christopher, 2013). In this study, hermeneutic phenomenology was used to provide a culturally-appropriate framework for examining the lived experiences of First Nations students, particularly in understanding how they perceive and make sense of their lives in relation to the research questions (van Manen, 2016). The issue of chronic absenteeism was explored through the personal and contextual experiences of First Nations participants who attended a K-12 school in Alberta. Their shared experiences of absenteeism are expressed in their own voices, providing insight into this common phenomenon.

As the study is exploratory in nature, the second rationale for a hermeneutic phenomenological design is that it emphasizes the knowledge construction and reconstruction process based on the participants' experiences to explore a more authentic perspective (Dangal & Joshi, 2020). Therefore, the practice of hermeneutic phenomenology goes beyond mere description; it involves interpreting the participants' narratives to uncover the deeper meanings and themes of First Nations individuals who demonstrated chronic absenteeism in K-12 schools in Alberta. The data collected from the study were examined to support or refute findings that

were previously identified in the literature. Ultimately, conducting a hermeneutic phenomenological study provided the opportunity to produce findings that are authentic and resonate with the lived experiences of First Nations students in Alberta (Creswell, 2014; Dangal & Joshi, 2020).

The third rationale for a hermeneutic phenomenological design was to reveal the underlying factors and barriers that motivate First Nations students' behaviors (Dangal & Joshi, 2020). Phenomenology was used to describe the common essence of participants' experience of a single phenomenon, such as First Nations students who experienced chronic absenteeism in a K-12 Alberta school (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenological study was bounded by time and place where the participants shared their lived experiences related to (a) chronic absenteeism and (a) the research questions. This research was intended to determine answers to the research questions related to the experiences of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in K-12 schools in Alberta.

Participants

The participants for this study were selected based on Alberta residency, First Nations status, age, and history of school attendance. Purposive sampling was employed to select each study participant. As argued by Dibley et al. (2020), purposive sampling is the only sampling technique that should be used in hermeneutic phenomenology because the process requires a selection of participants who can best provide insights into the topic of the study, which is essential for addressing the research questions. Purposeful sampling, commonly used in information-rich studies, is used to uncover overlooked details and areas for improvement (Shaheen et al., 2019; Suen et al., 2014). In phenomenological research, purposeful sampling is particularly effective because it allows for the collection of detailed, in-depth information

(Dibley et al, 2020). The data gathered enables a thorough exploration within a defined context, such as chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta. By using purposive sampling, the most relevant information was focused on to ensure the findings are both meaningful and applicable.

This study was bounded by province, cultural group, and previous school attendance. By limiting the study by geographical location, cultural group, and prior school attendance, I targeted the research to localized issues that are experienced within a specific cultural context. This bounded approach created a deeper understanding by targeting contextual factors that influence school attendance within the designated geographical area of a specific population. By bounding the case, the diversity and complexity of factors impacting school attendance within the designated geographical area and cultural context were more thoroughly explored and understood.

Determining the sample size saturation by considering various factors, such as the population relevant to the phenomenological research study, was essential because it ensured that the sample accurately represented the diversity and complexity of the population being studied (Vasileiou, 2018). Sample size saturation refers to a point in a research study where collecting additional data no longer contributes to gaining new insights or understanding pertaining to the phenomenon being studied (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). Hennink and Kaiser (2022) and Barbour (2018) found that achieving saturation typically requires 9 to 17 interviewees or 4 to 8 focus group participants when working with a homogeneous population with narrowly defined objectives. By using purposeful sampling for this study, I selected 13 eligible participants who chose to participate. Each individual was interviewed one-on-one and asked if they would be willing to participate in one of two focus group discussions.

All participants were identified using pseudonyms, age, whether the participant attended school on reserve, off-reserve, or both, and the level of education each individual has completed. While the data indicates whether the participant attended school on reserve, off-reserve, or both and is therefore eligible to participate in the study, the experience of chronic absenteeism remained the same for all participants.

To reiterate, for each case, I contacted participants directly via email or accessed them with the assistance of a supporting agency. Details regarding the phenomenological research study were provided to both the agencies and individual participants. Once participants agreed to participate in the phenomenological research study, all ethical considerations and the protection of privacy were ensured. I checked with each participant to ensure they understood the ethical procedures to be employed, the value of the IRB process, and the requirement of informed consent. Each participant was also made aware that their privacy was protected by using pseudonyms rather than real names and that I stored all recorded and transcribed data and personal documents in a secure and password-protected file.

Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis involves searching for patterns, concepts, themes, and ideas discovered within the data (Creswell, 2014; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). According to Braun and Clarke (2012), thematic analysis is the most commonly adopted method for data analysis in qualitative research due to its theoretical flexibility, accessibility to novice researchers, and ability to generate rich and detailed accounts of data collected from participants' lived experiences. In this phenomenological research study, thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and supported by Kiger and Varpio (2020) and Bryne (2022), was conducted using the six stages of the thematic analysis process, which required me to:

1. become familiar with the data,
2. generate initial codes,
3. search for broad themes,
4. review themes,
5. define themes, and
6. write-up findings.

It is important to note that Clarke and Braun's thematic analysis is designed to be a recursive rather than a linear process, in which subsequent steps prompted me to revisit earlier steps in response to new data or emerging themes (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

The first stage of the thematic analysis process was for me to become familiar with the data. At this stage, I immersed myself in the data. This process involved attentively listening to the audio recordings and a thorough perusal of the interview transcriptions, each was reviewed at least twice. Through this iterative approach, I gained a deep understanding of the nuances within the data, allowing for the identification of recurring themes and patterns. Becoming familiar with the data established a groundwork for the following stages of analysis, allowing me to engage with the data, maintaining a sharp focus on detail and insight.

The second step of the thematic analysis process was for me to generate initial codes. Codes are short descriptive words that assign meaning to the data related to the study (Miles et al., 2014). During this step, I organized the data in a meaningful and systematic manner to create these codes. In this thematic analysis, I analyzed the transcriptions and audio recordings, highlighting significant phrases, sentences, or sections that identify essential concepts or patterns. Each highlighted segment was then assigned a specific code, which served as a shorthand representation of the underlying theme. According to Kiger and Varpio (2020), the

process of initial coding to create underlying themes is an iterative process that required me to move back and forth through the data to refine and adjust the codes and themes as new insights emerged. The goal of stage two, which was the required step of generating initial codes, was to create a detailed and organized set of codes that was used to develop broader themes in the later stages of thematic analysis.

Searching for broader themes was the third stage of the data analysis. In this step, I began to identify broader patterns and themes within the data. Identifying broader patterns and themes entailed organizing the various codes generated in the previous step into potential themes that captured significant aspects of the data related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I reviewed all the coded data segments and grouped them together based on their similarities and the overarching ideas they represented. As recommended by Fearnley (2022), the grouping process was invaluable, as it used visual representations, such as mind maps and thematic charts, to help visualize the connections between codes and emerging themes. I then refined and adjusted these preliminary themes, ensuring that they accurately reflected the coded data and contributed to a deeper understanding of the research topic.

In the fourth stage of thematic analysis, I reviewed and refined the preliminary themes identified in the previous step. In this step, I transitioned from a detailed analysis of codes and categories to a more abstract interpretation by creating themes. To make this transition, I reviewed and refined the preliminary themes identified in stage three (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Maguire and Delahunt (2017) argued that the review of themes involves a detailed examination to ensure each theme is coherent, consistent, distinct, and accurately represents the coded data and effectively addresses the research questions. To ensure a quality review and refinement of the themes, I revisited the data extracts associated with each theme, not

only checking for coherence and consistency but also distinguishing clear boundaries between each theme. As recommended by Kiger and Varpio (2020), to enhance the clarity and relevance of each theme, I merged, divided, redefined, or even discarded themes when supported by evidence from the data. The process of adjusting the themes created a refined set of themes that were both meaningful and robust, providing a true representation of the data. The theme review in stage four also involved creating detailed descriptions and names for each theme, which was used in the final analysis and reporting phases.

In the fifth stage of defining themes, I thoroughly reviewed and analyzed each theme to clearly and accurately articulate its meaning and scope. Themes are characterized as units originating from patterned responses or meanings that are derived from the collected data and used to inform the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Defining the themes involved thoroughly analyzing the data within each reviewed theme to determine what aspect of the data each theme captures and how it contributed to understanding the overall research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

As stage five progressed, I wrote detailed definitions and descriptions for each theme, highlighting the core concepts and underlying patterns that make the theme distinct. This process also included identifying sub-themes to further refine and structure the themes. My goal was to ensure each theme was well-defined and distinct and provided an insightful and nuanced understanding of the data that led to a comprehensive write-up of the findings.

The final stage of the thematic process, the write-up of the findings, is presented in Chapter 4. In Chapter 4, I focused on writing up the final analysis and description based on the research questions and provided detailed findings in preparation for recommendations in Chapter 5. According to Kiger and Varpio (2020), much of the writing process already started through the

note-taking processes, describing themes, and selecting representative data, which were conducted in the previous stages. King (2012) and Braun and Clarke (2012) argued that the final report of the findings will move beyond the description of codes and themes to create a narrative that is a clear, concise, and logical account of the data. To create the final report, I presented each theme using both narrative descriptions and representative data extracts, such as direct quotes from participants, to substantiate the findings. This narrative highlighted the significance of each theme in relation to the research questions and overall study objectives. Utilizing hermeneutic phenomenology, I interpreted the themes, explaining their implications and how they contributed to the broader understanding of the research topic. Hermeneutic phenomenology allowed for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of First Nations students, providing a nuanced and contextual interpretation of chronic absenteeism in Alberta's K-12 schools. My goal was to provide a clear, insightful, and well-supported account of the research findings that effectively communicated the findings from the study and their relevance to First Nations students experiencing chronic absenteeism. The findings are followed by the conclusion and recommendations in Chapter 5.

Limitations

Understanding limitations is important because it acknowledges weaknesses within the study that may influence findings and conclusions (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). Ross and Bibler Zaidi (2019) also warn that if limitations are not recognized, the research findings may be misconstrued or the conclusions may be incorrect, undermining the integrity, validity, and generalizability of the research. Two potential limitations are identified to maintain the quality and rigor of this research study.

One limitation of using a phenomenological approach to study chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta is the time-consuming nature of the research process. Conducting a phenomenological study necessitated facilitating in-depth, open-ended interviews to explore the lived experiences of the participants, allowing me to gain a nuanced understanding of the factors contributing to absenteeism. Building trust was a critical aspect of working within Indigenous communities, as relationships often needed to be cultivated before meaningful dialogue could take place. The process of trust-building required extended periods of time engaging with participants to ensure they felt comfortable sharing their personal stories and perspectives (Kovach, 2021).

In addition to the lengthy data collection phase, the data analysis stage in phenomenological research was also demanding. I engaged in detailed coding and thematic analysis, often manually, to identify patterns and extract themes from the narratives. This process was especially complex when dealing with sensitive and culturally specific experiences, requiring careful interpretation to ensure that the analysis remained authentic to the participants' voices. Ensuring cultural sensitivity and accuracy further extended the time commitment, as I had to avoid imposing external interpretations that might distort the meaning of the participants' lived experiences. Overall, while phenomenological research provided rich, in-depth insights, the time-intensive nature of both data collection and analysis was a significant challenge when studying chronic absenteeism in this context.

The extended timeframe required for phenomenological research can also limit the scope of the study, often resulting in a smaller sample size. Due to the time-intensive nature of conducting in-depth interviews and the laborious process of analyzing qualitative data, I was only able to engage with a limited number of participants. This smaller sample size can present

challenges in terms of representativeness, as the data may not fully capture the diversity of experiences, perspectives, and factors influencing chronic absenteeism among First Nations students.

Although the study provided rich, context-specific insights into the lived experiences of the participants, the limited number of voices may mean that certain patterns or influences remain unexplored. This limitation raises concerns about the generalizability of the findings. While the results may offer valuable understanding of absenteeism within a particular group of First Nations students in Alberta, the findings may not be easily applicable to broader populations or to students in different regions or cultural settings. In essence, while the depth of understanding gained from the phenomenological approach is a strength, it comes at the cost of breadth, potentially limiting the study's wider relevance and impact.

Delimitations

Delimitations refer to the boundaries intentionally set by the researcher to define the scope of a study. By clearly stating these delimitations, I ensured that the study remained focused, feasible, and manageable, which in turn supported the validity and reliability of the research findings (Akanle et al., 2020). In this study, a key delimitation was the decision to interview only First Nations students between the ages of 18 and 30 who currently reside in Alberta and who experienced chronic absenteeism during their Kindergarten to Grade 12 years. This age range allowed the study to focus on individuals who can reflect on their past school experiences with a certain degree of maturity and hindsight, while also remaining connected to the education system through relatively recent attendance.

Another significant delimitation is that the interviews were conducted in the post-pandemic context, where the global disruption caused by COVID-19 has notably affected student

attendance patterns. By setting this boundary, I acknowledged the unique challenges of the pandemic era while still focusing on chronic absenteeism that predated it, providing a nuanced perspective on both long-standing and recent factors influencing attendance. Additionally, the study relied on self-identified chronically absent attendance designations, meaning that participants had to recognize and define their own experiences with absenteeism. This delimitation ensured that I captured individuals' personal perspectives on their absenteeism, but may have limited my ability to include those who do not self-identify, despite potentially fitting the criteria. These boundaries helped me narrow the focus, allowing the study to maintain depth and coherence while managing the complexities of the topic.

Due to these delimitations, the findings and results of this study may not necessarily generalize to other cultural groups, locations, or future time periods. The specific focus on First Nations students in Alberta and the unique context of post-pandemic attendance patterns may limit the broader applicability of the study's conclusions.

Summary

Throughout the literature, researchers have shown that the issue of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students is evident within Alberta's K-12 school environments (CBE, 2023; Fowler & McDermott, 2020; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023; Romero & Lee, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2016). The results of this research study provide an opportunity to explore the issue of chronic absenteeism among First Nations populations in Alberta. To answer the research questions, a hermeneutic phenomenological research study was conducted.

In this chapter, I explained why and how I employed purposive sampling for participant selection, selecting 13 individuals for this study. Data collection for the phenomenological research study involved interviews, focus groups with participants, and document analysis.

Following data collection, I became familiar with the data, generated initial codes, searched for broad themes, reviewed them, and defined them. Lastly, I wrote up the research findings in Chapter 4.

All of the study's results will be shared with educational stakeholders, policymakers, and community leaders who are looking to improve school attendance among First Nations students. By helping schools and communities better support students in overcoming barriers to attendance, the primary beneficiaries of the findings are expected to be the First Nations students experiencing chronic absenteeism. Chapter 4 details the findings of this study, while Chapter 5 outlines the conclusions.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The problem of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta and its impact on their well-being remains unresolved. The problem is highlighted by data compiled by the Calgary Board of Education (CBE), one of Alberta's largest school districts. According to the CBE's 2022–2023 Annual Results Report, 3.75% of the overall student population exhibited attendance rates below 50%, compared to 18.05% among First Nations students. Researchers have shown that chronic absenteeism correlates with numerous adverse outcomes, including lower test scores and grades, an increased likelihood of dropping out, higher rates of future unemployment, greater substance use, more pronounced behavioral challenges, heightened social disengagement and alienation, and a higher risk of early mortality (Allensworth et al., 2021; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Education Act, 2018; Fuhs et al., 2018; Gottfried, 2014; London et al., 2016). These statistics indicate the specific problem of disparity in absenteeism rates, with First Nations students in Alberta experiencing significantly higher levels of chronic absenteeism than their non-First Nations peers.

The purpose of this research was to identify the barriers to school attendance among First Nations students in Alberta's K-12 schools and to inform evidence-based interventions and policy initiatives that support academic success and overall development. The following two research questions guided the study:

RQ1. What meanings and understandings do First Nations students give to the experience of chronic absenteeism in K-12 schools?

RQ2. In the participants' experience, what would have helped to improve their attendance while in school from K-12?

Chapter 4 includes an analysis of the data collected from (a) interviews conducted with First Nations participants who attended K-12 schools, (b) focus group interviews, and (c) a literature review. The latter provides the contextual foundation and alignment to what was shared in the interviews. The purpose of the analysis is to explore the higher rates of school absenteeism among First Nations students compared to their non-Indigenous peers. Qualitative data from 13 First Nations participants were analyzed using a hermeneutic phenomenological design.

Initial codes were generated from the interviews and focus group discussions, which were then used to develop broad themes. From these broad themes, four key themes were identified: (a) disconnection, (b) mental health, (c) the impact of educational transitions, and (d) a sense of belonging. This chapter is organized around these themes, and each is supported by evidence from the data, including an analysis of interviews and focus group discussions, offering insights to address the research questions.

Presentation of Findings

Following the data collection, six stages of the thematic analysis process were initiated. These stages included:

1. familiarizing myself with the data
2. generating the initial codes
3. searching for broad themes
4. reviewing the themes
5. defining themes
6. writing up the findings

As Maguire and Delahunt (2017) noted, a detailed examination of the data is required to derive the initial codes to generate coherent, consistent, distinct, and accurate themes.

Conceptual codes emerged as an intermediate step between the initial codes and broad themes, helping to organize the data into higher-order constructs that clarified relationships between participants' lived experiences and the identified themes. These four broad themes directly address the research questions by identifying and synthesizing key patterns, meanings, and insights within the data. The thematic analysis offers a structured framework to interpret participant experiences, highlight significant phenomena, and derive meaningful conclusions. The data analyzed in this research study revealed four key themes highlighting barriers and demographic-specific challenges contributing to chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta's K-12 schools., Table 4.1 lists each of the broad themes and the conceptual categories from the reported personal experiences of all First Nations participants in this study. These thematic elements formed the foundation of each of the four themes.

The four themes were developed based on a review of the personal experiences and perceptions shared by the participants in the interviews and focus groups. The following section of this chapter defines each of these themes in detail. For each theme, an examination of the related conceptual categories is provided, illustrating how these categories connect the theme to the information gathered in the interviews with participants. Appendix F provides further information regarding the initial codes found in this study.

Table 4.1
Themes and Conceptual Categories

Themes	Conceptual Categories
Disconnection	Family Struggles & School Staff Barriers
Mental Health	Mental Health Challenges & Coping Mechanisms
Educational Transitions	Changing Schools & Environmental Impacts
A Sense of Belonging	Student Relationships & Adult Relationships

Disconnection

The interviews revealed that the various ways First Nations students interact with adults, including educational staff and family role models, influence the educational experiences and motivation of students. Through the interview process, various patterns emerged regarding the impact of support systems, physical and emotional safety, and respect. Positive interactions often foster engagement and confidence, while negative or limited interactions can contribute to disengagement and absenteeism. Within this theme, two conceptual categories emerged from the research: family influence and educational staff influence.

Family Struggles

Family was a word often used by the participants when they noted the challenges they faced when experiencing school attendance challenges. Miriam, one of the participants in this study, summarized the lack of family support to describe her difficulty with attending school:

> Sometimes, it was hard because I was raising myself. I was responsible for getting myself up, getting myself ready, making my lunch, getting out of the house, coming home, and feeding myself. It was really hard because I forgot to set alarms. I just didn't have things to get me awake by the time I needed to go.

Xallien and Jan expanded on family influence when they discussed acting as caregivers for family members. Xallien and Jan were often kept home from school to babysit. Jan's description indicated how she was used for childcare:

> Usually, my older sisters would interrupt my school by asking me to babysit. I have three older sisters, and a couple of them have kids. I would also have to help watch my younger brother.

While Xallien and Jan acted as caregivers to children, Forever and Em were tasked as caregivers for a parent who was terminally ill. Forever and Em both indicated that having a terminally ill parent impacted their school attendance. Em explained her situation succinctly:

> When my mom was sick, I couldn't leave her. I didn't want to leave her at home by herself. She was sick, and I had younger siblings that needed [to be] taken care of. I couldn't leave her.

While family influence is one attendance barrier First Nations students face, educational staff can also significantly impact their ability and motivation to attend school regularly.

School Staff Barriers

While many of the participants identified having supportive and caring staff in their schools, participants such as Christian and Rose encountered negative experiences with school staff that resulted in a barrier to school attendance. Christian simply stated, "Just having a teacher so dedicated to not caring is memorable."

Rose expanded on her experience with school staff and how it became a barrier for her to regularly attend school:

> There was a teacher who didn't like me, and she kept forcing the principal every day to push me to the Outreach school. So, I ended up getting sent to the Outreach school, and my friend, who was still in the class, told me she went in front of the entire class and told everyone I didn't know how to read and write. The principal at the Outreach wasn't a fan of mine either. She kept trying to find problems to get me out of school. At my graduation, she rudely said, "I hope you don't fall off the stage."

Another respondent, April, shared her experience with staff and how her encounter impacted her attitude toward her education:

> I told my principal that my gym teacher smacked me in the butt with a clipboard. I went to tell my principal and all she said was, "that's what you do in sports." I thought that was disgusting because I think it's even weird that football players and baseball players do that. I think that's weird, and I don't want that done to me. It made me uncomfortable, and not just uncomfortable; it made me angry because I wasn't being listened to and I was disregarded.

Therefore, the impact that adult influences, particularly family and school staff, can have on the education of First Nations students is evident. All participants interviewed suggested that family and school staff can positively and negatively impact school experience. Christian summarized this best: "If I'm not getting help, I'm not going to go." In addition to this first theme of adult influences in education, the second theme found in this study is mental health. The aforementioned adult influences in education may also influence mental health, which include family dynamics and support systems. The mental health of a student is often interconnected with adult influences, which may be a barrier to attending school regularly.

Mental Health

Poor mental health is one of the leading predictors of chronic absenteeism for students (Allensworth & Balfanz, 2021; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Kearney, 2016). Participants who were interviewed for this study reflected on these findings. The conceptual categories related to mental health that were uncovered in this research study found that students are often dealing with mental health challenges and have few coping mechanisms.

Mental Health Challenges

Whether there was a desire to attend school or not, the mental health challenges the participants faced were reportedly so debilitating that they were unable to attend school regularly. Amy spoke about the issue of her depression:

> The only time I wasn't at school was when my depression would get to me. I would get so, so sad, to the point where I couldn't leave my bed.

Likewise, April described how grief negatively impacted her mental health, leading her to stay home from school:

> We have so many suicides. So much hurt. It's because no one believes in us. And even if they do, they tell us to cut it out. I went from Grade one to Grade eight continuously up until my nephew passed away in February. After that, I didn't go. I didn't go for a very long time.

Thus, one major mental health issue most of the participants reported was that they often experienced depression that kept them away from school.

In addition to mental health challenges, several participants also described personal experiences where school exacerbated their feelings of depression and anxiety. In response to mental health challenges, Norris said, "I'll just have to ride out the storm." In contrast, Christian gave more details surrounding how his mental health challenges were triggered by personal experiences of grief and loss:

> Last year, my house burned, and my two little brothers died. Losing everything, I didn't care about school anymore. I didn't care about the future anymore. I did make a few appearances at school but, for some reason, the school reminded me of what I had lost, and I didn't want to go anymore.

Adding to the issue of mental health challenges, Xallien shared that her ongoing mental health struggles would impact her when she did go to school:

> If I didn't feel mentally capable of paying attention in class, I just thought there was no point. I'd just end up getting in trouble or skipping. My mom didn't mind because then I could babysit. At least two or three days each week, I'd babysit.

The mental health challenges described here are those exhibited by participants and how those challenges have impacted their lived experiences. The participants felt that their mental health impacted their attendance in school.

Coping Mechanisms

Participants were found to explore their own coping mechanisms to deal with mental health struggles such as depression, loss, and grief. However, not all coping mechanisms were healthy. April stated, “I started drinking when I was 13 because I had no other outlet.” However, April added that she eventually found a healthier way to cope with her mental health:

> Now that I know better, I always reach out to a counselor or doctor when I feel my mental health going down. I feel like every student should be able to have a counseling session so students can talk about anything and everything.

Miriam, too, expressed the importance of having someone to talk to. She added about her experience working with Indigenous student advisers in her school:

> There were Indigenous student advisers I had. They would take you through something like a counseling session with them. You know, they would talk to you about anything you need, and they'd help you. They'd help you figure things out.

While not all participants attended counseling or spoke to someone formally, many participants shared what they would do to improve their mental health. Madelyn was clear that she would "Sweat! Sweat! Sweat!" to improve her mental health. Madelyn would participate in regular sweat lodge ceremonies hosted by the school, where students could sign up. In a sweat lodge ceremony, an elder conducts a purification ritual to promote healing and balance.

While some participants benefited from external mental health support, such as working with a counselor, an Indigenous student adviser, or an elder, many others found that recreational activities had a positive impact on their mental well-being. Forever shared what recreational activities his school offered that improved his mental health and attendance:

> We had physical education three times each week. That's what always had me. It was nice. Sometimes there were times the teachers would set up other activities like beading or arts and crafts, or something like that. Or maybe traditional hand games or board games. I liked that.

Forever enjoyed playing a traditional game called "hand games," where two teams of five sit across from each other. One team member hides objects in their own hands while the other team tries to guess in which hand the objects are located.

Xallien shared her love for sports:

> Being in sports, especially basketball, that was what helped keep me active and to help me focus. It was something I was good at and felt good doing.

Jamie, on the other hand, stated that he required a coping mechanism that he could access at home and at school. While at home, he would listen to music and play his guitar to improve his mental health; at school, he loved going to the music room:

> Going to the music room. A lot of us went to the music room. Yeah, I'd go to the music room every day. When I was there, I'd do my best to get work done.

Like Jamie, Norris also indicated that he utilized strategies to cope with mental health by doing activities he could do on his own time or during school time:

> I liked doing outdoor activities and other stuff outdoors, whether it be with my friends or my class. Going outdoors is how we make good memories.

While participants shared their struggles with mental health challenges, they also identified healthy coping strategies that supported their well-being. These included engaging in cultural practices, building strong connections with staff and peers, participating in recreational activities, and spending time in nature.

Educational Transitions

The interviews revealed that many of the participants attended several different schools in various locations throughout Alberta. In most situations, family circumstances influence the need

to move. Educational transitions, too, impacted school attendance as students had to adapt to new environments, curricula, and peer groups. Two conceptual categories emerged from the research: changing schools and environmental impact.

Changing Schools

The need to change schools was often used by the participants when they noted the challenges they faced. Miriam, one of the participants interviewed in this study, highlighted the frequency of transitioning schools:

> I have attended 20 schools in my entire K-12 school career. So, it was roughly two or three schools every school year.

Stacey discussed being in foster care, which required her to move to several different locations and schools within Alberta. She shared the number of school changes she experienced from kindergarten to Grade 6:

> I attended kindergarten and grade one south of Ponoka, and then I went to a reserve school for Grade 2. I went to a different reserve school in Grade 3. For Grade 4, I went to school in Red Deer and then came back to a reserve school for Grade 5. Then I went to a Calgary school in Grade 6, but that was only for half the semester. I came back for the rest of my semester to a reserve school. So, I was always going through different schools.

Compared to some of his peers throughout school, Jamie did not feel he moved very often:

> I went to a couple schools off-reserve and some on reserve. I think I moved about eight or nine times between kindergarten and high school. It wasn't that much compared to some of my friends.

Overall, the research revealed that changing schools was a common experience for many of the participants interviewed. As several participants stated, changing schools resulted in significant instability and poor school attendance.

Some participants described the difficulty of maintaining stable friendships and continued education due to the change in schools. Like Jamie, Forever also had to move several times and

shared how frequently changing schools caused him instability. Forever identified moving as the reason he struggled to maintain friendships:

> I went to, like, I think about six different schools. I always had a problem moving around really quick. Yeah, it was definitely a problem, always moving around. The thing I didn't like is that I met some friends that I like but I didn't know [if] I was never going to see them again because I would have to move.

Miriam also expressed how changing schools resulted in instability for her. She added that not all schools follow the same curriculum timeline, resulting in her missing chunks of curriculum:

> I'd go to the next school, realize they're working on something I'd already done, but they've done things I didn't do. What was in the future for me, they had already done it. They were working on things I just finished learning. So, the curriculum was never the same and there are so many things I never got to learn.

Thus, participants identified how changing schools played a role in their education.

The environmental impacts of educational transitions are another barrier indicated by the participants who were interviewed, and this is discussed in the next subsection.

Environmental Impacts

In eight of the interviews, the respondents identified how often they remember experiencing discrimination and racism when attending a new school, specifically in schools off-reserve. When describing attending a school in an Alberta town, Madelyn stated, "I was the only Native there." The feeling of being a minority in their educational environment created a negative feeling in participants that they described as contributing to their dislike of school. Amy explained how she felt as a little girl going to an off-reserve school:

> I hated going to school off-reserve. The teachers were racist toward me—the way they would talk to me, the way they would treat me, the things they would say to me. I was just a little kid, so I couldn't really say anything. It was just really unfair.

When comparing going to school off-reserve to going to school on reserve, another participant, Jamie, noted, "It doesn't seem right; it doesn't feel right." Jan expressed similar feelings and expanded on why she felt this way:

> I went to school all over Calgary, and then back to Maskwacis, and then back to Calgary, and then to school in Wetaskiwin. I've been all over. Calgary was the worst because I just felt so lost because I didn't know anybody and I felt like an outsider. When I went to school in Maskwacis or Wetaskiwin, I had my siblings and cousins. Some of the staff were my aunties. We all knew each other and nobody was judging us and we felt like we belonged. I hated going to school in the city.

Additionally, April noted how changing schools from an on reserve to an off-reserve school can impact how staff view you and your academic ability:

> The town schools would take one look at me and where I went to school and want to put me in the lower academic classes, like Knowledge and Employability. I was strong academically. Even though I'd tell them they were putting me in the wrong class, I would have to prove myself to get moved to the higher classes. Just because I was Native and went to school on reserve, they would assume I didn't have the ability to do well in school.

In conclusion, the participants reported seeing the impacts of educational transitions as significant barriers to attending school. The next subsection describes the final theme, belonging, which connects all the previous themes that this research study exposes.

A Sense of Belonging

The need to belong is a basic human need (Maslow, 1943). Participants interviewed in this study reflected on this statement. The results indicated that a sense of belonging is shaped by conceptual categories related to student and adult relationships, both positive and negative.

Student Relationships

All of the participants in this study discussed their relationships with other students. Stacey was very blunt and said, "I didn't really have any friends in school." Miriam concurred that she also did not have many friends in school and explained why:

> I think students were always very happy, especially when we were younger, to have a new classmate or a new friend. But they always stuck to the people they knew best. They would say they wanted to be your friend but then they would just, kind of, leave you alone. And then, if you weren't at school for days at a time, you'd never make friends. You never made relationships with them. You didn't belong.

Another respondent, Amy, admitted that her emotions would impact her relationships with other students:

> I'd lash out at people here and there. It made a lot of people disappear from my life. A lot of students didn't really like me. They didn't want me around.

While several participants spoke about their lack of belonging among friend groups, other participants discussed how their romantic relationships influenced their relationships with other students. Xallien described how her relationship with her boyfriend impacted her education and relationships with other students:

> I had a boyfriend who was very controlling, and he did impact a lot about school. I'd sleep in, not take school seriously, and put all my focus on him. I was not allowed to have friends. If I did go to school, it wouldn't be until about 10:00 or 11:00. I would not recommend being in a relationship while still in school.

April also expressed how her relationship with her boyfriend impacted her relationship with students at school:

> I left my school and moved up to Northern Alberta to live with my boyfriend, who was from there. It's over a two-hour drive from where I lived. We ended up breaking up and I moved back home. When I moved back home partway through the school year, my old school wouldn't accept me. I had to go to school in town. My old school wouldn't take me back so I had to switch schools to another school on the reserve.

Regardless of the circumstances, participants indicated they felt isolated and lacked a sense of belonging among their peers. Some of the participants compared their relationships with peers to their relationships with adults.

Adult relationships

A sense of belonging not only in student relationships but in adult relationships as well. Miriam described her desire for adult relationships:

> I was more friends with the teachers than anybody else. I loved the teachers. I would beg to hang out with the teachers. Also, when I found a teachers' assistant I loved, I would ask to do work with them all the time. And I was in Boys and Girls Club at one point, too. I had a big sister. She was, like, 20. I was better friends with her than anybody else in that school. I would always want to go hang out with her. I always found myself just more drawn to the adults because they understood what I was going through because no kid my age should really have to go through what I was going through. The adults would empathize with me, and I could talk to them about certain things.

Christian concurred with how adults influence students. He added that an adult relationship can change your originally perceived life trajectory:

> It was my counselor. When I first went to the school, she asked if I wanted to have meetings like other students. I saw how much other students would always be with her or wanting to see her. I declined at first. Later on, I got to know her and eventually had sessions, too. I have never seen a teacher, let alone a person, care as much as she does. I would tell her about my life and other counselors things. In the last few years, she helped me get into college. I never expected to go, but she encouraged me to. I have now graduated from college.

Another respondent, Stacey, described how her uncle, who lived several provinces away, provided her with a belief that if he can do something, then so can she:

> I think about my uncle a lot. He graduated school, just like me, and now he’s living in Toronto. I always wanted to be like him and move off to a different province. He did it, so maybe I can, too.

While other participants shared positive experiences with adult relationships, Amy struggled:

> For me, it felt like some of the teachers and educational assistants didn’t like me. I had a speech impediment and had a low attention span and an attention deficit. It was really difficult for me to learn and talk to people. So, I never really got along with anyone or fit in.

Stacey also described how adult relationships could be complicated:

> The principal at my old school was related to my stepdad. We got along well, but she would always ask me personal questions that I didn't want her to ask at school. It was unnecessary because I was at school and those were just the type of questions I should talk to a counsellor about, in my opinion.

Jan concurred that relationships with adults in school could be complicated:

> I would usually talk to counselors. However, if there was a teacher I was really close to, I might talk to them. It was hard because some that I would trust would then go and blurt out my problems. I needed someone that would not blurt out my problems to other people. Some staff would.

To fully feel a sense of belonging in school and further engage in school, respondents indicated that student and adult relationships provide support, but can also cause serious damage, to First Nations students to achieve educational success.

Ultimately, the theme of belonging could inform solutions to improving school attendance for First Nations students in K-12 schools. Waite et al. (2023) noted that, with a history of dispossession and exclusion from mainstream society, First Nations youth are often trying to carve out their own sense of belonging in environments such as school. Willms (2003) argued that if students have good relationships with other students and adults connected to their education, the students will feel a greater sense of belonging. All participants endorsed this idea.

Summary

This chapter discussed the findings from interviews with 13 participants, followed by two focus groups. Using a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological approach to describe and interpret the phenomenon of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta allowed for the collection of data and subsequent data analysis. Regarding the study's two research questions, it was discovered that all First Nations students who participated in the interviews reported experiencing chronic absenteeism in a similar manner. These similarities illustrate four themes: (a) disconnection, (b) mental health, (c) the impact of educational

transitions, and (d) a sense of belonging. These themes provided valuable insight into the complex factors contributing to chronic absenteeism among the participants.

The next chapter reviews the study's findings, presents and discusses conclusions, and clarifies their relevance to the problem statement. It also explores the implications for school leadership, provides recommendations for future actions, and identifies potential areas for further research. The chapter concludes the study with a final statement.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to identify the barriers to school attendance among First Nations students in Alberta's K-12 schools. By obtaining these firsthand experiences and gaining insight into the barriers faced by First Nations students, educators and policymakers can develop evidence-based interventions and policies that effectively support their academic success and overall well-being. This study was guided by two research questions based on the literature reviewed and in consultation with the dissertation chair. These research questions include:

RQ1. What meanings and understandings do First Nations students give to the experience of chronic absenteeism in K-12 schools?

RQ2. In the participants' experience, what would have helped to improve their attendance while in school from K-12?

Data from 13 participants living in Alberta and who attended school in Alberta, Canada, were obtained using semi-structured interviews and two focus groups. The data analysis included familiarizing myself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for broad themes, reviewing those themes, and defining them. Chapter 4 described the findings from the interviews and focus groups of the 13 participants. From the information collected, King (2012) and Braun and Clarke (2012) noted that the discussion will move beyond the description of codes and themes to create a clear narrative.

Chapter 5 is organized into six sections that frame the overall conclusions of this study on First Nations school attendance in Alberta. These areas include: (a) a discussion and analysis of the findings and conclusions, (b) the application of findings and conclusions related to the problem statement, (c) the relevance of the findings to educational leadership, (d)

recommendations for action, (e) recommendations for future research, and (f) a concluding statement.

Discussion

The data collected for this study was guided by two research questions. Responses to these two questions and relevant conclusions are based on the six aforementioned themes. The next section of this chapter is structured around the two research questions and the conclusions derived from the findings. These conclusions are based on the themes that emerged from the study and are supported by existing research.

What are the Meanings and Understandings that First Nations Students Give to the Experience of Chronic Absenteeism in K-12 Schools?

The first research question relates to school absenteeism and how the lived experiences of First Nations students were described. While the majority of K-12 students in Alberta are non-Indigenous, First Nations students continue to demonstrate higher rates of chronic absenteeism. As noted in the first chapter, researchers from Alberta found that 80% of First Nations students living on reserve were chronically absent from school, compared to 20% of their non-Indigenous peers who were chronically absent (Fowler & McDermott, 2020). Therefore, how the study's First Nations students experienced K-12 education led to three key indicators. It was discovered that First Nations student's educational experiences were impacted by disconnection, mental health challenges, and educational transitions.

Disconnection

Described as a disconnection, the participants in this study discussed how they were often mistreated and exploited, preventing them from attending school on a regular basis. It was revealed that family struggles were a significant barrier to student attendance. Factors such as

family dynamics, parental involvement, socioeconomic status, housing stability, and access to resources all influence a student's ability to attend school regularly (Munir et al., 2023). A supportive and stable home environment with involved parents who prioritize education is more likely to promote consistent attendance (Deck, 2017). Conversely, students from homes with high levels of stress, financial instability, domestic issues, or inadequate access to basic needs like food and shelter may face significant obstacles that hinder their ability to attend school consistently (Deck, 2017). The participants in this study discussed their experiences with excess responsibilities based on their personal situations, leading to chronic absenteeism in school.

The findings from the study also revealed how a lack of familial or community support led to caregiving responsibilities that often impacted their connection to the school. Many students must care for younger siblings, parents, or grandparents, making it difficult to balance educational commitments (Armstrong-Carter et al., 2024). Research by Armstrong-Carter et al. (2022) establishes a direct correlation between the frequency and intensity of caregiving duties and student absenteeism. As caregiving responsibilities increase, student caregivers are more likely to experience higher absenteeism rates (Armstrong-Carter et al., 2022). This challenge is particularly prevalent among marginalized populations, including Indigenous communities, where familial expectations and cultural responsibilities may further affect school attendance (Armstrong-Carter et al., 2022). The caregiving responsibilities the study participants shared were expectations placed upon them by family and community. The participants went on to explain how caregiving expectations superseded educational accomplishments. Participants also discussed how they valued their caregiver roles but were frustrated by the treatment they received that prevented them from attending school.

While family influence may be one attendance barrier faced by First Nations students, educational staff can also have a significant impact on their ability and motivation to attend school regularly. Although some participants recalled supportive and caring staff, others, like Christian and Rose, encountered negative experiences that discouraged them from attending school. Christian stated, “Just having a teacher so dedicated to not caring is memorable.” Likewise, Rose shared an experience where a principal directed a demeaning tone at her during her high school graduation. The principal said, “I hope you don’t fall off the stage.” Therefore, the interactions that school staff have with students can impact how students view their school environment. Students who observe their schools as negative or hostile may disconnect from the environment and not attend (Willms, 2003). Consequently, when school staff articulate or demonstrate a lack of care for students, students will disconnect from school.

Mental Health

In addition to disconnection from school due to family and staff-related circumstances, this study found that participants also struggled with their mental health. These struggles were closely linked to school attendance, as participants described how depression impacted their ability to engage in education. Additionally, disconnection from school often worsens feelings of depression, sometimes leading to severe mental health outcomes (Kearney, 2007). All participants shared that the deaths of friends and family members influenced their school attendance. Several also noted the high frequency of suicide-related losses among loved ones and how these tragedies further affected their mental health and ability to attend school.

Participants also expressed concerns about the school staff's response to their mental health struggles. Many felt that staff failed to recognize or address their mental health challenges, instead identifying them as behavioral problems or oppositional. Deonandan and Janoudi (2019)

argued that disparities and biases in education can lead to alienation and exclusion, particularly among First Nations students. In this study, participants who lacked mental health support suggested that this gap in recognition and assistance may be one contributing factor to chronic absenteeism in K-12 schools.

Educational Transitions

The participants in this study identified educational transitions as a significant indication of chronic absenteeism. These transitions often involved changing schools frequently, sometimes in the middle of the academic year. As Deck (2017) notes, students from stable and supportive home environments are more likely to maintain consistent school attendance. For the participants in this study, frequent school changes were part of their lived reality—not just an individual experience but a pattern shared across peers and extended family.

Other geographical educational transitions discussed by participants included moving from rural to urban settings. Participants discussed situations where they got lost the large schools they attended and that they did not feel as though they belonged. All participants indicated that they preferred attending rural schools to urban schools. Moreover, most participants indicated they would rather attend an on-reserve school than one off-reserve. Participants identified that they felt more comfortable going to school on reserve because they felt a sense of belonging. All participants indicated that they always had family members, both students and staff, whom they could depend on at the on reserve schools, even if the reserve school they were attending was not their home reserve. As a group, participants discussed the closeness and shared histories of First Nations peoples and how many reserves in North America are connected. When attending school on reserve, participants felt connected; when off-reserve, participants felt disconnected.

In the Participant's Experience, What Do They Consider Would Have Been Effective to Improve Their Attendance When They Were in School?

A Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging was a key factor that influenced how participants felt about attending their learning environments. Most participants reported experiencing isolation, fear, loneliness, racism, discrimination, targeting, and neglect; all of which negatively impacted their sense of belonging. However, every participant was able to identify specific school environments where they felt a sense of connection and safety. Notably, all participants indicated that their 'safe spaces' were outside of academic classrooms. These spaces varied and included playing sports, participating in cultural activities, playing musical instruments, and having access to supportive adults, such as counselors or Indigenous support workers. Given the historical dispossession and exclusion of First Nations people from mainstream society, First Nations students may struggle to find a sense of belonging in school (Waite et al., 2023). Therefore, creating and maintaining environments where all students feel a sense of belonging is essential for improving school attendance.

While some participants indicated the areas in school where they felt a sense of belonging, all participants had recommendations for schools that would have improved their school attendance. The most common recommendation was for all staff to know the history of First Nations peoples and to have culturally sensitive and culturally responsive training. Not feeling understood, believed, or having their feelings invalidated or ignored were identified as being the factors that kept participants from wanting to engage in school. Participants also recommended improved access to mental health support, such as counselors inside and outside of

school. Access to academic support was also noted. With the regular transitions between schools, many participants felt frustrated with their situation and where they were academically. The participants who played sports also recommended that schools offer support with transportation. Some participants indicated that they could not play sports because they did not have transportation to get to and from games and practices. One participant appreciated that the only way she could play on her sports team was because her coach drove her home after games and practices. Lastly, all participants wanted to see more First Nations cultural activities offered in schools that students could easily access without repercussions from staff. An example of repercussions that were noted includes teachers telling them they would not pass assignments if they missed class or threats that they would be banned from a cultural activity if they did not do what they were told. Perhaps, participants noted, if the above options had been available to them in school, they would have attended more regularly.

Application of Findings Relative to the Problem Statement

Chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta is significantly higher than among their non-Indigenous peers. Therefore, the general problem addressed in this study is the unresolved issue of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta and its impact on their well-being. Fowler and McDermott (2020) found that 30% of the 800 Indigenous students in their school district were chronically absent, with this figure rising to 80% among those living on First Nations reserves. Researchers have shown that chronic absenteeism increases the risk of underachievement, poor social skills, executive functioning difficulties, school disengagement, and mental health challenges (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Fuhs et al., 2017; Gottfried, 2014). Additionally, it has been identified as a public health crisis, contributing to chronic disease, school attrition, substance abuse, early pregnancy, illegal activities, and

premature death (Kearney, 2008; London et al., 2016; Malika et al., 2021; Stempel et al., 2017). The current study examined the impacts of chronic absenteeism on First Nations students in Alberta and confirmed that it remains a significant issue affecting their overall well-being.

The study's research questions were designed to explore the lived experiences of First Nations students, understand the meanings they attribute to their school experiences, and identify what they believe would effectively improve school attendance for First Nations students. To address these questions and help mitigate the impact of the identified problem, four recommendations are presented later in this chapter.

Before presenting the four recommendations, it is relevant to note that all participants shared similar experiences, with no significant differences emerging. As a result, school leaders may find it beneficial to share these findings with their boards, staff, and other stakeholders in student education. One example of how students perceive their connections with adults was described by April, who not only struggled herself but also tried to support other students facing challenges at school:

> I was lucky because I had healthy and supportive parents. I would often bring my friends home and let them adopt my parents because many of my friends didn't have their parents. It's also why I spent so much time counseling my friends at school. Many of my friends had parents that didn't believe in counseling so they weren't allowed to go. My friends knew I went to counseling so I was always giving them advice that I would get. Too many people on the reserve don't believe in counseling or think something bad will happen if we talk. Instead, we're told just to suck it up and not feel depressed, and that's why we have so many suicides. Nobody believes us when we're calling for help. We're always told we're doing something wrong. We need more counselors who know how to work with First Nations people and understand where we're coming from. We need more liaison officers who have similar backgrounds to us. We need people who will listen to us and care about what we have to say and not just dismiss it.

April's experience demonstrates the need for culturally responsive support systems as a step toward building a sense of belonging to address chronic absenteeism among First Nations

students in K-12 schools. If school leaders actively listen to students' lived experiences and consider the findings related to attendance barriers, they can make informed, evidence-based decisions to shape more effective attendance strategies, procedures, and policies.

Schools play a crucial role in student attendance by shaping educational experiences and engagement (Osterman, 2023). Strengthening relationships with First Nations students and deepening the collective understanding of chronic absenteeism requires actively listening to their lived experiences. Beyond building these connections, it is also important to recognize that a student's experience in school can have a lasting impact on their future well-being. Chronic absenteeism is a public health crisis that, if left unaddressed, can lead to academic underachievement, poor social skills, executive functioning difficulties, and long-term health challenges (Stempel et al., 2017; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Fuhs et al., 2018; Gottfried, 2014). In summary, creating a learning environment where students feel a strong sense of belonging, safety, and support is essential to reducing chronic absenteeism among First Nations students.

Application to Leadership

Despite legal mandates in Alberta requiring school attendance for children between the ages of 6 and 16 (Education Act, 2018), First Nations students continue to experience disproportionately high levels of chronic absenteeism. Therefore, it is important for educational leaders to learn from these findings and to engage in conversations to strategically plan welcoming, safe, and secure learning environments where First Nations students can feel a sense of belonging. As multiple barriers have impacted First Nations students from regular school attendance, there are recommendations that may help First Nations students attend school more frequently. These recommendations to alleviate the barriers and to support the school attendance of First Nations students are described in the next section of this chapter.

Recommendations for Action

Based on the data resulting from this hermeneutic phenomenological research, four recommendations are suggested. Each of these recommendations has implications for current and future K-12 First Nations students, community, families, and educational leaders. To overcome the attendance barriers and challenges impacting First Nations students, the four recommendations for action include:

1. strengthening culturally responsive support systems,
2. addressing the school climate,
3. enhancing community and family engagement, and
4. increasing access to culturally relevant and experiential education

Strengthen Culturally Responsive Support Systems

A culturally responsive support system is the first recommendation to improve school attendance among First Nations students, as it fosters a sense of belonging, safety, and trust within the school environment. As indicated by the participants and Battiste (2017), many First Nations students experience isolation, discrimination, and a lack of understanding from the teaching and instruction they receive, which can lead to disengagement and chronic absenteeism. Schools can address this by providing culturally responsive training to all staff in both the schools and the school district. Having trusted adults who understand Indigenous perspectives, traditions, and intergenerational trauma can also provide students with the emotional and social support they need to feel valued and encouraged to attend school regularly (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2009).

In addition to personnel support, schools can create spaces and programs that reflect First Nations cultures, language, histories, and ways of knowing and learning. This could include

establishing cultural rooms, incorporating Indigenous ways of teaching and learning, and embedding Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum (Battiste, 2017). Ensuring that students have access to mentorship programs with Indigenous role models and elders can also contribute to student well-being and engagement in school (Crul, 2018). By strengthening culturally responsive support systems, Willms (2003) argued that schools can create an environment where First Nations students feel heard, respected, and motivated to participate in their education, ultimately reducing absenteeism and improving academic success.

Address School Climate

A lack of a sense of belonging is a significant barrier that prevents students from attending school regularly (St Amand et al., 2017). Experiences of exclusion, racial targeting, and cultural misunderstandings can lead to feelings of isolation, fear, and disengagement from school. To create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, the second recommendation is for schools to actively address these issues through anti-racism education, clear policies against discrimination, and professional development for staff on Indigenous histories, perspectives, and cultural competency. When students feel respected, seen, and valued within their school community, they are more likely to attend regularly and engage in their education (Willms, 2003).

Hartnett (2017) showed that school policies and practices regarding attendance monitoring can influence student attendance rates. First Nations students who are already struggling to feel a sense of belonging in the school environment can be further excluded by policies and practices such as suspensions and disciplinary actions (Allison et al., 2019; Craig & Martin, 2023). Improving school climates requires fostering positive relationships between students, educators, and administrators. Sanders (2022) recommended that, rather than policies

and procedures that use disciplinary measures such as suspensions, schools can use trauma-informed measures to implement culturally appropriate and contextual restorative justice practices, peer mentorship programs, and culturally safe reporting methods. Additionally, increasing First Nations representation among teachers and school staff can provide students with role models who understand their lived experiences (Battiste, 2017; Wilkins, 2017). By taking intentional steps toward addressing school climates, schools can create a more welcoming and equitable environment for First Nations students. Such an environment would encourage First Nations students to feel safe and supported in their learning journey.

Enhance Community and Family Engagement

Strong relationships between schools, families, and communities are the third recommendation for improving student attendance and overall academic success. Many First Nations students face systemic barriers that affect their ability to attend school regularly, including poverty, transportation challenges, intergenerational trauma, mental health struggles, and historical distrust of the education system (Battiste, 2017). To address these issues, schools must actively engage with families and community members in a meaningful and respectful way (Fowler & McDermott, 2020). Quality engagement includes fostering open and trauma-informed communication with families and ensuring that school policies and practices align with Indigenous cultural values. By building trust and mutual respect between families and schools, a more inclusive and supportive educational environment that encourages student attendance can be created.

According to Battiste (2017), engaging with families within their communities, rather than solely within the school, can foster greater involvement in the learning and development of students. Hosting cultural celebrations, language programs, and family-oriented workshops can

help bridge the gap between home and school (Battiste, 2017). Additionally, schools should offer flexible parent-teacher meetings, home visits, and outreach initiatives to better connect with families who may face barriers to traditional engagement methods (Wiedermann et al., 2023). When families and communities feel valued as partners in education, they are more likely to support and encourage regular school attendance and educational achievement (Battiste, 2017).

Increase Access to Culturally Relevant and Experiential Education

The fourth recommendation is to provide culturally relevant and experiential learning opportunities that can engage First Nations students and improve school attendance. Traditional classroom settings do not always align with Indigenous ways of knowing and learning, leading to disengagement and absenteeism (Battiste, 2017; Wood, 2018). Incorporating learning on the land, Indigenous language and culture programs, and hands-on experiential learning can make education more meaningful and relevant for First Nations students (Battiste, 2017; Wilkins, 2017). According to Battiste (2017), these approaches honor Indigenous knowledge systems and provide students with learning experiences that reflect their identities, histories, and communities.

School staff can also integrate First Nations perspectives into the curriculum by collaborating with local elders, knowledge keepers, and community members to provide culturally rich lessons and activities (Battiste, 2017). Experiential learning, such as learning from the land, storytelling, and project-based learning, allows students to connect with their environment and apply their knowledge in meaningful ways (Battiste, 2017; Wilkins, 2017). When students see themselves and their culture reflected in their education, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and engagement, which in turn supports regular school attendance and academic success (Battiste, 2017).

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings from this research study have confirmed that chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta's K-12 schools is a significant and complex issue influenced by historical, systemic, and socioeconomic factors. Researchers in Canada and other countries with Indigenous populations, such as the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, have demonstrated that chronic absenteeism among Indigenous students is a widespread concern that requires targeted interventions led and facilitated by Indigenous educational leaders. To extend the understanding of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta and to identify effective strategies for improving attendance, future research may continue to shed light on the problem. Potential directions for future research include:

- Examine the effectiveness of culturally responsive attendance initiatives and their impacts on reducing chronic absenteeism among First Nations students.
- Investigate the role of community partnerships, including elders, knowledge keepers, and First Nations organizations, in supporting student engagement and attendance.
- Explore the impacts of historical trauma, the intergenerational effects of residential schools, and systemic barriers on school attendance patterns among First Nations students.
- Assess the role of learning from the land and other First Nations pedagogies in fostering school engagement and attendance.
- To examine the impact of transportation, housing instability, and food security on the attendance rates of First Nations students in rural and urban Alberta communities.
- To investigate how school policies, teacher training, and curriculum content influence First Nations student attendance and overall school experiences.

- To explore the effectiveness of mentorship and peer-support programs in improving school attendance and academic success among First Nations children and youth.

Concluding Statements

The research conducted in this dissertation examined the issue of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta's K-12 schools. Based on (a) a review of the relevant literature and (b) the findings from this research study, it was found that historical, systemic, and socioeconomic factors continue to influence attendance patterns among First Nations students. Barriers such as the legacy of residential schools, intergenerational trauma, lack of culturally responsive education, and socioeconomic challenges were identified as factors that contribute to absenteeism. Additionally, transportation barriers, school climate, and family and community engagement have significant impacts on student attendance.

While chronic absenteeism among First Nations students continues to exist, it is recommended that school districts adopt a holistic approach that acknowledges the unique cultural, historical, and socioeconomic realities of First Nations students. Schools, policymakers, and communities must work collaboratively to create inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments that support student engagement and well-being. The insights gained from this study may help inform policies and interventions aimed at reducing absenteeism and improving educational outcomes for First Nations students.

Until meaningful and sustained changes are implemented at systemic and institutional levels, chronic absenteeism will persist as a significant barrier to educational success. This issue must be addressed through culturally relevant policies, equitable access to resources, and strengthened partnerships with Indigenous communities (Battiste, 2017). In conclusion, for attendance disparities to be reduced for First Nations students, education systems must move

beyond surface-level solutions and commit to long-term, Indigenous, community-driven strategies that empower First Nations students and their families.

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APPENDIX A

Research Letter to Local Agency

[Date]

Dear [Name of Manager],

My name is Wendy Solland-Hurlbut and I am a doctoral candidate with City University of Seattle. I am writing to request your support in contacting former students between the ages of 18 and 30 who have First Nations status and experienced attendance below 90% during their school years within Alberta. As we discussed on the telephone, I am conducting a study on chronic absenteeism amongst First Nations students in Alberta. It is important to understand the barriers First Nations students face in relation to attending school regularly.

All former students of First Nations status who attended school within Alberta and experienced chronic absenteeism are invited to participate in this research study. Participation requires those who choose to be a part of this study to take part in a 45 minute interview as well as a one hour focus group. With the consent of each individual, interviews will be recorded and transcribed to maintain accuracy of the content shared. Confidentiality will be maintained, using pseudonyms for each participant. **Please note that participation is voluntary and participants have the right to withdraw at any time**.

Interviews may be conducted face-to-face, by telephone, or an online meeting platform. The interview time, date, location, and format will be mutually agreed upon by each participant and me. If there are any documents that provide value to the study, I will request signed consent to review the artifacts.

I appreciate your time to review this request. I look forward to furthering this topic and the conversations with each individual around their experience with chronic absenteeism in school. If you are aware of any interested participants, I would appreciate their contact information so that I can contact them directly.

When complete, the results of the findings will be available to you and each participant. I would like to again assure you that the results will be kept confidential and participant confidentiality will be respected and protected.

Once again, I truly appreciate your attention and support.

Sincerely,

Wendy Solland-Hurlbut
Doctoral Candidate, City University of Seattle

APPENDIX B

Research Letter to Participants

[Date]

Dear [Name of Participant],

My name is Wendy Solland-Hurlbut and I am a doctoral candidate with City University of Seattle. I am conducting a study on chronic absenteeism amongst First Nations students in Alberta. Chronic absenteeism is when a student has missed 10% or more of the school year between Kindergarten to Grade 12. It is important to understand the barriers First Nations students face in relation to attending school regularly.

I am writing to request your participation in this research study. Participation will require you to take part in an interview that will take approximately 45 minutes and a focus group that will be approximately one hour in length. With your consent, the interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The purpose of transcription is to maintain accuracy of the content shared. Confidentiality will be maintained and, instead of your name, a pseudonym will be used throughout the research process.

Interviews may be conducted face-to-face, by telephone, or an online meeting platform. The interview time, date, location, and format will be mutually agreed upon between us. The intended timeline for completion of this study is Fall, 2024. Additionally, I would ask that if there are any documents or records that would provide value to the study, to please grant me permission to use these artifacts.

Please review the informed consent form attached to this letter. If the consent form is acceptable, please sign the form where indicated and return it back to me. **Please note that participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time**. If you have any questions, please let me know and we can arrange a time to discuss it further via telephone, in-person, or via an online meeting platform. We will also review the informed consent form again prior to the start of the interview to ensure understanding and comfort.

I appreciate your support in this research study. I look forward to meeting with you and furthering our discussion.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at your convenience using the contact information provided.

Sincerely,

Wendy Solland-Hurlbut
Doctoral Candidate, City University of Seattle

APPENDIX C

City University Informed Consent Form

CITYU RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

I, _____ , agree to participate in the following research project to be conducted by _____ , ☐ faculty member or ☐ student, in the Doctor of Education in Leadership Program. I understand this research study has been approved by the City University of Seattle Institutional Review Board. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form, signed by all persons involved. I further acknowledge that I have been provided an overview of the research protocol as well as a detailed explanation of the informed consent process.

Title of Project: In Their Own Voices: A Phenomenological Study of Chronic Absenteeism Of First Nations Students in Alberta

Name and Title of Researcher(s): Wendy Solland-Hurlbut, Doctoral Candidate

For Faculty Researcher(s): _____
Department:_____
Telephone:_____
Email: _____
Immediate Supervisor:_____

For Student Researcher(s):
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Pressley Rankin IV, Ph.D
Department: School of Education and Leadership
Telephone:_____
E-mail: rankinp@cityu.edu

Program Coordinator (or Program Director):

Sponsor, if any:_____

Purpose of Study: To investigate the issue of chronic absenteeism among First Nations students in Alberta's K-12 schools

Research Participation:
I understand I am being asked to participate in this study in one or more of the following ways (the checked options below apply):

- Respond to in-person and/or telephone Interview questions;
- Answer written questionnaire(s);
- Participate in other data gathering activities, specifically, _____ ;
- Other, specifically, _____.

I further understand that my involvement is voluntary and I may refuse to participate or withdraw my participation at any time without negative consequences. I have been advised that I may request a copy of the final research study report. Should I request a copy, I understand I may be asked to pay the costs of photocopying and mailing.

Confidentiality
I understand that participation is confidential to the limits of applicable privacy laws. No one except the faculty researcher or student researcher, his/her supervisor and Program Coordinator (or Program Director) will be allowed to view any information or data collected whether by questionnaire, interview and/or other means. If the student researcher's cooperating classroom teacher will also have access to raw data, the following box will be checked. ☐ All data (the questionnaires, audio/video tapes, typed records of the interview, interview notes, informed consent forms, computer discs, any backup of computer discs and any other storage devices) are kept locked and password-protected by me. The research data will be stored for 7 years (5 years or more if required by local regulations). At the end of that time all data of whatever nature will be permanently destroyed. The published results of the study will contain data from which no individual participant can be identified.

Signatures
I have carefully reviewed and understand this consent form. I understand the description of the research protocol and consent process provided to me by me. My signature on this form indicates that I understand to my satisfaction the information provided to me about my participation in this research project. My signature also indicates that I have been apprised of the potential risks involved in my participation. Lastly, my signature indicates that I agree to participate as a research subject.

My consent to participate does not waive my legal rights nor release me, sponsors, and/or City University of Seattle from their legal and professional responsibilities with respect to this research. I understand I am free to withdraw from this research project at any time. I further understand that I may ask for clarification or new information throughout my participation at any time during this research.

Participant's Name: _____
Please Print

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: _____
Please Print

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

If I have any questions about this research, I have been advised to contact me and/or his/her supervisor, as listed on page one of this consent form.
Should I have any concerns about the way I have been treated as a research participant, I may contact the following individual:
Dr. Pressley Rankin IV, Ph.D., Program Director, City University of Seattle, at rankinp@cityu.edu

APPENDIX D

Participant Semi-Structured Interview Guide

In an effort to get to know a little about you, please tell me about yourself and where yu went to school.

Can you tell me a little about yourself and what you enjoy doing in your free time?

How do you feel about school in general?

Can you share some reasons why you were often absent from school?

Did you find any subjects particularly difficult or uninteresting? If so, which ones and why?

How do you feel about the school environment, including the teachers, staff, and other students?

Have you experienced any health issues (physical or mental) that made attending school difficult? Can you elaborate?

Were there any family responsibilities or situations that contributed to your absences?

Did you face any challenges with transportation to and from school?

Did you ever feel unsafe at school or experience bullying? If so, how did that affect your attendance?

How did being absent from school impact your life now?

What kinds of support or resources would have helped you attend school more regularly?

What changes do you think the school could make to help students like you attend more regularly?

Do you have any advice for other students who are struggling with attendance?

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with school attendance?

APPENDIX E

Participant Focus Group Interview Guide

I have heard about various reasons why each of you were absent from school. What common challenges do you all think most students face that contribute to absenteeism?

Based on your experiences, what are some solutions or changes that you believe would make the biggest difference in reducing absenteeism for students like yourselves?

What kind of support from school, staff such as teachers, counselors, or the school administration, would make you feel more encouraged and able to attend school regularly?

How do you feel about the current school policies on attendance? What changes would you recommend to make these policies more supportive for students' chronic absenteeism in school?

APPENDIX F

Themes, Conceptual Categories, and Initial Codes

Themes	Conceptual Categories	Initial Codes
Disconnection	Family Influence	Family Caregiving Family Responsibilities Family Trauma
	Educational Staff Influence	Staff Relationships Staff Interactions
Mental Health	Mental Health Challenges	Trauma Depression Grief
	Coping Mechanisms	Alcohol Cultural Identity Cultural Belonging Sports Music
Educational Transitions	Changing Schools	Instability Frequent Relocation Transportation Fear Curriculum Differences
	Environmental Impact	Urban-Rural Discrimination Isolation
Belonging	Student Relationships	Bullying Romantic Relationships Isolation and Rejection
	Adult Relationships	Boundary Issues Family Dynamics

APPENDIX G

IRB Approval Email

System - No Reply<system-noreply@cityu.brightspace.com>
To:Wendy Solland-Hurlbut
Sun 12/3/2023 2:25 PM
You forwarded this message on Thu 9/26/2024 5:44 PM
This sender system-noreply@cityu.brightspace.com is from outside your organization.
Block sender

> You don't often get email from system-noreply@cityu.brightspace.com.

Hi Wendy,
Congratulations, you earned the IRB Certification award in IRB Research with Human Subjects Training Module.
Award Name: **IRB Certification**
Description: **You have completed all IRB trainings and passed all the quizzes.**
Evidence: **Receives greater than or equal to 70 % on grade item: Module One Quiz and Receives greater than or equal to 60 % on grade item: Module Two Quiz and Receives greater than or equal to 60 % on grade item: Module Three Quiz,**
Awarded: **Sunday, December 3, 2023**
Expiration: **Thursday, December 3, 2026**
Credits: **3.0**
Issuer: **City University of Seattle**
Issuer Contact: **ccisupport@cu.edu**