

# Supporting Indigenous Child Suicide Prevention Within Classrooms in Canada: Implications for School Psychologists and Educators

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## Abstract

Indigenous young people in Canada are disproportionately overrepresented in suicide rates and alarmingly, young children are accounted for in these disparities. Since children spend much of their day at school, schools are a vital context for suicide prevention, identification, and intervention. However, research indicates that educators often report that they feel unprepared to address mental health challenges within the classroom. Indigenous communities are developing community driven responses to suicide that are culturally relevant and strengths based. It is critical that these models are considered when developing such suicide prevention within schools as they diverge from medicalized focused approaches and attend to broader social dimensions. It is imperative that educators and the education system are properly equipped with the training and resources to provide suicide prevention within schools and communities servicing Indigenous children. School psychologists can play an important role in providing this prevention leadership. Through interviews with educators, we learned about the types of supports that are needed within schools to address Indigenous child suicide, and in what ways school psychologists could enhance prevention efforts. Using a reflexive approach to thematic analysis, we identified four main themes related to support needed. Findings are discussed in conversation with the current state of child specific suicide and suicide prevention literature. Applied implications for suicide prevention within schools for Indigenous children, as well as future research and community-based recommendations are considered.

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**Indigenous Child Suicide in Canada**

Suicide is listed as the fourth leading cause of death for children between the ages of 1 and 14 in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2020). Due to pervasive myths and misconceptions surrounding child suicide, there is a scarcity of research focusing on this phenomenon. This lack of research is particularly alarming for Indigenous communities considering Indigenous children living in Canada are disproportionately impacted by suicide rates compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts. For example, First Nations boys are reported to die by suicide at a rate that is four times higher than non-Indigenous boys, with rates being 10 times higher for boys living on reserve (Kumar & Tjepkema, 2019). According to the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations, who represents 74 of Saskatchewan's First Nations, First Nations girls between the ages of 10 and 19 were reported to die by suicide at a rate 29.7 times higher than non-Indigenous girls (APTN Investigates, 2018). However, it is important to note that Indigenous suicide rates must be interpreted with caution as there is marked variability between communities, with approximately 60% of First Nations communities in Canada reporting suicide rates of zero (Kumar & Tjepkema, 2019). Additionally, the suicides rates are predicted to be an underrepresentation of the crisis within Indigenous communities due to the misreporting of child deaths as accidents and the failure to include Indigenous identifiers when recording suicide data (APTN Investigates, 2018; Macdougall, 2019).

Suicide within Indigenous communities has often been framed using individualistic, pathologizing, and damaged-centered narratives (Ansloos, 2018; Tuck, 2009). For example, in a report conducted by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1995), depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, and unresolved grief were listed as the primary risk factors for suicide amongst Indigenous peoples in Canada (Nishnawbe Aski Nation, 2017). Although risk factors are undoubtedly helpful in that they inform suicide prevention practices, they have created a harmful narrative that excludes the historical and ongoing traumas Indigenous peoples have faced as a result of colonization (Ansloos & Peltier, 2020; Kral, 2016). As Isadore Day, member of Serpent River First Nation, explains, "There's a temptation to want to focus on the suicide issue. [ . . . ] But we have to look at the root causes. And those have to do with the social and economic conditions in Indigenous communities with high suicide rates" (Webster, 2016, para 4). Suicide must then be understood as an issue inseparable from ecological dimensions of distress such as inadequate housing, inaccessibility to health and mental health care, and the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system.

**Addressing Suicide Within the Classroom**

Since children spend a significant amount of time at school, the classroom can be used as a target for suicide prevention, identification, and intervention (Healthy Child

Manitoba, 2014; Whitley et al., 2013). As such, educators, school psychologists, and other educational staff must be prepared to promote positive student mental health and respond to student distress within the school context. However, in a report conducted by the Western University Centre for School-Based Mental Health (2014) only 34% of teachers reported having the necessary skills to address student mental health in the classroom. The curriculum and training related to mental health literacy for school staff varies across the country and as such, there is no solid understanding about which curriculum or training is most effective. However, it is understood that “one-off” workshops are no longer sufficient to teach educators about mental health (Western University Centre for School-Based Mental Health, 2014; Whitley et al., 2013). Educators listed facing discipline and unclear boundaries around addressing mental health in the classroom as two issues standing in the way of promoting student mental health (Western University Centre for School-Based Mental Health, 2014). Although initiatives and best practices in suicide prevention have been developed across the country for students, these practices are usually targeted toward adolescents (Healthy Child Manitoba, 2014).

There is an urgent need for the development of child-specific suicide prevention practices, particularly for Indigenous children. These practices must consider the complex disparities faced by some communities such as their ecological conditions, while also highlighting the strengths of the community. The exclusion of these factors fears the risk of creating programs and training that are culturally irrelevant and harmful for Indigenous communities. Although their program is geared toward youth, Healthy Child Manitoba (2014) program stresses the importance of programs that “reflect principles of cultural safety and recognize and honor all types of knowledge including traditional and cultural knowledge. Working with students, families, and community leaders collaboratively is important when designing and implementing culturally safe suicide prevention activities” (p. 25).

## **Purpose of the Present Study**

The purpose of the present study was to gain perspective from educators who work with Indigenous children about the supports that are needed to address Indigenous child suicide and assist in the promotion of positive mental health within the classroom. The results of this study have the potential to inform child-specific suicide prevention practices and training for school psychologists, teachers, and other educators working with Indigenous children.

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2021 with educators who work in Indigenous communities across Canada. Educators were selected as the informants since children spend most of their day at school and, as such, these professionals

experience firsthand how children are impacted by their mental health. Additionally, educators can speak to how the curriculum addresses or fails to address the mental health needs of Indigenous students in the classroom and assist in identifying gaps in current practices. Educators were identified using personal and professional contacts and had a range of experience working within Indigenous education school contexts. Participants had various years of experience in their roles as educators, from 4 to 44 years. The sample consisted of seven women, four of whom identified as Indigenous. Participants ages ranged from 40 to 60. The educators interviewed held various positions including five teachers, one principal, and one mental health worker at the elementary and secondary levels. The educators had experience working in various Indigenous communities in Northern Ontario and Quebec, and Nunavut. To protect the confidentiality of participants and communities, and with the consent of participants, pseudonyms were assigned to educators.

### *Approach*

To explore this phenomenon, qualitative interviews that centered community perspective were conducted. These narratives allowed for the opportunity to listen and “understand the social context of the suicidal person” (Wexler & Gone, 2012, p. 803). We engaged in a thematic analysis of the seven interview transcriptions to take an inductive approach to the data. This methodology was selected as it allows for examination of the crisis of childhood suicide in Indigenous communities in Canada through examining the social contexts in which these children are living.

### *Data Analysis*

Braun and Clarke’s (2006) reflexive thematic analysis was used to examine interview transcripts. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo. The first phase involved line-by-line repeated reading of the interviews to become familiar with the content. The next phase involved using NVivo to code the interviews for themes related to the research question. The codes were then organized to identify any overarching themes. The next phase involved reviewing the coded data to ensure that the information was relevant to the identified theme. Next, descriptions for the themes were created and sub-themes were created. The final stage involved writing about the narrative that the themes told in relation to the phenomenon.

## **Results**

### *Theme 1: Training, Mentorship, and Consultation Opportunities With School Psychologists*

Throughout engagement with educators, teacher training, mentorship, and opportunities for mental health specific consultation with school psychologists, was a priority area for enhancing support to prevent Indigenous child suicide within schools. This

call for enhanced preparation and support focused on several areas. First, educators called for increasing training and knowledge of the history of Indigenous peoples, and the ways this might come to impact child mental health promotion. Broadly, educators often spoke of gaps in their training related to Indigenous peoples history, and the importance of including this material in educational training for helping to enhance student experience. As one educator, Cheyenne, explained,

There needs to be education about Indigenous peoples from when they were first here and when colonization happened, and residential schools, and all that, like what their experiences have been and educating teachers and students.

Our conversations with educators made clear that this domain of learning is critical so that educators can understand the sociocultural context of psychosocial distress, and how it may impact the children day to day within their classrooms. As another educator, Kimi, explains,

[Educators] often don't understand why some of our kids are quiet. Why some of our kids won't look at them, why some of our kids won't participate in class. And for the most part it's because they've been either met with someone who's tried to argue with them about what they know or that intergenerational trauma from a family member attending residential school or community members.

In her interview, Dakota called for training specifically on how to address residential schools with students. She stated:

We're going to need some residential school training on how to approach this. [. . .] How do we approach this with us, within us? And then how do we approach it with our students?

Kimi says that any trainings that are provided to educators must “have an Indigenous focus or are teaching what educators have lacked in their own education in regard to Indigenous ways of knowing and Indigenous ways of being.”

A second key area identified to enhance support was about providing opportunities for mentorship focused on enhancing educator cultural safety. While cultural safety training workshops are one key dimension of this support, educators highlighted the need for more ongoing mentorship in this area, especially given that many schools are staffed by non-Indigenous educators. As one educator, Tanya, explained, “how do you sum up an entire culture of people in a three-day seminar?” Similarly, Kimi highlighted that cultural safety support and mentorship is needed “on a regular basis, not just as a once off or once a year training for staff that are involved with Indigenous children and youth.” Educators pointed to the role that administrators and school psychologists can play in mentorship. As Kimi highlights, “it's just making sure that staff are kept up with best practices and are aware of colonial traumas that have passed down and just being supportive and open to having conversations.”

A third area identified to enhance support was providing specialized training and consultation with school psychologists on general mental health issues and child-focused

suicide prevention. Uniformly, all educators in the study emphasized that they felt generally unprepared to address child mental health issues, especially suicidality. As one educator, Odina, shared:

"I don't think [suicide] was really a topic that we talked about very much . . . We talked mostly about ADHD, OCD, autism, and learning disabilities. But to have an actual conversation and somebody teaching us about mental health issues and suicide, I don't even think that was covered to tell you the truth."

Similarly, Ashley spoke about how educators felt particularly in need of expert consultation and training in responding to the reality of cluster suicides within smaller communities. She said:

As educators, we didn't know whether [talking about mental health] would encourage other children to do the same, if they were feeling underappreciated and loved, or they were really struggling with an issue; whether it was a social issue or a family issue or a poverty financial kind of issue. Or, whether it was a personal issue, like somebody maybe broke up with somebody else or something like that. Those things all contributed to, it seemed, to the suicides that followed after, like, we weren't sure whether that would contribute. [. . .], I don't know, but it definitely seemed like when there was one, there would be more in the community and then [. . .] it would get to like a crisis situation where everybody was just not sure what to do.

While educators acknowledged the importance of mental health referrals within schools in the addressing suicidal distress, they also highlighted the constraints they face in that there is a shortage of counselors, school psychologists, or mental health personnel within their schools or school systems. When such professionals are not available, educators must deal with the situation directly. Dakota shared one instance where, "it was very stressful because I didn't know what to say or to do, but I knew that I couldn't let [the student] go." She stated, "I don't know why we haven't had suicide training. [. . .] I would like to know more about it now." Many educators had resonant experiences and expressed an interest in direct consultation or services that they could access in such situations, specifically citing the value of school psychologists.

Kimi, who works specifically within a school psychology capacity said that educators have called for consultation and suicide prevention training. She says,

We should be able to have conversations about these things without it being like a secret, or hush hush. We don't talk about that. Cause it might hurt someone's feelings or it might trigger someone. Knowing that it might trigger someone, and understanding what wording to use, and how to ask those questions, but also how to provide safe spaces for those kids to talk about it.

Here the value of consultation and support is evident, specifically in providing supportive conversational contexts for educators to gain clarity and direction related to the types of useful therapeutic dialogues to engage with students.

## *Theme 2: Child Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Literacy*

Educators across all interviews described child mental health promotion and suicide prevention as areas requiring considerable attention. Educators suggested several practices to be implemented within the classroom setting. First, many educators believe that cultural literacy is a protective domain for Indigenous students. Educators suggested the inclusion of culturally relevant curriculum through providing students with accurate information about Indigenous history. In response to the TRC's Calls to Action, there has been a push to develop curriculum that accurately depicts Indigenous histories (Government of Canada, 2021). However, Kimi shared:

Unless you're taking a native history class or something Indigenous specific, you're just getting the generalized, we're included in a couple of paragraphs in the history of Canada book. It needs to be mandatory learning about our actual history including the things that aren't as appealing to the general public. Having that knowledge so that our Indigenous students can see that our truth is there. And that it's not something that we're making up and that's not something that can just be gotten over. And so that they're not having to argue in class with students or teachers about what the actual history of this country that we live in is founded on.

Kimi described cuts to this programming and curriculum as being directly tied to suicidality. She says, "there's money in education for these things. And it's politics at play and it's politics that's killing our kids."

Educators also called for educational material that is reflective of Indigenous cultures and communities. One educator, Tanya, who has experience working in the north stated that the material is "just not culturally relevant here" and that it is important that schools are providing resources that "are actually applicable to their lives." As an example, Tanya shared:

We were doing a reading assessment on a story about a child who had a pet cat. And [. . .] one of the main questions is 'why does the cat purr at the end? [..] Why would they know? They don't know why cats purr because they have no experience with cats.[. . .] Making it relevant to their lives would be huge. [. . .] If you don't know anything about it, you're less likely to be interested in it. Or, if you can't make a personal connection to what you're learning about, you're less likely to do it or want to do it. On top of that, not knowing the language. So, all of these things contribute to getting the kids successfully through school.

Educational material cannot be a "one size fits all" approach. Tanya explained that although there has been some progress over the last few years, educators in the north are putting in extensive work to provide students with resources in Inuktitut. She stated:

Elementary school teachers were having to create their own material. So, they're given a list of things that they need to teach, but they're not given the resources to teach them. So, they can't just go on Amazon and order a book that has all the skills your grade two student needs to know. [. . .] They have to literally sit down and create it in Inuktitut. And

that's a huge amount of work. A lot of our local teachers are over the age of 50, so they're not so comfortable using technology. So, they're literally doing everything pen to paper and photocopying it. I mean, just the resources are just not there. [ . . . ] it's a huge burden on teachers when they have to spend so much of their time making the material that they could be spending more with kids.

A second suggestion included the use of role models in the classroom. Educators highlighted the importance of the curriculum amplifying Indigenous culture and having Indigenous role models for children to look up to. Kimi shared the excellent work that one educator at her school is doing to incorporate Indigenous voices within the classroom. She shared,

Our English teacher has [ . . . ] integrated Indigenous literature into her curriculum. So more of the content is Indigenous based from Indigenous authors. So, we have had Waubgeshig Rice in. We've looked at his *Moon of the Crusted Snow* [ . . . ]. She has a lot of content that already touches on like suicide, drug abuse, mental health stuff, residential schools. So, we know that the kids are aware and we're trying to, we want them to know, even though they already know. But we also service non-Indigenous students. So, we have kids that have never known about these things.

Kimi went on to explain that it is important that Indigenous voices are "held at the same level as like a Shakespeare or like a J.D. Salinger. Like, we have authors, and we have artists that have that value and can speak from that from our voice, from our places, and our experiences."

Conversations with educators have highlighted how culturally relevant and applicable curriculum can promote positive mental health and wellbeing and potentially be a protective factor against suicide.

### ***Theme 3: Targeted Investments in School-Based Suicide Prevention Curriculum, Materials, and Programming***

Across all interviews, educators called for investments in school-based suicide prevention curriculum, materials, and programming. Educators reported that mental health resources and support for students is sparse, and this problem has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Tanya described this to be a particular issue in northern Indigenous communities where some communities experience disproportionate rates of child and youth suicides. Tanya explained,

Most of the mental health workers are from the south so they're not Indigenous. And they go up and they do maybe a six-week rotation. So, if you are reaching out for help, how do you develop a relationship and a sense of trust with anyone who's coming in for six weeks at a time, and then leaving and someone new is coming in? [ . . . ] There's no tracking of mental health. There's no long-term plan other than a six-week plan.

Educators suggested appointing local mental health workers to support Indigenous children with challenges related to mental health and suicide. Kimi stated,

Having mental health workers that use an Indigenous approach or are Indigenous that can understand, they can relate to those histories. They know the experiences that those kids come from, but they also know and understand the strength that we come from too, cause that resilience is a huge part of recovery from those traumas that we've experienced. To ensure that children are not subject to more harm, it is critical that the individuals who are providing mental health support are Indigenous or have the knowledge and experience to work with Indigenous children.

As a second solution, educators suggested the development and mandatory teaching of curriculum related to mental health and suicide. Many educators were unsure whether mental health was discussed within the curriculum. Ashley highlighted that although there is limited curriculum that does exist, it does not do an adequate job at educating students on mental health, and it is questionable whether students are receiving this education as there needs to be an educator willing to teach that portion of the curriculum. Cheyenne explained that the mental health curriculum needs to address mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and stress. She stated,

It needs to help them with these things, just these feelings with them because, you know, they experience these things because of [. . .] various reasons. It can be their living situation, or being put into a foster home, or things that are occurring at home. So just getting them to be able to have some coping mechanisms, strategies to use, to deal with their mental health issues.

Ashley suggested a tiered intervention framework for mental health, similar to the system that has been developed for special education. Alternatively, she suggested:

You could have two teachers in each class, one person who's completely focused on the curriculum and getting the kids [. . .] to achieve this level on their reading score and to move them along in this math concept. And then another person, an equally responsible and qualified person in that same classroom with those group of children who is completely responsible for their social well-being, for their growth, for their ability to find things that they enjoy and that they like and all those different things

Kimi spoke about the importance of addressing mental health in a way that is in accordance with Indigenous ways of understanding mental health and wellness. Referring specifically to the medicine wheel, Kimi explained:

We can't deal with just symptoms like physical symptoms, it has to be as a whole and not dealing with just one specific thing because that doesn't work. Because when one area in our personal medicine is off balance, the whole thing is off balance. I can be experiencing physical symptoms that look like a heart attack, but it's actually an anxiety attack because my mental health is off balance or my emotional health is off balance or, you know, I'm struggling in school, or all of those things combined. And if you can't see them as a

whole, then you're only dealing with that one little piece and you're really just plugging a hole in a larger dam that's about to crumble.

Educators make clear that targeted investments in culturally relevant, school-based suicide prevention have the potential to support Indigenous children's mental wellbeing through creating safe spaces for students to express their mental health needs and receive adequate support.

#### *Theme 4: Expanding the Role of Psychologists and Educators in Developing Cultural Connections and Community-Based Continuity of Care*

Educators revealed that school psychologists and educators can support students through encouraging cultural connections and community-based continuity of care. Cultural and community-based connections were described as playing a critical role in protecting Indigenous children against suicide. First, educators who spoke about language understood the importance of the revitalization of languages for Indigenous children. However, educators described many barriers standing in the way of getting Indigenous languages into the classroom. Tanya spoke about the limited availability of teachers who speak Indigenous languages, especially at the higher grade levels. She stated,

If you don't have local teachers speaking the language and having the knowledge of the curriculum, if teachers don't know the curriculum themselves, they can't teach it. Right? And so that plays a part, I think, in the decision to offer different classes in the different languages. So, I think, right from the beginning we set kids up to fail.

Tanya said there are steps being made in providing materials in Indigenous languages although she warns it is far from perfect. She said:

It's a typical government compromise. They're trying to develop, they're calling it an 'educational dialect' because they can't take one book and print it in 25 different languages, which essentially it is in 25 different dialects. So, they're taking some words from each community and they're developing this educational dialect and then they're printing books and printing material in Inuktitut and phonetically written with the English alphabet in Inuktitut but even then, you know, the teachers are teaching it, but they themselves don't know all the words because they might come from a different dialect.

Later in her interview, Tanya explained that this process is, "frustrating for teachers. It's frustrating for kids and it's like local people feel like their language is dying because, I mean, it is." Since it is difficult to find local teachers who speak the language of the community, Tanya suggested having local teachers pair with non-local teachers. She said:

Like how great it would be if we could team teach? So, for every classroom you could have, because there are so few local teachers, if you had like for myself and my grade five classroom, if I also had a local teacher there and we could team teach. So that they're learning the curriculum and everything, but they're also participating in their own language. And that they had someone that they could talk to. It would benefit them hugely.

Dayna also recommended that non-local teachers take language lessons so that they can communicate with their students using their Indigenous language. She shared,

And we have a culture teacher. Right? And that's a wonderful thing in the school. And last year the teachers all took Algonquin lessons. I don't know why that stopped. I quite liked it, but wherever possible we should be using Algonquin words and things like that. And the kids love it, I love it. Cause the kids- their pronunciation is much better than mine- and it gives them a chance to, you know, teach me, which is always a healthy thing. So, I think that incorporating First Nations culture and language in the classroom is very, very important for the self-esteem and respect of the student.

As a second suggestion, educators proposed having students listen and learn from elders and family members. Several educators noted that Elders should be playing an integral role in Indigenous student education. In her interview, Kimi suggested, "having an Elder in residence, someone they can speak to, someone that has knowledge about teachings," Similarly, Ashley proposed having "an elder room where kids could go, and they could talk to Elders and make connections with members of the community." As Kimi explained in her interview, this is particularly relevant for the Inuit children she was teaching in the north. She said:

For Inuit, their style of learning is watching an Elder. You watch an Elder, you watch an Elder, you watch an Elder until you're able to do it. For us, it's you try and fail. And if you fail, you try again. And if you fail, you try again. But I think historically that's not the Inuit model because if you try and fail, you could die. And I mean, that quite literally in the sense of, you know, going out on the ice, you, you don't do certain things because you could actually die or it's incredibly wasteful. You know, if you're skinning the seal because you need to make a parka, so you will survive the winter. You can't make a mistake. You need to know how to do it before you try. So right at the core of learning, it's so completely different. And we're asking kids to switch it on, switch it off when they go to school.

Kimi also spoke in her interview about the important role that family members have in passing on knowledge and teachings to children. She shared:

I would flood them with community. If we can build an actual school community, that's reflective of the way we were supposed to be. So having those Elders in residence, but also having aunts and uncles. We always talk about, or it's always expressed that the Elders are our knowledge holders, and they know the way that we're supposed to be and they know everything, but it's actually, when we're raising our kids, it's our aunts and

uncles that are involved primarily in our teachings and knowing what, how we're supposed to behave.

Educators also recognized the importance of connecting children with the land and, as a third suggestion, proposed that land-based teachings should be incorporated whenever possible. In her interview, Kimi explained:

Having access to language, having access to cultural pieces, spiritual pieces, and those emotional pieces, like relationships in our communities are key to our survival. Knowing that you have a relationship with everything around you, not just people, not just your pets; the land out there, the water out there, the trees, the plants, they all have a purpose. And we have a purpose in having relationship with them and learning and understanding what that relationship is supposed to be like.

Although educators say land-based teachings are being used more throughout the curriculum, Kimi says that we can do better. She says,

Everyone needs to learn this stuff. And I think more land-based stuff is really important, especially if we're not in Northern communities [. . .] we still need to honor those land-based connections for those kids, because that's a part of their wellness; being out on the land is how they're supposed to be. That's their traditions, that's their safe space. So, we try to do that as much as we can at our school. I can't speak about the board schools, but I think that needs to be implemented there too.

In conversation with another educator, Dayna, she said that her on-reserve school has implemented outdoor classrooms and she has noticed a positive change in her students. She says, "in our school, we are to be outside for a great portion of the day. That has completely improved the mental health of the children and their happiness level at school."

It is evident how impactful cultural and community-based connections are for Indigenous children and their wellbeing. School psychologists and educators must ensure that these connections are prioritized within the school setting.

## **Discussion**

### *Teacher Training, Mentorship, and Consultation Opportunities With School Psychologists*

This study revealed several gaps in the education and training of educators working with Indigenous children in Canada around Indigenous peoples history. Extensive literature (Battiste, 2013; Cote-Meek & Moeke-Pickering, 2020; Kitchen & Raynor, 2013; Korteweg et al., 2014) have cited the importance of Indigenization of teacher education as central to supporting positive educational outcomes for students, and our study makes clear that this is essential to producing environments that are protective to the issue of child suicide. Resonantly, Chandler and Lalonde (2008) have demonstrated

that cultural continuity is a protective factor for Indigenous suicide prevention, and while access to cultural literacy through facilitates and programs is one aspect of cultural continuity, other factors include community control of land-use, government, educational services, police and fire services, health services, the participation of women in local governance, and the provision of community-based child and family services. As such, it is important to think about cultural safety in schools in an expansive way that is also linked to comprehensive systems changes that enhance community control and self-determination. This highlights the importance of not only increased mentorship support for educators by educational leaders, but also the inclusion and leadership of community leaders, elders, and other knowledge holders in Indigenous communities. While it is tempting to make contexts of mentorship and support one off, our findings echo what other scholars have identified as the need for ongoing, iterative, and consultative training and support for educators (Battiste, 2013; Santoro et al., 2011; Tessaro et al., 2021), as well as tethering this work to the broader work of increased community leadership of schools and educational systems.

### *Child Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Literacy*

Our study also points out persistent curricular absences in education provided to students regarding Indigenous peoples history. Consistent with Miles (2008) our study revealed that educators, school psychologists, and other school staff play a key role in providing students with education on the history of colonialism and answering questions to help build understanding. In response to the TRC's Call to Action (2015) efforts have been made to include Indigenous history to the curriculum, but funding cuts to Indigenous-led curriculum writing has caused progress to come to a halt (DeClerq, 2021). Educators in this study and across Canada (Rodriguez, 2021) recognize the importance of surrounding Indigenous children with cultural knowledge, and how this can have a positive impact on children's mental health and potentially protect against suicide. Studies looking at the impact of culturally responsive curriculum have noted many positive outcomes including higher academic achievement, higher levels of thinking and conceptual reasoning, and enhanced student motivation and confidence when including Indigenous perspectives (Kanu, 2007; Maina, 1997). Finally, educators in our study also highlighted the importance of the inclusion of role models in the classroom which Meyer (2019) has named as being a protective factor in addressing the "suicide crisis" amongst Indigenous youth in Canada.

### *Investments in School-Based Suicide Prevention Curriculum, Materials, and Programming*

Educators in our study described many of the barriers to children accessing mental health support due to there being a shortage of workers and limited resources available in their communities, particularly in northern and remote communities. Various studies have cited the importance of investing in Indigenous community mental health workers, naming

the many benefits such as the local history and cultural knowledge, and traditional understandings of mental health, healing, and wellness that these workers hold (Hunter, 2007; O’Keefe et al., 2021). It is well known that the health care system has a history of racism and providing care that is culturally irrelevant to Indigenous peoples (Goodman et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2020), and investment in local workers reduces the risk of exposing children to this harm. Our study also highlights the inaccessibility of suicide prevention curriculum and materials for both educators and students. The literature has demonstrated evidence of the effectiveness of middle and high school-based suicide prevention programming, citing improvements in the reduction of suicidal ideation and attempts, increased help-seeking behavior, and improved knowledge and attitudes (Cusimano & Sameem, 2011; Wasserman et al., 2015), however, future research is needed that focuses on younger and Indigenous children.

### *Expanding the Role of Psychologists and Educators in Developing Cultural and Community-Based Continuity of Care*

This study emphasized the important role that educators, psychologists, and other school staff have in supporting cultural and community connections amongst their students. Language revitalization has been largely supported in the literature as a way of promoting healing and positive health outcomes (McKenzie, 2022; Whalen et al., 2016) and was named as being a protective factor against suicide by educators in this study. Supporting language revitalization through the education system has been suggested as a way to provide children with this important knowledge, however, scholars have echoed several of the limitations named in this study such as the scarcity of educators who speak Indigenous languages, the lack of curricular measures, and limited funding as standing in the way (Hornberger 2018). Elders, family members, and other community members are important knowledge holders in Indigenous communities. Singh and Reyhner (2013) speak about how colonial schooling practices have disrupted this generational transfer of knowledge and the importance of including these members in the classroom to participate in knowledge sharing. Finally, connecting with the land has been described by Indigenous youth as being a social determinant of health (Lines & Jardine, 2019) and was described by educators as contributing to students’ sense of purpose and identity in protecting against suicide. Echoing educators in this study, Simpson (2014) calls for land-based teachings to be incorporated into the curriculum.

### *Relevance to the Practice of School Psychology*

This work has the potential to improve the ways in which school psychologists engage with Indigenous children within the school setting. It is imperative that school psychologists receive the necessary education and training to work with and support Indigenous children in a way that is strength-based and healing focused. Indigenous-led education in the areas of Indigenous mental health and suicide have the potential

to create safer environments for Indigenous children to have conversations with school psychologists. Finally, these findings can inform the treatment practices of school psychologists and point psychologists in the direction of culturally relevant and safe intervention practices.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

There are some limitations to consider when interpreting study results. First off, this study has a limited sample size. Despite being able to share a great deal of rich knowledge on this topic, only seven educators were interviewed for the purpose of this exploratory study. Future research should consider increasing the number of educator voices and incorporating the voices of family members, community members, and other professionals to increase the diversity in perspectives. It must also be noted that these educators can only speak to a small number of the Indigenous communities in Canada in which they have experience working. It is important that results are not overgeneralized, and the uniqueness of Indigenous communities are acknowledged. Additionally, given the exploratory purpose of this study, the method of inquiry, as well as the nature of the topic and heightened vulnerability for children in this context, we chose to speak to educators rather than children. This does not diminish the importance of engaging with children themselves to better understand lived experiences with or conceptualizations of suicidality. Consideration of safety and ecologically valid approaches with children should be prioritized for such research.

### *Conclusion*

Indigenous children are disproportionately represented in suicide rates in Canada. Since children spend a considerable amount of time at school, the classroom can be used as a primary target for suicide prevention. Seven educators detailed many suggestions for how the education system can better support both Indigenous students and educators, as well as school psychologists. The findings detail applied implications for suicide prevention and life promotion services within the classroom and education system for Indigenous children. These services must be culturally relevant and community specific, including an emphasis on language revitalization, land-based connections, and interpersonal/community connection. It is essential that we create conditions in Canada where Indigenous children can flourish.

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