

**AN INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE: THE DROPOUT CHALLENGE  
FOR CANADA'S FIRST NATIONS**

*A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education, University of San Diego, San Diego, California*

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ABSTRACT

This modified case study honors the voices of 21 Cree participants, including nine students, six parents, four community leaders and two Elders. This study, written from an insider's perspective, identified more than 50 reasons why First Nations students dropped out of three provincial high schools located in northern Alberta, Canada.

The results were collapsed into several categories that can best be generalized as resulting from the effects of colonization. Canada's First Nations have a long history of oppression, colonization, and the resultant soul wounds.

The four participant groups collectively identified five common themes why students dropped out of provincial high schools. The commonalities included racism/cultural conflict, poor student/staff relations, marginalization, alienation, and systemic labeling. In addition, each group identified separate reasons: students identified alienation, personal identity, and relationship concerns; parents identified distrust of the education system, marginalization, and lack of involvement; the community leaders identified a sense of powerlessness to initiate change and the intergenerational effects of residential school. The Elders also recognized the intergenerational effects of residential schools.

The data indicated provincial high school authorities have failed to acknowledge the role that Canadian history has played and have not recognized the need to establish and then maintain positive relationships with the First Nations community. In addition, participants felt authorities chose to exclude professional development that would address, from a First Nations perspective, colonization and the past genocidal attempts.

Most First Nations adult participants felt like outsiders in the education of their children, a feeling that has perpetuated the sense of marginalization. The data suggested provincial school leaders, including teachers, administrators, and the board members need to find creative ways to ensure provincial accountability and to improve their relationships with First Nations peoples.

Ironically, not one participant identified “academic difficulties” as a reason for dropping out. While the number of First Nations students leaving provincial high schools is high, eight of the nine student participants in this study returned to school, thus indicating their resilient nature, despite the fact that most left due to racial/cultural concerns.