

Concept Paper

Consequences and Remedies of Indigenous Language Loss in Canada

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Abstract: Many Indigenous languages in Canada are facing the threat of extinction. While some languages remain in good health, others have already been lost completely. Immediate action must be taken to prevent further language loss. Throughout Canada's unacceptable history of expunging First Nations' ways of life, systemic methods such as residential schools attempted to eradicate Indigenous cultures and languages. These efforts were not entirely successful but Indigenous language and culture suffered greatly. For Indigenous communities, language loss impaired intergenerational knowledge transfer and compromised their personal identity. Additionally, the cumulative effects of assimilation have contributed to poor mental and physical health outcomes amongst Indigenous people. However, language reclamation has been found to improve well-being and sense of community. To this objective, this paper explores the historical context of this dilemma, the lasting effects of assimilation, and how this damage can be remediated. Additionally, we examine existing Indigenous language programs in Canada and the barriers that inhibit the programs' widespread success. Through careful analysis, such barriers may be overcome to improve the efficacy of the programs. Institutions must quickly implement positive changes to preserve Indigenous languages as fluent populations are rapidly disappearing.

Keywords: residential schools; settler colonialism; Indigenous peoples of Canada; cultural identity; ancestral language; language revitalization; language programs; language learning; academic success



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1. Introduction

Language is more than just a mode of communication, especially for Indigenous communities that have long endured the attempted erasure of their culture and heritage. Instead, language should be viewed as a natural resource [1]. As such, stewardship is necessary to preserve this resource for the benefit of future generations. The importance of preservation cannot be overstated, as ancestral language is essential and foundational to the collective Indigenous identity [2,3]. Bamgbose [4] reveals that the net effect of colonial hegemony, in many regions of the world, has been the dominance of the colonizer's language at the expense of native languages. This is indeed the case in Canada, where Indigenous languages and communities continue to fade.

Most of the remaining Indigenous languages spoken throughout Canada are at risk of extinction. Statistics Canada [5] has reported that of the 70 actively used Indigenous languages, 40 had fewer than 500 fluent speakers remaining. Thus, an urgency to revitalize these languages has been sparked nationwide. The situation is particularly dire in British Columbia [6], as the province is home to nearly half of Canada's remaining Indigenous languages [7]. A recent survey in Indigenous communities across British Columbia revealed that only 5% of Indigenous people are fluent in an ancestral tongue, and the majority of that small percentage is now over the age of 65 [7]. This revelation that language fluency is primarily maintained by elders is extremely concerning. If language is not passed down to future generations imminently, it will be lost forever. To prevent this, action must be taken now. While these statistics are specific to British Columbia, this is certainly not the only province facing language preservation deficits. Indigenous languages throughout Canada

are experiencing a watershed moment, with revitalization dependent on concerted efforts over the next several years.

Dr. Lorna Williams, a member of the Lil'wat First Nation and holder of the Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Knowledge and Learning, emphasizes the need for immediate action. She asserts that "we don't have much time left to document the knowledge of these languages [and] to hear their beauty" [1]. This sentiment is echoed by many Indigenous groups, who also recognize that loss of language leads to a loss of culture; subsequently, this results in substantial impacts on a person's sense of self-identity [8]. Given that language, cultural identity, and society are undeniably interwoven, the depletion of any one of these elements often causes the deterioration of all three. Those affected often find themselves torn between two cultures, feeling lost when they do not easily fit into either [9]. Furthermore, a strong cultural identity is a primary and important psychosocial determinant of health and well-being for Indigenous populations [10–12]. Therefore, the triad of language, cultural identity, and self-identity must be strengthened to improve the lives of Indigenous people (see Figure 1). The literature supports this relationship; it has been found that providing support to enhance Indigenous culture will result in positive mental health and coping outcomes [13,14].

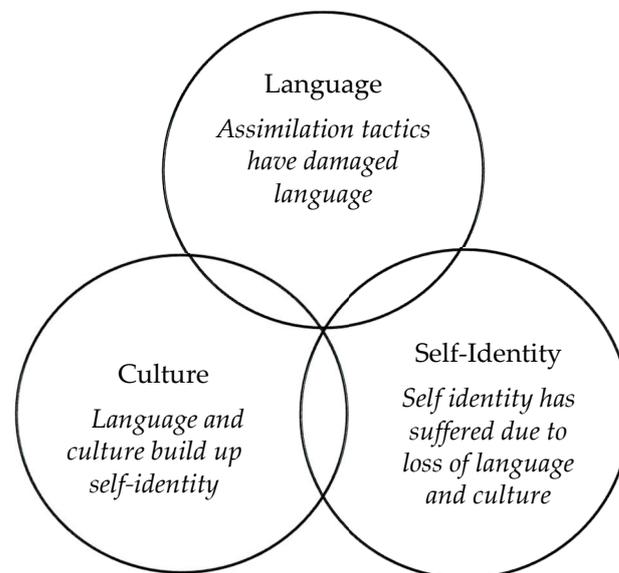


Figure 1. Interconnection of language, culture, and self-identity.

Given the relationship between language and health, support is needed at various institutional levels to repair the damage caused by past injustices. Recently, the entirety of Canada has been made aware of these transgressions. Non-Indigenous people in Canada, such as the author, are giving their support to Indigenous communities seeking to revitalize their culture. Prompted by the 94 Calls to Action issued from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) [15], select post-secondary institutions have also given their support by creating Indigenous language programs. These are steps towards revitalization and reparations, but more can be done by examining the structural elements of such programs to maximize benefits for Indigenous communities. It is hoped that the barriers to Indigenous language education would be dismantled, especially at the institutional level. By doing so, Indigenous students may access language education through thoughtfully designed programs, strengthening collective cultural identity as a result. This paper aims to understand the ramifications of language loss by further exploring the relationship between language, identity, and health through a sociological lens. Furthermore, recommendations to improve adult Indigenous language programs are proposed so that institutions offer support to Indigenous communities in their area.

2. Historical Context of Language Loss

Settler colonialism in Canada began more than 200 years ago, but it persists even today. Colonialism is an ongoing system of oppression in which Indigenous people are alienated from their lands and subjected to government-sponsored programs of assimilation [16,17]. English and French have historically been portrayed as superior languages in Canada, whereas Indigenous languages have been characterized as “primitive” [18]. Indigenous languages were seen as barriers to civilization and modernity, to the extent that Indigenous men were considered “disabled” until they could demonstrate proficiency in English or French [19]. Such hegemonic ideologies were responsible for the highly destructive policies that have impacted Indigenous people throughout recent history [12]. Indigenous languages were victims of these policies, by way of the residential school system and state-imposed domination of the French and English languages [20]. Although there have been efforts to undo this damage, discriminatory language discourse persists in Canada, largely based on systems of power that maintain a Eurocentric narrative [21]. Figure 2 highlights key events in Canada’s Indigenous language history.

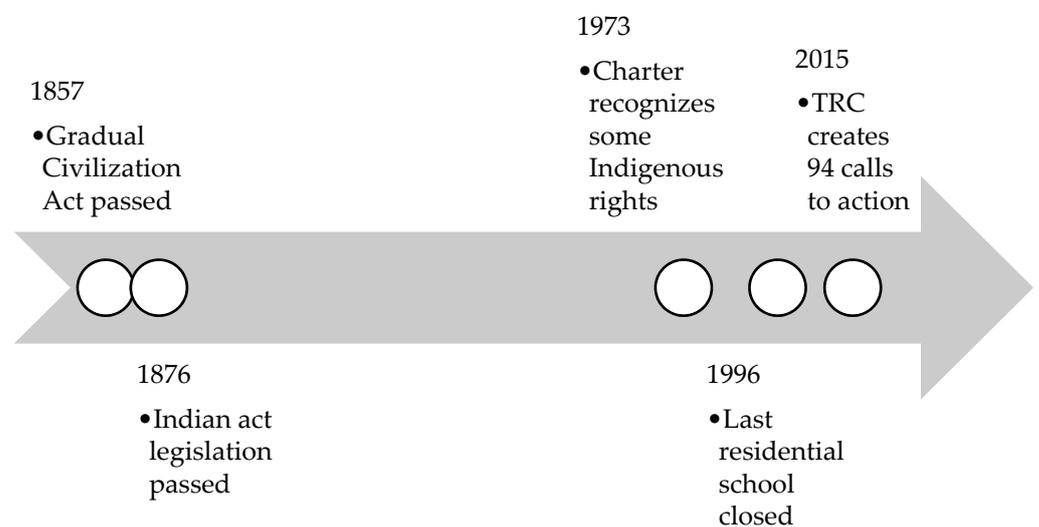


Figure 2. Key events in Canada’s Indigenous language history.

The residential school system, which was operational in Canada until 1996, inarguably dealt the heaviest blow to Indigenous languages. Early on, the Gradual Civilization Act of 1857 aimed to assimilate Indigenous men, as deemed fit by legislators, into Canadian society [22]. In 1876, further legislation required Indigenous children to leave their families and instead live and be educated at residential schools, making criminals out of any parent that defied the order [23]. In many instances, the residential schools were located as far as hundreds of kilometers away from the parent community [24]. This pattern of aggressive assimilation focused on targeting children, as they were easier to mold than adults. In most cases, children were kept away from their parents for ten months of the year and even segregated from their own siblings at school [25]. The schools were meant to forcibly assimilate Indigenous children and prohibit the use of Indigenous languages as a method of integrating them into the European customs of the colonizers. Corporal punishment was often used if children were caught speaking their native language. In short, the residential school system played a significant role in the decline of Indigenous languages in Canada [26]. Outside of the school system, edicts forbidding core cultural ceremonies and traditions such as the Potlatch festival and Tamanawas spirit dancing were enacted. Defying the edict resulted in fines and even incarceration [27]. The ban remained in place for more than sixty years, from 1886 to 1951. During this time, the status of Indigenous culture declined immeasurably [28].

Even after the era of residential schools and the cultural ban, Indigenous language interests continued to be marginalized in policy priorities. Despite increased Indigenous activism and calls for “Indian control of Indian education,” the structures of settler colonialism continued to undermine Indigenous ways of life. It was only in 1982 that the repatriated Charter of Rights and Freedoms recognized “existing” Indigenous treaty rights. It did not, however, refer to Indigenous language rights [29]. While Indigenous communities have made great efforts since then to revitalize languages, progress has been limited by a lack of resources [18]. Even as early as 2002, the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada Report observed that, with the decreasing numbers of Indigenous language speakers, more than a dozen Indigenous languages in Canada were either extinct or on the verge of extinction. Without sustained revitalization efforts, the remaining Indigenous languages will soon follow [30]. In 2021, Canadian Indigenous issues gained global attention following the discovery of the remains of 215 children at the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia. These children were buried in an unmarked mass grave, and their deaths were previously undocumented [31]. This event, while unspeakably tragic, has provided further momentum for Indigenous culture and language revitalization movements, which is critical as part of reparations for current Indigenous communities still experiencing the effects of Canada’s genocidal past. The mistreatment of Indigenous people throughout Canada’s history is distressing, to say the least, but it cannot be taken back. Now, action must be taken to acknowledge the collective Indigenous cultural identity and its inherent importance to Canada’s national history and future. By listening to Indigenous voices, we will gradually reach a more balanced society, inclusive of all its members [32].

3. Language Loss and Well-Being of Indigenous People

Language is closely tied to cultural identity, a fundamental right of every human being [33,34]. Article 24 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [33] includes the right to the highest attainable standard of mental health. The Canadian government has failed Indigenous communities in this regard. Many Indigenous people continue to suffer from trauma associated with past assimilation attempts endorsed by the Canadian government. Several studies have associated the negative impact of residential schools, including the loss of language and culture, with adverse mental health effects, substance abuse, and suicide [35–37]. Oster et al. [3] found that the cultural continuity of those living in Alberta’s Indigenous communities was inextricably linked with language and strongly correlated with one’s overall health. Furthermore, Hallett et al. [38] found that suicide rates were six times higher in Indigenous communities in which fewer than half of the members could converse in their ancestral language. If language loss continues unchecked, a great injustice will have been committed towards future generations of Indigenous communities.

3.1. Isolation and Cultural Discontinuity in Young People

Younger generations within Indigenous communities tend to lack the same extensive knowledge of their familial history that would have previously been passed down, partly due to the inability to speak and understand ancestral language. Historically, Canada’s Indigenous people passed their history through generations using oral tradition as opposed to written documentation [39]. Due to the longstanding suppression of Indigenous culture in Canada, this history was never recorded in writing. However, some efforts have recently been made by communities to digitize records [40]. Indigenous history is crucial to understanding cultural identity, especially for youth. Sivak et al. [41] attribute mental health issues to a lack of ancestral language knowledge. This finding is significant for developing children who are living amongst multiple generations of family. Some Indigenous grandparents in Canada do not speak English or French fluently and are therefore unable to communicate easily with their grandchildren [42]. Even in cases where they can speak colonial languages, the inability to communicate in their ancestral language with their grandchildren leads to the dilution of stories meant to be conveyed through inter-

generational oral traditions. Thus, families are unable to effectively share their complex history. Without a connection to the comprehensive spiritual teachings of their familial elders in their ancestral language, this could create feelings of seclusion. Isolation, when experienced in childhood, has been identified as a precursor to mental health issues and suicidal thoughts later in life [43]. Thus, preventing potential feelings of loneliness brought about by language loss is imperative.

Canada's failure to acknowledge Indigenous contributions may also affect the youths' perception of self. In America, it was found that Indigenous youth associated involvement with their culture with increased discrimination [44]. The vast majority of Canada has been built on unceded Indigenous lands, meaning it was never legally yielded to colonizers. The respect for Indigenous culture and language on these unceded land has been severely lacking. As such, it is possible for Indigenous children to feel as though their culture, heritage, and language are unvalued by those around them, further decreasing their motivation to learn about their ancestry and history. This attitude towards one's identity is detrimental to mental health and personality [45]. Children may therefore choose not to connect with their heritage at all, and thus cultural identity will be further weakened through successive generations.

Sivak et al. [41] explain eight themes about the connection between language and culture: connection to body, connection to mind and emotions, connection to family, connection to community, connection to culture, connection to country, and connection to spirit, spirituality, and ancestors. Regarding connection to mind and emotions, the authors state that language reclamation improves motivation, mood, and general happiness [41]. Language reclamation also holds the potential to improve one's sense of belonging and cultural identity, as well as strengthen community connectedness [41]. Given these findings, it is crucial to devise strategies to undo the historical erasure and teach the native languages. Such solutions could also help improve mental health outcomes for younger generations.

3.2. Abuse Aftermath among the Elderly

Older generations still suffer from past policies aimed to eliminate language and culture. The impact of residential schools continues to affect older Indigenous adults in various manifestations, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), despite the schools having been shuttered for more than twenty years [46]. Those who did not experience the aggressive assimilation firsthand could still suffer, as the trauma was passed down from parent to child [47]. Fontaine [26] found that elders are the primary speakers of Indigenous languages, and they tend to encourage younger generations to learn about their language. Unfortunately, residential schools robbed families of the opportunity to converse on deeper levels between generations using their ancestral languages. As students were not allowed to speak their languages, they started to lose hereditary connections with family members, increasing language barriers, and disjoining communities. This resulted in inevitable isolation for residential school students, even after they exited this system.

The atrocities of residential schools are still coming to light today, as we saw with the Kamloops Indian Residential School discovery in 2021. In recent decades, many residential school survivors have shared experiences of sexual abuse in the schools. It has been estimated that one in five children in residential schools experienced sexual abuse in the system [48]. However, crimes of this nature are grossly under-reported due to the associated shame that survivors often experience [49]. Thus, the actual prevalence is likely even higher. Research has shown that victims of childhood sexual abuse are three times more likely to attempt suicide as an adult [50]. Sexual abuse as a child can also result in a litany of developmental issues as well as incite a cycle of abuse [51]. Issues such as these drive generations further apart by creating shame and trauma, negatively impacting the transfer of language and other cultural concepts.

3.3. Harm Caused by Racism

Racism is another factor influencing mental health and well-being for Indigenous people of all ages. Experiencing racism is known to negatively impact one's mental health, causing depression and anxiety, decreasing self-worth, inciting post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and threatening one's sense of personal safety [52]. Racialized populations also demonstrate a higher occurrence of substance abuse disorders [53]. Priest et al. [54] found that experiencing prolonged, ongoing racism can result in physical health consequences as well, such as restlessness, sleep deprivation, increased or decreased appetite, and energy loss. Furthermore, in their research, it was determined that individuals experiencing frequent and repeated racism between the ages of twelve and seventeen are at heightened risk for suicide, substance abuse, and behavioral delays [54].

For centuries, Indigenous communities have experienced racism at various levels. The Canadian government, justice system, and even the healthcare system have demonstrated racist behavior towards Indigenous people [55,56]. This systemic racism has resulted in widespread racial profiling of Indigenous individuals. Out of fear, younger generations may refrain from practicing their ancestral language to feel more accepted by others in order to experience less racism. However, abandoning one's culture, history, and language has resulted in severely negative effects among Indigenous communities [45]. To combat the effects of racism, Canadians must be more respectful of Indigenous communities, with the hope that current and future generations can reclaim ancestral languages, increase cultural pride, and improve mental and physical health.

3.4. Barriers to Generational Knowledge Transfer

Cultural knowledge and identity among Indigenous communities have been declining with each passing generation [57]. Language loss and cultural minimization have contributed to this trend. Since language knowledge is largely missing, Indigenous communities are forced to primarily rely on art, clothing, and cultural traditions to connect with their heritage. By practicing traditions, there is still potential for younger generations to develop a sense of wholeness, spirituality, and self-identity by connecting with culture. However, residential schools stripped Indigenous children of their cultural rights and portrayed them as outcasts while bans on cultural displays communicated that Indigenous history was inherently unimportant. Due to these actions and their lasting effects, older Indigenous generations may refrain from sharing their experiences and knowledge.

3.5. Loss of Culinary Knowledge

A lack of generational knowledge transfer has also resulted in gaps related to traditional food and nutrition, which has caused widespread negative health implications. Indigenous linguicide could impair younger generations' opportunity to learn about traditional cuisine, which is an important aspect of culture. Effects of colonialization have also resulted in many Indigenous communities consuming overly processed, high-calorie food lacking nutritional value [58]. Generational nourishment-focused culinary knowledge is not being efficiently taught, resulting in a less nutritious diet for many individuals [59]. Not surprisingly then, malnutrition is a reoccurring issue within Indigenous communities, especially among women and children [58]. Children who are malnourished are more likely to develop mental illness or other health disorders as they grow older, as well as suffer from deficiencies in motor skills and physical abilities [60,61]. For Indigenous individuals living in a Westernized society, foods that were traditionally eaten pre-contact, may be difficult to obtain today. For example, the historical diet of British Columbia's Sylix First Nation is based on Four Food Chiefs: *Siya* (Saskatoon Berry), *Spitlem* (Bitter Root), *Skemxist* (Black Bear), and *Ntyxtix* (Salmon). These food chiefs represent healthy food that is available from the land in Southeast British Columbia, where the Sylix First Nation reside [62]. However, Indigenous people have lost the rights to these ancestral lands, making such food more difficult to access. Additionally, a lack of generational

knowledge surrounding the gathering and preparation of these foods may make it difficult for future generations to connect through cuisine.

4. Current Efforts and Recommendations

All of society bears some responsibility to support Indigenous communities as they heal from the injustices of the past. Specifically, influential institutions need to participate as leaders in restoration efforts. As such, universities and governments should spearhead language revitalization in Canada. Universities represent continual learning and innovation in society and are often the first institutions to adapt operations to changing societal expectations. This makes the university setting ideal for fostering innovation and community learning. Although individuals likely will not acquire fluency, post-secondary classes provide an opportunity to get in touch with one's cultural roots and help conceptualize self-identity in a positive way. The government also has a major role to play, as it has long been the primary perpetrator of deplorable acts against Indigenous people. Obstacles exist at several levels, which must be identified and overcome swiftly to save endangered Indigenous languages.

Canadian universities, with their multiple stakeholders and bureaucratic structure, can inadvertently create impediments for Indigenous language programs [63,64]. These include the reinforcement of hierarchy, which prioritizes Western education above Indigenous knowledge [65]. Additionally, public universities typically allocate funding according to which programs generate the most revenue. The author can speak to this, having observed and overseen changes in academic institutions. Since Indigenous language programs are generally small when compared to others, such programs often become marginalized and are vulnerable to the exclusionary practices of academia. Distrust of a Western knowledge ideology that discounts Indigenous learning methods is leading to a lower participation rate amongst young Indigenous learners [66]. General academic outcomes for Indigenous students are also a cause for considerable concern; low enrollment, high dropout rates, and low academic success rates are prevalent among Indigenous learners [67]. Previously suggested solutions have included lowering admission requirements for Indigenous candidates and establishing alternative programs that improve attendance and remedy learning problems, but these policies have not offered an enduring solution [67]. Hence, emphasis on other programs based on Western knowledge continues to persist. Indigenous language education can only flourish if these impediments are understood and remedied [68].

A few concerted efforts have begun in earnest, despite challenges. Indigenous languages are now part of several course offerings at educational institutions across Canada. The University of Alberta and University of the Fraser Valley, BC have developed Indigenous language programs for students, in hopes of aiding the revitalization effort. Another example is the Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute (CILLDI); this three-week summer school program prepares and educates students who aspire to learn or improve their fluency in Indigenous languages with the opportunity to receive a Community Linguistic Certificate (CLC) upon successful completion. Short programs like these help students get in touch with their culture. However, educators require more training in various dialects and pronunciations to make the program effective [69]. The University of British Columbia (UBC) has also increased offerings related to endangered Indigenous languages. Through the First Nations and Endangered Languages Program (FNEL), First Nations language courses are offered, as well as methodology classes on language documentation, conservation, and revitalization [70].

Early immersion programs are another solution at the educational level. While universities are largely offering Indigenous language programs for adult learners, research has shown that early immersion programs in Indigenous language results in positive academic outcomes for young learners [71]. Given children's ability to build language skills rapidly, there is an opportunity present for further research in this area. In doing so, a sense of identity can be formed with a solid foundation, improving outcomes for Indigenous communities. However, even if future generations of children are educated

early, a gap currently remains for adults. Therefore, solutions specific to adult learners must be further researched, developed, and implemented. Young and middle-aged adults must gain language proficiency now, even before children. If more adults are educated in the next few years, the urgency of language revitalization can be eased as the life of the fluent population will be extended. To motivate adult learners, universities might consider incentives to gain Indigenous language fluency. Such incentives could include financial rewards for passing language classes or even paid positions within the university for the duration of the program, as is sometimes done for Ph.D. students. Increased government funding may be required for institutions to manage this. However, the potential benefits to Indigenous physical and mental health, as well as the likely enhancement to Indigenous students' academic careers, are well worth these efforts.

Language revitalization solutions must also be sought at the governmental level. Unfortunately, Indigenous issues remain somewhat contentious in both provincial and federal governments in Canada, making policy development and enactment exceedingly slow. This lethargy has failed Indigenous people many times before. For instance, the federal government did not offer an official apology for residential schools until 2008 [72], more than one hundred years after the schools opened and long after many survivors had already died. Thus, we cannot rely solely on the government for swift action concerning Indigenous language revitalization. However, activism from society and other institutions can force a response from the government. In mid-2021, the Minister of Canadian Heritage announced the new Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages, along with the appointment of a commissioner and three directors [73]. This is the first Canadian governmental office aimed at Indigenous language preservation and revitalization, representing a long-awaited shift in government priorities. Though it is only a start, this is meaningful for Indigenous peoples in "ensuring that languages grow and prosper so they can be shared and spoken for years to come" [73].

5. Conclusions

Through acts of systemic racism and oppression, Indigenous language and culture were pushed to the brink of extinction. Within Indigenous communities, the unfavorable reverberations of these actions are still felt to this day, as they will be for generations to come. The right to one's language is irrevocable, and the Canadian government committed an injustice toward these communities by attempting to dissolve the languages. Although language acquisition will not resolve every issue faced by Indigenous communities, the links between one's language, cultural identity, self-identity, and overall health are clear and proven. Thus, all levels of society and leadership should fully participate in reparations. Given the benefits attributed to Indigenous language acquisition, future research should identify specific barriers present within post-secondary education systems and develop strategies to overcome them, both inside and outside the classroom. Students must not face impediments to accessing these programs based on socioeconomic status or otherwise. Additionally, when participating in the programs, structural issues stemming from Western knowledge ideologies must not prevent learning from taking place. Indigenous learning methodologies, such as taking a multiple disciplinary approach, should be further researched. Rigid structures that make it difficult for older generations who may have been the victims of the residential school system to participate should be dismantled, to allow this group a chance to learn more about their culture in a positive environment. In addition, studies should examine any barriers that the Canadian government faces when enacting meaningful reparation efforts and language revitalization programs.

The aim of all involved should be to help in such revitalization efforts. Traditional state paternalism is responsible for language loss, and the mistakes of the past cannot be continued or repeated. Recommendations may be provided to Indigenous community leaders, but not forced upon them. The recommendations based on this review include improvements to the funding of language programs where needed, and further communication of benefits to prospective learners. Additionally, providing official acknowledgment

and respect for such languages will communicate to Indigenous communities that their culture is valuable and appreciated. This is opposite to the narrative that has long dominated the Western world. To continue this trajectory of Indigenous acknowledgment, future Indigenous programs and educational opportunities must be explored and fully developed for successful language revitalization. This will perhaps also deepen the appreciation of cultural identity for the stakeholders of these language programs, strengthening ideological buy-in from the ground up. This author can confirm the value of such efforts from their experience in Winnipeg, Manitoba, working with Indigenous communities on health and cultural research. Lastly, future studies must explore the efficacy of current programs and propose further avenues of improvement. Events of 2021, such as the Kamloops Indian Residential School discovery and the founding of the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages, have created unprecedented momentum for Indigenous language revitalization efforts. To stop now would be yet another representation of Canada's monumental failure of Indigenous people.

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