INCONSISTENT LEGISLATION FOR ABSENT STUDENTS: WHAT CANADIAN EDUCATION ACTS SAY AND DO NOT SAY ABOUT ATTENDANCE

by

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Abstract

Attendance, defined by education acts and managed by school policies that record student-presence or -absence (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015), is a consistent positive correlate of academic success and well-being. When a student develops a pattern of missed schooling, it is often referred to as chronic absenteeism (CA) (Chang & Romero, 2008). To successfully monitor and understand rates of chronic absenteeism across Canada, accurate attendance tracking is critical. Valid and reliable attendance data are required to identify patterns of absenteeism. Such evidence could be used by school staff, including school psychologists and policymakers, to develop targeted interventions to support student success (Chu et al., 2019; Keppens et al., 2019; Landell, 2021). In Canada, publicly available attendance data are limited (Birioukov, 2021). However, all provincial and territorial education acts are publicly accessible. These acts govern education and regulate school structures, roles, responsibilities, and student attendance. To better understand how attendance is addressed across Canada at a provincial and territorial level, this study conducted a qualitative inductive descriptive analysis of attendance sections in all provincial and territorial education acts. It aimed to describe key themes and assess national consistency. Results indicated significant variation in each province's and territory's approach to addressing attendance within their Education Act.

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CHAPTER ONE

Understanding School Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism: A Review of Literature and the Role of Canadian Legislation

Several economic benefits have been linked to countries with developed and robust primary and secondary education systems, such as higher levels of economic growth, a reduction in poverty and increased productivity in the workforce (Abduallah, Doucouliagos, & Manning, 2015; Appleton, 2001; Hofmarcher, 2021; Spada et al., 2023). In a meta-regression analysis of 64 studies, Abdullah, Doucouliagos and Manning (2015) found that on average, public education is an effective tool for reducing economic inequality. Results demonstrate that higher levels of education within a population aid in alleviating poverty, with higher levels of parental education reducing the likelihood of overall household poverty (Abdullah, 2015). This has been shown on a correlational level, as studies consistently demonstrate a positive relation between education levels and income, with people's income increasing as their level of education climbs (Appleton, 2001; Spada et al., 2023). Research also shows that education can help reduce poverty rates, especially in developing countries, with studies demonstrating an increase in earnings with exposure to primary schooling and rising further with attainment of secondary education (Awan et al., 2011; Spada et al., 2023).

Education is also a social determinant of health, with higher levels of education resulting in better access to health services and increases in healthy behaviours (Alder & Stewart, 2010; Bonell et al., 2013; Braveman et al., 2011; Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014; Jemal et al., 2008; Kawachi et al., 2010; Meara et al., 2008). Healthy behaviours include positive dietary patterns, physical exercise and safe decision making (Adler & Stewart, 2010; Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014; Jemal et al., 2008). Lower education levels are linked to poorer access to services and poor

health (Alder & Stewart 2010; Braveman et al., 2011; Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014). Literacy is a central goal of K-12 education and is one likely explanation for the connections observed between attending school and health. For example, a systematic review of literature spanning over 20 years indicated that low-literacy was negatively associated with health status (i.e., increased risk of hospitalizations and hypertension, and decreased likelihood of illness-screening behaviours and adherence to disease treatments) (DeWalt et al., 2004).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Children's Rights

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Neal & Neal, 2013) posits that the education system a child experiences is a significant aspect of child and adolescent development. This theory involves five interconnected levels, all described as influencing, either directly or indirectly, a child's growth. The first is the Microsystem, which includes individual parts of a child's immediate environment, such as their family, friends, classmates, school, and neighborhood. The Mesosystem then refers to the connections between the different parts of a child's Microsystem, such as the relationship between a child's family and their school. These systems continue to build on each other, with the Exosystem examining environments that may indirectly influence the child, such as relationships between their home and the parent's workplace, labour negotiations for teachers in their school, and policies implemented by regional centres of education that play out to various extents in the child's school. The Macrosystem then captures an even wider scope and examines the larger cultural and social context that shape the child's environment, including cultural norms, international group leadership such as the United Nations (UN) and federal government leadership. Lastly, the Chronosystem involves environmental changes that occur over long periods of time, such as generational shifts. In summary, all of these systems work together and play complex and

contextualized roles in shaping child and adolescent development (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Neal & Neal, 2013). Considering education within the context of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is essential, as it is one of many factors that influences a child's development (Eccles & Roeser, 2012; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Roeser, Eccles, & Saeroff, 2000).

For example, at the microsystem level, relationships between teachers and peers at school may directly affect a child's learning and participation in school. Furthermore, when systems like home and school work together positively, they can help support a child's academic success and development (Eccles & Roeser, 2012; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). At the societal level, cultures that value education often value access to education and work hard to provide students with opportunities to attend school. (Finnie, 2012; Bronfenbrenner, 1976). Therefore, considering the role that public education plays in the context of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory helps to highlight how different system levels can influence a child's learning and development.

Models such as Bronfenbrenner's demonstrate the important part education plays in supporting child development. With educators and researchers around the world recognizing this, global efforts have been made to protect every child's right to education (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Eccles & Roeser, 2012; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000; Finnie, 2012). Various countries have integrated Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory into their public education approaches. For instance, this model has influenced education-related programs across North America (Bailey et al., 2021; Manitoba Education, 2012; Public Safety Canada, 2007; Tregaskis, 2015), has been applied to curriculum reform in Zambia, and has shaped

family-school collaboration policies and practices in Romania (Dan et al., 2023; Maguvhe & Mutambo, 2023).

Scotland has also integrated Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory into its approach to public education, explicitly stating that the government systems and adults in a child's life are responsible for the structures and daily experiences that foster child well-being and school engagement (Director-General Education and Justice, 2022). Their national practice model for meeting students' needs is rooted in this ecological system theory and is an action in response to a key international framework written by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Director-General Education and Justice, 2022). Adopted by nearly every country, though to varying extents in legislation policy and action, the UNCRC is a human rights treaty that aims to uphold various rights of children up to the age of 18 (United Nations, 1989). Among these rights, Article 28 specifically advocates for the right to accessible education for all children. Article 28 not only recognizes the right to education, but also emphasizes the importance of free primary education, the development of different forms of secondary education (including vocational) and measures to encourage regular attendance and reduce dropout rates (United Nations, 1989).

Correlates of Regular School Attendance

Education is recognized as a fundamental right for children and plays a key role in their development and learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Eccles, & Roeser, 2011; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000; Finnie, 2012; United Nations, 1989). For example, students aged 5–18 years achieve several social, psychological, physical and intellectual milestones while enrolled in educational institutions (Centers for Disease Control, 2023; Eccles, & Roeser, 2012; Eccles, & Roeser, 2011; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Schools often serve as a safe and supportive

environment for students and promote child and adolescent development by helping build life skills, allowing youth to participate in activities that improve their health (e.g., physical education classes) and provide access to age-appropriate knowledge on topics such as sexual education (Baker, Dilly, & Patil, 2003; Davis, 2015; Gomez, & Ang, 2007; World Health Organization, 2024).

To gain meaningful benefits from educating their populations, countries must first ensure that public education is widely available. Equally important, they must ensure that students are actively engaged in learning through consistent attendance. Attendance can be defined as the combination of student actions, along with the policies and procedures set by the school system that document whether a student is officially present or absent (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015). In the education system, student attendance is a key variable for assessing important outcomes, such as academic performance, well-being, and development (Allison et al., 2019; Gottfried, 2010; Havik et al., 2015; Keppens et al., 2019). Studies have demonstrated that consistent school attendance in primary and secondary schooling promotes success in various aspects of child and adolescent development (Allison et al., 2019; Centre of Disease, 2023; Gottfried, 2010; Havik et al., 2015; Keppens et al., 2019). For example, children who attend regularly report better adaptive functioning in their behavioural, health, psychological, and social domains (Allison et al., 2019; Chang & Romero, 2008; Gottfried, 2010; Kearney et al., 2022). In addition, beginning as early as preschool, inconsistent school attendance can lead to negative developmental outcomes in areas such as reading and social skills (Allison et al., 2019; Chang & Romero, 2008). A study conducted by Ansari and Purtell (2018) demonstrated this. They used nationally representative data from the Family and Child Experiences Survey 2009 Cohort (n = 2,842) in the United States to examine the effect of absenteeism on the early academic learning of 3- and

4-year-olds. The researchers found that children who missed more school days, especially those who were chronically absent (i.e., missing 10% or more of the school year), showed fewer gains in math and literacy during their preschool year. Importantly, the negative effect was greater for those who began with lower language, literacy, and math skills. The study also controlled for covariates, such as background (i.e., race, age, child health, parental marital status, education, employment and household income) and classroom characteristics (i.e., child-to-teacher ratio, class size, hours of school per week, and quality of teacher-child interactions).

On an academic level, regular school attendance has been linked to better academic achievement, including better test performance and higher scores on national skill assessments. A negative linear relation between levels of absenteeism and academic performance has been documented on several occasions, with students who demonstrate many school absences performing worse than those who attend regularly (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Allison et al., 2019; Cattan et al., 2022; Gottfried, 2010; Keppens, 2023; Klein, Sosu, & Dare, 2022; Ingul et al., 2012). For example, research conducted by Gottfried (2010) demonstrated a positive relationship between the number of days a student was present and their academic performance, as measured by GPA and standardized test scores. Conversely, poorer attendance was associated with negative academic outcomes. Expanding on this, Klein and colleagues (2019) observed a negative association between overall school absences during a year and students' national examination results. Allensworth and Easton (2007) further emphasized this connection, finding that school attendance was a more reliable predictor of school failure than standardized test scores.

Risk Factors for School Attendance Problems

Given the consistent relation between attendance and student outcomes, it is important to recognize that regular attendance plays a key role in supporting academic, social and emotional development (Allison et al., 2019; Chang & Romero, 2008; Gottfried, 2010; Kearney et al., 2022). Students who do not attend school regularly are at increased risk for a range of negative outcomes, including lower academic achievement, reduced well-being, and disengagement from school leading to dropout (Allison et al., 2019; Cattan et al., 2022; Gottfried, 2010; Ingul et al., 2012).

Chronic absenteeism (CA) describes a continuous pattern of missed schooling, whether excused or unexcused. In the empirical literature, it generally refers to students who miss 10% or more of the school year (Chang & Romero, 2008). Often, persistent absences can result from various causes, such as illnesses such as asthma and respiratory conditions, psychiatric issues such as depression, anxiety, and disruptive behaviour disorders (Kearney, 2008; John et al., 2022; Lawrence et al., 2019). CA has been studied across academic disciplines, with findings suggesting that many factors related to school, community, and economic status can lead to students missing large portions of their school year (Chang & Romero, 2008; Kearney et al., 2022).

Birioukov's (2016) comprehensive international review examined absenteeism in secondary schools across several countries including Canada, the United States, Taiwan, Pakistan, Israel, and various European nations. Key predictors of absenteeism identified included several school-based factors such as school environment, transitions between educational levels (e.g., elementary to secondary), perceived quality of education, student-teacher and peer relationships, and grade level. Other school-related factors thought to affect student absences

include perceived self-esteem at school, curriculum content, an unsafe school environment, bullying, and lack of value in the education system (Allison et al., 2019; Corville-Smith et al., 1996; Stempel et al., 2017).

Ingul and colleagues (2012) and Birioukov (2016) further expanded on various risk factors that predict absenteeism, demonstrating how life influences can contribute to students missing school. These factors include illness, substance abuse, and cultural influences. Higher levels of externalizing behaviours (such as conduct problems or hyperactivity/inattention), poor self-reported health, and socioeconomic factors (such as parental unemployment) may also play a role in student absences (Birioukov, 2016; Ingul et al., 2012). Research also demonstrates that students from equity-deserving groups are at risk of missing large amounts of school, with key findings demonstrating that students who are visible minorities, with disabilities and those who live in poverty miss more school than their peers (Garcia & Weiss, 2018; Kearney et al., 2022; Sosu et al., 2020).

Adolescence may also contribute to an increase in school absences, with Birioukov (2016) finding that absenteeism rates increased as students advanced through grade levels, especially once they reached secondary school. This may be because adolescence involves numerous stressors, including identity development, exploring sexuality and navigating peer relationships. During this stage, students experience puberty and face heightened risks of various mental health disorders, with many beginning to experiment with drugs and alcohol (Johnston et al., 2022; Lack & Green, 2009; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2019). In addition, an item-level report conducted by the Government of Nova Scotia identified differences between youth aged 8-11 and 12-15, with adolescents in the latter age group being 1.5 times more likely to experience chronic absenteeism than those in the former (Narrative

Research, 2023). Therefore, it is possible that this transitional period may contribute to the observed increase in chronic absenteeism. However, most studies have not explored the possibility that developmental changes contribute to chronic absenteeism (Ansari et al., 2020; Birioukov, 2021).

Defining and Understanding Chronic Absenteeism

Although school attendance can be an important indicator of academic success and student well-being, researchers have struggled to develop a consistent definition or standardized method for categorizing attendance and types of absenteeism as variables. Some studies lack clear definitions of what counts as an absence, whereas others rely on administrative classifications (Birioukov, 2016). Typically, administrative approaches use a simple binary system, such as excused versus unexcused absences, often based on parental notifications or school policies. In some cases, attendance can also be recorded at varying levels: per lesson, half day, or full day. However, as noted by Landell (2021), the consistency of attendance or absenteeism definitions or documentation practices in public schools is lacking, and standardized documentation can improve the quality of research on school attendance and absenteeism (SA/A) interventions.

This lack of clarity is further complicated by the practical challenges of excusing absences. Excused absences depend on communication between parents and schools, which does not always occur. For example, Keppens et al. (2019) found discrepancies between school records and self-reported absences, showing that boys, students from households primarily speaking a language that is not the language(s) of schooling, those with less-educated mothers, and students receiving school allowances had more unauthorized absences recorded than they self-reported. One possible explanation is that the school was unable to contact parents to

formally excuse the student, even when the parent in fact did approve of the absence due to perhaps illness or appointments.

In light of this, led by research conducted by Christopher Kearney at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, there has been growing interest in precisely defining, understanding and addressing school attendance problems (SAPs), or absenteeism. Depending on the function and severity of absences, a student could meet the criteria for school withdrawal, school refusal, or truancy. School withdrawal occurs when a child is deliberately kept at home by a caregiver for economic, social or safety reasons (Kearney, 2008; Kearney et al., 2019; Kearney et al., 2022). School refusal, also referred to as child-motivated refusal, occurs when a student does not attend school due to anxiety-based difficulties caused by separation, generalized or social anxiety (Kearney, 2008). This type of absenteeism frequently presents as partial absences, an intense dread regarding attending school that leads to pleas to miss school in the future and chronic tardiness (Kearney, 2008; Kearney et al., 2019; Kearney et al., 2022). Lastly, truancy frequently involves unexcused, illegal, and surreptitious absences that are not linked to anxiety about school and involve a lack of parental knowledge about the behaviour (Kearney, 2008; Kearney et al., 2019; Kearney et al., 2022). Students who exhibit truancy may face adverse social conditions such as homelessness or poverty, engage in delinquent behaviours, or experience academic problems (Kearney, 2008; Kearney et al., 2019; Kearney et al., 2022). Unlike the different types of absenteeism, which are often tied to emotional distress, truancy is more linked to rule-breaking behaviour or lack of motivation, rather than psychological distress (Kearney et al., 2019). Unfortunately, school refusal and truancy are often used interchangeably and inconsistently in literature, making it difficult for researchers, school staff and clinicians to

implement consistent and effective interventions based on the best-available evidence (Kearney, 2008; Kearney et al., 2022).

In recent years, SA/A have also been examined from a psychological perspective, with researchers advocating for the creation of a framework for this concept (Kearney et al., 2019). Kearney and colleagues (2019) advocate for a functional approach to this issue and suggest a new way to define and document these types of absenteeism by examining the reasons why students have difficulty attending school. Four functions of student absenteeism are suggested: (1) avoidance of school-related stimuli that elicit negative affectivity (e.g., depression and/or anxiety); (2) avoidance of social or evaluative situations (e.g., presentations, recitals, eating in the cafeteria); (3) seeking attention from a caregiver; and (4) pursuit of reinforcers outside the school environment (e.g., part-time work, family obligations, social events). By understanding the underlying functions of absenteeism, as suggested by Kearney and colleagues (2019), interventions can then be tailored to address the root causes of student attendance problems.

Addressing School Attendance Challenges

The use of a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) has been suggested to address the needs of students experiencing SA/A (Kearney, 2019). MTSS is an educational framework, consisting of Tier 1 support that addresses the needs of all students, Tier 2 implementing more targeted interventions for students at risk or with specific needs for generally short timeframes, and Tier 3 providing intensive support for students experiencing significant challenges (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008). In a school setting, Tier 1 interventions to help support attendance include personalized academic instruction, social-emotional skill development, bullying prevention and efforts to promote social inclusion (Brookmeyer et al., 2006; Brookmeyer et al., 2006; Vreeman and Carroll, 2007 as cited in Kearney, 2014). Parent-focused strategies aimed at increasing

family involvement outreach efforts, resource centres and volunteer opportunities can also be beneficial (Jeynes, 2007; McNeal, 1999 as cited in Kearney, 2014).

Tier 2 strategies that benefit students experiencing attendance problems include academic tutoring, peer mentoring, and skills training that incorporates cognitive-behavioural techniques (Bernstein et al., 2000; Suveg et al., 2005 as cited Kearney, 2014). Increasing student engagement by building consistent and supportive communication between school and home, closely monitoring absences and conducting frequent check-ins can also help support student attendance (Kearney & Albano, 2007; Murdock et al., 2009 as cited in Kearney, 2014).

Tier 3 strategies offer intensive support to students who experience significant absenteeism. These include psychological interventions such as cognitive behavioural and exposure therapy for those with anxiety or traumatic experiences and alternative educational settings that focus on part-time attendance as well as close mentoring of academic work (De Witte & Cabus, 2013; Kearney, 2014). There has been debate in the research suggesting that legal strategies such as truancy courts, police involvement, and stricter enforcement of attendance rules can also be effective Tier 3 approaches to addressing severe absenteeism (Desai et al., 2006; Hendricks et al., 2010, as cited in Kearney, 2014). Other researchers have suggested that punitive measures may worsen the problem and that various approaches (e.g., other effective tiered intervention strategies and a proactive approach) should be used in lieu of, or at least before, legal action to manage truancy (see Markussen & Sandberg, 2011; Bye et al., 2010; Jonson-Reid et al., 2007, as cited in Kearney, 2014).

Although using an MTSS approach has been shown to support student attendance, Kearney and colleagues (2019) also advocate for a multi-tiered, multi-domain system of support (MTMDSS) that values categorical and dimensional approaches to attendance as a variable.

Categorial approaches begin with a common binary: school attendance (i.e., physical presence during a school day) and school absenteeism (i.e., physical absence during a school day). Absences in this binary are often categorized (e.g., excused, unexcused, authorized, or unauthorized) and explored using related terms such as school dropout/stayout (i.e., permanent premature departure), truancy (i.e., unexcused absenteeism) and school refusal (i.e., inability to attend due to emotional difficulties). Dimensional approaches to attendance measure the degree to which categorical states can change, placing SA/As on a continuum from high attendance to complete absenteeism. This continuum also addresses the frequency and duration of a student's absence and risk factors, such as family dynamics, community factors, health issues and school environment. MTMDSS includes tiers of support across multiple domains, such as school staff recognizing students' academic, social and emotional needs. Using a MTMDSS approach will strengthen interventions at each tier (i.e., universal, targeted, and intensive), offering better support to all students and promoting the development of better school policies to address SA/A. To implement or assess the local efficacy of any evidence-based strategy, such as those proposed by Kearney, schools require attendance tracking systems that align with the operational definitions of the implementation model. System change in evidence-based directions would have the best chances of success with coordinated efforts across levels of ecological systems.

Tracking Attendance

Accurate attendance tracking is critical to monitor and understand the rate of chronic absenteeism. High quality attendance data hold the potential to understand patterns of absenteeism and can be used to guide schools and policymakers to inform targeted interventions and help support student success (Chu et al., 2019; Keppens et al., 2019; Landell, 2021). A case study by Moodley et al. (2020) demonstrated the power of using attendance data to improve

student outcomes using absence patterns in a primary school in the United Kingdom. After identifying the specific class periods with the highest absence rates, they implemented targeted Tier 1 initiatives to increase attendance during those times. For example, the school launched the "Monday Matters" program, specifically targeting Monday morning attendance, as their analysis demonstrated that fewer students showed up to school this day. It involved an "m-themed" program held on five out of ten Mondays during the term. Themes, chosen by school staff to appeal to students, included Move-It Monday, Muffin Monday, Mindfulness Monday, Mask Monday and Movie Monday. The school also implemented other interventions to promote attendance, particularly during periods of decreased attendance. Using data and targeted interventions, the school reached the national average attendance rate of 96% for the first time in four years and reduced persistent absenteeism by over 55%.

Although school attendance is an important factor for student success, as noted in previous sections, a key challenge in this area is the lack of standardized definitions and consistent documentation practices for tracking attendance (Birioukov, 2016; Keppens et al., 2019; Landell, 2021). This variability in data collection influences the effectiveness of research aimed at addressing issues related to school attendance. Given this, researchers have begun to advocate for the use of well-defined and consistently documented school attendance as a valuable variable (Birioukov, 2016; Landell, 2021; Moodley et al., 2020). However, challenges remain with both the collection and interpretation of attendance data, which can limit their effectiveness (Birioukov, 2016; Keppens & Bach Johnsen, 2021; Keppens et al., 2019). Researchers have called for future studies to improve the accuracy of attendance records and develop practical systems that schools can use to better identify students with school attendance problems (SAPs) (Keppens & Bach Johnsen, 2021).

Canadian Context

In Canada, publicly accessible attendance data remain sparse and there is limited clarity on whether and how provinces monitor attendance and types of absences as systemic indicators. Birioukov (2021) highlights the country's relative silence on the issue of publishing attendance data, noting a general scarcity of national statistics on absenteeism. Despite this, there are indications that students are missing a significant amount of school. For example, estimates from the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) suggest that approximately 23.2% of Canadian students reported skipping school at least once in the two weeks prior to the assessment (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019).

Some provinces have identified student absences as a significant concern with Alberta, Manitoba, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador all publishing reports that directly address chronic absenteeism alongside possible interventions and target goals to increase school attendance (Adams & Street, 2009; Government of New Brunswick, 2024; Alberta Government, 2015; Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2019). For example, in a report titled *Every Student Counts School Reference Guide* the Alberta government (2015) investigated chronic absenteeism in the school system, defining it as a student missing more than 10% of the school year (i.e., 18 days) for any reason or missing a month or more from school in the previous year. While this report does not provide specific attendance data or offer any suggestions on the rate of school attendance for Alberta students, it serves as a reference guide for addressing student attendance concerns. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (2019) released a report titled *Chronic Absenteeism: When Children Disappear*, highlighting the lack of a systematic approach to this issue in Canada. The report identified that approximately 6,600 students in the province (1 in 10) were absent for at least 18 days during the

2016-17 school year. The review also notes that only two provinces, New Brunswick and Quebec, state in law that school absenteeism can harm children's well-being. These provinces have identified missing large amounts of school as a form of educational neglect and have made it reportable under provincial child protection legislation.

Despite this, most provincial reports on chronic absenteeism lack detailed attendance data, including rates of absenteeism within their school systems (Government of New Brunswick, 2024; Alberta Government, 2015). This absence of data raises concerns about provinces' ability to effectively monitor attendance or evaluate interventions due to insufficient information guiding decision-making. When attendance data are reported, they tend to be inaccessible to the public and are used mainly for descriptive purposes rather than to inform interventions and track over time or assess response to interventions (Adams, 2009; Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2019). Additionally, certain provinces, such as British Columbia and Prince Edward Island, do not produce provincial reports on attendance, leaving a significant gap in understanding attendance trends in these regions. Without reliable and transparent data, it remains difficult to identify patterns, evaluate interventions, or understand the rates or causes of absenteeism nationwide.

Nova Scotia reflects this broader trend. Provincial-level attendance data are not publicly available, except for limited self-reported information captured through the *Student Success Survey* (SSS), administered annually by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) (Narrative Research, 2023). The anonymous survey was distributed to students in Grades 4–12 in the public school system and aimed to gather information on student well-being, school climate, equity, and health behaviours. While not solely focused on attendance, the SSS included relevant items such as how often students missed school in the past

month (e.g., “did not miss,” “missed 1–2 times,” “missed 3+ times”) and reasons for absence (e.g., illness, mental health, extracurricular activities, did not want to go to school). Self-reported data from the SSS showed concerning rates of chronic absenteeism. Among students surveyed, 26% of those in Grades 4–6, 37% in Grades 7–9 and 44% in Grades 10–12 reported missing school three or more times in the previous month. Marginalized groups reported even higher rates, with 48% of Indigenous students and 47% of 2SLGBTQIA+ students in Grades 7–12 reporting chronic absenteeism (Narrative Research, 2023). Researchers' inability to access data from provincial surveys, such as the SSS, presents a considerable challenge. For example, in the past, researchers submitted a formal request to the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) seeking access to an anonymous random sample of item-level data from the SSS, but this was ultimately denied by the province. This outcome highlights the broad challenge of accessing and using attendance data in Nova Scotia and across Canada. Without access to reliable data, researchers, educators and policymakers are limited in their ability to understand attendance trends, identify the most affected populations and implement evidence-based interventions. However, a secondary avenue for understanding how Canada addresses school attendance in its education system lies in publicly available policy documents.

Education Acts in Canada

Unique to Canada, there is no federal Department of Education or national education system; instead, it is designated as a provincial or territorial responsibility. As referenced in The Constitution Act of 1867, each jurisdiction in Canada has the authority to make its own laws related to education (Lessard & Brassard, 2005; Levin, 2005; Wallin et al., 2021). As a result, across the country, each province and territory has created its own legislation, commonly

referred to as the Education Act. These acts serve as guiding documents on how an education system is legally bound to be governed. Education acts outline information related to student rights, curriculum mandates and the duties and responsibilities of all parties involved in education, including the Minister of Education, school boards, principals, teachers, parents and students. School attendance is a fundamental area addressed within education acts. Education acts often include mandates for compulsory attendance, including age requirements and outlines for various exemptions to attending school (Lessard & Brassard, 2005; Levin, 2005; Robson, 2019; Wallin et al., 2021).

Although education acts represent foundational legal documents, the broader body of education law and governance (i.e., policies) also affects school systems by defining in-depth issues such as inclusion, behaviour, and curriculum outcomes (Wallin et al., 2021). These policies are often strongly influenced by societal values, historical contexts and political priorities. As noted by Wallin and colleagues (2021), policy is also frequently referenced in education acts and is intended to guide the implementation of the law, reflecting the needs and characteristics of each province and territory. This further emphasizes that education acts and policies, though perhaps not consistently closely aligned, are also not detached from each other.

There is growing interest in incorporating evidence-based approaches into education policies across Canada (Wallin et al., 2021; Robson, 2021). Historically, education policies and practices have often relied more on intuition and tradition than on empirical research (Levin, 2011). However, the trend is now shifting towards using research findings and empirical evidence to help inform educational decisions and documents, such as education acts (Lessard & Brassard, 2005; Robson, 2019; Robson, 2021; Wallin et al., 2021).

Given the autonomy of provinces and territories in mandating education legislation, synthesizing how each region addresses attendance in its Education Act might significantly improve our understanding of school attendance across Canada by providing a foundation for how to move our systems forward in evidence-based ways. To date, research has not yet examined attendance within Canadian Education Acts or assessed the extent to which they align with the growing body of attendance research and operational definitions linked to supportive practices (Lessard & Brassard, 2005; Levin, 2005; Robson, 2019; Wallin et al., 2021).

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CHAPTER TWO

A Pan-Canadian Qualitative Examination of Education Acts and Provincial or Territorial Level Attendance Policies

Literature consistently links robust education systems (e.g., high-quality teaching, equitable access to institutions, and strong curricula) to several positive societal outcomes (Abdullah, 2015; Alder & Stewart, 2010; Braveman et al., 2011; Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014;Spada et al., 2023). One such benefit is a stronger economy, with strong education systems leading to higher levels of economic growth, a reduction in poverty, and increased productivity in the workforce. Education has also been found to reduce income inequality, with higher educational levels reducing household poverty, and increasing income (Abdullah, 2015; Awan et al., 2011; Spada et al., 2023). Educational attainment is also widely recognized as a social determinant of health. Higher education levels are associated with better access to health services and an increase in healthy behaviours (Alder & Stewart, 2010; Bonell et al., 2013; Braveman et al., 2011; Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014; Jemal et al., 2008; Kawachi et al., 2010; Meara et al., 2008). Conversely, individuals with lower educational levels frequently have decreased access to health services and experience worse health outcomes (Alder & Stewart, 2010; Braveman et al., 2011; Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014).

Beyond economic and health benefits, education has been shown to support child and adolescent development (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Eccles, & Roeser, 2011; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Schools plays a crucial role in supporting students as they achieve various social, psychological, physical, and developmental milestones (Centers for Disease Control, 2023; Eccles & Roeser, 2011, 2012; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Schools are also often safe and supportive spaces that help children build essential life skills

(Baker, Dilly, & Patil, 2003; Davis, 2015; Gomez & Ang, 2007; World Health Organization, 2024). Due to the important role education plays in child development, global efforts have been made to ensure every child's right to education. This international commitment is reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a treaty adopted by nearly every country worldwide, that aims to uphold various rights for children up to 18 years of age (United Nations, 1989). Specifically, Article 28 emphasizes the right to accessible education for all children.

Although education is viewed as a fundamental human right, its benefits can only be realized through student attendance. Student attendance, defined as a student's physical presence or active participation at school, can be used as a predictor for assessing important outcomes, such as academic performance, well-being, and overall development (Allison et al., 2019; Gottfried, 2010; Havik et al., 2015; Keppens et al., 2019). This is because students who attend school regularly perform better academically and have improved social and psychological well-being (Cattan et al., 2022; Gottfried, 2010). Several negative outcomes have been related to poor attendance (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Allison et al., 2019; Cattan et al., 2022; Klein, 2019; Sosu, & Dare, 2022). On an academic level, a strong negative linear relationship between levels of student absences and academic performance has been consistently documented (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Allison et al., 2019; Cattan et al., 2022; Gottfried, 2010; Keppens, 2023; Klein, 2019; Sosu, & Dare, 2022; Ingul et al., 2012). Students who do not attend school regularly also face an increased risk of reduced overall well-being and disengagement, potentially leading to school dropout (Allison et al., 2019; Cattan et al., 2022; Gottfried, 2010; Ingul et al., 2012).

Due to the importance of school attendance to long-term outcomes, researchers have aimed to define, explain, and inform targeted interventions to address school attendance. There is

particular interest in developing guidelines to address chronic absenteeism (CA; Change & Romero, 2008), defined as frequent and recurrent absences totalling 10% or more of the school year. Chronic absenteeism has been attributed to a variety of factors, including physical illnesses (e.g., asthma, respiratory conditions) and psychiatric issues (e.g., depression, anxiety, disruptive behaviour disorders) (John et al., 2022; Kearney, 2008; Lawrence et al., 2019). Kearney and colleagues (2019) examined chronic absenteeism or student attendance problems (SAPs) using a functional approach and identified four main reasons students struggle to attend school: (1) avoiding negative emotions tied to school; (2) avoiding social or evaluative situations; (3) seeking attention from a caregiver; and/or (4) seeking activities or reinforcement outside of school. They advocated for a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) to help address student absences, with the main focus on prevention, targeted interventions, and individualized support for non-attenders (Kearney, 2014; Kearney, 2019).

To support students experiencing SAPs, schools first need accurate attendance data. This requires clear and consistent definitions for unexcused versus excused absences and established procedures for tracking this variable effectively (Birioukov, 2016; Keppens et al., 2019; Moodley et al., 2020; Landell, 2021). These data can then be used to identify attendance patterns, assess which students are at risk for SAPs, and inform targeted interventions (Chu et al., 2019; Kearney, 2019; Landell, 2021). Despite the recognized importance of school attendance, publicly accessible attendance data remain sparse across Canada. As stated in Birioukov (2021), there is a notable silence on the lack of national statistics or open data regarding student attendance rates, including absenteeism. This lack of data makes it difficult for researchers and school systems to monitor attendance patterns and understand the true context of absenteeism in Canada. Although some provinces acknowledge chronic absenteeism (CA) in various governmental reports (see

Alberta Government, 2015; Government of New Brunswick, 2024; Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2019), detailed and transparent data, including actual rates of absenteeism, are often missing in these documents, further contributing to the inaccessibility of attendance data. In addition, provinces such as British Columbia and Prince Edward Island do not produce provincial reports on student attendance. This creates an even wider gap in the understanding of regional trends. This lack of reliable, accessible and transparent data makes it challenging to understand rates of absenteeism in specific regions or national trends across Canada. Furthermore, understanding changes over time, developmental change or contextual correlates of attendance is rendered impractical.

Nova Scotia experiences the same challenge as the rest of Canada; that is, a lack of publicly available school attendance data. The Student Success Survey (SSS) is the only exception, offering limited self-reported insights from Nova Scotia students. Administered annually by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), the SSS is an anonymous survey distributed to students in Grades 4–12 in the public school system. It aims to gather information on various aspects of student experience (e.g., student well-being, school climate, equity, and health behaviours) within the provincial public education system using self-reported questions. In 2023, it included several questions related to attendance, with the results displaying a clear trend of chronic absenteeism (i.e., missing school three or more times in the previous month) among Nova Scotia students. Specifically, 26% of students in grades 4–6, 37% in grades 7–9, and 44% in grades 10–12 met this criterion. Even more concerning, these rates are higher among Indigenous (48%) and 2SLGBTQIA+ students (47%) in grades 7–12 (Narrative Research, 2023).Given the difficulty in accessing provincial attendance data, it is essential to examine other methods of describing or promoting attendance,

such as analyzing publicly accessible documents that mandate requirements of administrators, schools, and other stakeholders, such as education acts.

In Canada, education is not federally mandated or regulated, meaning that each of the 13 provinces and territories has developed their own Education Acts to address how schools operate, the legal obligations and rights of students, parents, and educators, and policy/procedure related to school attendance. Education acts are not isolated; they are intertwined with broader education policies that define specific issues such as inclusion and curriculum outcomes, reflecting regional needs and societal values (Wallin et al., 2021). As explained by several authors (see Lessard & Brassard, 2005; Levin, 2005, 2011; Robson, 2019; Wallin et al., 2021), there is a national interest in moving toward evidence-based approaches in these policies and education acts and away from historical and political roots informing educational decisions and governing law. Despite this, change is slow and current research, to our knowledge, has not yet thoroughly examined provincially or territorially mandated Canadian Education Acts' approaches to attendance. Therefore, the objectives of this study were to: (1) describe material related to student attendance included in each Education Act and provincial- or territorial-level attendance policy; and (2) assess consistency across documents. Synthesizing this information could significantly enhance our understanding of how school attendance is framed in Canadian legislation, including alignment with evidence-based practices and consistency across the country, thereby providing a basis for future evidence-based system improvements.

Method

This descriptive document analysis followed Sandelowski (2000, 2010) and Turale's (2020) approach to qualitative description that emphasizes low-inference, straightforward analysis. Central to qualitative description is staying close to the original language and meaning

in the data without interpretation. This approach has been widely used in health and educational policy research (e.g., Chafe, 2017; Ozone et al., 2020; Ryder, Jacob & Hendrickson, 2019).

Procedure

Searches were conducted to retrieve acts and policies from publicly accessible provincial and territorial government websites in December 2024. Retrieved documents were stored in a shared cloud-based folder as pdf files and weblinks to each downloaded document were saved for future use and referencing. Details about document retrieval, data extraction, analysis, and interrater reliability are below.

Document retrieval

Education Acts from every province and territory in Canada were downloaded from publicly accessible government websites. An online document search was also conducted to identify provincial- or territorial-level attendance policies. This search found that only Nova Scotia and Yukon have formally established attendance policies separate from their Education Acts at a province- or territory-wide level. Because of the lack of a provincially or territorially governed policy related to attendance for 11 of the 13 provinces and territories, the primary focus of this study involved analyzing the 13 provincial and territorial Education Acts. The policy documents from Nova Scotia and Yukon were analyzed separately to better understand how attendance is being addressed in policy frameworks outside of legislation. All Education Acts and attendance policies are publicly available through provincial or territorial government websites (See Tables 1 - 2).

Data Extraction and Analysis

To keep the data organized and allow for easy comparisons across regions, data from each province or territory were placed in its own worksheet within one excel file. Consistent with

Sandelowski (2000), large amounts of data were organized into themes that summarize raw data using the words in the dataset rather than imposing preconceived theoretical or interpretive frameworks. The coding process used in this study was inductive, guided by the principles of descriptive qualitative analysis (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010 and Turale, 2020).

The thirteen Education Acts were reviewed and coded to identify how student attendance was referenced within Canadian legislation. Nova Scotia's and Yukon's attendance policies were also coded in the same way to allow for comparison between legislative and non-legislative documents. All clauses relating to attendance from these 13 Education Acts and two policies were collected and analyzed inductively to generate themes and calculate the percentage of clauses within each act relating to each theme. The process began by reading each retained document in full, extracting all clauses relevant to attendance and entering the clauses into an Excel spreadsheet.

The clause was established as the primary unit of analysis for coding, meaning that each distinct legislative or policy statement pertaining to attendance was treated as an individual datum. The initial phase involved reading the extracted clauses repeatedly to gain an in-depth understanding of their content. During this process, preliminary codes were assigned to text segments that represented different concepts related to attendance. For instance, a clause outlining parental obligations received the code *Parental Responsibility*, while one detailing attendance tracking procedures might be coded as *School Reporting*. As coding progressed, these initial codes were continuously compared and grouped together based on shared properties and dimensions. This categorization process allowed for the editing of preliminary codes resulting in the development of overarching themes and descriptive subcodes.

Interrater Agreement

To assess the extent to which themes and their descriptions were clear and coded consistently interrater agreement was calculated from two independent raters. Percentage agreement is an indication of theme validity in that an independent rater who was not involved in the construction of the themes was tasked with reading the descriptions of the themes and assigning a theme to a random sample of clauses. A randomly selected subset of 30 clauses from the dataset was coded independently by a secondary coder. The thesis supervisor provided the second coder with themes and descriptions identified by the primary coder in a word document and directed them to assign a theme to each clause in a spreadsheet. No further communication occurred until secondary coding was complete. The supervisor then compared the results of the two coders and calculated their agreement. One hundred percent (100%) agreement was achieved after the first independent coding. No further rounds or discussions were deemed necessary. Perfect agreement was interpreted to mean that the themes and their descriptions below were transparent and closely aligned with the language used in the documents, which was the intention of this method.

Results

Every Canadian Education Act provided some type of definition or formal language surrounding attendance. Word count varied widely for attendance sections of Education Acts and ranged from 73 words to 2368 words (See Figure 1). Seven overarching themes descriptively summarized and represented all data regarding attendance retrieved from Education Acts: (1) Definitions; (2) Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria; (3) Governance; (4) Role of Stakeholders; (5) Documentation; (6) Communication; and (7) Response to Absences. For distributions of prevalence of each theme in each region, see Figures 2 to 14.

Definitions

When examining the theme of definitions, the subcodes identified included references to compulsory attendance (e.g., attendance being mandatory for all students) and age requirements (e.g., the expected age ranges during which students were required to attend; see Table 3). Every Education Act had established compulsory attendance for all students. Some provinces, such as Alberta, referred to this as *Compulsory Education* (Alberta, 2012), whereas Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec, Prince Edward Island, Yukon, New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador used the term *Compulsory School Attendance* (New Brunswick, 1997; Newfoundland and Labrador, 2020; Ontario, 1990; Prince Edward Island, 2022; Quebec, 2024; Saskatchewan, 1995; Yukon, 2002). By contrast, Manitoba used the language *Right to Attend* (Manitoba, 1987), and Nova Scotia referred to this as the *Requirement to Attend School* (Nova Scotia, 2018).

All provinces and territories outlined the specific age ranges during which students were required to attend school. Although many acts adhered to a standard range, there were variations in these compulsory age requirements. Most jurisdictions, such as Quebec (2024), Prince Edward Island (2022), Newfoundland and Labrador (2020), Yukon (2002), and Saskatchewan (1995), required attendance from age 6 to 16. However, Nova Scotia (2018) differed by mandating school attendance from age 5 until 16. In contrast, Ontario (1990), Manitoba (1987), and New Brunswick (1997) extended this compulsory period; students in these provinces were required to attend school from age 6 to 18. Some Education Acts considered a student's age alongside their graduation status (New Brunswick, 1997; Quebec, 2024). For instance, New Brunswick (1997) required children to begin school at the age of five and continue their attendance until they either graduated from high school or reached 18 years of age. Furthermore, Manitoba (1987), Prince Edward Island (2022), and Newfoundland and Labrador (2020) specified eligibility using

calendar dates. These acts typically described compulsory age as beginning when a student was 6 years of age or older by December 31 in a school year and continuing until September 1 in a school year when they were younger than 16 years of age; such students were required to attend school for the entire school year. Saskatchewan (1995) provided the shortest explanation of age requirements. Their Act simply stated that compulsory school age meant having "…attained the age of six years but not having attained the age of 16 years" (p. 10).

The definition of "absence" was not explicitly provided in any Education Act; however, both provincial-and territorial-level attendance policies offered one. Nova Scotia defined an absence as "Any time that a student is not in class or not participating in a school activity" (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2023, p. 1) and defined late arrival as "…a student arriving to class at any point beyond the scheduled start time." (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2023, p. 1). Yukon took a more specific approach by recording an absence as "…[a]n absence will be recorded in all instances where a student is not physically present in the school." (Government of Yukon, 2022, p. 2). These two definitions highlight a difference in how absence was interpreted across jurisdictions, such that in Nova Scotia, there was a focus on being present and participating in the class, whereas in Yukon, the emphasis was on a student's physical location (See Table 3).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The second theme was related to inclusion and exclusion criteria, specifically students who were exempt from attending school under the Education Act. All provinces and territories except British Columbia (British Columbia, 1996) had exemptions from compulsory attendance. Common exemptions included medical issues (see Alberta, 2012; Manitoba, 1987; New Brunswick, 1997; Newfoundland and Labrador, 2020; Northwest Territories, 1995; Nunavut,

2008; Ontario, 1990; Prince Edward Island, 2022; Quebec, 2024; Saskatchewan, 1995; Yukon, 2002), religion (e.g., missing school due to religious holidays; see Alberta, 2012; Manitoba, 1987; New Brunswick, 1997; Northwest Territories, 1995; Nunavut, 2008; Ontario, 1990; Prince Edward Island, 2022; Saskatchewan, 1995; Yukon, 2002) or suspensions or expulsions (see Alberta, 2012; Manitoba, 1987; New Brunswick, 1997; Newfoundland and Labrador, 2020; Northwest Territories, 1995; Nunavut, 2008; Ontario, 1990; Quebec, 2024; Saskatchewan, 1995; Yukon, 2002; see Table 4). Many provinces and territories also deemed alternative forms of education, such as homeschooling, enrollment in private institutions, or participating in an adult learning program, as acceptable exemptions (see Alberta, 2012; Manitoba, 1987; New Brunswick, 1997; Newfoundland and Labrador, 2020; Northwest Territories, 1995; Nunavut, 2008; Ontario, 1990; Prince Edward Island, 2022; Quebec, 2024; Saskatchewan, 1995; Yukon, 2002). Some Education Acts included participation in school activities as an acceptable exemption (see Alberta, 2012; Manitoba, 1987; Northwest Territories, 1995; Nunavut, 2008). Unique to Yukon, students could be exempted from attending public school if they were participating in cultural activities, such as Aboriginal harvesting and other school-approved events (Yukon, 2002; see Table 4). Additionally, exemptions from attending could be granted with approval from the Board of Education or Minister (see Alberta, 2012; New Brunswick, 1997; Newfoundland and Labrador, 2020; Nova Scotia, 2018; Nunavut, 2008; Prince Edward Island, 2022; Saskatchewan, 1995; Yukon, 2002) or if students had achieved the qualifications for a high school diploma or certificate of completion (see Alberta, 2012; Manitoba, 1987; Newfoundland and Labrador, 2020; Ontario, 1990).

Both Saskatchewan and Ontario allowed exemptions from mandatory school attendance based on transportation barriers. Ontario's legislation was specific, specifying age-based

distances (e.g., children under seven years old by the first school day in September were not required to attend school if there was no school situated within a 1.6 kilometre radius of their home; Ontario, 1990) and Saskatchewan stated application of this exemption if the distance to a school that the student is entitled to attend exceeded four kilometres (Saskatchewan, 1995). No further detail was provided to explain or exemplify these exemptions.

Finally, some Education Acts included other exemptions that did not fit into the previous subcodes, including parents providing a valid reason as to why the student should not be required to attend school (see Alberta, 2012; Manitoba, 1987; New Brunswick, 1997; Newfoundland and Labrador, 2020; Nunavut, 2008; Ontario, 1990; Quebec, 2024; Saskatchewan, 1995; Yukon, 2002). In some Education Acts, if it is determined that school attendance was not beneficial for the student, an exemption could be granted (See Table 4). This occurred in Saskatchewan, where the Education Act stated that if "…the director, after inquiry or investigation, is of the opinion certified in writing, that continued attendance at school is not productive or is detrimental to the pupil or to the school" then the student was not required to attend (Saskatchewan, 1995, p. 72). Yukon's Education Act included a similar provision, stating that students "…may be entitled to receive an optional education appropriate to the student's needs" (Yukon, 2002, p. 25; see Table 5).

Governance

In a wide range of Education Acts, the theme of *Governance* (i.e., who holds the responsibility for ensuring that students attended school) was identified. Almost all Education Acts identified parents, students, school staff, and the school district as having some degree of responsibility to ensure that students attended school (see Alberta, 2012; Manitoba, 1987; New Brunswick, 1997; Newfoundland and Labrador, 2020; Northwest Territories, 1995; Nova Scotia,

2018; Nunavut, 2008; Ontario, 1990; Prince Edward Island, 2022; Quebec, 2024; Saskatchewan, 1995).

Most provinces placed the primary responsibility on parents to ensure that their child was attending school regularly (see Alberta, 2012; Manitoba, 1987; New Brunswick, 1997; Northwest Territories, 1995; Nova Scotia, 2018; Nunavut, 2008; Ontario, 1990; Prince Edward Island, 2022; Quebec, 2024; Saskatchewan, 1995). Some Education Acts emphasized the obligation parents had to make sure their child attended school, stating they must "cause" or "ensure" their child's attendance (see Alberta, 2012, p. 47; Manitoba, 1987, p. 243). Other provinces used phrases like "take the necessary measures" and "to the best of the parent's ability," indicating that parents must take meaningful action to support their child's attendance (see Prince Edward Island, 2022, p. 26; Quebec, 2024). Additionally, some Education Acts assigned students a degree of responsibility for attending school and classes regularly and punctually (see Alberta, 2012; New Brunswick, 1997; Nova Scotia, 2018; Nunavut, 2008; Prince Edward Island, 2022; Saskatchewan, 1995; see Table 6). From a policy perspective, Nova Scotia's attendance policy not only emphasized the responsibility that students had to attend, but also to be ready and on time for class. It stated: "All students are expected to be present and prepared for the beginning of class. Schools will develop and implement consistent, school-wide practices for responding to late arrivals." (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2023, p. 1).

In some jurisdictions, attendance responsibilities also fell on various school staff (e.g., principals or teachers; see Manitoba, 1987; New Brunswick, 1997; Nova Scotia, 2018; Nunavut, 2008; Quebec, 2024; Saskatchewan, 1995). The Nova Scotia Education Act explained, "[Teachers] take all reasonable steps to secure full and regular attendance at school of the

students under the teacher's supervision" (Nova Scotia, 2018, p. 21). Quebec was similar and emphasized the role of the principal in supporting attendance by stating, "The principal shall ascertain, in the manner determined by the school service centre, that students attend school regularly" (Quebec, 2024, p. 6). Finally, in some provinces and territories, the education authority (e.g., the school board) also had a degree of responsibility and was required to make all reasonable efforts to ensure that students who were enrolled in a school operated by the board attended (see Alberta, 2012; Manitoba, 1987; New Brunswick, 1997; Prince Edward Island, 2022; Saskatchewan, 1995).

Roles of Stakeholders

The roles of stakeholders emerged as a distinct but related theme to governance. Many Education Acts identified individuals and groups such as attendance officers, attendance committees, and attendance boards as playing a role in supporting regular school attendance (Alberta, 2012; Manitoba, 1987; Nova Scotia, 2018; Ontario, 1990; Quebec, 2024; Saskatchewan, 1995). Attendance officers were often described as being responsible for ensuring that students attended school regularly and their responsibility was similar across provinces, in that they had the authority to investigate students' absences (Alberta, 2012; Manitoba, 1987; Ontario, 1990; Quebec, 2024; Saskatchewan, 1995). The duties of attendance officers included collaborating with parents, students, and school staff to resolve attendance issues, as well as conducting investigations of non-attenders. This investigation process was referenced similarly across Education Acts that identified attendance officers and included entering places where students may be found and having the power to send students back to school or home once located. Investigators can also serve notices to parents or guardians when a student is not attending school (see Table 7).

Alberta was the only province identified to have an Attendance Board (Alberta, 2012). This board was described as following a clear process for managing attendance cases, starting with a case conference involving the student, parents and school staff. If this approach did not resolve the issue, a formal hearing could be scheduled. The Board had the authority to summon witnesses, request documents, and conduct hearings. At the hearing, the Board could issue various orders, such as directing the student to attend school, requiring parents to ensure that their child attended, or imposing a monetary penalty.

Lastly, the Nova Scotia Education Act referenced the establishment of an attendance committee and outlined its role, which included monitoring student attendance and addressing absenteeism within schools. The committee might also recommend interventions for students who were regularly absent without valid justification. As stated in the Act:

> An education entity may establish an attendance committee. An attendance committee shall, in accordance with provincial policy, monitor the attendance of students in schools under the jurisdiction of the education entity, take steps to reduce the absenteeism of students and make recommendations for remedial steps with respect to those students who have been reported by the principal as being habitually absent from school without acceptable excuse. (Nova Scotia Education Act, 2018, p. 18)

Documentation

Documentation was another theme that appeared in some Education Acts (see Manitoba, 1987; Nova Scotia, 2018; Newfoundland and Labrador, 2020; Nunavut, 2008; see Table 8). In the Education Acts where this was identified as a theme, teachers were commonly responsible for taking daily attendance and following their school's established procedures (see Nova Scotia, 2018). In some jurisdictions, Education Acts mentioned attendance tracking only in terms of

administrative reporting, such as sending records to meet district requirements or legal cases involving frequent absences (Manitoba, 1987; Newfoundland and Labrador, 2020; Nunavut, 2008). Overall, in the acts that referenced this theme, explanations were brief and lacking in detail.

Communication

The communication theme highlights clauses stating the importance of keeping parents, schools, and communities informed and engaged in matters related to student attendance. In some Education Acts, schools were required to inform parents about their child's attendance. They all used very similar language, commonly stating that a parent of a student attending a school is entitled to be informed of the student's attendance, behaviour, and progress in school. (see British Columbia, 1996; Manitoba, 1987; New Brunswick, 1997; Newfoundland and Labrador, 2020; Northwest Territories, 1995; Quebec, 2024; Saskatchewan, 1995; Yukon, 2002) In some jurisdictions (e.g., Quebec, 2024; Saskatchewan, 1995), parents were also expected to notify the school if their child could not attend. For example, the Quebec Education Act stated that parents must provide the school with any information it required on their child's situation within a reasonable time (Quebec, 2024). Other clauses related to the theme of communication were also coded across different jurisdictions. For example, in Ontario, principals were required to report students with attendance issues to attendance counselors, but the act did not specify any requirement for direct communication with parents (See Table 9). They stated, "… the principal of every elementary and secondary school shall, report to the appropriate school attendance counsellor and supervisory officer the names, ages and residences of all pupils of compulsory school age who have not attended school as required" (Ontario, 1990, p. 49).

Nunavut’s Education Act also included a unique provision that district education authorities regularly communicated school attendance information directly to the community. Specifically, Section 2 mandated that the district education authority “shall, regularly and in accordance with the regulations, provide the community with information on attendance at schools in the community.” (Nunavut, 2008, p. 23). This emphasis on community reporting distinguished Nunavut from other provinces and territories, highlighting its commitment to transparency and community engagement in addressing school attendance.

Quebec and Saskatchewan Education Acts, as well as Yukon and Nova Scotia's attendance policies, all included clauses related to both parent and school communication surrounding attendance (see Government of Yukon, 2022; Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2023; Quebec, 2024; Saskatchewan, 1995). This highlighted the importance of two-way communication between home and school. In these documents, parents were responsible for reporting their child's absences, and schools were expected to contact parents if attendance concerns arose, emphasizing a more collaborative approach that involved both teachers and parents in managing attendance concerns.

Responses to Absences

Most provinces outlined a response to address attendance concerns when they arose (see Alberta, 2012; British Columbia, 1996; Manitoba, 1987; New Brunswick, 1997; Newfoundland and Labrador, 2020; Northwest Territories, 1995; Nova Scotia, 2018; Nunavut, 2008; Ontario, 1990; Prince Edward Island, 2022; Quebec, 2024; Saskatchewan, 1995; Yukon, 2002; see Table 10). Subcodes within this theme included collaboration, parental involvement, legal approaches, penalties and the number of absences needed to trigger a given response.

The first subcode that emerged was collaboration, with some Education Acts emphasizing a joint response that considers the student's circumstances and involves problem-solving with both families, school teams and support services (see Alberta, 2012; Quebec, 2024). For example, Quebec's Education Act stated:

> Where a student is repeatedly absent without a valid excuse, the principal or the person designated by him shall intervene with the student and his parents to come to an agreement with them and with the persons providing the school social services with respect to the most appropriate measures to remedy the situation. (Quebec Education Act, 1995 p. 6)

Alberta's Education Act also emphasized collaboration, but only after a referral to an attendance board. Their Education Act stated:

> Where a matter is referred to the Attendance Board by a board or the person responsible for the operation of a private school, the Attendance Board may attempt to mediate the matter by means of a case conference with the student, the student's parent and school staff. (Alberta, 2012, p. 57)

When examining the two provincial- and territorial-level attendance policies, both Nova Scotia and Yukon emphasized the importance of collaboration in supporting student attendance. Nova Scotia highlighted the role of community partners working together with students, families, schools, and Regional Centres for Education to provide the necessary support to help students experiencing attendance issues (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2023). Similarly, Yukon stressed that successful attendance policies depended on the entire school community working collectively to promote student attendance and success (Government of Yukon, 2022). Together, these policies reflected a shared collaboration between

home and school in response to addressing attendance challenges. Collaboration was emphasized at a high level without operationalization.

Parental involvement emerged as a key sub-theme in several Education Acts, highlighting the role parents played in responding to student absences (see Alberta, 2012; New Brunswick, 1997; Nova Scotia, 2018; Saskatchewan, 1995; Yukon, 2002). Parents were often required to take prompt action once they were notified about attendance concerns. For example, New Brunswick's Act placed an immediate and clear duty on parents, stating that "the parent of the child shall immediately cause the child to attend school" (New Brunswick, 1997, p. 21). Similarly, Nova Scotia's legislation mandated that if a child is not attending school, "a parent or person in charge of a child not attending school shall, within five days after having been served with a notice by the education entity naming the child, cause the child to attend school and continue in regular attendance" (Nova Scotia, 2018, p. 18).

Saskatchewan's Education Act was the only one that clearly stated the number of absences that would trigger a formal response to address student absenteeism. Their Act explained that if a student is absent for more than four days in a month without justification, the principal must report the case to the local attendance counsellor. Saskatchewan was also unique in permitting suspension for irregular attendance: principals may suspend a student for up to 10 days if they determined that the student had been irregular in their attendance (Saskatchewan, 1995).

When examining policy documents, both Yukon and Nova Scotia also stated the number of absences that triggered a formal response to address student absences. In Yukon, if a student had one unexcused absence, the school administrator or teacher would notify the parents and seek support from them to resolve the issue. After five unexcused absences, the administrator

would have a conversation with the student and inform the parents. If the student reaches 20 unexcused absences, a meeting will be held with school staff and parents to discuss possible solutions, such as access to in-school resources or alternative programs (Government of Yukon, 2022). In Nova Scotia, a response is implemented when absenteeism or chronic lateness exceeds 10-15% of class time. If more than 15% of class time is missed, targeted intervention will be provided. However, the policy did not provide specific guidelines on the type of targeted interventions that should be implemented. If a student misses 20% of class time in high school, the teacher can recommend loss of credit, with the final decision made by the principal in consultation with other school staff (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2023).

Conclusion

In addition to the seven main themes identified, various other concepts emerged that were important to note across documents. Employment was a consistent focus across Education Acts, with some provinces explicitly stating that student employment was prohibited during school hours (see Manitoba, 1987; New Brunswick, 1997; Nova Scotia, 2018; Nunavut, 2008; Ontario, 1990; Saskatchewan, 1995). Provinces that prohibited the employment of school-aged children during school hours also imposed penalties, including monetary fines, for violations. Each province that referenced employment also offered exceptions to this rule, such as participation in apprenticeship programs. Some impose age restrictions on student employment. For example, in Saskatchewan's Education Act, children under the age of 14 years could not be employed; however, children who have completed Grade 5 could be excused from school for up to 30 teaching days to assist with tasks such as farming or urgent household duties (Saskatchewan, 1995).

Nunavut's Education Act was unique, as it included cultural values to reflect and respect the traditions and beliefs of its communities. When examining attendance, district education authorities and education staff were required to implement registration and attendance policies in accordance with Inuit societal values and the principles of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, particularly emphasizing the concepts of Tunnganarniq (i.e., fostering a good spirit by being open, welcoming, and inclusive) and Pijitsirniq (i.e., the importance of serving and providing for the family or community; see Nunavut, 2008).

Nova Scotia's provincial attendance policy encouraged an individualized response to absenteeism based on a student's age, grade, developmental stage, and personal circumstances. The policy noted that "…responses to student absenteeism and chronic lateness will vary based on the age, grade and development of the student, the professional judgment of teachers and principals and the individual circumstances of the student" (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2023, p. 2). Despite this emphasis, the policy did not provide or refer to clear guidelines stipulating how schools should operationalize this individualized approach.

Lastly, across Canada, the term "chronic absenteeism" was notably absent from Education Acts, although it appeared in both of the provincial- and territorial-level policy documents. These documents acknowledged the importance of addressing chronic absenteeism but did not provide a clear, standardized definition. For example, Yukon's policy valued collaboration among parents, schools, and community social agencies to address chronic absenteeism (Government of Yukon, 2022), whereas Nova Scotia assigned responsibility to teachers to monitor attendance and to identify potential issues related to chronic lateness or absenteeism (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2023).

Discussion

This study assessed the consistency of Education Acts across Canada and their alignment with evidence-based practices. It also included a secondary examination of formal attendance policies in Nova Scotia and Yukon. A qualitative descriptive inductive coding process was conducted, prioritizing a low-inference approach by remaining close to the original language of the data (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010; Turale, 2020). This method allowed for the identification of key themes without imposing *a priori* theoretical frameworks and yielded a comprehensive understanding of how student attendance is addressed within each provincial/territorial Education Act.

Inconsistency throughout Canadian Education Acts

The results of this study contribute to a broader understanding of the myth of consistency in Canadian public education (Boudreault et al., 2013; Waddington, 2018). Despite assumptions of uniformity throughout Canadian Education Acts, and while all provinces shared the common goal of encouraging regular school attendance, significant differences existed in how they defined, documented, and responded to student absences. For example, the age at which students were expected to attend school was inconsistent across Canada, ranging from 5-6 years for entry to 16, 17, or 18 years for completion. Some Education Acts further complicated matters by requiring attendance until either age sixteen or diploma completion. There was also considerable variability in how Education Acts responded to student absences. Some jurisdictions responded by using attendance officers or boards, while others adopted a more legal approach. Meanwhile, most Education Acts provided minimal guidance on how teachers and administrators should address student absences. These examples were among several inconsistencies found across

documents, which also revealed significant variability in word count, as well as the number and frequency of themes across Education Acts (See Figures 1-14).

The inconsistency present across Education Acts may be creating a pan-Canadian implementation gap, causing attendance directives set out in these Acts to be ineffectively applied in schools. As Hudson et al. (2019) note, a lack of national policy often leaves the responsibility for creating and implementing directives outlined in documents such as Education Acts, to subnational governments, such as individual provinces and territories or smaller regional centres of education. This fragmented approach to policy development often leads to significant variations in how concepts are addressed and implemented on a systems level. Consequently, in Canada, the absence of a national attendance policy, paired with individually developed Education Acts, may be hindering effective, widespread implementation of attendance directives. This inconsistency is likely resulting in a complex, disjointed system and a fragmented national approach to student attendance (Hudson et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the lack of consistency across Canadian Education Acts regarding student attendance is concerning because it may be contributing to teachers' diminished belief in the legitimacy and meaningfulness of these Acts. For example, a study conducted by van Engen et al. (2019) investigated how policy-consistency affects teachers' perceptions of policy meaningfulness and legitimacy. Their results demonstrated that teachers perceived consistent policies to be more meaningful and legitimate. Conversely, inconsistent policies hindered teachers' ability to understand and identify with such policies, leading to a reduction in overall perceived policy effectiveness. In Canada, where education acts vary based on jurisdiction, teachers are often faced with different approaches to attendance depending on their location. This inconsistency might negatively affect teachers' sense of purpose and belief in the legitimacy of

educational policies and legislation, such as education acts. This is particularly problematic given that teachers are on the frontlines of education and are expected to abide by these documents. If they perceive these acts to lack legitimacy, their motivation to implement such directives at a school level may significantly decrease.

A possible solution for enhancing policy consistency begins with effectively bridging the gap between research and policymaking. Research conducted by Alazmi and Alazmi (2023) highlighted the importance of conducting high-quality education research to inform education policy. Authors note that by using methods such as effective communication and shared goals between researchers and policymakers, as well as collaboration, particularly via Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs) (e.g., intentional collaborative relationships designed to address real-world problems), stakeholders can better integrate research into policy development. In the context of education acts, using these strategies could help improve consistency. Such consistency could include policy that uniformly defines excused vs. unexcused absences, outlining a uniform system for recording and monitoring attendance, and establishing clear, targeted interventions and supports for students struggling with absenteeism, applied equitably across the country.

Vague Definitions and Their Effect on Attendance Data

Results indicated that across Education Acts, key terms pertaining to attendance were often vaguely defined or simply absent, and concepts were frequently non-operationalized. To start, no Education Act explicitly defined attendance or absence. Although both attendance policies provided a definition of absence, they differed significantly. One policy adopted a narrow view focused solely on physical presence, whereas the other adopted a broader perspective that included participation in school-related activities. Building on this, in the few

provinces and territories that referenced practices of documenting and tracking attendance, it remained unclear precisely what was being recorded or who was allowed to access recorded data due to the absence of clear guiding definitions. As well, in some Education Acts, teachers were cited as responsible for collecting daily attendance according to school or district procedures. However, to the best of our knowledge, these procedures are not publicly available, which makes it difficult to ascertain their clarity or consistency.

The recognized importance of attendance data for understanding patterns of absenteeism and guiding student support is well-established in the literature (Chu et al., 2019; Keppens et al., 2019; Keppens & Bach, 2021; Moodley et al., 2020). These data enable schools and policymakers to identify at-risk students, analyze patterns of absenteeism, provide resources where needed, and inform targeted interventions (Birioukov, 2016; Chu et al., 2019; Keppens et al., 2019; Keppens & Bach, 2021; Moodley et al., 2020). Despite the recognized importance of accurate attendance data, our findings show that provincial and territorial Education Acts generally provide minimal detail on their collection, maintenance or use. This aligns with previous research, highlighting a key challenge: the lack of standardized definitions and consistent documentation practices for tracking attendance, which limits its effectiveness (Birioukov, 2016; Keppens & Bach Johnsen, 2021; Keppens et al., 2019; Landell, 2021).

The fundamental lack of clear, consistent definitions for attendance and absence at the legislative level, coupled with the absence of standardized methods for collecting meaningful and comparable attendance data, severely affects our nation's ability to understand national attendance trends. Without reliable data, school systems operate with limited insight, making it almost impossible to effectively respond to student attendance issues (Birioukov, 2016; Keppens & Bach Johnsen, 2021; Keppens et al., 2019; Landell, 2021). This lack of guidance regarding

tracking and monitoring at the highest legislative levels means that education systems may struggle to promote equitable access to learning and create supportive environments that encourage regular school attendance across the country.

Poorly Operationalized Responsibilities and Lack of Collaboration

Additionally, concepts were rarely operationalized across the Education Acts. For instance, although strong accountability for student attendance was frequently placed on parents, Acts often failed to explicitly explain how these various stakeholders should collaborate to proactively support student attendance. Similar to literacy instruction, where evidence indicates that explicit instruction in reading is necessary for students to become proficient, this same logic suggests that explicit instruction to parents and staff on how to promote attendance will most likely lead to improvements. Without such clear guidance, stakeholders might resort to unproductive or even harmful methods. For example, parents who coerce a child into attending school for a single day might cause attendance that day, but this approach could also exacerbate the underlying problems that lead to school refusal and, in the longer-term, increase the risk of chronic absenteeism and other significant long-term challenges for the child.

Adding to the lack of guidance and clarity on how to proactively promote student attendance, Education Acts made almost no reference to collaboration as a means of support. This stands in contrast to existing research which highlights the important role of shared collaboration among students, schools, and various community organizations in significantly improving student attendance. For example, Childs and Grooms (2018) emphasized the importance of family and community involvement programs, with school action teams proactively supporting attendance. Similarly, Sheldon (2007) underscored the vital role of school teams in engaging parents to achieve attendance improvement.

Furthermore, Education Acts provided sparse and disjointed guidance on collaboration when responding to attendance challenges. This led to considerable variation and vague provincial and territorial approaches to non-attenders. However, literature demonstrates that a Transformative School-Community Collaboration (TSCC) framework can effectively reduce school absenteeism (Kim & Gentle-Genitty, 2020; Kim, 2017). This framework targets attendance issues by emphasizing bringing together various stakeholders and resources within the school and community to resolve these issues. Kim and Gentle-Genitty (2020) showed, consistent with previous research, that a TSCC approach, or the involvement of school–community collaboration, helps resolve school absenteeism issues. This framework is consistent with Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Neal, & Neal, 2013) in that collaboration between schools, families, and communities benefits students experiencing attendance issues. However, most provinces adopt a more legal and punitive approach (e.g., using attendance boards, hearings, fines, or even referrals to law enforcement) in response to attendance challenges, even though evidence from Kearney and colleagues (2008, 2014, 2019) does not support such measures as a means of addressing the root causes of absenteeism.

Instead, Kearney's research focuses on the behavioural mechanisms underpinning absenteeism, such as avoidance of school-related stimuli that precipitate negative affect or uncomfortable social/evaluative situations. Using a functional approach, Kearney emphasizes the underlying reasons students struggle to attend school and suggests that student absenteeism serves specific purposes such as avoidance (e.g., escaping negative school-related or social/evaluative situations), seeking attention (e.g., receiving increased attention from a parent), and the pursuit of outside reinforcement (e.g., part-time work, family obligations, social events). To resolve school attendance problems, Kearney advocates for practical and tiered interventions

that recognize the behaviour's purpose, including offering mental health supports, and forming partnerships between home and school.

Unfortunately, these evidence-based models are not reflected in current Education Acts or attendance policies. This disconnect between research and legislation limits schools' ability to implement effective and responsive interventions for students struggling with attendance. Adding to this, the fact that education legislation is primarily a legal document written by and for law enforcement presents an inherent contradiction with best available evidence on how to treat absenteeism and improve attendance. Legal documents that define the basic structures of our government systems are necessary, but they do not need to be predominantly punitive when mandating responses to student attendance. Education Acts can also stipulate enforceable clear operational definitions and use language that requires use of actions based on best available local and empirical evidence.

Provincial and territorial Public Health Acts offer a compelling model for how legislation can bridge this gap in other sectors, such as education, by explicitly incorporating the role of research and the use of provincial information systems for population data (e.g., Alberta Health Act, 2010; Nova Scotia Legislature, 2004; Manitoba, 2023; Prince Edward Island, 1988). For example, in Prince Edward Island a subsection on the requirement of a Provincial Information System outlines a "a provincial information system for the ongoing and systematic collection, analysis, interpretation, publication and distribution of information necessary to: "…facilitate public health research and planning." (Prince Edward Island, 1988, p. 33). This statement is parallel to clauses in Manitoba's Health Act (Manitoba, 2023). Although a national review of Health Acts was not conducted, a quick review indicated clauses about quality data and applied research in consistent ways across regions that was absent from Education Acts.

This is a feasible and appropriate goal for Canadian Provincial and Territorial Education Acts. Applying such an approach has the potential to enhance their effectiveness in addressing student absenteeism. The currently fragmented and often punitive nature of attendance directives may impair systemic improvement. Given the well-established links between school attendance and long-term health, social, and economic outcomes (Allison et al., 2019; Centre of Disease, 2023; Gottfried, 2010; Havik et al., 2015; Keppens et al., 2019), it is illogical for education policy to lag behind public health in its use of data and evidence. By incorporating the data-driven and research-informed principles found in public health legislation, Education Acts could shift from enforcement tools to frameworks for continuous improvement. In turn, this approach would not only provide educators with more robust policies, but it would also allow them to shift from reactive to proactive, prevention-focused strategies that support student success and school engagement.

Implications for School Psychologists

Despite being uniquely positioned to address student absenteeism, school psychologists are rarely asked to consult on matters of student attendance. Even with their expertise in behavioural principles, mental health, and multi-tiered systems of support, all important aspects of effective attendance interventions (Kearney, 2008; Kearney et al., 2019; Kearney et al., 2022), school psychologists are often not consulted when it comes to supporting student attendance. Adding to this, when they are involved, due to inconsistencies, lack of data, and vague- or non-operationalized terms and concepts between and within Education Acts and polices, they frequently work with incomplete or inconsistent information. This limits their ability to detect absenteeism patterns, understand underlying causes, evaluate interventions, and provide support to schools and communities (Birioukov, 2016; Kearney, 2014; Keppens & Bach, 2021).

Advocating for the use of school psychologists to help support student attendance, increasing their consultation opportunities regarding absenteeism, and incorporating consistent attendance definitions, standardized data tracking, and evidence-based psychological frameworks such as Kearney's into education legislation might help strengthen the role of school psychologists and improve attendance outcomes nationwide. To test this hypothesis, access to quality education data is necessary.

Limitations and Future Directions

The inherent nature of legal documents, such as Education Acts, makes their analysis uniquely challenging for descriptive research. First, the complexity and specialized language of Education Acts often require specific legal expertise for accurate interpretation, as these documents are created within a legal context and are primarily designed for regulatory and statutory purposes rather than for comprehensive descriptive or research analysis (Cardno, 2018).

Another limitation of this study was not exploring antecedent or subsidiary attendance policies. Although Education Acts provide the highest guiding framework, their comprehensive scope often means that the practical application and implementation of student attendance procedures are more frequently delegated to lower-level policies. Document searches revealed that specific attendance policies also exist at the municipal and school board levels, with these bodies often developing their own procedures, which could have provided greater depth to the analysis. Though outside the scope of this study, future research can endeavour to collect and analyze the plethora of policies and guidelines within each province and territory; some of which might not be publicly accessible.

As well, a purely descriptive qualitative analysis of Education Acts does not capture the actual implementation of Education Acts from a 'bottom-up' perspective (e.g., how districts interpret directives, how teachers practically manage attendance, or responses to student

absences). Furthermore, this study did not account for the perspectives, lived experiences, or interpretations of key stakeholders (e.g., school administrators, teachers, parents, or students), whose understanding and application of the policies might differ significantly from the written word of the Education Acts.

To address these limitations and offer a more comprehensive understanding of how Education Acts are perceived and applied beyond their legislative text, future research could incorporate methods that capture the practical implementation of policies and Education Acts. This could include moving beyond textual analysis to empirical studies examining how Education Acts related to attendance are implemented in different provinces, territories, districts, and schools, as well as the experiences and interpretations of key stakeholders. Beyond the current scope, future research into student attendance and Education Acts would also benefit from an interdisciplinary approach, including collaborating with legal scholars or lawyers. Doing so could help bridge the gap between policy and practice, allowing for deeper analyses of the legal enforceability and interpretation of Education Acts. This approach would also create the possibility of collaborating and effectively integrating evidence-based strategies to improve student attendance in policy and guiding documents.

In conclusion, to improve attendance outcomes and equity, provincial Education Acts should be aligned to: (1) promote overall greater consistency across Canada within Education Acts; (2) establish standardized definitions, attendance tracking and documentation procedures; (3) emphasize how to implement collaboration of all stakeholders including parents, students, school staff, and attendance officers to support student attendance; and (4) and incorporate the expectations of schools to use and evaluate practices based on best-available evidence. Such an alignment could improve our understanding of attendance patterns and establish clearer

standards for responding to attendance concerns and supporting students in K-12 public schools across Canada.

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Table 1

Education Acts Used in Analysis (Part 1)

Province/Territory	Citation
Alberta	Alberta. (2012). Education Act, SA 2012, c. E-2.1. https://www.albertaschoolcouncils.ca/public/download/files/98229
British Columbia	British Columbia. (1996). School Act, RSBC 1996, c. 412. https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/96412_00
Manitoba	Manitoba. (1987). The Public Schools Act, C.C.S.M. c. P250. (Archived to 2019). https://web2.gov.mb.ca/laws/statutes/archive/pdf/_pdf-arch.php?cap=p250&dt=2019-02-28
New Brunswick	New Brunswick. (1997). Education Act, S.N.B. 1997, c. E-1.12. https://laws.gnb.ca/en/document/cs/E-1.12
Newfoundland and Labrador	Newfoundland and Labrador. (2020). Education Act, SNL 2020, c. E-2.1. https://www.assembly.nl.ca/legislation/sr/statutes/s12-2.htm
Northwest Territories	Northwest Territories. (1995). Education Act, S.N.W.T. 1995, c. 28. https://www.justice.gov.nt.ca/en/files/legislation/education/education.a.pdf
Nova Scotia	Nova Scotia. (2018). Education Act, SNS 2018, c. 1. https://nslegislature.ca/sites/default/files/legc/statutes/education.pdf
Nunavut	Nunavut. (2008). Education Act, S.Nu. 2008, c. 15. https://www.nunavutlegislation.ca/en/consolidated-law/education-act-official-consolidation
Ontario	Ontario. (1990). Education Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2. https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/90e02
Prince Edward Island	Prince Edward Island. (2022). Education Act, SPEI 2022, c. E-0.2. https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/sites/default/files/legislation/e-.02-education_act.pdf
Quebec	Quebec. (2024). Education Act, CQLR c. I-13.3. https://www.legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/document/cs/I-13.3%20/
Saskatchewan	Saskatchewan. (1995). The Education Act, 1995, SS 1995, c. E-0.2. https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/canada/employment-

	social-development/migration/documents/documents/English/Statutes/Statutes/E0-2.pdf
Yukon	Yukon. (2002). Education Act, R.S.Y. 2002, c. 61. https://laws.yukon.ca/cms/images/LEGISLATION/PRINCIPAL/2002/2002-0061/2002-0061.pdf

Table 2

Education Policies Used in Analysis

Province/Territory	Citation
Nova Scotia	Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2023, August). Provincial student attendance and engagement policy. https://www.ednet.ns.ca/docs/provincialstudentattendanceengagementpolicy.pdf
Yukon	Government of Yukon. (2022, December 20). Student attendance policy. https://yukon.ca/sites/default/files/edu/edu-student-attendance-policy_0.pdf

Table 3

Definition Theme and Subcodes in Canadian Education Acts and Policies

Province/Territory	Attendance	Age	Absence
British Columbia	X	X	
Alberta	X	X	
Saskatchewan	X	X	
Manitoba	X	X	
Ontario	X	X	
Quebec	X	X	
Nova Scotia	X	X	1
New Brunswick	X	X	
Prince Edward Island	X	X	
Newfoundland & Labrador	X	X	
Northwest Territories	X	X	
Nunavut	X	X	
Yukon	X	X	1

Note. "X" indicates reference in the Education Act; "1" indicates reference in Policy documents. "Attendance" and "Age" refer to compulsory school attendance and compulsory school age, respectively. "Absence" refers to how student absence is defined, categorized, or addressed in legislation or policy.

Table 4

Inclusion/Exclusion Theme and Subcodes in Canadian Education Acts and Policies (Part 1)

Province/Territory	Medical	Alternative Ed	Religion	Suspension/ Expulsions	Activities
British Columbia					
Alberta	X	X	X	X	X
Saskatchewan	X	X	X	X	
Manitoba	X	X	X	X	X
Ontario	X	X	X	X	
Quebec	X	X		X	
Nova Scotia		X			
New Brunswick	X		X	X	
Prince Edward Island	X	X	X		
Newfoundland & Labrador	X	X		X	
Northwest Territories	X	X	X	X	X
Nunavut	X	X	X	X	X
Yukon	X	X	X	X	X

Note. "X" indicates reference in the Education Act; "Activities" refers to school/cultural activities.

Table 5

Inclusion/Exclusion Theme and Subcodes in Canadian Education Acts and Policies (Part 2)

Province/Territory	Transportation Barrier	Board Approval	Graduate Status	Excused Other
British Columbia				
Alberta		X	X	X
Saskatchewan	X	X		X
Manitoba			X	X
Ontario	X		X	X
Quebec				
Nova Scotia		X		X
New Brunswick		X		X
Prince Edward Island		X		
Newfoundland & Labrador		X	X	X
Northwest Territories				
Nunavut		X		X
Yukon		X		X

Note. "X" indicates reference in the Education Act.

Table 6

Governance Theme and Subcodes in Canadian Education Acts and Policies

Province/Territory	Parent	Student	School	Education Authority
British Columbia				
Alberta	X	X		X
Saskatchewan	X	X		X
Manitoba	X		X	
Ontario	X			X
Quebec	X		X	
Nova Scotia	X1	X1	X1	
New Brunswick	X	X	X	X
Prince Edward Island	X	X		X
Newfoundland & Labrador			X	
Northwest Territories	X			
Nunavut	X	X	X	
Yukon	1	1	1	

Note. "X" indicates reference in the Education Act; "1" indicates reference in Policy documents; "X1" indicates reference in both Education Act and Policy documents.

Table 7

Role of Stakeholders Theme and Subcodes in Canadian Education Acts and Policies

Province/Territory	Attendance Officers	Attendance Board	Attendance Committee
British Columbia			
Alberta	X	X	
Saskatchewan	X		
Manitoba	X		
Ontario	X		
Quebec	X		
Nova Scotia			X1
New Brunswick			
Prince Edward Island			
Newfoundland & Labrador			
Northwest Territories			
Nunavut			
Yukon	X		

Note. "X" indicates reference in the Education Act; "X1" indicates reference in both Education Act and Policy documents.

Table 8

Documentation Theme in Canadian Education Acts and Policies

Province/Territory	
British Columbia	
Alberta	
Saskatchewan	
Manitoba	X
Ontario	
Quebec	
Nova Scotia	X1
New Brunswick	
Prince Edward Island	
Newfoundland & Labrador	X
Northwest Territories	
Nunavut	X
Yukon	1

Note. "X" indicates reference in the Education Act; "1" indicates reference in Policy documents; "X1" indicates reference in both Education Act and Policy documents. There were no subcodes identified in this theme.

Table 9

Communication Theme and Subcodes in Canadian Education Acts and Policies

Province/Territory	Parent Notification	School Notification
British Columbia		X
Alberta		
Saskatchewan	X	X
Manitoba		X
Ontario		
Quebec	X	X
Nova Scotia	1	X1
New Brunswick		X
Prince Edward Island		
Newfoundland & Labrador		X
Northwest Territories		X
Nunavut		
Yukon	1	1

Note. "X" indicates reference in the Education Act; "1" indicates reference in Policy documents; "X1" indicates reference in both Education Act and Policy documents.

Table 10

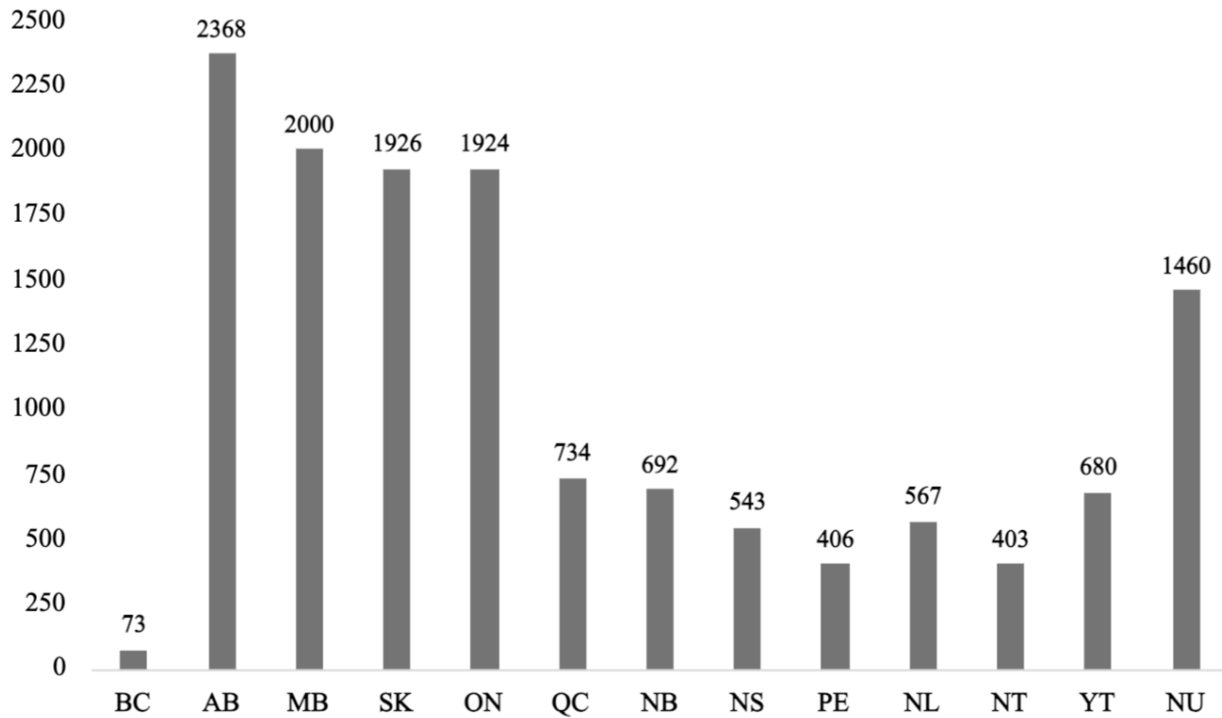
Response to Absences Theme and Subcodes in Canadian Education Acts and Policies

Province/Territory	Collaboration	Parent	Suspension	Legal Approach	Penalties	#
British Columbia						
Alberta	X	X		X	X	
Saskatchewan		X	X	X	X	X
Manitoba				X	X	
Ontario				X	X	
Quebec	X			X		
Nova Scotia	1	X		1		
New Brunswick		X		X		
Prince Edward Island				X		
Newfoundland & Labrador				X		
Northwest Territories				X	X	
Nunavut					X	
Yukon	1	X		X1	X	

Note. "X" indicates reference in the Education Act; "1" indicates reference in Policy documents; "X1" indicates reference in both Education Act and Policy documents. "#" refers to the number of absences needed to trigger a response.

Figure 1

Word Count of Attendance Sections in Canadian Education Acts



Note. BC = British Columbia; AB = Alberta; MB = Manitoba; SK = Saskatchewan; ON = Ontario; QC = Quebec; NB = New Brunswick; NS = Nova Scotia; PE = Prince Edward Island; NL = Newfoundland and Labrador; NT = Northwest Territories; YT = Yukon; NU = Nunavut.

Figure 2

Distribution of Themes Identified in British Columbia's Education Act

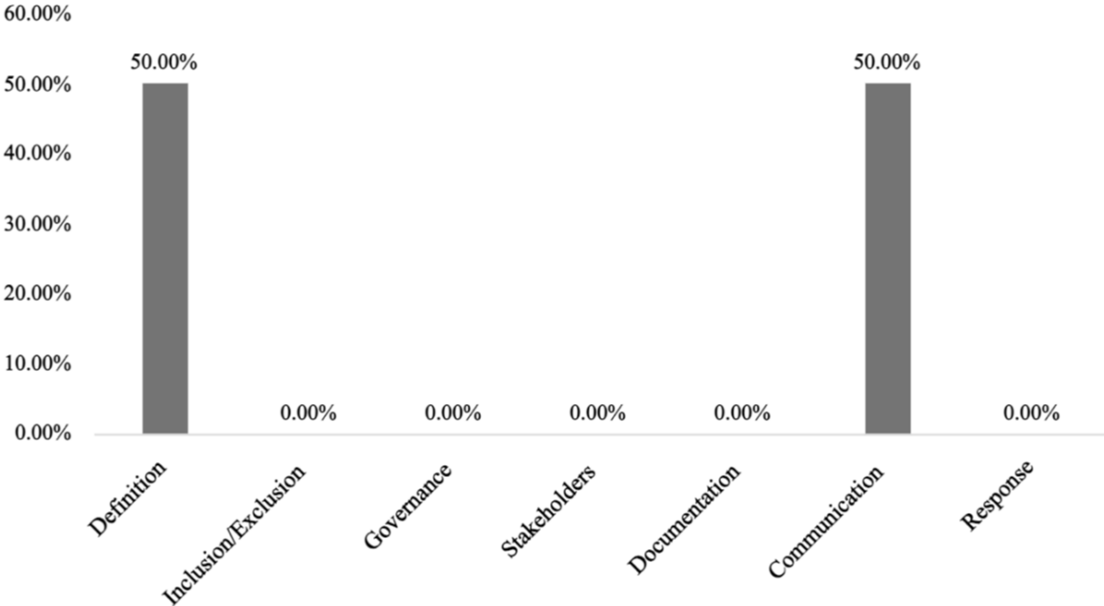


Figure 3

Distribution of Themes Identified in Alberta's Education Act

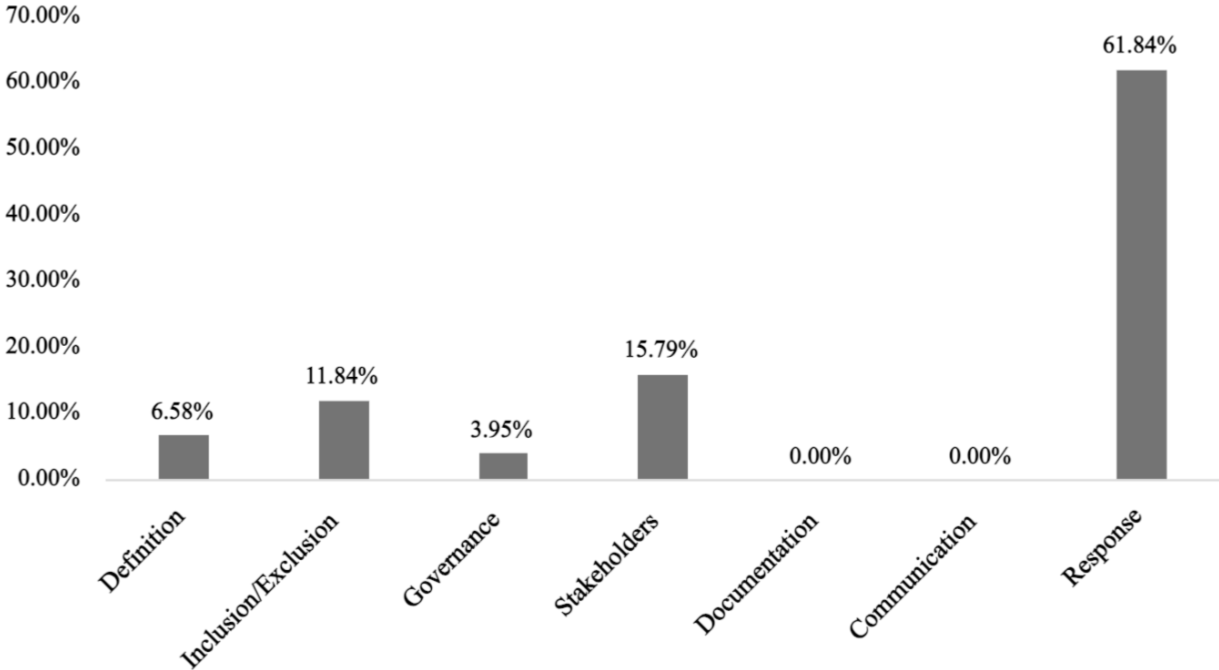


Figure 4

Distribution of Themes Identified in Saskatchewan's Education Act

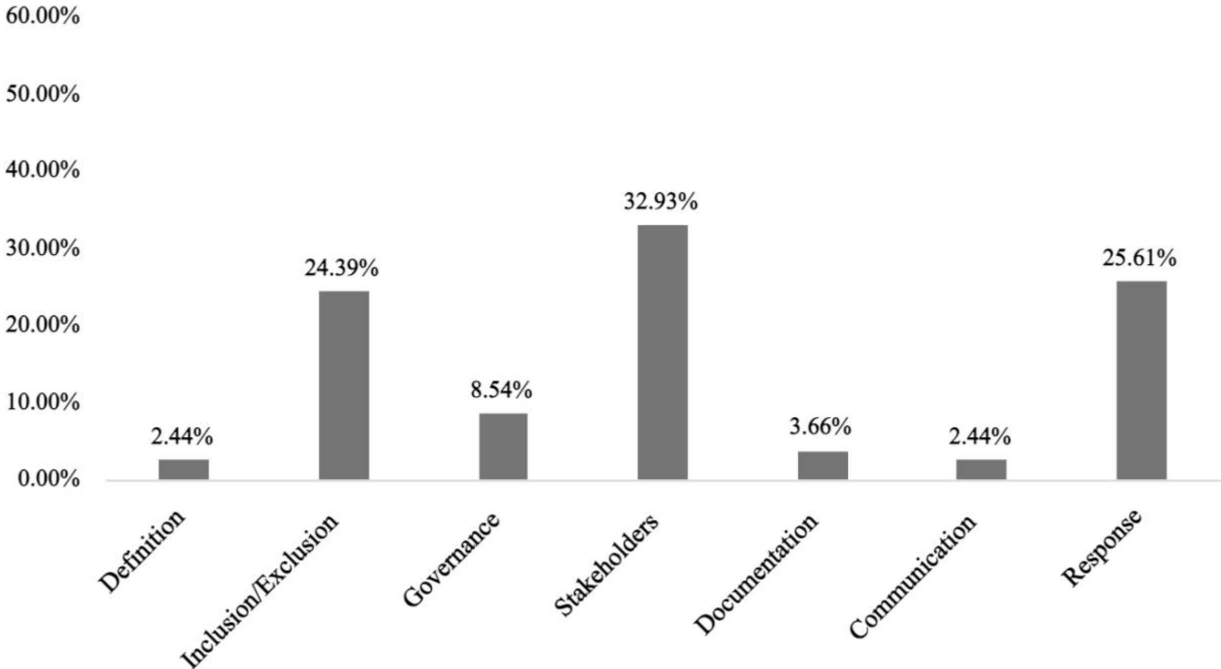


Figure 5

Distribution of Themes Identified in Manitoba's Education Act

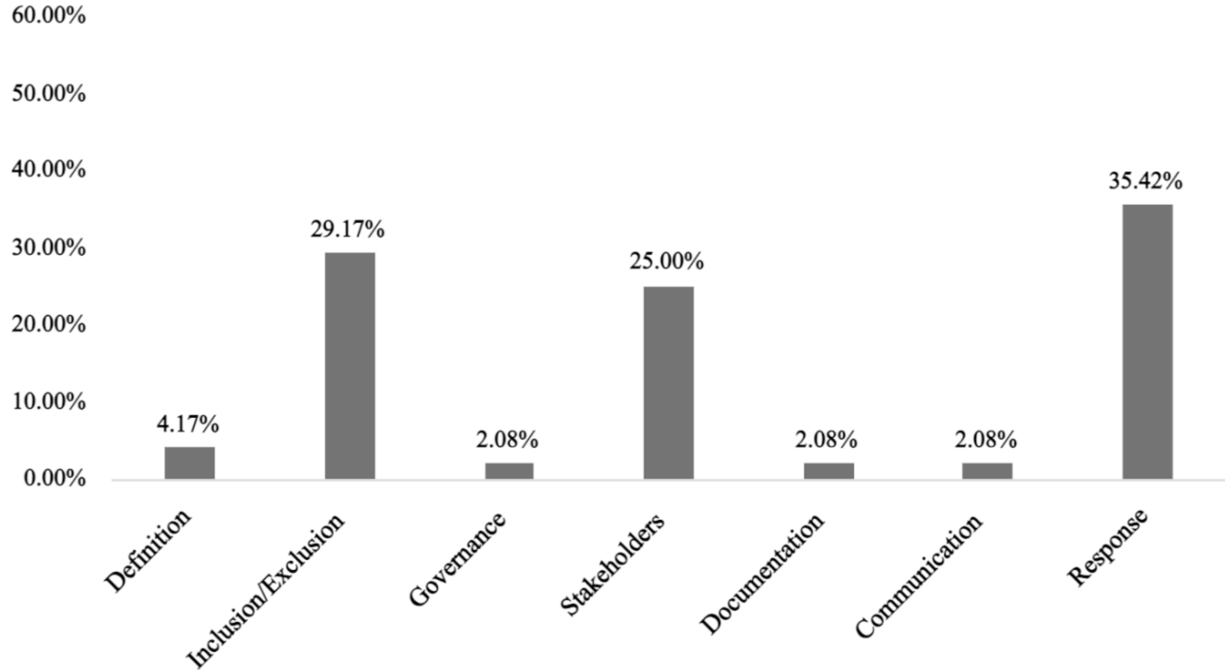


Figure 6

Distribution of Themes Identified in Ontario's Education Act

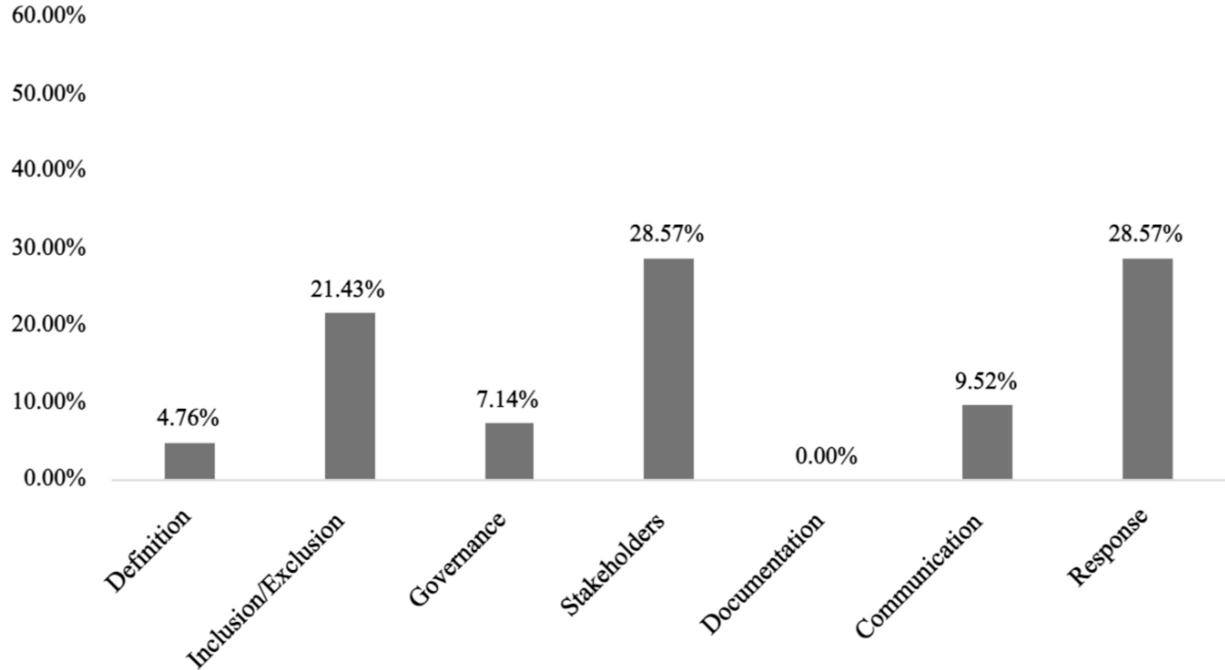


Figure 7

Distribution of Themes Identified in Quebec's Education Act

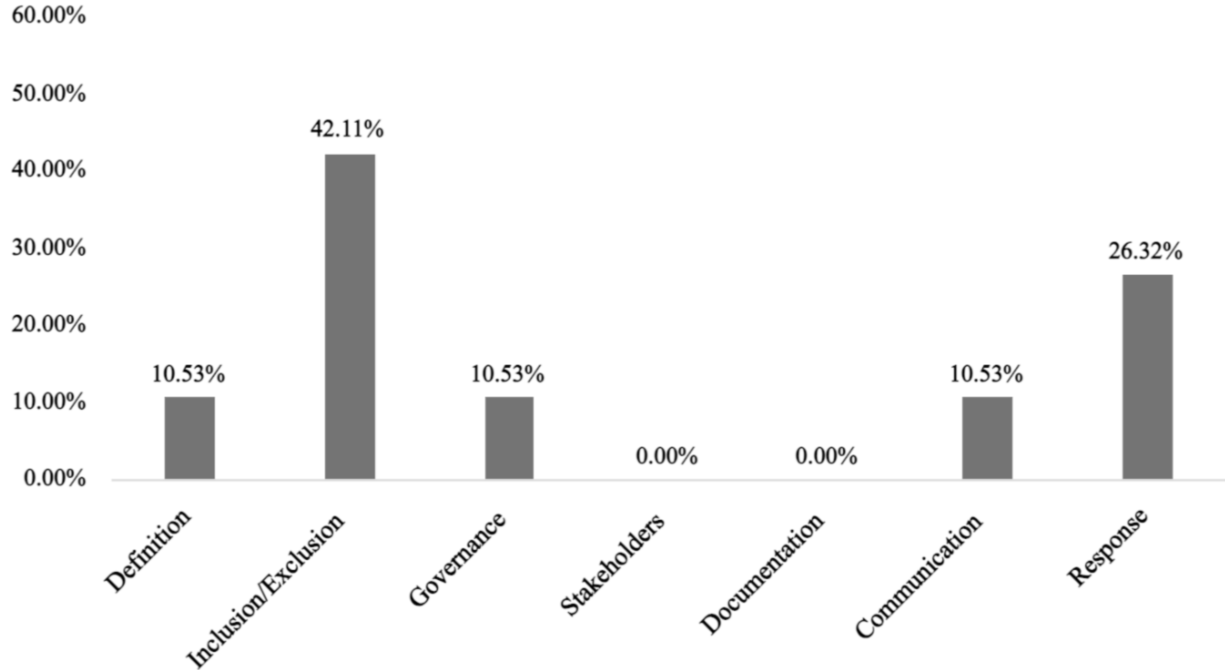


Figure 8

Distribution of Themes Identified in New Brunswick's Education Act

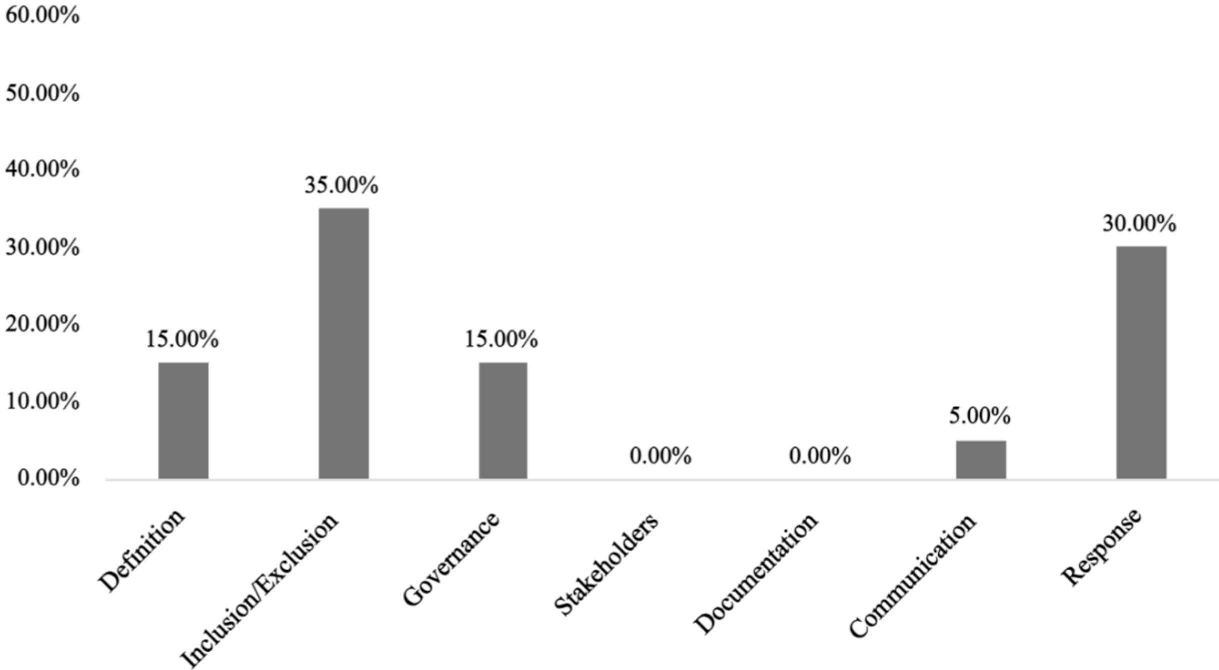


Figure 9

Distribution of Themes Identified in Nova Scotia's Education Act

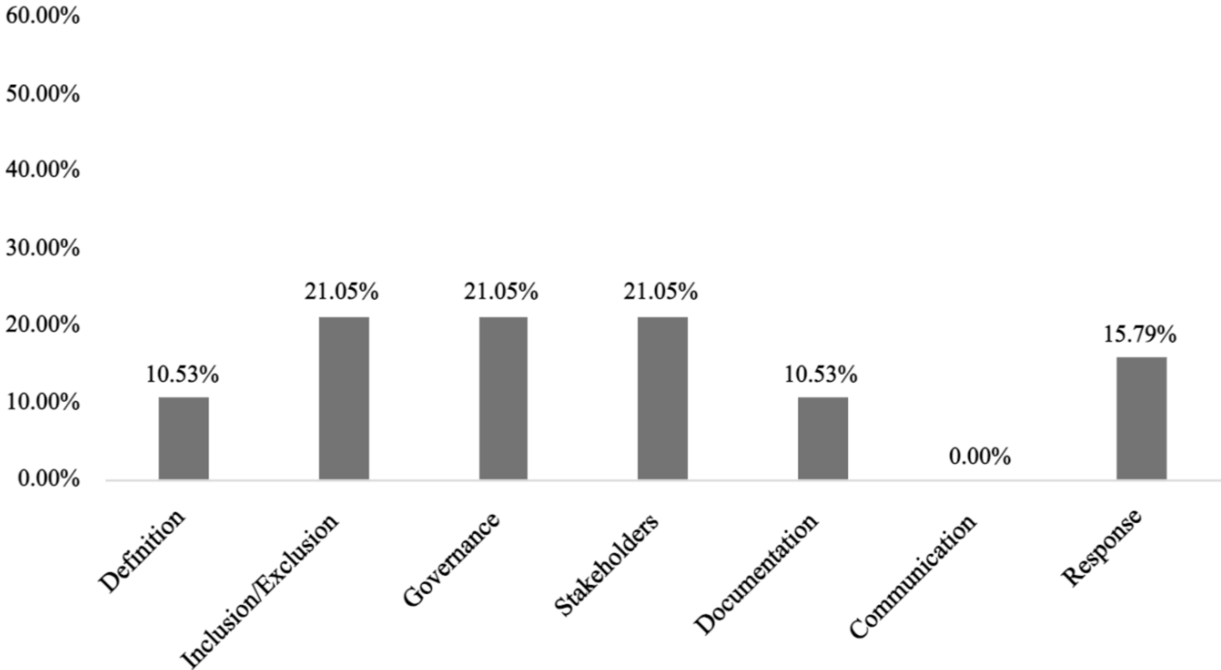


Figure 10

Distribution of Themes Identified in Prince Edward Island's Education Act

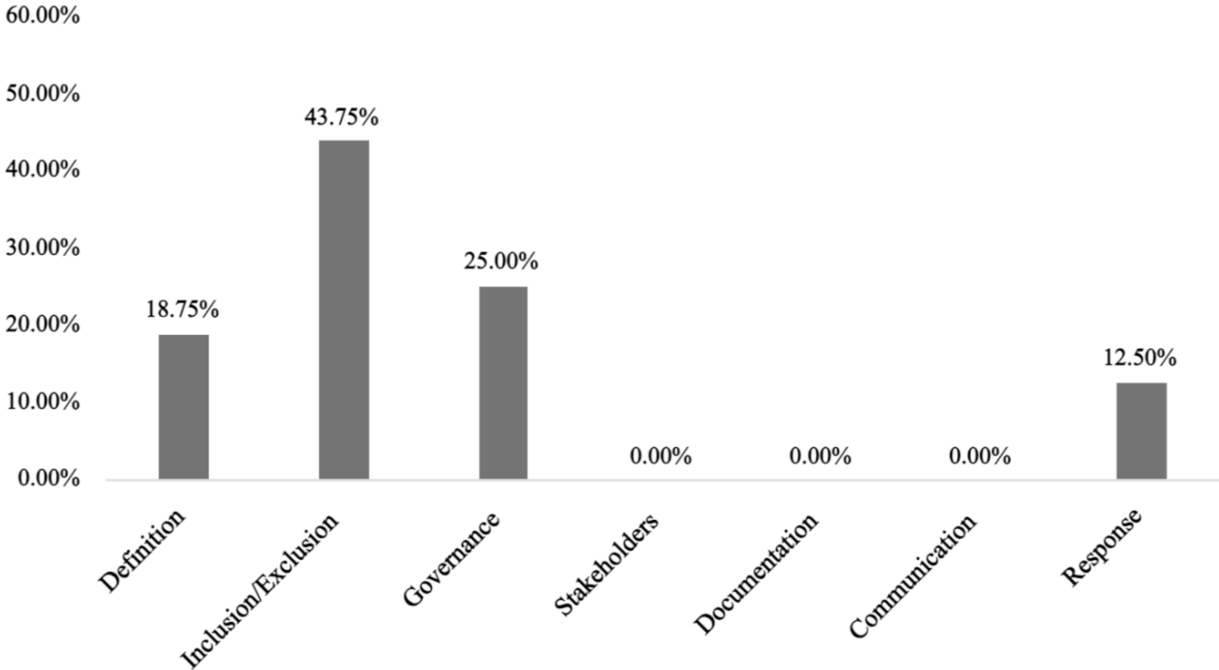


Figure 11

Distribution of Themes Identified in Newfoundland and Labrador's Education Act

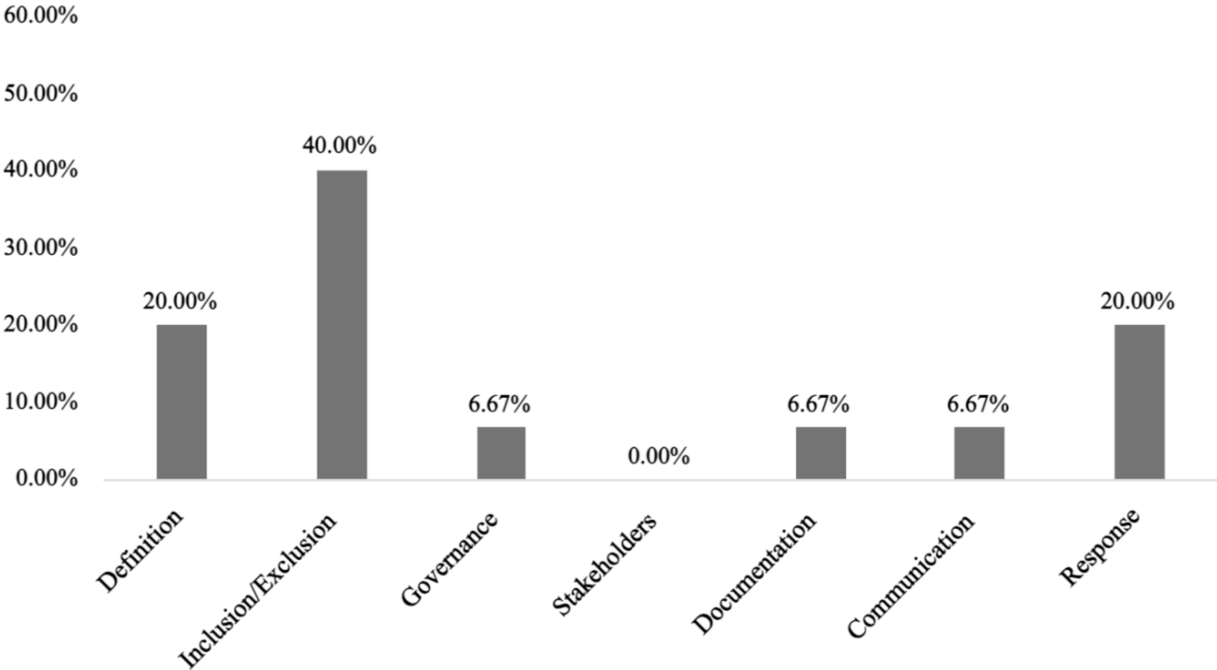


Figure 12

Distribution of Themes Identified in Nunavut's Education Act

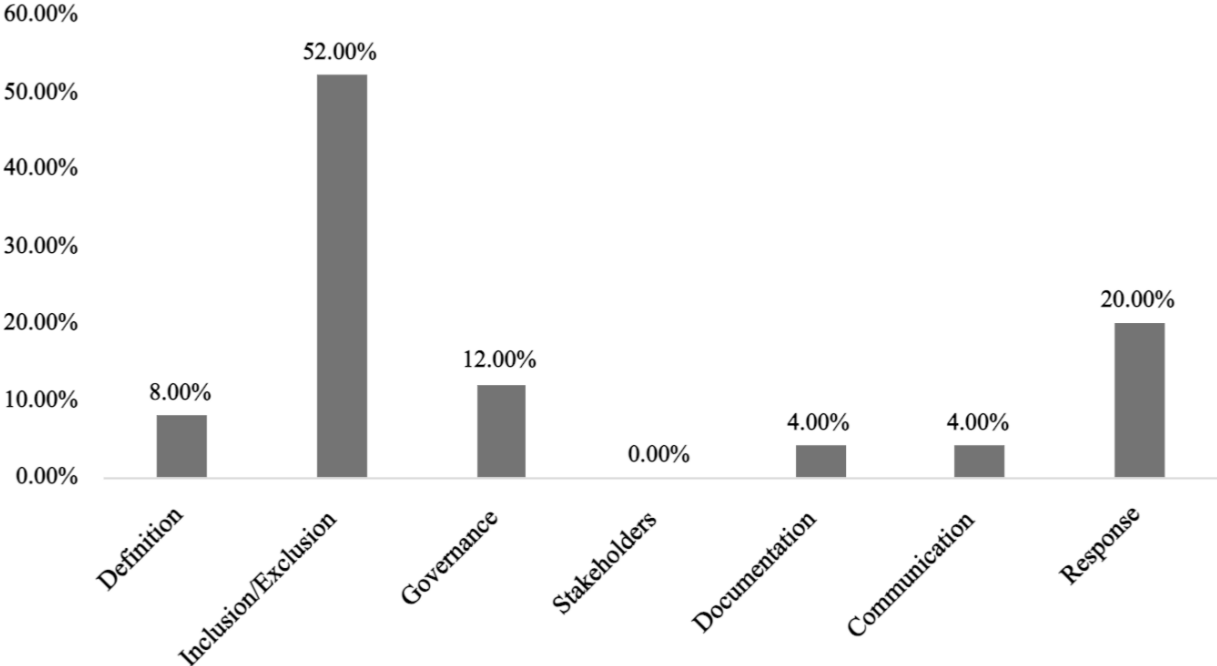


Figure 13

Distribution of Themes Identified in Yukon's Education Act

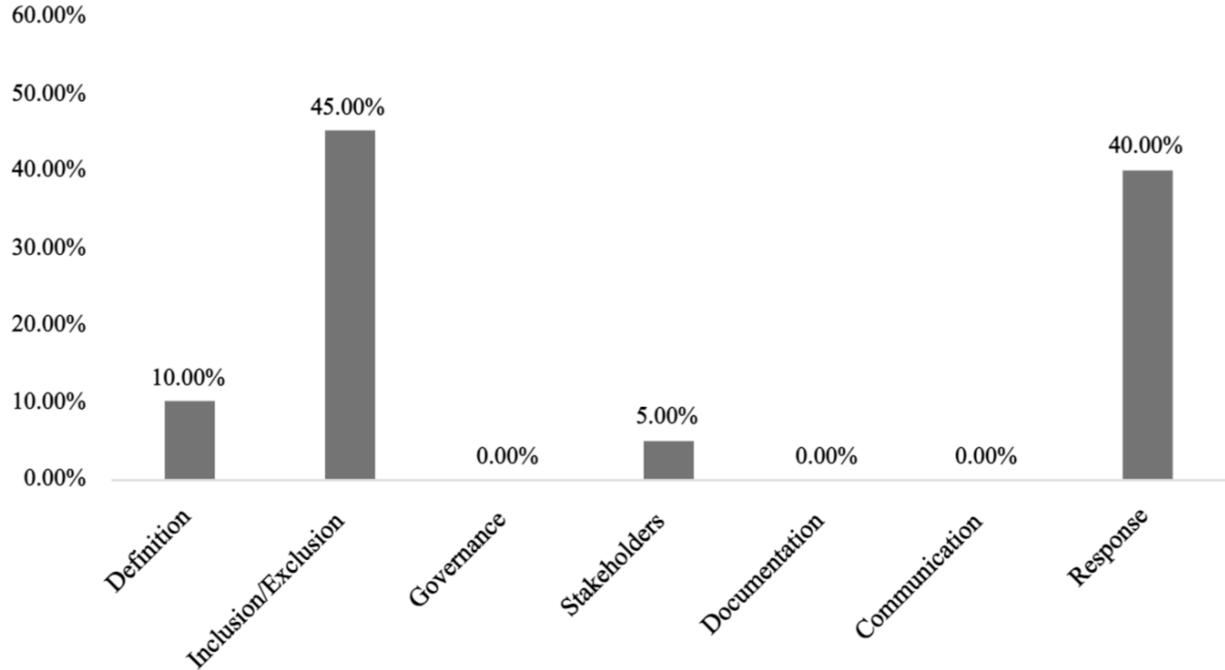


Figure 14

Distribution of Themes Identified in Northwest Territories' Education Act