

IMPROVING ACCESS TO POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION AMONG CARE-EXPERIENCED YOUTH: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF TUITION WAIVER PROGRAMS IN ATLANTIC CANADA

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Abstract

Access to post-secondary education (PSE) can significantly change the life course of care-experienced youth (CEY) in Canada, yet most do not complete high school and few pursue higher education. This article draws on 26 in-depth interviews with CEY ($n = 8$) and staff/supporters ($n = 18$) involved in tuition waiver programs and related post-secondary and community-based supports across Atlantic Canada. Using thematic analysis, our team identified key barriers including limited program awareness and uptake, educational costs beyond tuition, uneven navigation and mentoring supports, limited data tracking, and inconsistent eligibility policies and success indicators across programs. Greater cross-jurisdictional coordination and shared indicators of educational success are warranted.

Keywords: care-experienced youth, access to post-secondary education, tuition waiver programs, barriers to accessing higher education, Atlantic Canada

Résumé

L'accès à l'enseignement postsecondaire peut considérablement transformer le parcours de vie des jeunes pris en charge par les services de protection de l'enfance au Canada. Pourtant, la plupart de ces jeunes n'achèvent pas leurs études secondaires et rares sont ceux qui poursuivent des études supérieures. Cette étude s'appuie sur 26 entrevues approfondies menées auprès de personnes ayant été placées en milieu d'accueil ($n = 8$) et de membres du personnel ou personnes de soutien ($n = 18$) impliqués dans des programmes d'exonération de droits de scolarité ou offrant du soutien postsecondaire ou communautaire aux personnes ayant été prises en charge par l'État, dans l'ensemble des provinces atlantiques du Canada. À l'aide d'une analyse thématique, notre équipe a identifié des obstacles majeurs, notamment, une connaissance limitée des programmes d'aide entraînant une faible participation à ceux-ci, des coûts réels dépassant les subventions offertes pour couvrir les droits de scolarité, un soutien inégal dans les services d'aide à l'orientation et de mentorat, un suivi limité des données, ainsi que des politiques d'admissibilité et des indicateurs de réussite incohérents entre les programmes. Une meilleure coordination intergouvernementale et des indicateurs communs de la réussite scolaire s'imposent.

Mots clés : jeunes ayant grandi en milieu de placement, accès à l'enseignement postsecondaire, programmes d'exonération des droits de scolarité, obstacles à l'accès à l'enseignement supérieur, provinces atlantiques du Canada

INTRODUCTION

Canadians who have spent time in the child welfare system have significantly lower educational attainment, including a lack of completed high school or completed post-secondary education (PSE), than those without care experience (Cheung et al., 2012; Gahagan et al., 2023; Kirby et al., 2025). In fact, over 50% of care-experienced youth (CEY) do not graduate from high school as compared to approximately 25% of youth who were not in care (Kovarikova, 2017). In addition, young people exiting the system are more likely to have children and therefore have specific needs when participating in educational opportunities, programs, or interventions (Schelbe et al., 2022). Furthermore, Black, Indigenous, and 2SLGBTQ+ youth remain over-represented in the foster care system and under-represented in the available data on attendance at, and completion of, PSE in Canada (Nichols et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2015; Strand, 2014).

Access to and completion of PSE can have implications for employment, social mobility, overall quality of life, and health outcomes across the life course (Gahagan et al., 2023; Geiger & Okpych, 2021). As such, improving access to PSE among those with care experience through interventions such as tuition waiver programs is one way to help reduce disparities, both directly and indirectly, by increasing social mobility and employability. In addition, access to PSE can serve as a potential pathway for CEY to become both current students and future educators. However, despite Canada's national and international commitments to equity in education and education as a human right, it remains unclear how tuition waiver programs specifically contribute to both improved access to PSE and educational attainment among CEY (United Nations, 1989, 2015). Given that education is a provincial responsibility, access and educational supports for CEY can vary widely across Canada.

Given that many CEY do not complete high school, this can place them at greater disadvantage in accessing PSE programs. As indicated by the limited available national data, barriers to PSE generally include lack of high school completion; the high cost of tuition; the absence of trauma-informed approaches to meet the unique needs of CEY; the lack of additional wraparound supports such as housing, food, and transportation; being the first in one's family to attend higher education; and other factors (Doucet et al., 2023).

METHODS

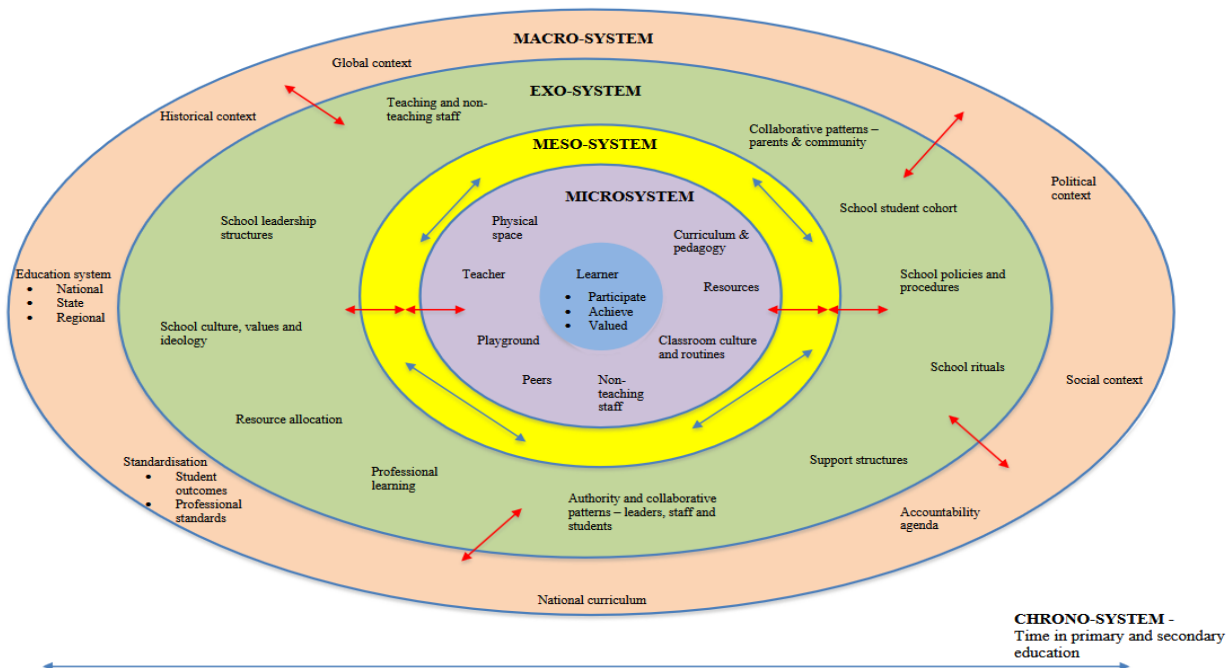
This study utilized a qualitative, inductive research approach consisting of in-depth interviews with CEY and those who support them to explore educational supports such as tuition waiver programs. This qualitative study was specifically undertaken to advance our understanding of barriers and facilitators to higher education within existing tuition waiver programs in the Atlantic region (Patton, 2003, 2015; Patton & Campbell-Patton, 2022). Following ethics

clearance at the 10 partnering PSE institutions across the four Atlantic provinces, our team undertook a utilization-focused evaluation to understand the unique educational issues facing CEY in Atlantic Canada.

Theoretical Framework

Given the array of systemic barriers (e.g., policies, practices, and norms) and structural barriers (e.g., broader societal obstacles, social stigma) to PSE experienced by CEY, we drew from the ecology of inclusive education (EIE) framework to help guide this study. This framework was adapted to move away from the deficit approach and toward a more strengths-based approach where all learners are encouraged to participate in education to maximize their potential (Mbelu & Maguvhe, 2024; Tahir et al., 2019). As noted by Anderson et al. (2014) and Zhang et al. (2014), the key elements of inclusive education are participation, achievement, and value of the person. Based on the social nature of inclusive education, the objectives of this research cut across all five systems of the EIE's educational ecosystem as indicated in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Five Systems of the Ecology of Inclusive Education



We use this framework to make an explicit line of argument about how tuition waivers shape access to PSE for CEY. In this framing, access and persistence are not individual attributes but outcomes produced through interacting conditions across five levels of influence. Following Anderson et al. (2014), we treat inclusive education as the extent to which systems enable (a) participation (i.e., students can enter and remain meaningfully engaged), (b) achievement (i.e., students can progress in ways that are educationally and personally meaningful), and (c) value/recognition (i.e., students experience dignity, belonging, and culturally safe support).

To ensure an inclusive environment for all students, including those with care experience, it is necessary to address the ways in which educational institutions and systems impact student experiences and success. This is particularly salient for CEY in that resource decisions within these educational systems can impact financial supports such as tuition waiver programs. In applying the EIE framework to the development of our study regarding tuition waiver programs, we identified the five interconnected levels within the educational ecosystem as follows:

- microsystem level – to address individual-level knowledge gaps pertaining to how tuition waiver programs impact the lives of recipients, and perceived barriers and benefits in the uptake of these programs;
- meso-system level – to understand how tuition waiver programs advance gender-based analysis plus (GBA+) and equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility (EDIA) policies among the participating PSE institutions, and how recipients experience these programs relative to their intended outcomes;
- exo-system level – to examine the support structures of PSE, and the student experience within existing tuition waiver programs;
- macro-system level – to explore policies on access to PSE initiatives for CEY, analyze social factors within PSE, and to inform broader cross-jurisdictional learning; and

- chrono-system level – to explore the impact of time on the student learner's preparedness for and engagement with PSE generally, and tuition waiver programs specifically.

This framework guided three linked phases in the study: development of the interview guide to elicit barriers and facilitators at each ecological level; coding and theme development by tagging codes to ecological levels and to inclusive education dimensions (i.e., participation, achievement, value); and interpretation of findings as multilevel mechanisms that explain why tuition waivers alone are necessary but insufficient for equitable access. Accordingly, our findings and conclusions are organized to indicate how barriers and facilitators cluster into a small set of higher-order, cross-level themes that answer the research questions.

Research Questions

Guided by the ecology of inclusive education framework, our key qualitative, inductive research questions emerged from our earlier first-voice study (Gahagan et al., 2023) and focused on the perspectives of those with lived experiences in care and/or those who support tuition waiver programs. This included two research questions: (a) How do tuition waivers and associated structural/institutional conditions shape CEY program uptake and sustained engagement in PSE? and (b) What supports and practices do participants identify as necessary for CEY persistence, belonging/recognition, and meaningful measurement(s) of success within tuition waiver programs?

Participants

Our team interviewed 26 participants, including eight CEY and 18 staff/supporters who work in various roles aimed at supporting access to PSE for CEY. The staff/supporters represented a range of roles across sectors, including student services and advising, financial aid, counselling and wellness, senior institutional leadership, tuition waiver program administration, and community-based youth-serving organizations

(e.g., social workers, non-profit executive directors), including one participant in an Indigenous education authority role. One CEY participant also held an internship role with a youth advocacy organization. Staff/supporters outnumbered CEY in this study because we sought to document how tuition waiver policies and supports are designed, administered, and implemented across institutions and sectors; however, this imbalance likely increases the prominence of system-facing perspectives in the findings and is considered in the interpretation and implications below.

All interviews were conducted online via the Microsoft Teams video conferencing platform and were simultaneously recorded and transcribed with consent of the participants. Prior to data analysis, all personal and identifiable information was removed from the transcripts. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and followed an interview script that was developed based on our earlier phases of a three-year study (Gahagan et al., 2023).

The interview guide was structured to reflect the EIE framework. Prompts were organized to elicit experiences and observations at each ecological level (micro through chrono) and across inclusive education dimensions (participation, achievement, and value/recognition). For example, participants were asked about (a) material and logistical barriers to participation (e.g., costs beyond tuition), (b) relational and institutional navigation supports (e.g., awareness, advising, mentoring, and continuity of support), and (c) how programs define and track “success” over time (e.g., persistence, re-entry, well-being, and belonging).

Data Analysis

The transcribed interview data underwent an open coding process, with data analysis assisted using the MAXQDA qualitative data management software. Six core team members used Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2012, 2021) approach to thematic analysis, meeting weekly to familiarize themselves with the data, generate initial codes, search for and review themes, define and name themes, and report findings. We used the EIE model to map levels of influence,

including reviewing institutional tuition waiver policies (e.g., eligibility requirements, verification procedures, time limits, and available wrap-around services).

Consistent with a theoretically informed thematic analysis, we developed an initial open codebook inductively from transcripts and then conducted a second-cycle analytic step mapping codes to ecological levels (micro/meso/exo/macro/chrono) and tagging them to inclusive education constructs (participation, achievement, value/recognition). This mapping helped consolidate first-cycle codes into a smaller number of higher-order themes and supported comparison of CEY and staff/supporter segments within each theme; where accounts diverged, CEY narratives were treated as primary evidence of lived inclusion outcomes.

The EIE framework was used as an analytic organizing logic. We conceptualized CEY’s access to higher education as shaped by interacting conditions across the five ecological levels and aligned with inclusive education aims of participation, achievement, and value/recognition (Anderson et al., 2014). The framework informed the study in three connected ways. First, it shaped the interview guide so prompts elicited experiences and observations across levels (e.g., individual and relational supports, institutional processes, inter-agency coordination, policy and funding conditions, and transitions over time). Second, it guided analysis through a two-stage coding approach: we conducted inductive open coding and then mapped codes to ecological levels and tagged them to participation/achievement/value-recognition. This step helped ensure that interpretations extended beyond individual experience to recurring cross-level patterns. Third, the framework shaped how findings are presented. We consolidated initial codes into a small set of higher-order themes that explain how tuition waivers operate as an inclusion mechanism—linking structural conditions beyond tuition, navigation and relational continuity, and recognition-based supports and accountability over time. This approach clarifies the line of argument connecting the framework, research questions, coding decisions, themes, and conclusions.

FINDINGS

Using the ecology of inclusive education framework to connect participants' accounts across levels of influence, we identified three higher-order themes that explain how tuition waivers shape access to higher education. Theme 1 addresses the material and structural conditions of participation (macro/exo → participation). Theme 2 addresses the navigation and relational infrastructure that enables participation and achievement (meso/exo/micro → participation/achievement/value). Theme 3 addresses recognition, well-being, and definitions of success over time (micro/chrono and institutional data practices → achievement/value). Together, these themes respond to the research questions by showing why tuition waivers are necessary but insufficient without coordinated cross-level supports. Because staff/supporters comprised a larger share of participants, the themes necessarily foreground institutional processes (e.g., promotion, navigation infrastructure, staffing capacity, and evaluation practices). We therefore interpret staff/supporter accounts primarily as explanations of how systems operate, while treating CEY accounts as the central evidence of how those systems are experienced in relation to PSE participation, achievement, and value/recognition.

Theme 1: Participation Requires Material and Structural Conditions Beyond Tuition

The high cost of tuition speaks to the organizational and socio-political levels of the ecological model of inclusive education, which represents a significant structural barrier for many wishing to access higher education. This barrier is compounded by the fact that many with experience in the child welfare system have fewer material supports to draw from. Tuition waiver programs can reduce a significant portion of the financial burden, however, many students still struggle with additional expenses, such as textbooks, transportation, food, housing, and living costs. These gaps continue to create challenges for CEY, often leading to financial stress given the

lack of familial connections to help offset these stressors. As one participant (participant #1), a social worker in Nova Scotia, states: "Like, school is a lot more financial burden than just your tuition." This participant further described these stressors:

Certainly, you know, having your tuition covered is helpful, but you still have to be able to support yourself and pay your rent and buy groceries and, you know, buy all the other things that you need, books and fees and whatever.

In ecology of inclusive education terms, tuition coverage reduces one barrier to participation, but interviewees emphasized that participation remains constrained when basic needs (e.g., housing, food, transportation, textbooks, child-care) are not secured through institutional and policy-level supports.

A former foster child in Newfoundland and Labrador (participant #2) described their challenges as follows: "It's frustrating, because you don't get a lot on student loans. As a foster kid, I didn't have any chance to save up...and we're in a housing crisis right now, so everything is really expensive." One student from Nova Scotia (participant #3) shared the following concern: "It covers my tuition, but I still, like, have to pay rent, and sometimes you can't get loans." A student in New Brunswick (participant #20) had similar concerns about costs beyond tuition, saying, "The cost of books is a lot...I think also a big thing is food...it starts getting harder and harder to, like, fulfill your studies and, you know, actually focus and do what you need to do."

Participants framed long-term planning as a structural transition-to-adulthood issue, not simply an individual shortfall. As illustrated in the following quotes, the focus often remains on crisis management, due, in part, to age-related transitions rather than long-term planning and educational attainment. As one provincial government program administrator noted, "that long-term future planning is often not to the point we would like it to be in" (participant #22). From a higher education perspective, this gap was described as a resourcing and capacity issue: "I

would love...to have the resources for...students who were former youth in care...to meet with someone and have a plan in place, and...some funding available...career-enriching summer jobs and part-time jobs” (participant #10). Taken together, these accounts suggest that tuition coverage alone does not ensure participation when institutions and systems lack the stable staffing and funding needed to support planning, continuity, and basic opportunities beyond tuition. From an EIE perspective, reducing one macro/exo barrier (tuition) does not secure participation unless meso- and micro-level navigation and relational supports translate policy into lived inclusion, which is the focus of Theme 2.

Theme 2: Participation and Achievement Depend on Guidance from Navigators

At the meso- and exo-levels of the ecology of inclusive education framework, participants described tuition waivers as “available” but often inaccessible, because students must navigate institutional bureaucracy with limited relational continuity and uneven promotion. As a student services staff interviewee (participant #8) explained:

My fear is, like, who knows about these programs, and is it only a select few that are able to navigate that system and then apply, because there’s...a level of bureaucracy, I believe. I’m not entirely sure how that’s promoted. Just knowing some anecdotal information around people who tell me, “Oh, I’ve heard it from my caseworker,” [or] “I’ve been referred to your program.”

Participants stressed that tuition waivers must be paired with wraparound supports beyond tuition costs. A senior university administrator (participant #10) described connecting recipients to supports, explaining

We have quite a few programs that we would want the student to engage in, and we’d make sure that they know about

them...and if our students are members of historically underserved groups, there’s also access to mentoring and tutoring, academic advising, and then, if needed, counselling and other support.

A community college senior administrator (participant #24) underscored that tuition alone is insufficient:

I think it’s a holistic approach. A financial bursary alone is not going to overcome the odds and all of a sudden create a magical solution for someone. So, we need all of the well-being supports, additional financial support outside of tuition and fees, and maybe even some advising and coaching.

An executive director of a youth-serving organization in Newfoundland and Labrador (participant #16) argued these supports should be built into the waiver,

making it automatic that...attached to that tuition waiver, there’s access to counselling whenever needed, or to wellness programs at the [institution]...I think counselling or access to a counselor should be automatic for these youth. That should just be part of the program...do they have stability in housing? Do they have stable mental health? Do they have adequate access to food? Are their basic needs being met?

A consistent mentor or navigator was described as the mechanism that translates waiver policy into participation and achievement. A school mental health program administrator in Nova Scotia (participant #22) stated, “There needs to be a key contact person...that stays consistent in their life and can help navigate...whether it’s their housing or food security...getting connected with tutoring...[and] all the relationships that happen.” An administrator of a tuition waiver program in New Brunswick (participant #13) described a proactive model: “They also get connected with what we call a student success coach...[who] proactively

reaches out...tries to make sure that they answer any questions.” A tuition waiver advisory committee member in Nova Scotia (participant #14) emphasized that this is especially critical for first-generation students: “Having familiar faces on the inside...that post-secondary mentor...that support network is huge.” Given the small number of waiver spaces, this level of support was also described as feasible, as one student services professional (participant #9) put it, “If they could have a navigator that...texted them and had regular check-ins...really building a relationship with the students.”

Finally, participants emphasized that staff shortages and turnover undermine continuity and trust. A school mental health program administrator (participant #22) observed: “There’s such a shortage...they get pulled into crises all the time.... And there’s also a high turnover.... So, with that worker change, it would be like every year they get a new parent.” A youth-serving non-profit participant (participant #16) likewise warned: “I’m very vocal with government about the need for making sure that permanency plans are in place. Because my experience has been the older ones are the ones who fall through the cracks.” For one care-experienced youth (participant #2), this instability meant there was no transition support into post-secondary: “There is no transition period...for me, there wasn’t...it ended abruptly, and they just kind of, like, [say] ‘Figure it out yourself.’”

Theme 3: Success Requires Recognition, Well-Being Supports, and Evaluation

The participants emphasized that “success” in tuition waiver programs depends on recognition, well-being supports, and evaluation practices that capture non-linear pathways. Several interviewees described impostor syndrome and mental health challenges as barriers to engagement and persistence. As one academic advisor (participant #6) noted:

There’s a lot of, like, impostor syndrome that’s happening, so there’s that barrier, that mental kind of barrier.... So, may-

be I’m not supposed to be here. I’m in this program that’s reducing this barrier, but...maybe this is just not where I’m supposed to be.

Those with care experience linked these feelings to instability and interrupted schooling. Participant #2 explained,

Due to my upbringing in the foster care system, my mental health was really bad...I moved around a lot and went through a lot, and it significantly impacted my school attendance and enrolment. So, actually, when I applied, I originally got rejected.

Another care-experienced youth (participant #20) highlighted the pressure of having limited fallback supports:

I feel like it’s a lot of pressure, and I don’t think anyone can really relate to the amount of pressure unless you’re in a similar circumstance where, like, you have no one else to fall back on...it’s you and your brain against the world. (participant #20)

Staff echoed that isolation is common after leaving care: “A common theme amongst these youth once they leave care is just loneliness...a lot of them have no connections to their biological family.... So, loneliness...is significant” (participant #16).

Participants therefore stressed culturally safe communities, connection, and accessible counselling. A staff person with an Indigenous education agency (participant #18) described supports that build belonging:

They provide support through, like, counselling, and even just workshops where they do things together, and they feel more in a community sense, versus feeling left out and alone all the time, which is really key. Basically, making sure that they don’t feel left out, and, like, someone cares.... That really supported the mental health and emotional part...

doing crafts, watching movies together, learning about their language and their culture.

The same participant underscored the connecting role of campus advisors:

I think a lot of advisors have programs and things at the universities to help bring the sense of community, and then they can refer them to us for other resources.... But having that connection is really important.... If they're not connected in that way...starting with the Indigenous advisor would be a perfect starting point.

Consistent with inclusive education principles, participants argued that success should not be reduced to a linear completion schedule or tied only to graduation. Participant #19 explained,

What typically happens in the life of a university student...is that we measure our success by...the number of students that walk across the stage at graduation. However, in my office, I measure success by the number of students coming back after graduation...and just reflect on other aspects of processing success, like...going beyond what is the norm, and what is the acceptable norm, and creating a new standard.

Participants also framed success as including supported pauses, redirection, and re-entry. Participant #17 stated,

So, sometimes success doesn't necessarily mean that a student is ready for education...a success for me is when the student comes to a realization, a true realization of where they're at...and then we can make an action plan for that. So very often having an exit interview...helping a student to develop a plan of re-entry at a time when they're better prepared.

Participant #14 reinforced this non-linear view:

There's two different types of success that I see.... Graduate, got decent grades, is now in the workforce, doing something with their degree...the other success [is] when students fail a program, and they come back to me, and they say, "That really wasn't for me. I had all of these struggles, and I couldn't do it, but I want to try again."... When they come back, they recognize, "These are the issues that impacted me. This program did not fit, but I think this one will, and I wanna try this one."

Participants emphasized that current data practices are insufficient to make tuition waivers accountable as an inclusion strategy. Without shared indicators aligned to participation, achievement, and value/recognition, waivers risk operating as a "black box" in which access is funded but inclusion is not measured or improved. Staff noted that common institutional metrics miss lived experience: "We're looking for data points that don't tell the full story...[and] doesn't reflect how a student would consider their success" (participant #9). Participants proposed tracking program uptake and outcomes and asking students what supports mattered: "Tracking how many students use it, how many students actually get through post-secondary... also maybe asking them what parts helped the most.... At least with that, you can provide... stats and actual numerical proof" (participant #20).

Research Questions Revisited

The findings provide important answers to the study's research questions. Regarding how tuition waivers and associated structural/institutional conditions shape CEY uptake and sustained engagement in PSE, participants described waivers as a necessary entry point but insufficient on their own to secure and sustain engagement. Costs beyond tuition (e.g., housing, food, transportation, textbooks, childcare) affected whether engagement was feasible,

while system capacity and transition-related constraints limited proactive planning supports. Engagement was further constrained when tuition waiver information was inconsistently promoted and students were required to navigate complex institutional processes with limited continuity of support. As one student services staff person explained, “My fear is, like, who knows about these programs, and is it only a select few that are able to navigate that system and then apply, because there’s...a level of bureaucracy” (participant #8). Another participant noted that information can be difficult to locate, saying, “In my Quick Search, I couldn’t find it. Isn’t that terrible?” (participant #17), suggesting access may depend on informal knowledge rather than transparent pathways. Further, care-experienced narratives also emphasized that persistence is shaped by non-linear transitions through PSE and the abrupt loss of supports when leaving care. As one CEY described, “it ended abruptly, and they just kind of, like, [say] ‘Figure it out yourself’” (participant #2).

Regarding what supports and practices are necessary for persistence, recognition, and meaningful measures of success, participants emphasized coordinated wraparound supports and stable relational infrastructure as key mechanisms through which waivers translate into inclusion. Participants highlighted the importance of connecting recipients to tutoring, advising, and counselling, saying, “There’s also access to mentoring and tutoring...academic advising, and then, if needed, counselling and other support” (participant #10), and also stressed how financial relief alone is not a “magical solution,” that “all of the well-being supports...additional financial support outside of tuition and fees, and maybe even some advising and coaching” (participant #24) are also required. A consistent navigator/mentor was widely identified as essential to persistence and belonging, as participant #22 already mentioned: “There needs to be a key contact person...[who] stays consistent in their life and can help navigate...housing or food security...getting connected with tutoring.” Finally, participants argued that accountability requires evaluation practices aligned with care experience realities, includ-

ing non-linear pathways (e.g., pauses, re-entry, program transfers), rather than graduation-only indicators. Meaningful success is therefore best understood as sustained engagement, supported achievement, and recognition over time, measured in ways that capture lived experiences and inclusive education.

DISCUSSION

This study extends scholarship on higher education access for those with care experience by explaining how tuition waivers operate as a necessary but insufficient policy lever when considered within an ecology of inclusive education. The findings align with prior research showing that financial supports can reduce one barrier to participation but do not address layered material constraints and transition-related instability that shape access and persistence. Our results also reinforce research emphasizing the importance of relational continuity, navigation supports, and trauma-informed, culturally safe services for students with care histories, while adding empirical detail about how these supports are experienced and operationalized within tuition waiver initiatives in Atlantic Canada.

Theme 1, *Participation Requires Material and Structural Conditions Beyond Tuition*, aligns with scholarship showing that tuition waivers reduce one barrier to access but do not address the broader material and structural conditions that shape whether those with care experience can enter and remain engaged in higher education. Participants’ emphasis on costs such as housing, food, transportation, or textbooks is consistent with work documenting how non-tuition costs and structural precarity undermine persistence despite financial aid (Cheung et al., 2012; Kovarikova, 2017). Our findings also reinforce care-experienced-specific literature arguing that policy levers like tuition waivers require complementary, system-level supports to translate into equitable participation (Gahagan, 2021; Gahagan et al., 2023; Kirby et al., 2025). In this way, the study extends prior work by specifying how “feasibility beyond tuition” functions as a necessary condition within an ecology of inclusion account.

Theme 2, *Participation and Achievement Depend on Guidance from Navigators*, is consistent with research indicating that educational outcomes for care-experienced individuals are shaped by institutional navigation demands and the availability of sustained relational supports. Participants' accounts of uneven promotion, bureaucracy, and the centrality of navigators/mentors align closely with evidence that "connected after care" policies and programs and consistent guidance are associated with stronger education and employment outcomes (Geiger & Okpych, 2021). The findings echo research on how institutional know-how and targeted supports affect persistence for students facing structural disadvantage (Nichols et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2015; Strand, 2014). Our contributions show how, within tuition waiver programs specifically, navigation and relational continuity operate as the mechanisms that convert formal eligibility into sustained engagement and progress.

Finally, Theme 3, *Success Requires Recognition, Well-Being Supports, and Evaluation*, aligns with inclusive education scholarship in emphasizing that meaningful "success" includes belonging, recognition, and well-being, rather than linear, time-bound completion alone (Anderson et al., 2014; Kirby et al., 2025; Mbelu & Maguvhe, 2024; Tahir et al., 2019). Participants' calls to define and track non-linear pathways are consistent with literature on the complexity of post-care transitions and the need for sustained, responsive supports over time (Geiger & Okpych, 2021; Schelbe et al., 2022). Their emphasis on success indicators shaped by care experience and accountability also aligns with first-voice and equity-oriented approaches to evaluating supports for youth in and from care (Doucet & Mann-Feder, 2021; Doucet & National Council of Youth in Care Advocates, 2022). Together, these findings extend the literature by positioning evaluation as an inclusion practice in that waivers become "accountable inclusion" when success is defined and measured in ways that reflect lived experience in care.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While our qualitative findings suggest that more needs to be done to address barriers to higher education among those with care experience, it is important to acknowledge the efforts being made in the Atlantic provinces to extend care and related supports across ecological levels. Participants nonetheless identified a persistent gap in longitudinal data tracking and evaluation practices that can demonstrate whether tuition waivers, combined with associated supports, are improving participation, achievement, and value/recognition over time. Strengthening institutional and interprovincial data practices, including consistent tracking of waiver uptake, persistence, re-entry, and student-defined outcomes, would support continuous improvement and make programs more accountable as inclusion strategies.

Participants also highlighted that supports and eligibility policies for those with care experience differ across jurisdictions and institutions, creating uneven access depending on where a young person was in care and where they pursue higher education. Our findings support the value of shared, lived experiences, and informed principles and benchmarks that jurisdictions and institutions can adopt and adapt to promote equity and consistency in post-care educational supports. The *Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care* (Doucet & National Council of Youth in Care Advocates, 2021, 2022) provides one such framework. This proposed holistic approach addresses issues raised in our findings, including financial stability beyond tuition, directories of supports and services, peer navigators and mentors, relational permanency and supportive networks, readiness-based transitions to adulthood, long-term mental health supports, and cultural supports, especially for 2SLGBTQ+, Indigenous, Black, and other racialized CEY.

LIMITATIONS

Staff/supporter participants outnumbered CEY participants, which may amplify organizational and policy interpretations of barriers and facilitators relative to first-voice accounts. As a result, our themes likely capture institutional logics (e.g., program administration, staffing, tracking) in greater detail than the day-to-day emotional and relational dimensions of “lived inclusion.” We mitigated this risk by triangulating accounts within each theme and by interpreting divergence as analytically meaningful (i.e., as an indicator of misalignment between program design and lived experience). Future research should seek to over-sample those with care experience and include them in analysis and interpretation to strengthen the first-voice basis for design and evaluation of tuition waiver interventions.

CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes an ecology of inclusive education account of how tuition waiver programs function as a policy lever that can enable access, but only when embedded within multilevel inclusion conditions. Across three higher-order themes, our findings show that tuition waivers primarily address one macro/exo barrier (tuition) while leaving other participation constraints (basic needs), navigation and relational infrastructure (meso/exo), and recognition-based supports and accountable evaluation (micro/chrono) uneven or absent. As a result, equitable access is best understood not as funded entry alone, but as participation, achievement, and value/recognition sustained over time.

It is equally important to ensure that individuals with care experience are involved not only as participants but as co-designers and co-interpreters of tuition waiver interventions (e.g., in defining program goals, specifying indicators of success, and shaping outreach and support models), particularly because staff/supporter perspectives, while essential for understanding implementation, cannot substitute for lived experience in determining whether programs

produce inclusion in practice. This in turn can meaningfully transform the lives of those with care experience by improving their life chances through better access to higher education. In this study, the larger number of staff/supporter interviews helps explain how systems currently function and where implementation constraints arise; it also reinforces our conclusion that future program development and evaluation should be led by or partnered with care-experienced populations to ensure that institutional solutions align with care-informed definitions of access, belonging, and success. By linking access to higher education to a cross-level inclusion mechanism, including material supports, navigation infrastructure, recognition, and accountability, this study moves beyond descriptive accounts of “barriers” to specify *why* tuition waivers succeed or fail in practice and *what* institutions and governments must coordinate to make waivers an equitable pathway.

In summary, this study advances our understanding of tuition waivers by moving beyond description to explain how waivers function as an inclusion strategy within a cross-level ecology. By specifying a mechanism linking material feasibility beyond tuition, navigation and relational continuity, and recognition with accountable evaluation over time, the study clarifies why tuition waivers may succeed or fail across contexts. The higher-order themes developed here integrate youth and system perspectives into a coherent ecology-of-inclusion account, and they generate empirically grounded implications for program design and evaluation, particularly the need for indicators of success and co-design processes with care-experienced students to better align institutional solutions with lived experience.

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