

## **The Kokum Connection Reclaiming First Nation Education**

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Between 1871 and 1921 a series of numbered treaties, Treaty 1 through 11, were negotiated in Western Canada between the Crown's representatives, Treaty Commissioners, and Chiefs and Headmen of the western prairies and the northern territories. In this chapter we argue that the Crown's treaty commitment to education was not honored, with disastrous consequences for First Nations people. These failures bode poorly for all citizens, not just First Nations people. Fulfilling the treaty promises for education is perhaps the most obvious way to change these dark outcomes. The Kokum ("Grandmother" in Cree) Connection, with its emphasis on family and community involvement, as well as its focus on culturally appropriate teaching and learning methods, provides a means of meeting the treaty commitment to education – and fulfilling the dreams of the First Nations signatories to the treaties.

The Royal Proclamation 1763 established British Indian policy and recognized the Indigenous peoples of North America as nations. It was issued in response to "white encroachment upon Indian lands, a situation of fraudulent purchases of Indian property by white settlers,...create[d] a large area of.... reserved land....to the Indians...which, the Proclamation note[d] could only be 'ceded to or purchased by us' – the Crown" (Cumming & Mickenberg, 1972, p. 28). The Proclamation established the Crown's relationship with First Nations and recognized the latter's pre-existing land rights and formed the basis for the relationship between the two parties in all future negotiations relating to Aboriginal rights. When the fledgling Dominion of Canada was formed in 1867, the Royal Proclamation 1763 was applied and First Nations rights were "affirmed" to their traditional territory within Canada and across the expanse of the western territories (Cumming & Mickenberg, 1972, p. 31). A century later, Canada, desiring to create a nation from sea-to-sea and stave off American encroachment north, committed to construct a railway from Ontario to British Columbia (a demand of the latter's entry as the fifth province of Canada) was required within the dictates of the Royal Proclamation to enter into treaty negotiations with the First Nations peoples in order to 'purchase' their traditional lands.

Between 1871 and 1921 a series of numbered treaties, Treaty 1 through 11, were negotiated between the Crown's representatives, Treaty Commissioners, and Chiefs and Headmen of the western prairies and the northern territories. These treaties are recognized by The Statute of the International Court of Justice as legally binding agreements, "a compact made between two or more independent nations with a view to the public welfare" and are thus "contractual engagements" (Yogis, 1995, p. 227). Between 1871-1877 the Crown's Treaty Commissioners met with the Chiefs and Headmen of the First Nations across what is today known as western Ontario to Alberta to negotiate Treaties 1 through 7. The two parties

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recognized each other as nations. The two entities did, however, have differing understandings of the purpose of entering treaty – the Treaty Commissioners entered into negotiations to gain title to all the ceded lands of the First Nations in exchange gifts and services. The Chiefs and Headmen in agreeing to treat with the Crown sought to share their lands with the newcomers in exchange for services which would enable them to maintain their own ways and learn the skills of the newcomers in order to live and prosper in the new era of economic change brought by an ever growing influx of newcomers and the transcontinental railway. They did not agree to “the absolute surrender [of their land as] described in the [numbered] treaty text[s]” (Taylor, 1985, n.p). Delia Opekokew (1979) maintains First Nations people entered into the numbered treaties with the Crown “so that they could live as Indian people forever; that is to retain their inherent powers” (as cited in Taylor, 1985, n.p.).

In this chapter, we argue that the Crown’s treaty commitment to education was not honored and that a renewed focus – one which honors traditional culture and values is paramount if the dismal and destructive educational programs provided by Canada for First Nations children over the last century is to be overcome and a new approach which respects traditional culture and values and supports, community involvement, educational achievement, and brighter future for all First Nations children. In many ways, a new approach to education for First Nations children is an old approach – the Kokum Connection. Kokum is Grandmother in Cree. The Kokum Connection builds upon traditional connections between family, community, and education: a connection that respects and builds on the past. Community involvement in the total education of their children is what was understood by the Chiefs and Headmen who negotiated the numbered treaties with the Crown’s representative. While the Chiefs and Headmen negotiated the provision of western educational services for their people, they wanted them as an addition to, not a replacement of, their own educational practices. The Treaty Commissioners assured them that western schools would “not take away your way of life, you will have it then as you have it now, and what I offer is put on top of it” (as cited in Taylor, (1985, n.p.). Thus the ‘knowledge of the white man’ would be additional to First Nation educational teachings (Morris, 1880/1991, p. 49). At the Treaty 4 negotiations, the Treaty Commissioners assured the people that:

The promises we have to make to you are not for today only for tomorrow, not only for you but for your children born and unborn, and the promises we make will be carried out as long as the sun shines above and the water flows in the ocean. (Morris, 1880/1991, p. 96)

### **Treaty 4, 1874**

“The Cree, Saulteaux, and other Indians, inhabitants of the territory” (Morris 1880/1991, p. 330) in the area, which today is known as Southern Saskatchewan had lived there “since the world began” (Ray, 1996, n.p). In the early 1870s, Canada not only identified the area through which the railway line would be

constructed but also considered the land the “Fertile Belt:” an area which would attract farmers and other settlers and thus solidify Canada’s claim to the First Nations territory. Bound by the Royal Proclamation 1763, “the Dominion Cabinet... recommended, that treaties should be made, with the Indians at Forts, Qu’Appelle, Carlton, and Pitt (Morris, 1880/1991, p. 77). In 1874, Treaty 4 often referred to as The Qu’Appelle Treaty, was negotiated. The areas of Forts Carlton and Pitt would be the site of the negotiations between the two parties.

In 1874, Treaty 4 resulted in Indian title being “extinguished in a tract of country, embracing 75,000 square miles of territory:” a process achieved after a “long and animated discussions” with the Chiefs and Headmen of the Lake Qu’Appelle area (Morris, 1880/1991, p. 79). Those discussions over several days, resulted in the commitment by the Crown to a specific quantum of land for the families within each First Nation, a series of services and ‘gifts’ – including treaty annual payments of \$5.00 per person, agriculture equipment, clothing, and a school to be built on each reserve – western education would be incremental to Indigenous teachings. These allowances, First Nations people were assured were to be “counted upon and received from Her Majesty’s bounty and benevolence” (Morris 1881/1990, p. 351) and were not just “for today or tomorrow only but should continue as long as the sun shone and the river flowed” (p. 208).

#### **A dark outcome: The failure to provide the treaty right to education**

The failure by the Government of Canada to honor the Treaty commitment to provide a school on each reserve, a system “equal to the whites,” and one which respected Indigenous education, languages, and culture has had, over the last century and a half, dire consequences for First Nations people. First Nations understood the treaties were between two equal partners but in 1876, Canada passed its own legislation, the Indian Act, which gave the government of Canada and its administrative arm, the Department of Indian Affairs now renamed as the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, jurisdiction and control over all aspects of First Nations peoples’ lives. The imposition of the Indian Act guaranteed a different future for First Nations communities that promised in the treaties, nowhere is this more evident than in the provision of educational services. John Ogbu (1998), an American anthropologist, provides a helpful means of describing the consequences of the Canadian government’s decision to impose the Indian Act, despite the seeming contradiction with the terms of the numbered treaties. Ogbu & Simons (1998) classification of North American Indians as involuntary (non-immigrant) minorities became an apt description of Canada’s treatment of First Nations people. Ogbu suggested that the two primary descriptors of involuntary minorities are that “(1) they did not chose but were forced against their will to become part of the United States, and (2) they themselves usually interpret their presence in the United States as forced on them by white people” (p. 165). This is also an apt assessment of the treatment of First Nations people in Canada.

Ogbu (1998) argued that involuntary minorities are “less economically successful than voluntary minorities, usually experience greater and more persistent cultural and language difficulties, and do less well in school” (p. 166). This is

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seems relevant within the Canadian context. Canadian statistics regarding education, income and employment speak to this issue. With respect to educational attainment, Table 1 below suggests that Saskatchewan Aboriginal residents, as compared to provincial non-Aboriginal populations, demonstrate consistently lower rates of educational attainment.

**Table 1.** Educational attainment of Saskatchewan students.

<i>Educational Attainment</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Aboriginal Identity</i>	<i>% Diff.</i>
Total population 15 years and over	766,235(100%)	91,295	
No certificate, diploma or degree	231,730(30.2%)	45,135(49.4%)	19.2%
High school certificate or equivalent	205,495(26.8%)	20,055(22.0%)	4.9%
Apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma	86,310 (11.3%)	8,910(9.8%)	1.5%
College, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma	111,770(14.6%)	9,055(9.9%)	4.7%
University certificate or diploma below the bachelor level	32,180(4.2%)	2,850(3.1%)	1.1%
University certificate, diploma or degree at or above bachelor level	98,755(12.9%)	5,285(5.8%)	7.1%

Source: Statistics Canada. 2007. 2006 Community Profiles. 2006 Census. Statistics Canada. 2008. Aboriginal Population Profile. 2006.

Furthermore, Saskatchewan labor force characteristics illustrate similar results. Table 2 shows that the unemployment rate is 3.25 times higher for Aboriginal citizens, while their employment rate is 28.6% lower than the overall population.

**Table 2.** Labor force characteristics by number and percentage

<i>Labor Force Characteristics</i>	<i>Saskatchewan</i>	<i>Aboriginal</i>
Population 15 years and over	766,235	91,295
Number/% in the Labor Force	524,305/68.4%	51,480/56.4%
Number/% Employed	494,901/64.6%	42,095/46.1%
Number/% Unemployed	29,361(5.6%)	9,390(18.2%)

Source: Statistics Canada. 2008. Labour force indicators by age groups for both sexes, 2006 counts – labor force, for Canada, provinces and territories – 20% sample data (table).

Table 3, reviews average and median income, indicates similar outcomes. Saskatchewan Aboriginal income levels are dramatically lower than the overall provincial population. As an example, the average income of Aboriginal residents is \$19,939 as compared to \$33,108 for the broader provincial population.

**Table 3.** Income Levels

15 Years and Over	Non-Aboriginal	Aboriginal	Percentage
Number With Income	646,405	82,560	NA
Average Income \$	33,108	19,939	60.2%
Median Income \$	25,234	13,843	54.9%

Source: Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Population, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 97-563-XCB2006008.

This dire situation is also borne out by Saskatchewan Kindergarten to Grade 12 high school completion rates. The 2008 Saskatchewan Education Indicators Report (Ministry of Education, 2008), which documents graduation rates, refers to the striking difference between Northern students (who are approximately 85% Aboriginal) and other student cohorts. Steeves, Carr-Stewart, and Marshall (2010) indicated that “approximately 25-30% of Aboriginal and Northern students complete high school whereas 70-80% completion rates of non-Aboriginal students complete grade 12” (p. 25). Further to Ogbu’s thesis, the effects of involuntary minority status do appear to exist within the province of Saskatchewan. The very issues that First Nations leaders hoped to avoid with the signing of the treaties seems to have come to pass. As illustrated in the above tables, Saskatchewan residents of First Nation descent consistently demonstrate lower levels of educational attainment, employment, and income. These results, the authors argue, would be typical of other Canadian measures of Indigenous social, economic, and educational outcomes.

### **The way forward: The Kokum Connection**

Canadian research (Helin, 2008; Richards, 2008) suggests that the best way forward for First Nations people is by improving the often discouraging educational outcomes of Indigenous students. For example, the Auditor General of Canada (2004) stated, “Education is critical to improving the social and economic strength of First Nations individuals and communities to a level enjoyed by other Canadians (p. 2). He further stated, “We remain concerned that a significant education gap exists between First Nations People living on reserves and the Canadian population as a whole and that the time estimated to close this gap has increased slightly from about 27 to 28 years” (p. 1). The report of the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (1996) similarly emphasized the important role played by education, “Education programs, carefully designed and implemented with parental involvement, can prepare Aboriginal children to participate in two worlds with a choice of futures. Aboriginal people should expect equity of results from education in Canada” (p. 442). This is what First Nations expected with the signing of the treaties; they negotiated the peaceful sharing of their land in exchange for services that they believed would enable them to survive the loss of their traditional lifestyle and to participate fully in

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the new economy while maintaining their own Indigenous practices including education (Treaty 7 Elders & Tribal Council, 1996, p. xi).

As the efforts of the Canadian government to assimilate First Nations children through the residential school system indicate, the answer to this commitment was not assimilation; neither was it other attempts to utilize the provincial systems as a delivery vehicle for the education of First Nations children. Rather a better way was needed, one that recognized the legitimate aspirations of First Nations people. The *Gathering Strength: Report on the Royal Commission on Indigenous Peoples* (1996) stated “It is vital that Aboriginal parents and families be able to become involved, articulating and shaping the education they want for their children” (pp. 442-443). Similarly, Steeves, Carr-Stewart, and Pinay (2012) argued, “Traditional First Nations culture implicitly confirms what current research related to student achievement suggests: that student achievement will be enhanced if supported by a broader, more inclusive approach that recognizes the impact of variables such as family, socioeconomic status and community” (p. 67).

Bernadette, a Kokum or Grandmother in Cree and long serving education commission member of the Chief Kahkewistahaw Community School, captured the essence of what many First Nations people believe, with her statement that there is a need to:

teach our children the traditional cultural values that we have with our people. A lot of them have lost their culture and their language... I have heard elders say ... if we don't teach our children our traditions and our cultural activities, what are they going to know in the future? We are going to lose everything, they said. We are going to lose our treaties. We are going to be just nothing. We are going to be lost. Our kids are going to be lost” (audio taped research conversation, November, 2011).

Bernadette speaks for many First Nations people. The preservation of language and culture is fundamental if First Nations people are going to survive and prosper. A belief that is reinforced through the oral history of the Numbered Treaties which keeps alive the treaty promise that education would ensure that their children would survive and prosper in the western world and maintain live within their world of traditional customs, language and culture. A critical component part of this heritage is the relationship between family, community, and the school. The 1996 *Gathering Strength* report found that throughout consultations with Aboriginal people, family “appeared repeatedly as part of a formula for transforming reality, where individual, family, and community are the three strands that... will strengthen cultures and restore Aboriginal people to their former dignity... families consistently occupied the central position between individual and community” (p.11).

Prioritizing the role of culture and language, in particular the role of family and community, in relation to improved learning of First Nations children, is critical to children's success. Lori Whiteman (personal communication, May 5, 2010), project manager for the Treaty 4 School Success Program, commented that

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while improvements in literacy and numeracy levels were core to the initiative, this could not be accomplished without a sustained commitment to the role of community in the child's learning. We believe that this approach, identified here as the Kokum Connection, is vital if the commitments made within the treaties are to be realized.”

The Kokum Connection as a metaphor for this more holistic approach characteristic of traditional First Nations learning traditions:

The message conveyed by the confluence of educational research related to student achievement...combined with traditional knowledge drawn from First Nations communities, provides an alternative... The Kokum Connection supports and demands the active involvement of the family and community in students' learning in order to accomplish the desired long term outcomes of developing healthy, well-adjusted citizens who pursue educational opportunities on their life path. (Steeves, Carr-Stewart, Pinay, 2012, p. 71)

Another critical aspect of the Kokum Connection relates to the application of culturally appropriate teaching and learning methods. For example, William Demmert (2001) commented on the importance of “the positive aspects of including the language and cultural base of the Native community served” (p. 18). Cornel Pewewardy (2002) stated, “American Indian/Alaska Native students generally learn in ways characterized by factors of social/affective emphasis, harmony, holistic perspectives, expressive creativity, and nonverbal communication” (p. 1). He further suggested that these learning approaches were clearly tied to culture and heritage, stating that American Indian/Alaska Native learning styles were “different – but not deficient” (p. 1). This final comment is critical in relation to the issue of improving Indigenous student learning; Bishop and Berryman (2010), reflecting on this issue comment:

Such deficit theorising blames others and results in low teacher expectations of Māori students, thus creating self-fulfilling prophecies of failure, and leaving teachers bewildered as to how to make a difference for Māori students. Changing deficit theorising, by teachers repositioning within alternative agentic discourses, including their use of different pedagogy, is therefore a necessary condition for improving Māori student educational engagement and achievement. (p. 178)

They further suggested that teachers needed support in “changing ... explanations and practices (theoretical repositioning within discourse) about what impacts on Māori students' learning involves providing teachers with the opportunity to challenge their own deficit theorising about Māori students (and their communities).” (p. 180). They further describe the process of professional development and support that “mirrors the caring and learning relationships and interactions that are necessary for teachers to develop with Māori students in their own class-



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rooms. Pedagogies such as these...provide evidence of change to the seemingly immutable educational disparities for Māori” (p. 184).

Examples of the learning relationships that Bishop and Berryman referred to are provided by Rasmussen, Baydala, and Sherman (2004) who commented that Indigenous students were “more holistic, observational, and experiential learners whom prefer collaborative group work and experiential learning techniques” (p. 334). Similarly Backes (1993) proposed a departure from teacher-directed learning models to “instructional strategies that are more indirect and cognizant of learner behaviours” (p. 10). Melnechenko and Horsman (1998) also recommended that “teachers teach the concept of culture and provide opportunities for students to participate, share, and explore their thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, and practices” (p. 26). Finally, Laremore (2000) and Brancov (1994) concluded that cooperative learning models tended to encourage positive learning outcomes among Indigenous students. These concepts help comprise the basic precepts of the Kokum Connection. Members of the Kahkewistahaw First Nation may not have clearly articulated these beliefs as they considered a vision for their future school and students but they intuitively sensed their critical priorities. These priorities eventually were articulated by their Director of Education, Mr. Don Pinay, as the Kokum Connection, serving as a metaphor for the education aspirations of the community.

### **Fulfilling the promise: The Chief Kahkewistahaw Community School**

Chief Kahkewistahaw Community School, located 150 kilometers east of Regina (the provincial capital of Saskatchewan) was founded in 2005. Previous to its establishment, students had attended Broadview School, a nearby provincial school, and two nearby band controlled schools. While these school attempted to serve the needs of all its students, there was a desire for a full K-12 local school within the community. George, a former chief of the community, commented that “When our forefathers signed the Treaties it said there would be a school put in each First Nation.... What I wanted to see was a real school that had from K-12 and that is what we worked toward” (audio taped research conversation, November, 2011).

There were particular concerns with the provincial school; Jeannette, a local educational official commented:

when the education committee met with us ... they said that they had grave concerns with the success of our high school students in the provincial schools. A lot of them were dropping out or there were complaints that they were treated unfairly and the time we met with ... the native liaison worker out of Broadview School ...where the majority of our students went. ... a lot of our students were placed in the special education program or in the high school placed with modifications to the programming. They weren't graduating with a regular grade 12. After we met ... that's when the committee decided to open this high school. (audio taped research conversation, August, 2011)



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The process was complex and time-consuming, involving extensive community consultation. Jamie, an individual heavily involved in the planning process, discussed the community meetings and the use of surveys to elicit feedback; “Those surveys were done more than once and utilized at the education committee.... I don’t have the statistical mind...now viewing them I just kind of read it and shared the common concerns” (audio taped research conversation, August, 2011). The eventual result was a decision to establish their own school. As Bernadette, a member of the Educational Committee, commented, “we pulled our students out of Broadview, I think it was, and we started them on the reserve here in the Resource Centre, in the Complex upstairs and we had one class in the Church” (audio taped research conversation, November, 2011). Although it was a difficult time, the community sustained the teaching staff; as Jeannette indicated, what “got us through that time was the community support. The committee—they always had parents’ meetings. Were always communicating with the community about the needs and what we needed or what the community wanted to see” (audio taped research conversation, August, 2011). Even with the initial opening of the school, a solid community relationship existed. Jeanette referenced the role of the community, commenting that “They didn’t ask for dollars or anything like that. They just came and did what they had to do. It was so good” (audio taped research conversation, August, 2011).

The composition of the Education Committee was also helpful; Jamie commented that they “were mothers who knew all the kids and knew the families and knew some of their family challenges, dynamics and that was – when I think about it now I certainly – they are all grandmas, Kokums” (audio taped research conversation, August, 2011). Jamie also discussed the importance of a spiritual dimension:

I can share with you, the teachings from the former Chief, to the importance of spirituality and always considering children unborn. That is a big thing. We are not looking at this year. We are not looking at ten years down the road. We are looking at grandchildren that are not born yet. Think about that with every decision we make. He did not come out and say it that way but that it what he meant every time. That’s what he meant. With that, even the name Chief Kahkewistahaw. They went and had a sweat. (audio taped research conversation, August, 2011).

She further commented that “It just comes out what you are praying for, and why you are praying for it. I really feel that the stones here—they are all stones from our community, from our grandfathers.... The foundation in all our school” (audio taped research conversation, August, 2011). Out of this process of dialogue, consultation and prayer came a clearer sense of what the school’s mission should be; all agreed that their students should experience greater success in school. Bernadette said that “I wanted to see more graduates too. We always had a lot of dropouts and I don’t know really why” (audio taped research conversation, November, 2011). The community was influenced in their thinking by Don Pinay,

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then the Director of Education for Yorkton Tribal Council (YTC) serving their local school. Jamie commented that “I have known him a long, long time. He has ... talked about the Kokum Connection and that importance of that culture component and instilling language... that’s where we started realizing that there needed to be that kind of connection” (audio taped research conversation, August, 2011). Don elaborated on this concept stating that “The school is only good at the reading, writing and computer.... It is not good at band aiding or making changes they have no power to change” (audio taped research conversation, August, 2011). Furthermore, he stated:

The school is – ok, community involvement, parental involvement – lets’ work on those but it is always the school’s agenda even with the Elders. Oh, we have to get the elders involved and so bring in elders.... Elders have their own agenda as to how they can prepare our children. Parents have that same responsibility. (audio taped research conversation, August, 2011)

Jamie captured the essence of what the founders of the new school hoped to accomplish:

[It] goes back to the Kokum Connection...getting the community involved with raising our children as opposed to sending them somewhere for someone else to identify shortcomings.... The residential school did a lot to many different communities and one of the... items I see is the families are segregated now. They are no longer a united tribe kind of thing....The school brings that family dynamics together. And yes there are challenges.... But the more we get together, the easier we learn to get along and that is something the former Chief always said Get along. Get along. We are here. We are family. Get along. And that mentality needs to spread out to the community to accept our differences. You see somebody hurting, you are supposed to help. With that, in our history, we have a lot to overcome in learning how to get along and this is a focal point to do that. Once you start getting along then we can start addressing wellness. The wellness of our community for the betterment of their grandchildren. (audio taped research conversation, September, 2011)

### **A Concluding Comment**

Jamie’s words capture the essence of what the First Nations signatories of Treaty 4 hoped to accomplish – the maintenance of their culture while also preparing their children for success in the new world that was coming. Yet subsequent actions by the Government of Canada meant that their expectations were not to be fulfilled, despite the clear commitments that seem to exist within the numbered treaties that were signed in good faith by First Nations leaders. As is all too apparent, the results have been disastrous for First Nations people and,

potentially, communities such as the Province of Saskatchewan. The failure of Saskatchewan First Nations people to achieve the expectations of the signatories to the numbered treaties, including Treaty 4, bodes poorly for all provincial residents, not just First Nations people. Fulfilling the treaty promises for education are perhaps the most obvious way to change these dark outcomes. The Kokum Connection, with its commitment to family and community, as well as its focus on culturally appropriate teaching and learning methods, provides a means of fulfilling this commitment – and the dreams of the First Nations signatories to the treaties.

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