

From Colonialism to Neocolonialism: Indigenous Learners and Saskatchewan's Education Debt

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ABSTRACT: Despite prevailing myths of social harmony and cooperation Saskatchewan is a jurisdiction with a race problem rooted in a problematic colonial history. By highlighting the persistent racialization of educational opportunities and inequalities in Saskatchewan, we document the systematic assaults on Indigenous epistemologies, languages, and cultures that occurred within schools and implicate these schools in the production and reproduction of deeply embedded intergenerational educational disadvantage. The article makes the case that the colonial model employed by European settlers to marginalize the original inhabitants of the land evolved into a neocolonial model that continues the marginalization of Indigenous peoples in present-day Saskatchewan. In arguing that schools have failed Indigenous students rather than vice versa, we reframe current Indigenous educational disparities as an *educational debt* rather than an *achievement gap* and document the multiple ways in which that *educational debt* continues to socially and economically exclude Indigenous peoples, especially through the racialization of poverty. We conclude that only substantial compensatory educational funding, as part of a wider program of redistribution and poverty reduction, can address the *educational debt* and ensure equitable educational outcomes for Indigenous learners in Saskatchewan.

KEYWORDS: Saskatchewan, Indigenous education, educational debt, colonialism, neocolonialism, compensatory funding.

Despite the prevailing myths of “social harmony and a tradition of cooperation” (Green 2006, 525), Saskatchewan is a jurisdiction with a race problem rooted in a problematic colonial history. The legacy of colonialism’s hostility to the land’s original inhabitants¹ is deeply embedded in Saskatchewan’s institutions, including its schools.² Thus, Saskatchewan is no dif-

ferent from other jurisdictions where Euro-settlers³ took control of the lands across Canada. There was a brutality specific to this bi-racial interaction on the prairies, however (Daschuk 2013).

This paper makes a case that there is an educational debt owed to Indigenous peoples in Saskatchewan. It begins with an historical perspective beginning in the 1870s with the signing of the Prairie Treaties and the imposition of the Indian Act. This is followed by a brief discussion of various strategies employed by contemporary Indigenous youth involving the attainment or rejection of social and economic capital in the contexts of the school and the community. The main objective of this paper is to make a case for increased funding in order to improve the educational outcomes and life chances of Indigenous learners in Saskatchewan. The paper concludes with an outline of a plan for this targeted funding.

1 Throughout this article, several terms are used to represent the original inhabitants of North America. Indian is used only when it refers to historical documents such as the Indian Act. First Nations is the preferred term in Canada, and this term is used instead of Indian in most cases. Aboriginal is used in Canadian constitutional law and in government-sponsored documents such as the Truth and Reconciliation Report (2015), and includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. Indigenous is also an accepted term, and appears to be preferred in many circles today. The term is used whenever applicable. In some instances, either Aboriginal or Indigenous could have been used.

2 Section 93 of the Canadian constitution assigned jurisdiction over education to the provinces, resulting in the establishment of secular and denominational publicly funded systems regulated by provincial Ministries of Education in most provinces, including Saskatchewan. However, the federal government retained jurisdiction over “Indians, and Lands reserved for the Indians” (Carr-Stewart 2003). Thus the Indian Act, administered by the federal Department of Indian Affairs (DIA), subsequently became the all-encompassing mechanism for fulfilling Canada’s obligations in all matters, including education, to First Nations people (Carr-Stewart 2003). Residential schools in Saskatchewan were administered by the Federal government until the 1990s, at which point Indigenous students either attended provincial schools or First Nation-controlled schools on reserves.

3 Throughout this article, the preferred term used to signify the peoples that usurped the land of Indigenous peoples is Euro-settlers. This is in keeping with the burgeoning scholarship on settler colonialism in Canada, the USA, Australia, and New Zealand. Settler colonialism is a distinct type of colonialism that functions through the replacement of Indigenous populations with an invasive settler society that, over time, develops a distinctive identity and sovereignty.

Achievement Gap and Educational Debt

The term *achievement gap* has often been used by educational researchers to explain disparities in academics between students from various minorities compared to White students. In particular the term is most often used to highlight differences in high school graduation rates and especially in standardized test scores. Ladson-Billings contends that a focus on the achievement gap places the onus where it should not be because it implies a cultural deficit on the part of oppressed groups rather than an institutional deficit that further privileges dominant groups (Ladson-Billings 2006).

The term *education debt* more accurately reflects the contemporary situation and points to factors that have accumulated over time. According to Ladson-Billings, the education debt “comprises historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral components” that illuminate the execution of systemic and institutional power (2006, 3). In this paper, we use both terms by arguing that these historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral components accurately explain why there has been a persistent achievement gap, thereby demonstrating the existence of an education debt in the province of Saskatchewan. While emphasizing the critical role of publicly funded education as a potential means of mitigating disadvantage and promoting social cohesion, we draw on insights from post-colonial and neo-Marxist theory to argue that schools, alone, cannot effect the larger social and structural changes required to eliminate the racialization of poverty in the province of Saskatchewan. Regardless of the effectiveness of public schools thus far, there is an education debt owed to Indigenous peoples living in the province.

Colonialism and Saskatchewan’s Education Debt

A strong case can be made that there is an *educational debt* to Indigenous peoples in Saskatchewan resulting from well over a century of colonization. The educational debt warrants compensatory funding in support of present and future Indigenous learners in the K-12 school system. Indeed, in a major study with First Nations and Métis students and parents involving fifteen research sites across Saskatchewan, “participants spoke eloquently of the historical education debt and its continued malign implications for Aboriginal

peoples” in the province (Pelletier, Cottrell and Hardie 2013, vii). For Saskatchewan’s Indigenous peoples, the importance of this education debt cannot be overstated.

Schooling for Indigenous youth has come a long way from the residential school policy that was institutionalized in Canada in the 1870s until the last school closed over a century later (Cottrell 2010; Barman 1995). Although the high school graduation rates for Indigenous youth have shown slight improvement in recent years, in Saskatchewan there is still a massive gap: in 2017, the graduation rate for non-Indigenous students was 76.5 percent compared to 43.2 percent for their Indigenous peers (Government of Saskatchewan 2017). Although some may utilize cultural deficit discourses to explain this discrepancy, *colonialism* is the fundamental explanation for inequitable outcomes.

Colonialism, typically, is legitimated by myths of superiority, inevitability, and racism, and is enforced by the colonizers’ socio-political institutions. Canadian colonialism was justified by the *essentialist* racial discourse that framed Indigenous peoples as alien “others” to emerging provincial and national identities based on Christianity, Anglo-Saxon cultural norms, and capitalist ideals of progress and wealth acquisition (Frankenberg 1993). It was assumed that this biological superiority conferred an attendant right to dictate the fate of all other races. Thus, a model of colonization was developed and implemented to gain control over Indigenous peoples and their lands, a model that began with the English colonization of Ireland in the 16th century (Wood 2003). Indeed, contagious disease and intentional starvation were early strategies used by the Canadian state to maintain power over the First Nations (Daschuk 2013).

In Saskatchewan Colonialism Began in the 1870s

Since the Canadian federal government followed British precedent in utilizing treaties as instruments of nation-building, formal agreements that guaranteed reserve lands and other rights, including education, were negotiated with Indigenous groups in what became Saskatchewan in the 1870s (Carr-Stewart 2003). Treaties 4 and 6 are the major treaties covering Saskatchewan that were signed by First Nations leaders and the federal government in the 1870s. These num-

bered treaties constituted the benign face of Canadian colonialism and arguably also represented attempts on the part of prairie First Nations to achieve an accommodation with Euro-Canadian society by accessing formal schooling and other technologies of modernity. Much more malign were subsequent federal policies of dispossession, removal, and transformation through which Indigenous autonomy was coercively appropriated (Daschuk 2013; Dickason and McNab 2008; Green 2006). The facts bore this out.

In order to bring the prairie lands into the geography and body politic of the newly formed country called Canada in the 1870s, the federal government desired European immigrants to farm the land. The land belonged to the prairie First Nations, of course, many of whom were migratory hunters of the buffalo. To force the First Nations to cede the lands to the federal government, massive numbers of bison were slaughtered by White bison hunters in the 1800s (Daschuk 2013; Dickason and McNab 2008; Tobias 1983). This was a necessary condition in order to help persuade European farmers to immigrate to the plains. To that end, Prime Minister MacDonald sent Alexander Morris, the main Treaty Commissioner of the federal government, to negotiate on behalf of Canada with the First Nations leaders (Tobias 1983). After long negotiations, treaties were agreed upon and signed. The treaty details are clear (Talbot 2009).

The European settlers would receive parcels of land as the First Nations people were to be moved to tiny reserves, based on a general formula of 128 acres per person (Miller 2009). The spirit of intent pertaining to this dispossession of Indigenous lands was only to be to the depth of a plough. (This point will be discussed in a subsequent section about the education debt.) The newcomers would be able to live in peace because the First Nations agreed to this. They would also be able to practice their various European-based religions. In exchange for these promises, the First Nations people would receive education in day schools located on or next to the new reserves – the Cree, Saulteaux, Dene and Dakota leaders wanted the next generation to know how to read and write in order to better understand the ways of the Euro-Canadians. They were to receive medical help, and agricultural tools to change from hunters to farmers. Clearly, *all* of the people living

on the prairies in those days were treaty people, regardless of race (Miller 2009).

Acknowledging the brutal strategies of state-sponsored coercion, the First Nations people honoured the promises they made in the treaties (Dickason and McNab 2008). They were soon to find out, however, that honouring one's word did not go both ways. For example, whenever the First Nations people became successful at farming and out-competed the settlers, as occurred in the Qu'Appelle Valley, they were quickly relocated to less arable land (Carter 1993; Daschuk 2013). There were far more duplicitous actions by the federal government that the First Nations would experience, however, actions with extremely disastrous consequences.

Even worse, at the same time that Morris and the leaders of the prairie First Nations were engaged in treaty negotiations, the federal government was developing another legal document in Ottawa, one that had *absolutely no input from First Nations people*. Once it became law it changed the lives of every Indigenous person in Canada from the 1870s until today. It was called *the Indian Act*.

The Indian Act Renders Prairie Treaty Promises About Education Meaningless

The Indian Act of 1876, a clear example of how the essentialist discourse led to racist government policy, defined Indigenous peoples as wards of the state, and empowered the federal government to enforce aggressive assimilation policies as a means of rendering Indigenous people into acculturated Canadian citizens (St. Denis 2007). A mass system of segregated education was seen as critical to the achievement of this goal and was formalized through the Indian Act and the infamous Davin Report of 1879⁴ (Milloy 1999). Education as a tool in the cultural transformation of Indigenous peoples found particularly graphic expression in residential schools, which operated between the 1880s and the 1990s as partnerships between the Canadian state and various Christian churches

⁴ Based on his observations of schools in the US, Davin recommended that the Canadian Federal government, in partnership with Christian churches, should operate residential or industrial schools, where Indigenous children would be removed from their families and subjected to a regime of radical resocialization to assimilate them into Euro-Canadian culture. See Davin 1879.

(Cappon 2008). Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes at the age of six to residential schools where, if they survived, they would remain until 16. Parents were not allowed to visit their children in these schools that were located extremely far from the reserves. Children could only see their parents during the summer months. *Thousands* of them died either in the schools or trying to escape from them to find their way home. Tragically, some parents never found out what happened to their children (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015).

The residential school system for First Nations children was created with the stated intention of assimilating them into mainstream Canadian society. This system was flawed right from its outset, however, as the design of the policy itself appears to have been “not for assimilation but for inequality” (Barman 1995, 57). A lack of understanding of First Nations cultures in the curriculum, inadequate funding leading to poor food and undernourished students, inferior instruction from mostly poorly qualified teachers, and only half days for academics immediately doomed this educational project to failure. Whether intentional or not, the state’s policy on Indigenous education “made possible no other goal than Aboriginal peoples’ absolute marginalization from Canadian life – a goal schools achieved with remarkable success” (Barman 1995, 75). The underpinnings for this project were based on the essentialist discourse of White supremacy. The Canadian government wanted First Nations people to assimilate into the bottom rungs of mainstream society, as farm workers and domestic servants, because they were fearful of violent conflict and “Indian wars,” such as was occurring in the United States (Miller 2009; Milloy 1999). The schools embarked on a philosophy of “kill the Indian to save the man,” (Friedel 2010, 4) resulting in cultural genocide. First Nations parents’ worst fears about what these schools were doing to their children were being realized – they were being physically beaten for myriad reasons, even for speaking the language they spoke at home with their parents. The mandate to rid First Nations languages and traditions led to a culture of severe violence within the schools in which the children had no one to protect them – parents were most often forbidden to visit their own children.

First Nations leaders demanded that the federal government adhere to what was promised in the signed treaties. In particular, they wanted day schools to be on or near the reserves as was agreed upon in the treaties. The cold and cruel response was that the Indian Act negated anything the government had promised in the signed treaties. In other words, the Treaty 4 and 6 promises made by the federal government through its representative Alexander Morris were virtually meaningless. The anguish experienced by Indigenous parents and children as a result of this egregious and duplicitous policy of institutional racism is incomprehensible to most White people (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015). The facts about kidnapping young innocent Indigenous children and forcing them to grow up under the horrific conditions of residential schools are evidence that paying an historical education debt is warranted.⁵

As a contemporary example of the lingering ignorance among many White people, consider an editorial published in August 2017 in a Saskatchewan newspaper. The author lamented that First Nations leaders often speak of the racism they experience (cited by Hunter 2017). Called “When will it end?,” the editorial claimed that “racism is a daily reality . . . for everyone,” yet First Nations people are the only ones “claiming racism.” The incorrect implication was that even though White people also experience racism, they do not complain about it. This position refuses to acknowledge White privilege in all of the nation’s institutions. Even worse, a Conservative Senator, Lynn Beyak, was embroiled in a battle with her senate colleagues over racist letters she had posted on her parliamentary website, refusing to remove them. Beyak “is the Indian residential school apologist who believes the schools weren’t all that bad and that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – which found that at least 6,000 children died in the schools – could have done a better job focusing on the positives” (Talaga 2019).

Canadian authorities have acknowledged that residential schools were responsible for brutalizing children emotionally, psychologically, physically, spiritually, culturally, and sexually (Milloy 1999). The narratives

⁵ The use of the term *kidnapping* may be jarring to some readers. We use it because it is an accurate portrayal of what transpired when government officials appeared at the homes of Indigenous families to apprehend children against the will of the parents.

of survivors of the residential school system included in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report make explicit the pain and suffering of Indigenous peoples at the hands of a racist federal government steeped in the belief that colonization of the First Nations people was for the best: “‘savages’ were to emerge as Christian ‘white men’” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015, 58). The findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada provide evidence of the European assumption that they were a superior race of people:

The educational goals of the schools were limited and confused, and usually reflected a low regard for the intellectual capabilities of Aboriginal people. For the students, education and technical training too often gave way to the drudgery of doing the chores necessary to make the schools self-sustaining. Child neglect was institutionalized, and the lack of supervision created situations where students were prey to sexual and physical abusers. [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015, 3-4]

It has become clear that it was not a civilized people educating savages as the government claimed and the media of the day portrayed; rather, the narratives of residential school survivors strongly suggest that the opposite was closer to the truth (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

The government’s insistence on separating children from their families over multiple generations resulted in a significant incapacitation of the cohesiveness and social sustainability of First Nations families and communities. This created a “complex situation where a high level of *dependency* toward the state is combined with a *profound distrust* of that same state” among most Indigenous peoples (Papillon and Cosentino 2004, 1). In other words, the legacy of the racist residential school policy very much exists today. The social problems and low economic status of large segments of Indigenous peoples today are evidence of that. Indeed, postcolonial historiography locates in these institutions the roots of many contemporary educational challenges in Saskatchewan, especially the enduring disconnect between Indigenous peoples and state-sponsored formal educational institutions (Battiste 2005; Cottrell, Preston and Pearce, 2012).

Many Canadians are unaware that the federal government has not lived up to the promises negotiated in the numbered treaties of the prairies (Tupper 2012). They do not understand that the First Nations leaders negotiated with the federal government a promise of schools to be located on or near the newly created reserves rather than the residential schools. Nor is the fact well known that the First Nations *have* lived up to all of the promises they made in Treaties 4 and 6, or that the federal government implemented the Indian Act and residential school policy immediately after the Treaties were signed. There are other factors in the contemporary context, however, that further highlight an education debt owed to Indigenous peoples in Saskatchewan. These factors demonstrate the evolution of the colonization model into a scenario best described as neo-colonialism.

Strategies Utilized by Indigenous Youth to Survive the Neo-Colonial Experience Today

Do Indigenous high school students in Saskatchewan have to act White to improve their academic standing? If they do, are they then subjected to ridicule and viewed as “sellouts” by their communities if they succeed? These are the questions posed by several scholars in a seminal work edited by Ogbu entitled *Minority Status, Oppositional Culture, and Schooling* (2008). Although the focus of the book is on African American adolescents, some of the contributions are useful when applied to the situations experienced by Indigenous youth in Saskatchewan.

One of the objectives throughout Ogbu’s work was to theorize the *roots of oppositional culture* in minority youth groups. He proposed that the expectations of the dominant White culture about how the Other was to behave led to minorities bearing the “burden” of acting White, especially in schools. This theory suggests that unsuccessful school performance is not necessarily caused by a lack of desire on the part of minority youth to attain good grades. Rather, many or even most non-White youth from certain cultural backgrounds often reject mannerisms that are conducive to currying favour with the mostly White teaching force. This is especially the situation for what Ogbu and Simons term *non-voluntary minorities* (1998). Non-voluntary minorities in the USA are African Americans, Hispanics,

and of course Indigenous peoples. Demographics in Saskatchewan indicate that Indigenous youth fit the profile of the non-voluntary minority⁶ (Howe, 2006).

Ogbu (2008) developed a cultural ecological model (CEM) in order to study how different factors such as community and the school itself affect the academic performance of minority youth. When youth from these non-voluntary racial and cultural backgrounds adopt the habits and styles of the dominant White culture, they run the risk of being ostracized by their peers and communities. By extension, for Indigenous youth in Canada who are academically successful in schools, a common perspective is that they have been assimilated into settler society.⁷

In addition to being ridiculed and ostracized by their communities, there are myriad reasons why Indigenous youth are not driven to excel at academics in the school's current curricular format. In Saskatchewan and across Canada there is widespread support for *meritocracy*. This is the belief that through hard work and skill, a person will rise to the station in life that they deserve. There is no allowance for concepts such as the oppression of certain social groups or White privilege. In other words, similar to the colour-blind discourse, meritocracy is power-blind. The following example is a demonstration that meritocracy is a myth that enables privilege to continue to affect all social relations.

Over a decade ago, one of us completed a study in which the social science department heads at ten Vancouver high schools were interviewed, all of whom were White males who had been teaching for at least 10 years (Orlowski 2008). When asked for their thoughts as to why the high school graduation rate for Indigenous students was about half that of non-Indigenous students, nine teachers used variants of

the *cultural-deficit discourse*, putting the onus on the students themselves to adapt to the ways of White people. Some of these discourses included the following: Indigenous students do not value education; they do not have good family role models; and socializing, rather than academics, is their sole inspiration to attend school. Only one teacher pointed to the Eurocentric curriculum and an almost all-White teaching force as likely factors for the lower graduation rate. Similarly, this same teacher was the only one of the ten who said he tried to incorporate Indigenous perspectives when he taught Canadian history, despite the fact that he admitted that he did not understand them very well. All nine of the other teacher-participants simply refused to incorporate Indigenous perspectives. They invoked the importance of the colour-blind curriculum, apparently unaware that such a curriculum is embedded with whiteness as the hegemonic norm. Although we have not interviewed Saskatchewan teachers on these issues, we have no evidence to suggest the thinking of veteran White social science teachers would vary from their BC counterparts. Is this fair to Indigenous students?

There is much research that suggests teacher expectations are crucial in determining the academic performances of students (Dunne and Gazeley 2008; Leroy and Symes 2001). Might this be a factor in the lower graduation rates for Indigenous students? The research is unclear. But one thing is certain, when it comes to the practice of *tracking* or *streaming*, teacher expectations certainly play a role in the academic careers of many Indigenous high school students (Oakes 2005).

In another study one of us conducted, this one with working-class students from five racial backgrounds, we learned that seemingly benign intentions on the part of teachers can have devastating consequences (Orlowski 2011). As a case in point, consider the following description that an Indigenous female grade 12 student participant offered of the time that a possibly well-meaning math teacher moved her from regular Math 8 into the modified Math 8 class:

I had a lot of teachers at [my former high school] who felt sorry for me because they thought I was poor. And I didn't like it. I didn't like the way ... well, they didn't treat me badly, but they treated me differently

6 It is important to note that Indigenous peoples are not considered to be a *minority* in the common usage of the term. The history of colonization experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada renders their situation to be different from all other minority groups, who are considered to be settlers.

7 Some Indigenous youth who have been academically successful in the K-12 school system and at post-secondary institutions have charted a path that both honours their cultural traditions and accepts ideas and concepts used in mainstream educational settings. Teacher education programs for prospective educators from Indigenous backgrounds at University of British Columbia (NITEP) and the University of Saskatchewan (ITEP) have been developed from this perspective. For more, see Kawagley 2006.

from everybody else. ... In my math class, in grade 8, I kept to myself and I didn't get my work done all the time. That's why they put me into modified math. They didn't really give me a chance. They didn't want to get to know me. They just felt sorry for me. They thought I was stupid and slow. They didn't want to deal with me. There was no extra help like there was for other kids. The math teacher, actually he was pretty nice, but he told me it was going to be better for me in the modified class, and the next thing I knew that's where I was. I didn't understand this would stop me from going to university. [Orlowski 2011, 81]

This excerpt helps to explain how well-intentioned teachers can still play into the dynamics of systemic racism and inadvertently work toward maintaining White hegemony and Indigenous oppression. The student was removed from the regular math course and placed into a "modified math" course, which is less demanding, but poses a major obstacle for admittance into any university program. The decisions around which students go into these less academic streams underscore the gatekeeper role that school personnel have in society. These decisions most often have the effect of masking and perpetuating social and economic inequalities.

Society's acceptance of meritocracy as truth and the practice of streaming should not be surprising when one considers the demographics of students placed into less academic programs. The practice of streaming structures societal inequality because most modified school programs are filled with students from economically, socially, and culturally marginalized families (Oakes 2005; Kelly 1993; James 1990). Moreover, after leaving school, they are also more likely to become members of the working class (Curtis, Livingstone and Smaller 1992). It is clear that adopting meritocracy in the contemporary context is an effective way to maintain traditional social hierarchies and the status quo. Orlowski can attest to Oakes' premise from his own experience teaching in alternative programs for many years. Only a small percentage of the students came from middle-class backgrounds, and although White students were the majority in the mainstream schools, they were a tiny minority in modified and alternative programs.

It is important to realize that these modified and alternative programs are in effect gatekeepers for entrance into university. For most of these students, their life chances and economic futures are severely limited because of this. The situation is exacerbated even more for Indigenous students who go to federally funded First Nations schools, also known as band schools. A study undertaken by a former chief economist for TD Bank found that "First Nations children living on reserve *receive at least 30 percent less funding for their education* as children under provincial jurisdiction" (Porter 2016, emphasis added). This egregious funding discrepancy leads to shortages in various supports for First Nations students attending band schools.

The preceding discussion further highlights the case that there is an education debt to be paid to the Indigenous communities in Saskatchewan. In light of the federal government's broken treaty promises, deployment of colonizing strategies, and reluctance to engage in resource revenue sharing with the First Nations, the current funding shortfalls are particularly contemptible. The next section makes further connections between economics, racism, and educational outcomes in the province of Saskatchewan.

Saskatchewan Today and Racialized Poverty

Despite the newfound prosperity generated by the resource boom over the past two decades, Saskatchewan's poverty rate of 15.3 percent remains among the highest in Canada (Hunter, Douglas and Pedersen 2008). Also striking is the fact that this poverty is not distributed evenly across racial lines because, excluding people living on reserves, Indigenous people in Saskatchewan are almost four times as likely to be living in poverty than non-Indigenous (Hunter and Douglas 2006). The situation is even more striking with respect to child poverty. Despite record royalties from potash and other resources, child poverty for Indigenous families in Saskatchewan is a staggering 45 percent, whereas the child poverty rate for non-Indigenous is 13 percent (Douglas and Gingrich 2009). While disadvantage was less pronounced (but still significant) for Métis children at 28.3 percent, an overwhelming 57.9 percent of First Nations children in Saskatchewan regularly go without some of the basic necessities of life (Douglas and Gingrich 2009). This

deprivation has profound, wide-ranging, and long-term effects on children, as Hunter and Douglas (2006) attest:

Poverty can do both immediate and lasting harm to children. Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to lack adequate food, clothing and basic health care, live in substandard housing and poorly resourced neighborhoods, become victims of crime and violence, be less successful in school, suffer ill health and have shortened life spans. [1]

It has long been known that race and social class are major determinants of educational opportunities and achievement as well as future life chances (Bernstein 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Oakes 2005). Severe poverty has an even more deleterious effect on educational outcomes in all Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, including Canada (West 2007).

A large body of research suggests that the pervasive disadvantage experienced by Saskatchewan's Indigenous peoples emanates from, and is reflected in poor educational achievement normalized by the legacy of colonialism (Battiste 2005; Bell 2004; Richards 2008). This legacy has created intergenerational disparities, which impede educational progress among many Indigenous students, leading to the reproduction of low socioeconomic status in succeeding generations. That Indigenous peoples benefit the least from publicly funded education has long been suspected and has recently been proven, but the degree to which race influences educational outcomes has become abundantly clear over the past decade with the collection of detailed data on student achievement by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education.

Acknowledging that our colonial past continues to inform current disparities requires a painful confrontation with the realities of racial privilege and necessitates a more equitable and ethical distribution of wealth premised on a treaty relationship as the basis for cross-cultural co-habitation. Since the wider resources of the state are critical to the achievement of this outcome, we also conclude that challenging the current neoliberal vision of a limited state in order to revitalize a more activist and redistributive government is an additional prerequisite to the achievement

of a prosperous, shared and harmonious future in the province of Saskatchewan.

The Canadian government now has an opportunity to finally pay back the education debt to the Indigenous peoples of Saskatchewan that it first accrued during the Treaty-making period of the 1870s (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015). Indeed, the Treaty reference to owning the land to the depth of a plough is a cogent and ethical rationale for paying back this education debt. After all, if this statement was to be taken literally, all profits from resource extraction on Treaty 4 and 6 territories should support Indigenous communities. Further actions on the part of the federal government, such as over a century of the enactment of residential school policy and the underfunding of band schools, demonstrate the ethical imperative behind this call to finally pay the education debt owed to the Indigenous peoples of this province. The final section outlines a plan to rectify the grossly unfair conditions and unethical practices pertaining to Indigenous learners in Saskatchewan.

An Outline for Compensatory Funding for Education and Reconciliation

We are calling for targeted funding to improve the educational outcomes of Indigenous peoples in Saskatchewan. The plan for this funding is connected to the notion of community development, and is part of enhancing nation-building. The outline encompasses three different levels: Level One, frontline workers (teachers and educational assistants); Level Two, specialists (educational psychologists, consultants, and after school programs); and Level Three, governance (school board trustees). The most successful strategy to ameliorate educational inequities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is the *community school*, and this will underpin the outline for this project. Here are some of the details.

A revamped community school model for Indigenous learners will be the base of Level One of this plan. Funding will be used to create a Head Start program within the community school for early childhood education similar to the Head Start program in the US. Ideally, the staff will be educated in Indigenous perspectives and open to engaging with the community. Teachers will be similarly well-educated in Indigenous

ways of knowing and experts in culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 1995). They will engage in decolonizing teacher practice (Dion, Johnston and Rice 2010). Teacher experts will be hired at the primary grade level (K-3), and the intermediate level (4-7). Subject specialists will be hired at the junior high school level (8-9), and the senior high school level (10-12). All teachers must understand the history of colonization in Saskatchewan. They must first and foremost be caring educators (Kadyschuk 2017). The teacher-to-student ratio will be in line with best practices. The educational assistants will be trained in engaging with students with various special needs such as FAS, FAE, and ADHD. The well-being of these and all Indigenous students cannot be met without adequate funding.

Level Two of the targeted funding will utilize a promising approach known as wraparound services. Wraparound services attempt to improve students' mental and physical health by addressing outside of school issues such as poverty and has shown some success around improved educational outcomes in many jurisdictions in the US (Fries *et al.* 2012). Most often in tandem with the community school model, the wrap-around approach relies on an emphasis on counselling services, after-school programs, and social service support for families in need. In the context of this project, the targeted funding will be used to hire educational psychologists well trained in successful strategies in mental health and student assessment for Indigenous learners. Families and community Elders will be made welcome in the community schools. Counselling psychologists educated in successful approaches to individual and family therapy with Indigenous peoples will be part of the team. After school programs will also be developed to help students and their families living in poverty. An example of this may be basketball leagues for girls and for boys.

Level Three is vitally important to the overall success of this endeavour. The roles and responsibilities of school board trustees must emphasize the importance of decolonizing the curriculum and the school in general. They must provide professional development opportunities for all front-line school personnel, from the school principals, to the teachers and education assistants. The Board must value and respect the Indigenous communities that will be part of the

school, and strive to strengthen partnerships with these communities.

This is only the skeletal outline of a plan to engage with and support Indigenous learners. As mentioned throughout the paper, the main objective is to make the case that an education debt exists in Saskatchewan. By addressing this debt through targeted funding, the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students should lessen over time.

Conclusions

Acknowledging that our colonial past continues to inform current disparities requires a painful confrontation with the realities of racial privilege and necessitates a more equitable and ethical distribution of wealth premised on a treaty relationship as the basis for cross-cultural cohabitation. It is clear that supporting Indigenous youth in schools cannot be the sole strategy to raise more Indigenous people out of poverty. Indeed, challenging the status quo around governance in the province itself is necessary. Because the wider resources of the state are critical to the achievement of this outcome, a clear conclusion is that confronting the current neoliberal vision of a limited state in order to revitalize a more activist and redistributive government is an additional prerequisite to the achievement of a prosperous, shared, and harmonious future in the province of Saskatchewan.

Paying the education debt, however, is an important contribution to improving the lives of Indigenous peoples in Saskatchewan. There is a historical ethical imperative to address this. As more people in Saskatchewan understand this, the more likely the success of this project.

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