Ensuring the Future of Métis Well-Being through Heart-Work and Digital Means

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Abstract

As Métis educators working in Alberta, we have long advocated for the meaningful inclusion of Métis perspectives and relational ways in educational spaces. We take up this work of advocacy and critical scholarship to honour our ancestors and ensure that the next generations of Métis are firmly rooted in their identity and empowered with confidence to assert their presence. Despite our efforts and those of many dedicated others who see the need for equity and inclusion in Indigenous education, our attempts to interrupt dominant settler-colonial logics have only been marginally successful. This article explores how a lack of knowingness around the Métis, flawed notions of racial purity, and assumptions of full assimilation of the Métis have resulted in ongoing injustices against the Métis. We share how we have worked to rectify these inequities through digital means alongside the prioritization of traditional Métis values that include respect, relational ways, and reciprocity.

Keywords: Métis, equity, Indigenous education, settler-colonialism, assimilation, digital advocacy

Résumé

En tant qu'éducatrices et éducateurs métis travaillant en Alberta, nous militons depuis longtemps pour une inclusion significative des perspectives et des modes relationnels métis en éducation. Ce travail de sensibilisation et de recherche critique vise à honorer la mémoire de nos ancêtres et à offrir aux prochaines générations de Métis un enracinement identitaire solide et la confiance en soi pour s'affirmer. Toutefois, malgré nos efforts et ceux d'autres personnes tout aussi engagées envers l'équité et l'inclusion en éducation autochtone, nos démarches pour dépasser la logique coloniale dominante ont jusqu'ici rencontré un succès limité. Cet article explore comment la méconnaissance des Métis, la croyance en leur assimilation complète ainsi qu'une conception erronée de la pureté raciale continuent d'alimenter des injustices persistantes. Nous présentons également comment nous avons œuvré à corriger ces iniquités au moyen d'initiatives numériques et par la mise en avant de valeurs métisses ancestrales, telles que le respect, les relations interpersonnelles et la réciprocité.

Mots-clés : Métis, équité, éducation autochtone, colonialisme de peuplement, assimilation, sensibilisation par le numérique

Introduction

> The history of the Métis constitutes one of the first and most enduring adaptive experiences in Western Canada. In coming to understand this experience we are coming to understand ourselves. (Foster, 1985, para. 7)

As Métis educators working in the province of Alberta, we have long advocated for the full inclusion of Métis perspectives and relational ways within in the provincial curriculum (Poitras Pratt, 2020; Poitras Pratt & Gladue, 2022; Poitras Pratt & Lalonde, 2019; Poitras Pratt et al., 2021). We take up this work of advocacy and critical scholarship to honour our ancestors and ensure that the next generations of Métis are firmly rooted in their identity, empowered with the confidence to assert their presence. Despite our efforts and those of many dedicated others who see the need for equity and inclusion in Indigenous education, our attempts to interrupt dominant settler-colonial logics have only been marginally successful (Wolfe, 2006). Knowing this, we ask ourselves why our efforts are not being taken up more fully by educators? It is our contention that if fellow citizens choose to remain in a state of ignorance around the Métis (Ahmed, 2014; Isaac, 2016), our continued existence as a unique nation of Indigenous Peoples is at risk. A widespread and nation-wide lack of knowingness around the Métis Peoples is one that has caused much confusion and hurt, and the continuation of unwarranted "ancestral pain" (L'Hirondelle, 2003, as cited in Daniels, 2006); moreover, this lack of knowing has translated into a lack of mainstream support for Métis rights and perspectives. We turn to the thoughtful words of fellow Métis scholars Leah Dorion and Curtis Breaton, who note that "as more Métis people across Canada decolonize their identity and spirituality, a new, holistic conversation can occur, encouraging our children to be mindful about our past, present, and future vision" (Dorion & Breaton, 2021, p. 26). We understand our own ardent political and arts-based endeavours, and that of an ever-growing body of Métis scholars, as engagement in Métis futurities where

> Indigenous futurities involve continuous focus on self-determination in ways that uphold Indigenous epistemologies as indispensable as all knowledges. In other words, if all epistemologies can sit in a circle and value one another, white settler colonialism would be dismantled as a dominant force over others. (Sandoval, 2022, p. 46)

As more global peoples make their way into these lands to call Canada their home, we ask what lessons can be learned from the experiences of the first post-contact people, the Métis, in terms of our shared future?

This article begins with introductions of the authors, followed by a brief look at the Michif way of life, including identification of values and principles, as a way of introducing readers to the persistence of Métis self-determination. We provide a rationale for why Métis futurities are essential for the future well-being of our nation among colonial realities such as racist ideologies and the presumed assimilation of the Métis. The story of how a group of Métis educators, supported by allies, collectively disrupted a colonially mired provincial curriculum is included. The article concludes with a brief description of how we have used innovative online multimedia forms to amplify authentic Métis voices through a collaborative, community-based approach and, in doing so, demonstrate how "Indigenous futurities are not only in the future, but are being practiced and seeded now" (Kulago et al., 2024, p. 3). In centering Métis ways in our collective work, we seek to disrupt settler logics that include outdated notions of racial purity as the basis for Indigenous belongingness and we assert the presence of the Métis, rather than our erasure.

Affirming Our Métis Identity and Positionality through Miyeu Waahkootoowin

It is common practice for Métis people to share their family lineages with one another upon first introduction (Hourie & Carrière-Acco, 2006). This custom allows us to make ready alliances, as we often share kinship connections or common stories of place; lately, this practice also serves as a form of establishing genuine connections to our Métis lineage in a variety of settings, but especially in academia, where Métis identity is routinely co-opted by non-Métis people who are benefiting at our cost.[1] In the spirit of honouring what is a traditional practice, we offer our own family lineages and remind readers that "Métis identity is the way Métis people see the world and the way they live in the world *by the values they hold*" (Littlejohn, 2022, p. 33, emphasis added).

1 A CBC documentary hosted by Drew Hayden Taylor explores the appropriation of Indigenous identity (https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/video/1.6597284), providing an illuminating look at what Métis lawyer Jean Teillet describes as the next form of assimilation.

My name is Yvonne Poitras Pratt, and both my mother and father were born and raised in the Fishing Lake Métis Settlement in northeastern Alberta. After moving out of the settlement community to find work, my parents began a new life in British Columbia. As a child, I was told that I had "Native" ancestry, but I was also cautioned by my parents to "keep that secret to ourselves" as racism against the Métis was rampant.[2] I came to more fully understand what any disclosure of Métis ancestry meant as I made my way through three degrees as a mature student. I was often perplexed and angered at what was taught about the Métis in these formal settings and how this rendition conflicted with the stories that were shared in my childhood home and at Métis gatherings. From my relative, the late Gordon Poitras, I learned that the European forefather of the Poitras family, André, traced his arrival from France to the "New World" in 1640. André's descendants became involved in the fur trade and had the good sense to partner with First Nations women. Their offspring, and others like them, would assert themselves as a new post-contact nation of Indigenous Peoples, the Métis, in the 1800s (Teillet, 2019). I also learned the proud history of my great-great grandfather Pierre Poitras, a famed buffalo hunter who served in the 1869 Provisional Government with Louis Riel; later, his son (my great-grandfather) Elzear Poitras (1856–1919) and Elzear's wife Marguerite Dauphinais (1863–??) built and managed the first hotel in St. Paul des Métis (now St. Paul, Alberta). Working with skilled Métis genealogist and community historian Darcy McRae, I have also learned that Paul Fagnant (also spelled Fayant), born 1837 in St. François Xavier, was assigned Métis scrip in what is now known as the Stampede Grounds near downtown Calgary. This recent revelation means there are more Métis ancestors who will arise as early residents of what is now often described as a "young" and vibrant city. I expect to learn more as I delve into my closely related family lines of Parenteau, Calliou, Lemire, and others.

As an active citizen of the newly named Otipemisiwak Métis Government (formerly the Métis Nation of Alberta), and a professor at the University of Calgary's Werklund School of Education, I have dedicated much of my scholarly activity to supporting Métis educational needs and interests at the provincial and national levels. I served as the inaugural Associate Director, Métis Education at the Rupertsland Institute in 2012–2013, an Executive Council member of the Rupertsland Centre for Métis Research

2 See Yvonne's digital story, "Learning Who I Am: From the Bush to the Tower," on the Métis Voices website (https://www.metisvoices.ca/story-1).

(2013–2021), and on the Alberta Métis Education Council (2015–2022). As a Métis academic, I have been a strong advocate for the use of digital media as a decolonizing force in community-engaged scholarship (Poitras Pratt, 2020). I now mentor a new generation of Métis students, educators, and scholars who are bravely stepping into work that is meant to serve community needs and interests as a priority.

I am Billie-Jo Grant, a proud Métis woman and citizen of the Otipemisiwak Métis Government. I am an award-winning educator who carries the rich heritage of my Fraser ancestors from the Northwest Territories and Fort Chipewyan area, as well as Pruden ancestors from northern Saskatchewan. My paternal lineage includes the Pruden family, who were deeply rooted in Métis history through the fur trade. My maternal heritage includes Nancy Ann Beaudry (Cree-Métis), born around 1813 at Carlton House, Saskatchewan, to Louison Joseph Beaudry (dit Gaudry) and Lizette Chatelain. Nancy married Colin Fraser, a Scottish-born fur trader and piper for Sir George Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company, around 1832 at Fort Carlton. Together, they raised a large family, including a son who would later become a trader and trapper in Fort Chipewyan. This blended lineage embodies the cultural richness, resilience, and complex intergenerational connections that define Métis identity.

Like many Métis families, my ancestors endured societal pressures and a sense of shame that others imposed on them. This reality ultimately silenced and suppressed my family's Métis identity as they continued to live in northern communities. What I now view as a generational burden shaped my own childhood, one marked by movement, confusion, and a limited understanding of the strength of my Métis heritage. Instead, I internalized the dysfunction around me, believing it was an inherent part of my identity rather than recognizing it as a colonial construct imposed on my family and community. Discussions of Residential Schools and historical trauma on both sides of my family later revealed the source of this hurt. While I am now a proud Métis woman (*iskwew*), I was not a proud Métis child (*awâsis*). In fact, it was not until I became a mother myself that I began the transformative journey to reconnect with and embrace my Métis culture, history, and community. Today, I take pride in sharing the resilience and beauty of the Métis nation with my three adult children and in teaching others.

As the Director of Indigenous Education for Wild Rose School Division in Alberta, I have made it my mission to seamlessly integrate Métis perspectives into everyday learning. I have worked extensively with the Rupertsland Institute and other

organizations to create authentic Métis resources and to elevate Métis education across the province. My work is grounded in curiosity, dialogue, and lifelong learning, with a vision for an education system that celebrates Métis culture and history on a daily basis. I aim to inspire educators, students, and communities to embrace a more inclusive and enriched understanding of the Métis.

Our shared commitment to advancing Métis education brought us together in 2017. Billie-Jo was working with the Rupertsland Institute education team, who have been tasked with addressing critical gaps around the educational interests of Métis citizens across Alberta, and Yvonne in her role as a Métis scholar and founding member of the Alberta Métis Education Council. As the first-ever Associate Director, Métis Education at the Rupertsland Institute in 2012–2013, Yvonne had joined five Métis educators to form that council, an advisory body to the Rupertsland Institute education team (Poitras Pratt & Lalonde, 2019). Our group was guided by the spiritual leadership of Cree-Métis Elder Elizabeth Letendre, whose traditional teachings deeply informed our educational vision. Under her guidance, we agreed that a collective voice was essential to honour our ancestral ways.[3] Our respective familial and professional stories are guided by and encompass central tenets of Métis ways: respectful relations, reciprocity, and resilience (Auger, 2021; Fiola, 2021; Gladue & Poitras Pratt, 2023; Poitras Pratt & Gladue, 2022).

As Métis people, being related in a good way, or miyeu waahkootoowin (also spelled wâhkôhtowin), means our "collective experience of freedom is informed by the meaningful relationships in which individuals are engaged [in or] through kinship connections" (Saunders & Dubois, 2019, p. 42). We extend this definition of kinship into the realm of professional education, where like-minded individuals who gather to address a matter of importance or to celebrate a shared event often describe themselves as family (Payment, 2009). As professional educators dedicated to social justice, where equity means the inclusion of Métis perspectives, we have collaborated with fellow Métis to develop authentic, accessible teaching resources and to offer critiques of approaches that omit Métis perspectives. These efforts are grounded in heart-work that honours our ancestors, lifts up contemporary Métis voices, and creates pathways for future Métis generations. Collectively, we are driven by a shared commitment to improving educational outcomes and fostering pride in future generations of Métis. Our educational

3 The Alberta Métis Education Council was dissolved by the Rupertsland Institute leadership in January 2023.

activities are guided by a Métis futurities perspective where "we must continually reflect on whether the types of futurity work we are engaged in centers [sic] Indigenous values and systems of relationality or [conversely] aligns with settler logics and practices of erasure" (Kulago et al., 2024, p. 3). In this article, we share our work framed within Métis futurities, recognizing that our traditional knowledge provides enduring insights and transformative lessons for future generations.

ka ishi pimaatishiyaahk—Our (Michif) Way of Life

As a post-contact Indigenous group, the Métis came to rely on an amalgamation of values and principles that reflected ka ishi pimaatishiyaahk (our way of life). These were more than just regulations or even laws; they represented a governance system rooted in Métis values and belief systems that balanced respect for the fierce independence and freedom of the Métis alongside considerations for collective well-being and survival. In the 1800s, these governance systems took the form of prairie laws and Rules of the Buffalo Hunt (Teillet, 2019), with formalized rules reinforcing shared principles such as cooperation, respect, and accountability. In their study of Métis political history, allied scholars Kelly Saunders and Janique Dubois identify Métis adherence to principles of freedom, kinship, democracy, the rule of law, and provisionality. Notably, Métis "political organization[s] and the mechanisms of governance that accompany it are not ends but, rather, means through which the more fundamental goal of *self-determination* [emphasis added] can be achieved" (Saunders & Dubois, 2019, p. 37). These ever-adapting ways of life, ka ishi pimaatishiyaahk, have now become evident in the political realm.

In modern times, the dynamic interaction of freedom and kinship responsibilities that value our interrelatedness and interconnectedness has led to the former Métis Nation of Alberta now identifying as Otipemisiwak—the Free People. It is essential to understand that this individual freedom is deeply rooted in the well-being of the wider collective; the ability of an individual to "live the good life," mino-pimatisiwin, relied on our connection with and the success of our kin community (Saunders & Dubois, 2019, p. 39). In the context of identifying ethical principles for Métis health research, this mutually dependent interaction emerged as "respect for individual and collective autonomy" (Métis Centre @ National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2018, p. 5). Similarly, in the decolonizing project undertaken in the Fishing Lake Métis Settlement, Poitras Pratt

(2020) identifies "an individual responsibility to collective survival [emerged] as a central theme" (p. 11). Finally, in the process of creating the "Métis Memories of Residential Schools" online teaching resource, Métis Elder Angie Crerar reiterated the same principle to our small team: "We are stronger and braver together."

The inherent tensions of balancing individual freedom with collective well-being lies at the heart of Métis self-determination, and, in this balancing, the identification of shared values is an essential undertaking. Lawrence Barkwell (2014), in his volunteer position as Coordinator of Métis Heritage and History Research at Winnipeg's Louis Riel Institute, attempted to identify a listing of Métis values. An abbreviated version of this list includes pride in being Métis, respect for Elders, celebrating family and life through music, dance, and food, an ethos of sharing, honesty, loyalty, conservation (in terms of not wasting), the use of humour as a way to lessen life's harder moments and to demonstrate humility, and, finally, diverse religious practices of "Roman Catholic, Protestant, and First Nation's [sic] rituals" (Barkwell, 2014, p. 2). It is important to point out that values differ from traditions, yet values—the beliefs and ideals that guide a community—are foundational aspects of the customs, rituals, and traditions that form part of any community. Thus, from the perspective of a long-time and trusted ally such as Barkwell, the much-loved traditions that the Métis practise, along with the values to which they adhere, serve as vital reminders of what the Métis hold up as markers of a "good life." Given our history, pride in being Métis and the ability to articulate a detailed Métis family lineage, especially when these truths have been carefully hidden by well-meaning family members, is a relatively recent phenomenon. It is far more common to hear Métis people say they are just finding out about their Métis heritage and, with the help of community, finding their way back to belongingness.

From an educator's perspective, Métis scholar and sustainability advocate Yvonne Vizina (2022) rightly points readers to the collaborative and nationwide undertaking led by the Canadian Council on Learning in the creation of the Métis holistic lifelong learning model (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). She maintains that "themes within [this model] are areas that should be considered when seeking a solution to a problem or challenge" (Vizina, 2022, p. 73) and include considerations of self, people, land, language, and traditions. For the Métis, the act of making informed choices for future actions or decisions is an expression of self-determination, grounded in a holistic worldview that recognizes Métis Peoples and communities as the best authorities regarding their own

needs. This perspective balances short- and long-term benefits to communities with the responsibility of sustaining the natural world. Here, the lessons of the past must interact with the present to ensure the health of future generations.

> Ancestral links to Métis experiential knowledge, thought processes, and values concerning the natural world have a place of importance in early childhood learning, within formal education, and throughout one's lifelong learning, so that future generations have the opportunity to live in a world based on sustainable choices. (Vizina, 2022, p. 73)

Another values-based resource arose from the vision of the Alberta Métis Education Council, a group of professional Métis educators who collaborated with the Rupertsland education team. As a collective, we generated a visual of a five-petal beaded flower in which each petal represents a specific aspect of foundational knowledge around the Métis. Once we came to consensus on these themes, extensive deliberations were held with a group of respected Knowledge Keepers from across the province, drawing on their lived experiences and expertise to generate authentic Métis knowingness. One of the five topic areas, "Métis Cultures and Traditions," asserts a Métis truth: "Historically and today, Métis culture and traditions are often absent and misunderstood in Canadian classrooms. It is essential, for all students, that educators adopt a positive, healthy perspective and an appreciation of Métis culture and traditions" (Rupertsland Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2021, p. 2). The following set of values are identified in this resource: (i) community, networking, and kinship; (ii) traditional storytelling; (iii) mobility and adaptability; and (iv) resilience. In honouring a sense of community through kinship and networking practices, the Métis are living in good relations with our own people and, importantly, with others. With pressing global issues on the rise, we believe that meaningful engagement with Métis values will not only help educators bridge gaps in knowledge and understanding of Métis people but could also provide guidance in terms of navigating racist and other equally flawed ideas.

Envisioning Métis Futurities Among Colonial Realities

The written history of Métis Peoples throughout Canada's post-contact history reveals a plethora of colonial and racist biases. It is not the intention of the authors to provide an ongoing platform for more mistruths; rather, we stand beside Métis authors Leah Dorion and Darren Préfontaine, who assert that the "traditional literature on Métis origins was primarily racist" (Dorion & Préfontaine, 1999, p. 8).[4] For instance, some historians, such as George F. Stanley, cast the Métis as primitive people who fought only to preserve disappearing traditions rather than a nation of people fighting to protect their homelands and way of life (Stanley, 1936, as cited in Dorion & Prefontaine, 1999, p. 18). Other historical accounts involving the Métis relay disturbing beliefs around miscegenation, or the mixing of racial groups, as problematic.

These dehumanizing ideas, set within a binary trap of "us and them" where people must neatly fit into one racial category or another, remain an insidious factor in how the Métis people continue to be treated in Canada. The Métis people, and eventually the Métis nation, emerged precisely because our ancestors were willing to see beyond issues of race to the person. This openness, along with a willingness to enter new territories of learning to establish kinscapes (Macdougall, 2021), has resulted in a unique nation of peoples who, from a Eurocentric standpoint, defy simple racial categorization (Andersen, 2014; Gaudry, 2018; Littlejohn, 2022). In truth, the Métis embody both the colonizer and the colonized. However, what endures and is most telling about our story is our continued fight to be recognized as Indigenous Peoples.

From a colonial perspective, assimilation was viewed as the most viable solution for those who came from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous lineages. Indeed, historical print literature "advocated complete assimilation as a positive step for mixed-race people…[and there] was rarely an accurate portrayal of the social and psychological consequences of denying an individual's cultural identity" (Dorion & Préfontaine, 1999, p. 25). Under a well-planned "logic of elimination" (Wolfe, 2006), assimilation has been the primary objective of colonial powerholders who supported Métis involvement in

4 The historiography compiled by Dorion and Préfontaine (1999) provides further evidence of the colonial bias held by influential historians and authors who "argued that the Métis and other 'primitive' Indigenous peoples irrationally resisted Euro-Canadian 'civilization' and the onward march of progress" (p. 18).

residential and other colonial forms of schooling, followed by the Sixties Scoop. Today, assimilationist aims are advanced through identity politics, notably in the Pretendian phenomenon, where the invention or misappropriation of a long-distant Indigenous relative is used as a false claim of Indigeneity. All have played a role in trying to eliminate the "Métis problem." Yet what remains evident from our nation's colonial past is that the Métis have never conceded their distinction as a unique nation of Indigenous Peoples or their privileging of Indigenous ways.

This stance of self-determination was most evident in the ways the Métis politically organized in 1869 and challenged the incoming colonial government, first through legal means in the form of 84 petitions sent to Prime Minister John A. MacDonald, all of which were ignored, and then in their rejection of the encroachment of surveyors on their homelands. In truth, their resistance arose to the lack of response to their persistent legal actions. After the 1885 Northwest Resistance, where a small group of Métis stood their ground for days against a much larger group of Canadian military troops, the surviving Métis were cast as "rebels" and "traitors" by the victors (Royal Canadian Geographic Society, 2018, para. 3). The charge of treason against Métis leader Louis Riel and the overruling of a plea for clemency in Riel's execution by MacDonald meant that the colonial powers viewed their military and political conquest of the Métis as the closing chapter on the so-called Métis problem.

As history proves, the colonial question of what to do with the Métis was not solved through these historical events and actions. The few Métis who navigated the extremely flawed scrip system[5] were relegated to faraway lands, while numerous others moved westward to escape the injustices, and still others hid in plain sight, disavowing their Métis identity and family lineages (Teillet, 2019). All these options proved painful. For those who left everything to start anew, this was a time of both fear and desperation, as overt and blatant racism against the Métis was the norm.[6] In an act of desperation, some Métis set up temporary homes in road allowances on Crown land, and others moved further north, where a more traditional lifestyle was still possible (Anderson, 1985;

5 The majority of Métis scrip lands ended up in the possession of American land speculators or were sold by starving and desperate Métis for a small fraction of their worth to others (Muzyka, 2019).

6 The National Film Board's 1986 film *Places Not Our Own*, part of the four-part *Daughters of the Country* series, offers a telling glimpse into these times of overt racism: https://www.nfb.ca/film/places_not_our_own/.

Dobbin, 1981). As highly respected Métis matriarch Maria Campbell (2019) explains in her book *Halfbreed*, the road allowance people did not own property and therefore did not pay taxes, which meant that their children did not have access to schooling. In other cases, Métis children attended Residential Schools, with some families even paying for this schooling (Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2014; Métis Nation of Alberta, 2004; Poitras Pratt & Daniels, 2014). These Métis children were dually disadvantaged, enrolled "as minorities in largely Indian residential schools…[where their] minority status and lack of 'official' sponsorship [meant they were further] discriminated against" (Chartrand, 2006, p. 23). The displacement of Métis Peoples from their ancestral homelands and close connections to kin has had ongoing and damaging effects that resonate today; still, many Métis have managed to retain a strong sense of who they are. What we cannot control or determine is how others see us—this essential step is reliant on individuals taking up learning around the Métis when institutions and powerholders fail to do so.

A telling example of what happens when uninformed decision makers make policy decisions that affect Métis Peoples is found in the 1960s study *Métis Education in Alberta*. Working on behalf of the provincial Ministry of Education in Alberta, the author, Dr. Chalmers, adopted an "unusual and extremely narrow definition of Métis people" (as cited in Chartrand, 2006, p. 143). This author's biases are evident as his study focused solely on Métis students living in impoverished circumstances. His rationale for the exclusion of other Métis students revolved around his assumption that those Métis who were doing well "did not seem to present any educational problems" (p. 143). This provincially funded study concluded that Métis students were: "extremely retarded [sic], and almost certain to drop out of school before the age of 15" (p. x). Through its flawed findings, the study "documented and exposed the bigotry against Métis students and their families that seemed to be ingrained in the fabric of the educational system" (p. 146). It is little wonder, then, that Métis people are "continuing to experience the effects of…ancestral pain" in terms of school-based experiences and ongoing neglect of Indigenous rights (p. 163). The concerning issue of power holders who lack even a basic understanding of who the Métis are, let alone their unique history, manifests itself in policies, reports, and curricula that adversely affect Métis in contemporary times. The following excerpt—from a letter penned by school officials from Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta in the 1920s—further exemplifies another source of deeply flawed ideas in their attempt to racially classify Métis:

> Halfbreeds may be grouped into three fairly well-defined classes.
>
> 1. Those who live, in varying degrees of conditions, the ordinary settled life of the country.
>
> 2. Those who live, in varying degrees, the Indian mode of life.
>
> 3. Those who—and they form the most unfortunate class in the community—are the illegitimate offspring of Indian women, and of whom white men are not the begetters
>
> Those of the first class make no claim upon the Government of the Dominion for the education of their children; nor has any such claim as far as the knowledge of the undersigned goes been made on their behalf. The third class are entitled to participate in the benefits of the Indian schools…. That policy appears to have been adopted to discourage illegitimate breeding. (as cited in Logan, 2006, pp. 72–73)

Equally vexing is the ongoing absence of Métis perspectives in the educational realm as fellow Canadians continue their claims of not understanding who the Métis are or their unique Indigenous experience (Isaac, 2016; Paulson et al., 2015). More heartbreaking evidence that a strategy of erasure has had a real impact is found in the all-too-common narrative of Métis people not knowing their own family connections or the colonial history of Canada. The erasure, ignoring, and silencing of Métis voices and perspectives in education represents a form of symbolic violence that is psychological rather than physical in its attack (Poitras Pratt, 2021), and when provincial curricula present no Métis material or confusing perspectives on the Métis, more harm than good results.

Over the years, Métis scholars and activists have been proactive in relaying who they are to the uninformed (Adams, 1975; Andersen, 2014; Campbell, 2019; Forsythe & Markides, 2024; Gaudry, 2018, 2021; LaRocque, 1975, 2010; Macdougall, 2006, 2010; Poitras Pratt, 2021; Teillet, 2019). This type of agency reflects another longstanding tradition of the Métis:

> During the late eighteenth and nineteenth century in Western Canada, Métis had their own system of educating their children and communities through transfer of language and knowledge *from their own Elders, parents and tea-*

> *chers outside of the church-run school system* [emphasis added]. Alongside their own laws, social, political and economic systems, Métis communities were able to determine how their children would be educated. (Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2014, p. 4)

This resilience to ongoing colonial injustices has also been amply demonstrated in literary and other artistic contributions and, from a political stance, in the insistence of the Métis to be included as one of three Aboriginal groups in the 1982 Canadian Constitution (Sawchuk, 1998). Moreover, this agency demonstrates that the Métis have privileged their Indigenous ancestry despite having accrued very few benefits or rights as a result; they continue, however, to bear their fair share of racism (see Flanagan, 2017). It is also true that the trend of confusion and misunderstandings around the Métis, which some scholars call "epistemologies of ignorance" (Adams & Omar, 2024; Ahmed, 2014; Mills, 2007; Mueller, 2020), is likely to continue without the deliberate inclusion of appropriate Métis perspectives in provincial curricula.

Resisting and Replacing Colonial Ideas with the Creation of Our Own Educational Resources

Today, the K–12 education landscape across Canada continues to reflect the colonial structures and systems on which it was founded (Battiste, 2013; Goulet & Goulet, 2015; Toulouse, 2018). With Métis Peoples presumed subdued and assimilated after 1885, the academic literature on Métis perspectives in education remains sparse and somewhat sporadic (Anuik, 2009, 2010, 2022; Chartrand et al., 2006; Kearns & Anuik, 2015; Poitras Pratt & Lalonde, 2019; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Given the reality that Métis priorities have necessarily focused on the pursuit of basic Indigenous rights recognition, Métis organizational, legal, and community-led studies represent the most prolific source of information on Métis education (Howe & Rupertsland Institute, 2013; Métis Nation of Alberta, 1990, 1999; Métis National Council, 2022; Paulson et al., 2015; Racette, 2010). These education-related documents, inclusive of conference reports, federal reports, and community-based educational resources, provide useful and often compelling information on community-led efforts around education. In the current context of no federal Métis education rights or appropriate inclusion of Métis perspectives within provincial curricula, the variety of educational initiatives that groups of Métis community

members and organizations have implemented reveals a persistent commitment to Métis self-determination (Barkwell et al., 2001). In many cases, these efforts are propelled by an understanding of the negative implications that can result from the absence of Métis perspectives in education and across broader society.[7]

At a homeland level, education remains an important national focus for the Métis National Council (MNC). Despite some recent political shifts[8] in provincial organizations, the MNC continues to advocate for federal support of Métis education across the homeland (an area roughly spanning British Columbia to Ontario, and excluding Manitoba). The creation of a Métis Education and Training Standing Committee, including technicians, policy makers, and Métis education professionals, presented a policy discussion paper[9] to the federal government in 2022. This document points to the ways in which Métis Peoples have had their inherent Indigenous rights excluded, specifically in the realm of education:

> Allocated to provincial jurisdiction, Métis students have been subject to diverse provincial approaches where a lack of coordinated efforts have resulted in educational programming that is underdeveloped and alienating. Métis students are subsumed under a First Nations-centric approach where their unique perspectives, knowledge, and traditions are either ignored or minimally mentioned. Reports highlighting the educational conditions of Indigenous peoples point out the failings of a colonially biased education

7 See, for instance, the award-winning Métis Crossings cultural centre and hotel located near Smoky Lake in northern Alberta (https://Métiscrossing.com/) and the Tail Creek (Crossings) Campground and board display situated "partially on the site of a historic Métis buffalo hunters' (Hivernants) village which dates back to the 1870s" (https://www.Métis3.ca/tail-creek-park-campground/). Métis culture can also be experienced firsthand at the annual "Hills are Alive: (Métis) Music and Dance Cultural Festival" in the Cypress Hills of southern Alberta. From a homeland perspective, there are community-friendly resources such as "The Métis - A Visual History," by Métis educator, author, and illustrator Sherry Farrell Racette (2010), at the Gabriel Dumont Institute: https://gdins.org/Métis-culture/.

8 The Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF) political leadership has raised concerns about what they see as a lack of rigour around Métis citizenship and/or membership criteria in some of the other provincial Métis organizations. Given these concerns, MMF withdrew from MNC in 2021; the Métis Nation-Saskatchewan and the Métis Nation-British Columbia followed suit, leaving MNC in the fall of 2024. From our perspective, the Pretendian issue and rogue Métis groups laying false claim to Métisness are at the root of these concerns, and while these disruptions appear turbulent in the present moment, these events provide space for critical discussions and, ultimately, a necessary correction to misguided understandings.

9 Permission was granted from the MNC to Poitras Pratt to include this excerpt of the 40-page position paper presented to the Liberal government as she was involved as an author in its initial draft.

> for Indigenous learners, and we see this situation further exacerbated within a Métis context. (MNC, 2022, p. 2)

From all accounts, the document was well received and moved through several stages of readings at Parliament, yet the fate of federally funded Métis education now rests in the ever-shifting landscape of Canadian and global politics.

As professional educators engaged in Métis futurities, we reflect on the ways in which we have individually and collectively collaborated in our shared wish to improve the educational outcomes for future generations of Métis Peoples. We acknowledge and support the efforts of a growing group of fellow Métis educators who are coming together to engage in collective pursuits of self-determination (Forsythe & Markides, 2024). These collective pursuits reflect and honour the ancestral ways of our people and are making a real difference in how Métis see themselves today. We are honoured to be one small part of these collective efforts.

Métis Educators as Creative Cultural Mediators in Canada

By creating Métis-specific teaching resources, we see our roles as creative cultural mediators who facilitate communication between diverse peoples by sharing "information on different sets of value[s], orientations to life, beliefs, assumptions and socio-cultural conventions by clarifying culture-specific expressions and concepts that might give rise to misunderstanding" (European Commission, n.d.). Our hope is that our efforts have helped fill some of the gaps in Métis education and, ultimately, contribute to the collective project of Métis self-determination.

We ground our work in a solid foundation of educational mandates and policies meant to advance Indigenous education (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2010; Hare & Tupper, 2023),[10] knowing that there is often a lack of Métis perspectives within these national initiatives. Described as "dually disadvantaged," the Métis are continually caught up in a jurisdictional battle between federal and provincial governments. Writing for the Canadian Deans of Education, Anishnaabe scholar and educator

10 To reference this foundation of work as it specifically relates to the National Centre of Truth and Reconciliation, please see the Centre's collection of reports: https://nctr.ca/records/reports/

Jan Hare and allied scholar Jennifer Tupper assert how a shift to a rights-based approach to Indigenous education is needed:

> Given all that has unfolded since the [2010] Accord was first launched, there is an imperative to move from a language rooted in the politics of respect to the politics of rights, creating new opportunities for educators to deepen and expand their understanding and their practice in ways that actively confront the colonial relations of Canada, moving us into an Indigenous-settler future in *ethically relational ways* [emphasis added]. (Hare & Tupper, 2023, para. 7)

With the heartbreaking discovery of Indigenous children's remains at Residential School sites in 2021, many educators expressed shock and dismay and sent out notes of genuine concern to Indigenous colleagues and friends. The lack of action since, along with vocal Residential School denialists, is a jarring reminder that settler-driven futurities cannot go on uninterrupted (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). A shift into rights-based teaching and learning that moves educators from politics of respect and an ethics of care into meaningful actions that recognize Indigenous rights as the basis for Indigenous futurities is needed for positive and lasting changes (United Nations, 2007).

These rights-based directives are found in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 calls to action, specifically calls 62–65, where each province and/or territory has responded by setting out educational mandates for the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives. In Alberta, the mandating of Teaching Quality Standard 5 (TQS5), under which teachers are expected to gain and apply foundational knowledge of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples, holds the greatest potential for disrupting colonial logics and the certainty of settler futurity. However, without any accountability measures around TQS5, which is also saddled with a general sense of fear and apathy among teachers in teaching Indigenous perspectives (Danyluk et al., 2023), little to no progress has been made in disrupting settler futurities (Indigenous Watchdog, 2025). Indeed, it is quite possible that this stalling might result in a full stop without a reconsideration of how we approach Indigenous education. In the case of the ethical and appropriate inclusion of Métis, each province and territory is ultimately responsible for ensuring an inclusionary approach is achieved, and it may be the case that we are relying on those who lack knowledge on this topic to set direction. In the spirit of serving as cultural mediators for fellow educators, we present our own perspectives on Métis education in Alberta with the hope of motivating and inspiring others.

Métis Educators as Creative Cultural Mediators in Alberta

The Métis Peoples have lived in the lands we now call Alberta since well before its provincial formation in 1905. A growing number of Métis family histories and stories connect us to these lands and our First Nations relatives in distinct and revealing ways and serve as poignant reminders of our interrelatedness and interconnectedness. As Métis educators, we recognize a deficit of Métis perspectives in the provincial curriculum—these are stories that could shine a spotlight on how the Métis have advocated for their rights among ongoing colonial injustices (Anacker et al., 2020; Huysman & Poitras Pratt, 2023; Oster & Lizee, 2021; Poitras Pratt, 2020). For example, it was the lobbying efforts of the Métis Famous Five in the 1930s that eventually resulted in the distinctive land-based phenomenon known as Métis settlements. These eight (originally 12) parcels of land in northern Alberta were originally set aside for what the Ewing Commission deemed the "destitute Métis" but have now become a point of pride and the basis for negotiations with the federal government (Dobbin, 1981; Ewing Commission, 1938; Métis Settlements General Council, n.d.; Sawchuk, 1998). This unique story, which includes years of active lobbying by the Métis before the provincial government agreed to listen to their arguments, is noticeably absent. With minor exceptions, the truths of our past and present are glossed over with stories of inevitable progress and assimilation, or what Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) call a "curriculum project of replacement" (p. 75). We persist in elevating and illuminating the Métis stories of this place because there is an unheard side of the colonial story worth hearing and learning from. We share the following stories in the spirit of supporting a socially just future where rights are elevated above political aspirations.

Alberta Education and a Host of Curriculum Challenges

Under the leadership of the provincial United Conservative Party (UCP), the preservation of colonial logics is aptly demonstrated through a series of ongoing attempts to renew Alberta's curriculum. This curriculum renewal process began in August 2020 (with K–6) and extended into early 2021 during the COVID-19 global pandemic. We each spent a substantial amount of time reviewing the draft of the 2020–2021 curriculum, at first individually and then collectively with fellow Métis educators. This initial attempt to renew

the Alberta curriculum was heavily criticized for a number of reasons but proved most shocking for its racist overtones regarding Indigenous perspectives. Our reviews culminated in a position paper commenting on the proposed Social Studies program, where we asked educators the following:

> Do students really need to know how to "Calculate the distance in kilometres travelled by the North West Mounted Police from Regina to Duck Lake during the 1885 Métis uprising"? This insensitive activity is not only geographically misplaced but is also tainted with an aura of colonial taunting. Moreover, the term "uprising" assumes actions were taken against the government when Métis were justifiably defending inherent rights to their ancestral homelands. Resistance is the correct term for such action. Decolonizing, simply put, is removing colonial bias to make space for the full truths of Canada—as uncomfortable and difficult as these may be. (Poitras Pratt et al., 2021)

Fellow educators across the province expressed their own outrage and the flawed Social Studies curriculum was subsequently withdrawn by Alberta Education. Another attempt at the Social Studies (K–6) program was made in fall of 2023. This time, university-based subject experts were called in and, as a member of this group, Yvonne was heartened by the advocacy of this expert group for the respectful inclusion of Indigenous perspectives. However, our unified efforts to advance a new vision for the Social Studies curriculum were largely ignored. In the newly piloted 2024–25 Social Studies that is now formally implemented as of fall 2025, the sporadic inclusion of the Métis is more likely to confuse educators than inspire them to include Métis perspectives. So, while we tend to "engage in Indigenous futurity work in education without the need for settler justification" (Kulago et al., 2024, p. 3), this experience aptly demonstrates that allies are standing beside Métis educators in this challenging work (Bodnaresko & Poitras Pratt, 2024). As educators are well aware, the curriculum forms the basis for teaching, and when educator voices are not honoured in its creation, the roadmap of classroom teaching and learning remains mired in outdated ideas.

In fact, without substantive change in how education is delivered, settler-driven futurities that replicate the inequities of our current status quo are inevitable. The most obvious form of settler futurities takes shape in provincial curricula crafted to privilege

and advance settler-colonial interests,[11] but is also evident in a set of practices and structures that uphold a dominant worldview. With very little progress made on the TRC's 94 calls to action since 2015, specifically in the realm of education, we concur with Hatch and Rosiek (2024) that an "assemblage" of existing structures and attitudes supporting the continuation of the settler-colonial status quo is what is at play. This dominant apparatus manifests itself in a variety of forms, including "educator resistance to teaching critically about settler colonialism" that is further

> manifested as an assemblage of parent affect, administrator anxiety, popular political discourse, and institutional power relations. This assemblage, although a collection of disparate elements whose form shifted over time, nonetheless had coherence and consistency of effect. It sought to silence teaching that centered Indigenous experience and knowledge. (Hatch & Rosiek, 2024, p. 30)

In taking up this work, we are seeking to centre Indigenous knowledge traditions in what is typically a highly formalized and structured learning space—the K–12 classroom—in order to enact positive change for all learners. As the curriculum journey reveals, the navigation of diverse worldviews is a complex undertaking, and when one party has substantially more power than the other, forward progress is abruptly halted.

Digital Media Initiatives in Support of Métis Self-Determination

In looking at what we have accomplished across our respective careers by way of introducing Métis perspectives into Alberta's classrooms, we believe that creative online contributions have the most potential to affect change. We see these initiatives as gifting, or giving back, to educators useful and relevant resources that also represent educational practices of Métis self-determination. In fact, the internet has provided a virtual space to house community-led virtual platforms that tell a different tale of Canada than what has historically been taught. For educators, the ability to discern what is authentic and what

11 See Alberta Curriculum Analysis website: https://alberta-curriculum-analysis.ca/an-open-letter-on-the-new-social-studies-curriculum-march-15-2024/

is not among a complex web of online offerings is increasingly vital. From our vantage point, the Métis have continued a longstanding tradition of adapting technologies to suit their needs and interests (Poitras Pratt, 2010). One of the more popular uses of digital media, digital storytelling, has taken hold across the country, with many Métis communities seeing its inherent potential for honouring oral traditions (Iseke, 2013; Iseke-Barnes, 2002; Lavallee & Gabel, 2024; Poitras Pratt, 2010, 2020), reclaiming authentic voices, and providing an overall sense of community empowerment. Starting in 2009, Yvonne partnered with Fishing Lake Métis Settlement community members and Elders to create a set of 19 digital stories where lived experiences and community belongingness stand as markers of authentic and everyday Métis realities.

In 2021, Yvonne and Billie-Jo worked together to launch the Métis Voices website, working with members of the Fishing Lake Métis Settlement who shared personal insights into their digital stories. Together with storytellers or their family members, we worked on reflective questions and downloadable resources to accompany each of the nine stories that signal each storyteller's willingness to share beyond our initial project. Building on the decolonizing work undertaken by Yvonne in the Fishing Lake Métis Settlement, these multimedia vignettes offer salient messages of survival and thriving directly from Métis settlement members. As another creative initiative, we launched the Métis Memories of Residential Schools mural mosaic in 2022 to offer viewers multiple pathways to learn about Residential Schools in a safe, trauma-informed, and developmentally appropriate way. Each of the 24 panels that comprises the mural contains distinct stories of Métis Peoples, several focused on how Métis experienced Residential Schools and other colonial forms of schooling, and carefully balanced with stories of strength and resilience. In reflecting on our shared work, we identified the following Métis values inherent in the ways that we worked together and lifted one another up.

Central to the shared work that we undertake is a deep respect for Elders, who have a wealth of lived experience and who publicly affirm the importance of education. Another central aspect of our work is shared pride in being Métis, which is expressed in many ways, not the least of which is a shared understanding of our colonial past and our current struggles. This ethos of sharing extends to the support of those who are in need and is intended to lift up the dignity of all, no matter their individual life circumstances. Finally, in relaying the truths of what comprises decades of injustices against the Métis, the use of humour and a sense of loyalty to one another is essential. We honour the gifts that we each

bring and in turn carry a sense of humility around our own limitations. Knowing that we are "stronger and braver together" binds us in the collective pursuit of self-determination.

Moving Forward

In closing, we initially asked what lessons might be learned from the experiences of the first post-contact people, the Métis, in terms of Canada's shared national future. In what could be framed as a long and complicated history of embodying reconciliation, the Métis have continually navigated a highly contested space in between cultures to ground themselves in Indigenous ways and values while constantly adapting to changing circumstances. In our collective attempts to have Métis perspectives understood in Western schooling systems, we remain firmly grounded in the relational ways of our ancestors, who knew that working together would result in the best outcomes for future generations. Traditional values of relationality, reciprocity, and respect are ways that matter and can make a lasting positive difference for all in our shared educational spaces. We ask the same of our family of educators.

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