

Métis Educational Life – Patrick Young

Module Objective: This module will provide students with an overview of the history of Métis education from the fur trade era to the present.

I) Traditional Métis Education

Traditional Métis educational systems were informal and were based on knowledge, skills and values held by the child's parents, grandparents and the community. This was oriented around acceptable social behaviour and means of survival. One of the most important characteristics of this system was the emphasis on experiential learning. Métis children were taught about their culture, beliefs, values, customs, traditions and survival skills by directly participating in community and family events. Learning for Métis children was a lifetime process and did not occur during a set period of time. Métis children were highly valued by the community and it was everyone's collective responsibility to participate in the social, cultural and psychological development of youth. Elders spent a great deal of time teaching Métis children while the parents laboured over daily chores. This Métis traditional education system inherited many elements of First Nations customs and beliefs systems such as taking children everywhere. This cultural practice had many benefits because it strengthened the bond between parents and family and gave children the opportunity to gain new life experiences.

The Métis' informal "tribal" method of education was more of a program of socialization, on how to behave, act and contribute to society. In this system, Métis girls were taught skills such as how to prepare and make garments from hides, how to set up camp, how to prepare and process food, and how to take care of children. By contrast, Métis boys were taught hunting skills and bravery. As Métis boys matured, their fathers and male

kinsmen played a more active role in their development, taking them on daily rounds and introducing them to a larger social world. This training, on how to be an adult, was very important. As a child grew, his or her training became more directed based on his or her skills and abilities. Grandparents and **shamans** became the teachers and would educate the children about such concepts as divisions of time, numbering systems, history and **genealogy**. In some cultures by the age of ten, boys and girls were separated because of the **incest taboo**, a traditional Cree practice. During this period of separation, boys learned more about trapping, hunting, fishing, and marksmanship while girls' time was spent learning how to take produce and turning it into edible and **utilitarian** materials.

It was not unusual for each family or community to have a woman or women trained as midwives, a skill often passed on from mother to daughter. However, when people were trading and trapping, or freighting on the open plains, midwives were not always present and many children were brought into the world by family members who were on hand. Some mothers taught their children on how to assist in childbirth, so that they could perform the minimal requirements necessary to aid a mother in giving birth – if the circumstance arose.

In Red River, traditional Métis education was the common practice prior to the arrival of the Selkirk Settlers in 1811. The immigration of Europeans to Red River introduced western educational concepts and philosophy including structured lessons, age-grade divided classrooms and the removal of Métis students from their families and communities. Métis education was greatly influenced by these new systems as Métis families settled and intermarried

with European families. As a result, Métis education became more structured and formalized with attendance lists and rewards for advancing into the next grade.

II) Métis Fur Trade Education

Officers with the **Hudson's Bay Company** (HBC) sought to provide their mixed-heritage children with a formalized, English education, trying to incorporate them both into fur trade and British society. Male children received schooling in Upper or Lower Canada (what's Ontario or Québec) or overseas in Britain more commonly than female children. In addition, while numerous Métis children were educated in settlements around posts, it was not uncommon for French Canadian and Scottish fathers in the fur trade companies to send their Métis sons to be educated in Lower or Upper Canada, or even Britain. These children sometimes returned to aid the Métis. **Cuthbert Grant** and **Louis Riel** were two such examples. Others stayed overseas when they completed their education but aided the Métis by acting as their representatives in matters regarding the Crown and the HBC. For instance, **Alexander Isbister** was a Métis who became a barrister in England and represented the Métis at the British Boards of Inquiry.

The investment of social, economic and emotional commitments by fathers to their children regarding proper upbringing, education and placement of children was known as **patrilocality**. Mixed-blood sons were able to achieve some degree of career advancement within the posts in the early 1800s due to the degree of competition between the companies and the necessity of utilizing the skills and contacts of these men. In fact, in 1836, the HBC passed a regulation that fathers had to attend church service with their

families regularly, speak to them in French or English only, and to teach them the alphabet and **catechism**. While this aided in the standardized education of children, it also promoted the assimilation of Métis children into a Euro-Christian society.

With the emergence of a male-centered fur trade society, many female children were generally left with the mothers' families in "Indian Country". Métis sons of officers were able to secure, for some time, advancement and careers as a result of their father's efforts. Métis daughters often had arranged marriages with local European fur traders, in some cases these families gained support from a dead father's **annuities**. It was, generally, the educated daughters secured the best marriages, sometimes to an officer in the post. As time passed, though, more and more daughters embarked on transatlantic trips or gained an education once reserved for sons.

III) The Church and Métis Education

Euro-Christian education in Canada began as early as the seventeenth century. The objective of Roman Catholic missionaries was to bring civilization to the First Nations and Métis. Industrial schools opened as early as 1676 in Montréal. Later, English language schools were established with government and private support, and some churches also operated day schools. The HBC implemented a European education system prior to 1800 to take care of the schooling of its employees' children. These education systems moved north and west into **Rupert's Land**, though the various Protestant churches were not actively involved in this movement until after the mid-nineteenth century.

In 1818, Catholic missionaries organized a parish and a school at Pembina, Red River. They also aimed to convert First Nations, reclaim delinquent Christians, baptize and marry couples who had entered into "irregular" unions, establish schools, and to stress obedience to the laws of the church and state. In 1825, a school for girls was set up in St. Boniface by the Nolin sisters, two Métis sisters who were educated in Québec, under the supervision of the local bishop and was very successful. For the first decade, these missionaries worked primarily with the Métis. While those Métis who received the greatest amount of formalized education were tied to the posts or who had taken up agriculture, priests traveled with the nomadic bison hunting groups on their long journeys to make sure that these children also received schooling and further exposure to Christianity. Ultimately, the more nomadic groups followed more First Nations' beliefs and were less apt to settle down and begin farming until their lifestyle ended with the disappearance of the bison. However, the Métis of French-Canadian descent welcomed the priests and were eager to receive the sacraments.

The different religious orders, both Catholic and Protestant, worked closely with the HBC to convert the Métis from nomadic bison hunters to settled farmers in order to keep them under the watchful eye of authorities, particularly after the 1821 merger. However, while the bison were present on the plains this was a difficult task. Therefore, the Roman Catholic **Oblates** tried to convince the men to leave their families behind at the settlements when they went on the hunt so the children could attend school.

There was an agenda on the part of the Roman Catholic Church to educate the Métis in order to acculturate or "civilize" them. Education had definite

religious and moral overtones, and was a means of social control. Both First Nations and Métis children had a difficult time in dealing with the extreme strictness and discipline which was part of life in a Catholic boarding or residential school.

Boarding schools were set up at isolated posts to educate traders' children while they were away. By keeping the children isolated from their families, the missionaries tried to extinguish their traditional way of life and make them more European. Children were forced to speak English or French at all times while at the schools. Some communities, because of very strong ties to their traditional culture, refused to accept missions and schools. Shoal Lake, in what is now Saskatchewan (a Cree community) was one such example where the people resisted the attempts of Reverend Settee in 1851 and Reverend Henry Budd in 1854 to introduce Christianity.

After the 1870 and 1885 dispersals on the Prairies, those Métis families who were once in close contact with the clergy and formal schooling took on a different lifestyle because their traditional provisioning or trading lifestyle was all but over. In those areas where families followed a hunting-fishing and trapping lifestyle such as Lac La Biche, The Pas, Great Slave Lake, the children were not able to gain a formal education. In these cases the parents, who had received academic training in the Red River Settlement or other posts, were more literate than their children who did not have similar opportunities.

IV) Residential and Industrial Schools

By the 1830s the government of Upper Canada (present-day Ontario) was actively involved in Métis education, taking over the financial burden of the churches but not the control and direction. In the 1840s, residential schools had been established with an English-based curriculum. In what is now Western Canada, residential and industrial schools became particularly prevalent by the mid-to-late nineteenth century. The Oblate missionaries were the main group involved in the establishment of these schools and churches in settlements. In these residential and industrial schools boys were taught agricultural trades, printing, carpentry, blacksmithing and shoemaking while girls learned sewing, cooking, washing, ironing, tailoring, knitting, shirt-making, dairy work, and general housework.

Success in this form of education occurred primarily among children whose families were already semi-settled farmers. However, in particularly difficult times, families who were nomadic might send their children to these schools to make sure they received food and clothing. These schools were intended for Treaty First Nations children only; however, many Métis children were sent to these schools because of close proximity to their home and community. Access to education was a challenge for many Métis families. In one case, Helen Sinclair stated that she was adopted by treaty First Nations in order to go to Muskowekwan Indian boarding school in Lestock, Saskatchewan.

Due to the presence of mission schools, the Red River Valley became the training ground for Métis who became priests, such as the Reverend **Henry**

Budd, teachers and nuns. The **Grey Nuns** frequently welcomed Métis women into their order with many of them taking up teaching positions in convents and boarding schools. According to oral histories, the nuns played a large part of Métis education. Marie Lussier from St. Eustache, Manitoba and Mary Louise Lavallée from Walstrom, Manitoba and Myrtle LaFontaine from Lestock, Saskatchewan all comment on the influential presence of nuns in the Métis educational system.

Other Roman Catholic residential schools were established at Fort Resolution and Fort Providence, with an Anglican school at Hay River, Northwest Territories. Students attending these northern residential schools could expect to be absent from home anywhere between four to seven years, with travel in the early years being too impractical to even allow trips home during the summer. In the Northwest Territories, after the Second World War, missionaries were no longer responsible for education and schools; instead, there was a rapid development of the federal school system. While the mission schools maintained an equilibrium between the traditional roles of the Indian and Metis, the new federal system was designed to provide each child with the tools to succeed in the contemporary and ever changing society on both a social and economic level. However, many Metis students did not fare well under this new system. Absenteeism, poverty and feelings of shame contribute to poor self-confidence and interfere with successful learning.

Based on an agreement between the churches and the Department of Indian Affairs, Métis children were no longer allowed to attend First Nations residential and industrial schools in Manitoba after 1910. However, if there

were vacancies in the classrooms, Métis children could attend the schools, though they would not receive funding from the Department. In these cases, the church sponsored the children, as the parents commonly did not have the money. Therefore, while the schools were to be First Nations only institutions, most had at least a few Métis in their ranks. A similar situation occurred in reserve schools. Métis families regularly lived on the outskirts of reserves and their children made up a small portion of the school population when room was available. Métis communities, particularly those in isolated areas, did not always have their own schools and their children's schooling was often sporadic at best.

Education for those Métis living in the **provincial north** often did not go beyond grade eight if children even attended school. One of the main problems was securing teachers to work in northern communities, particularly teachers with cultural sensitivity or teachers from similar cultural backgrounds. It was not until after 1912, when Manitoba's boundaries extended to 60° N that the provincial school system moved into northern communities. Clergymen or literate volunteers had already established a few schools in the north, but clearly too few to meet the needs of the widespread population. The Frontier School Division, in northern Manitoba, is one institution, which provides secondary school service, though it was not established until 1965. It operates a residential high school at Cranberry Portage where students from communities across the northern half of the province attend.

In Canada, once Métis students were excluded from the residential and day school system they attended public schools, which were dominated by non-

Aboriginal people with little sensitivity to a different cultural background. Until recently, children assumed two social positions: one at home and one at school, maintaining household duties while completing their schoolwork. At home, the child was independent and self-reliant while at school dependence on the system, acceptance of authority, and adherence to rules were (and are) important. There were also problems in philosophies – survival at home was contingent upon co-operation while at school it is based on competition. There was simply a different cultural and learning experience for Métis children in their upbringing. To fit into such a school system they had to unlearn these traits then re-learn and acquire new behaviours, skills, perceptions, and expectations. It is no wonder why so many Métis students had trouble integrating into this system and keeping up with the other students. Many times this results in a chain of negative sanctions on behaviours, which the child has been brought up with, futility in the pursuit of success, and finally a lack of motivation resulting in absenteeism.

Absenteeism was not always a result of lack of motivation, but due to cultural and economic reasons, particularly in northern communities. For instance, entire families were sometimes required to leave the community to gather berries, harvest wild rice, or go sugar beeting. This, of course, required that the children miss classes for weeks at a time. Schooling meant being tied to a settlement. Mothers and their children stayed in permanent residence while the fathers trapped and hunted for short periods of time. The traditional way of living required the entire family to work, and this was no longer possible. This led to a depletion of animals in the hunting and trapping territories because the fathers could only travel a fraction of the

distance the family once traveled. In addition, in order to get Family Allowance payments, which people had become dependent on, children had to regularly attend school meaning that the traditional lifestyle of hunting, trapping, and gathering was disrupted.

Language difficulties were a major problem for Métis children upon entering school. Many students spoke English as a second language or did not speak it at all, being fluent in Michif or Cree while the teacher might only know English, which many times resulted in students having to repeat grades. As well, children frequently started school at a later age than their counterparts, which ended up in social ridicule and frustration. Howard Adams provided four reasons why Métis, in this case from Saskatchewan, were hindered in the education process. These were 1) low aspirations, 2) an inadequate concept of education, 3) social discrimination, and 4) economic poverty.

To conclude, pre 1980 education systems for the Métis weakened social bonds to the point that the family-oriented educational system could not fulfill its task of transmitting culture and identity effectively.

V) Contemporary Métis Education

Today, most Métis students attend public schools where they are integrated with other children. Children living in towns, or who are bussed in from nearby communities, utilize these schools most commonly. Métis education is a provincial responsibility. Some Métis students attend private schools, which might or might not operate as residential schools. In these instances,

the student requires subsidies to attend, which might be covered by provincial bursaries or scholarships. However, Métis leaders and communities feel that the fact Canadian educational system has little Métis input in terms of content and far too few Métis teachers. Other studies indicate that cultural, social, economic and health needs of Métis children are not met in our current educational systems. Many teachers are not trained in cross-cultural awareness specific to Métis culture and society. Furthermore, many Métis children are poor and maintain other priorities such as household duties and raising siblings, which affects their participation in the mainstream educational system. As a result, there is a high dropout rate among the Métis. As a result, illiteracy or poor literacy, poor job skills, and a general lack of information for living in today's society are endemic.

Education is a priority among Métis communities. In 1995, the Métis National Council held the first ever Métis National Literacy forum in Calgary, Alberta. The following is the overview of Métis literacy issues discussed at the conference:

- Lack of knowledge of Métis people by government officials and literacy organizations;
- Little direct communication between Métis organizations and education authorities;
- No jurisdiction in Canada has a policy regarding literacy programs and Métis peoples;
- There are no funding structures in place to address the long-term literacy needs of Métis people;
- Few Métis people are involved in evaluating proposals, monitoring programs, suggesting appropriate materials or providing feedback on the outcome of projects;
- Autonomous institutions such as community colleges deliver literacy programs with little or no contact with Métis organizations;

- Métis people have limited involvement with Literacy Councils which form the literacy network;
- It is not clear if Literacy Councils are the best way to address problems of literacy for the Métis people;
- Little research or evaluation data is available for guiding Métis literacy programs;
- There is a lack of Métis specific literacy materials and curricula;
- There is no agreement on what is meant by “literacy” in regard to meeting the needs of the Métis people

Today, adult education for the Métis involves the following streams: education upgrading, vocational, technical and post-secondary education. In 1980, the **Gabriel Dumont Institute** (GDI)’s Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program was created to train Métis teachers for the classroom. GDI has since expanded to provide Saskatchewan’s Métis with adult basic education, vocational and technical training through its affiliate, the Dumont Technical Institute. Furthermore, in 1996, Gabriel Dumont College was created in affiliation with the University of Saskatchewan (and now the University of Regina) in order to provide post-secondary University programming to Métis students in Arts and Science. This is the first Métis controlled post-secondary college in Canada. Similar Métis controlled post-secondary institutions such as the Louis Riel Institute in Winnipeg or Turtle Mountain College in Belcourt, North Dakota provide similar programs.

In the K-12 system, Métis students have benefited from the success of Aboriginal survival schools in urban centres across Canada. At the community level there are more Métis teachers and more non-Métis teachers implementing Métis specific curriculum. Today, many Métis children receive a Métis-specific pre-school education. As of January 1996,

Health Canada has funded the very successful Aboriginal Head Start Program. This program is based on early intervention strategy, which addresses the needs of young Aboriginal children living in urban centres and large Northern communities. It is designed to meet the spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical needs of the child and focuses on locally controlled and administered Aboriginal non-profit organizations who see the parent/caregiver as the natural advocate of the child and whose primary concern is the health and well-being of Aboriginal children.

Other organizations such as the Metis Resource Centre (MRC) run by the Métis women of Manitoba based in Winnipeg are excellent educational support systems. The MRC acknowledges the important role that the Métis have played in Western Canada's history. The centre has a library, videos, newsletter and workshops on arts and crafts and how to research your family tree and much more. Many similar Métis centres and programs are emerging across Canada.

Parents and grandparents are still important educators in Métis families, particularly in northern communities, though there has been a great deal of loss of knowledge regarding traditional lifestyle skills. For instance, mothers are responsible to a large degree for the religious education and upbringing of young children, and grandparents are teachers in that they provide "good life" examples for the children and their stories often contain life lessons. With the resurgence of pride in Métis heritage, there has been a push to once again integrate more traditional forms of knowledge (e.g. dancing, hide tanning, moccasin making, hunting and trapping skills) into curriculum,

either as a part of formalized schooling or as extracurricular experiential learning.

VI) Educational Resources About the Métis

In the past, most curricula and textbooks neglected to address the contributions and participation of Indian and Métis people in Canadian society. Since the 1980s educational resources about First Nations and Métis people have gone under complete review. Today, there is an explosion of curriculum resources in the field of Native Studies. Saskatchewan Education, now the Department of Learning, has mandated that Indian and Métis content be integrated throughout the K-12 system. Even conventional social studies textbooks are integrating Indian and Métis content. *The Story of Canada* and *Revisiting Canada* are two recent examples of social studies texts which both contain a significant amount of Indian and Metis content.

Many provincial ministries of education have developed Native education branches to develop Native Studies curriculum, evaluate resources, and conduct research on Aboriginal educational policy and perspectives. In Saskatchewan and Manitoba most Métis content is found within existing Natives Studies curriculums. These provincial bodies have also provided useful bibliographies for teachers. To get on these bibliographies the books have to pass extensive review criteria set up by each ministry. These bibliographies can be very beneficial to the general public.

There is still a great demand for high quality Métis resources by educators. Some provinces have responded by publishing Métis supplements to the curriculum. For example, in 1994 the First Nations Education Division of

Greater Victoria School District #61 published a resource book on the Métis. In Alberta, the St. Albert School District #3 and St. Albert Protestant Separate School District #6 co-published a book entitled Alberta's Métis. Educational publishing about the Métis is still in its infancy and there is still a great need for Métis resources that complement existing curriculum.

Questions and Activities

- 1) Outline the different types of education systems that have been used by the Métis. Were/are some better than others for the preservation of Métis history and culture? Why or why not?
- 2) Visit the Aboriginal Healing Foundation website at <http://www.ahf.ca/english/index.shtml>. Peruse through the projects that have been funded in your region or province. How widespread was the abuse at residential schools? What sorts of healing initiatives are the various Aboriginal groups proposing? Do you think that these will be effective?
- 3) In the fur trade era, did Métis girls receive the same sort of education as boys? Why or why not?
- 4) What was the agenda of the Christian missionaries regarding the education of the Métis in the nineteenth century? What impact would this have on Métis identity?
- 5) Conduct some research on Aboriginal post-secondary systems in Canada. How many different Aboriginal colleges are there in Canada? Is the Gabriel Dumont Institute unique as a Métis post-secondary education institution?
- 6) Visit the Saskatchewan Department of Education Website <http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/k/> or another provincial department of education website. How have provincial education departments made an effort to ensure that Métis content is being used in classrooms?
- 7) Have your teacher invite an Elder to your classroom. Ask him or her questions about how Métis children were traditionally educated by the Old People. Was this any different than from Euro-Canadian school teachers? How was this type of learning different and similar to the type of learning that you currently receive?
- 8) What sort of problems to Métis children face when they tried to go to school after 1885 to quite recently?
- 9) Role Playing. With your classmates create a mission school with Aboriginal students and nuns and priests as educators. With your teacher's help, develop a sample lesson plan that the religious would have used with the Aboriginal children. Remember that this will

involve positives and negatives. Design a system of rewards and punishments that the Aboriginal children would have encountered for speaking their language, remembering the catechism, or for speaking English or French.

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