



Interview with Métis Nation of Ontario's Early Learning and Child Care Program

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Hello. My name is Nick Petten and I am writing this article from the perspective of a member of the Guiding Committee on Truth and Reconciliation at the AECEO. As a group, we decided to shed light on the colonial frameworks that continue to fail Indigenous children and their families and try to ensure that there are equitable opportunities for Indigenous early childhood educators to influence systemic change and share their knowledges, traditions, and teachings with all ECEs and early years staff in Ontario. As a contributor to this article in the eceLINK, I tried to establish a context where our government and many of our institutions are routinely and persistently trying to maintain the status quo of cultural ignorance, appropriation and genocide. Within that context, our group wants to shed light on the amazing, inspiring and aspiring work of people that are trying to change the status quo. Especially important is to shed light on the work done from within the communities that have been oppressed since the colonial governments of Europe landed on the shores of Turtle Island and instituted the Doctrine of Discovery that is used to justify their violent and oppressive policies.

In my efforts to be explicit about my positionality as a way to understand my intentions, experience and

background as a writer, I offer this surface-level description: I am a non-Indigenous, cisgender (but probably queer), heterosexual male with mixed ancestry from Europe and South Asia (which largely places me within the more privileged members of our society) but who has experienced the hardships having a disabled parent in the long-term care system that largely prioritizes profit over dignity. My chosen career is program evaluation because of its ability to demonstrate the impact of our policies and spending and compares that to the intended outcomes of an equitable and just society and sustainable natural environment.

I had the privilege to sit down (virtually) with staff from the Métis Nation of Ontario's (MNO) Early Learning and Child Care Program (ELCC) (<https://www.metisnation.org/programs-and-services/education-training/early-learning-and-child-care-2/>), Amanda, Madison and Emma, who diligently listened to the Guiding Committee's questions and provided some answers that I've tried to summarize here as best as I can.

About the MNO

"In 1993, the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) was established through the will of Métis people and Métis

communities coming together throughout Ontario to create a Métis-specific governance structure. Prior to 1993, Métis had been involved in pan-Aboriginal lobby groups and organizations. The MNO was not created to represent all individuals and communities that claim to be Métis, but those individuals and communities that are a part of the Métis Nation." (<https://www.metisnation.org/about-the-mno/>)

I met with Amanda Pont-Shanks, Manager of the Early Learning and Child Care program, and Emma Langdon and Madison Frias, Supervisors of the program. Their website states "The mission of the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) Early Learning and Child Care Program (ELCC) is to improve access to culturally grounded early learning opportunities for Métis individuals, families, and the Métis community as a whole. We do this by promoting and fostering community development and providing the care and support necessary to meet the fundamental needs of MNO citizens." (<https://www.metisnation.org/programs-and-services/education-training/early-learning-and-child-care-2/>)

When I asked **what is happening in the MNO's ELCC program that they are most proud of**, the first answer was simply, "we have lots". Between the three people that I spoke to, Emma,

Madison, and Amanda, I quickly got the impression that the ELCC program and services were sweeping in scope and highly adaptable to the Métis Nation of Ontario citizens they were serving. Madison spoke about the support they provide to Métis families in navigating a complex system that is meant to address the diverse early learning needs of families and their children. She also told me about some special projects that provide culturally grounded and developmentally appropriate programs for Métis early learners across Ontario. Their program provides free learning at home and education kits and resources that support a child's development through a culturally grounded approach. You can check out many of their programs and services here: <https://www.metisnation.org/programs-and-services/>. Emma spoke about the financial supports the ELCC program provides, including the Subsidy and Extra-curricular program. Emma indicated that the financial supports are responsive to a family's diverse needs and how she loved receiving testimonials from families on the impact, benefits, and successes of the program. Emma was very proud of the growth and adaptation of the program over the years that saw a substantial increase in staff and teams, and families that are accessing the programs and services. Amanda provided some important background information about MNO's road to Self-Government. You can find out more about the MNO's journey to Self-Government here: <https://www.metisnation.org/self-government/>. Amanda spoke about how some Métis people see themselves as the "lost generation" or the "found generation". Many Métis community members are only now publicly identifying themselves

as Métis because of historical fears that their children would be placed in residential schools. However, I was reminded that the deep and historical community connections were never really lost. Amanda described how when she gathers with other Métis citizens, there is an immediate sense that they are family, and are connected together through a shared ancestry, way of life and cultural connection.

My next question was, "what are your hopes for the future of early childhood education programs for Indigenous children, families, educators and communities?"

Madison, Emma, and Amanda all agreed that it is important for Métis children and their families to have access to Métis-specific programs that celebrate the long history of the Métis People in Ontario and teach children about their history, culture, and way of life. Additionally, Madison, Emma and Amanda expressed the importance of providing culturally relevant, and developmentally appropriate Métis early learning resources to early learners, child care centers and early years' spaces across the province, to teach all children about Métis culture, way of life, and who the Métis are as people.

"Children growing up in an environment where they are accepted."
- Madison

"Families see themselves being reflected in services and programs that they use." - Emma

Amanda spoke about how Métis families live in "almost every major town and city in Ontario" and, when it comes to Métis representation on Indigenous issues, it is problematic when the public has a stereotypical view of what an Indigenous person

looks like. I'm reminded how this could lead to further exclusion of people based on race and ethnicity. Amanda recognizes that parents don't always have the capacity or cultural knowledge to teach their history and require supports. She hopes that these supports are child-led, and not teacher-led.

Finally, I asked, **"if you could envision the ultimate child care program in your community, what would it look like?"** The MNO serves many communities and serving all of them requires paying attention to the fact that they might look a little different based on geography, population and access to programs and support. There are 7 historic rights-bearing Métis communities in Ontario. You can learn more about these communities by following this link: <https://www.metisnation.org/registry/citizenship/historic-metis-communities-in-ontario/>. Amanda spoke about their strategy of being mindful of those historic and other more contemporary communities while implementing and creating programs for Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) at the MNO. The ultimate child care program would look different depending on the context of the community and it is "hard to paint a picture" of that diverse and complex system. You can learn more about the Métis Nation Early Learning and Child Care Accord on the Government of Canada's website: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/indigenous-early-learning/accord-metis.html>. The Accord was signed on March 6, 2019 and represents a step towards improving the lives of Métis families and children. You can read the MNO's press release about it here: <https://www.metisnation.org/news/elcc/>.

“Every community is included, and distinctions are respected and appreciated” - Madison

Another important consideration in developing the ultimate child care program, is keeping in mind the different languages spoken by Métis people, including Michif and French. The ultimate program would respect and appreciate the uniqueness of each community and ensure that all children in those communities are served. Since families know what’s

best for their children, the ultimate child care program would be family-centered and child-focused while making sure that they have the opportunities that meet their needs.

“Family-centered, child-focused: making sure families have the opportunity that their needs are being met.” - Emma

I would like to thank Amanda, Madison, and Emma for taking the time to sit down with me and answer

a few questions from the Guiding Committee.

The AECEO Truth and Reconciliation Guiding Committee would like to invite others to share their work and highlight Indigenous-led programs, pedagogies, and knowledges. We are grateful to those who have shared their stories and highlighted their work. If you would like to connect and contribute, please reach out to info@aeceo.ca.