

## MÉTIS STUDENT SELF-IDENTIFICATION IN ONTARIO'S K-12 SCHOOLS: EDUCATION POLICY AND PARENTS, FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITIES<sup>1</sup>

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The mandate for school boards to develop self-identification policies for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students is part of the 2007 Ministry of Education's *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework*. In this paper, we share findings from a larger study on the *Framework* that examines Métis student self-identification processes and assesses barriers, challenges, opportunities, and best practices. We draw on themes from a literature review concerning Métis education and we examine data from an online survey and key interviews with school administrators responsible for initiatives to support Métis students' self-identification. The survey and interviews took place in the winter of 2011. We find that, for the self-identification policy to be effective, teachers, administrators, and support staff (clerks, receptionists, secretaries, and teaching/educational assistants) must build a school climate that welcomes Métis learners and parents, families, and communities and affirms their historical and contemporary values in practice. This way, students and their families may feel comfortable to identify as Métis.

### Introduction

In 2007, the Ontario Ministry of Education released the *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework*<sup>2</sup> to support voluntary self-identification of First Nation,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper emerges out of the program of research titled Métis Education Barriers, Challenges, Opportunities, and Best Practices: Foundations and Practices to Support Métis Education in Ontario. Financial support for this program of research comes from the Education and Training Branch of the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO). We are grateful to the MNO for its support of this program of research, especially Dr. Chris Paci, Manager of the Education and Training Branch, Chris McLeod, Education Analyst/Officer, and Guylaine Morin-Clérout.

Excerpts of this paper have been presented at the 2012 meeting of the Canadian Association for the Study of Educational Administration at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. We thank the participants from the session. We are also grateful to the respondents to the survey and participants in the interviews for this project. And this paper emerges from the longer report on the project titled *Report on Métis Education in Ontario's K-12 Schools* (Anuik & Bellehumeur-Kearns, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter known as the *Framework*.

Métis, and Inuit learners in K-12 schools; the ministry asks boards to collect this data. There are approximately 26,200 identified Métis students who attend elementary and secondary schools in Ontario, according to the 2001 Canadian Census, and numbers are growing according to the Metis Nation of Ontario (MNO), as more people are joining the MNO. Some school boards have designated Aboriginal<sup>3</sup> education officers and coordinators to facilitate development of self-identification forms, collect the data, and work in collaboration with Aboriginal parents, families, communities, and allies to create supportive relationships that affirm Aboriginal “cultures, histories, and perspectives” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 6). In 2009, the Ontario Ministry of Education completed the first progress report on the *Framework*, concluding that “remarkable progress has been made” (p. 5). How can we investigate this “remarkable progress,” and does it include Métis student self-identification? With support from the ministry, the Education and Training Branch of the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) commissioned research to look at Métis education barriers, challenges, opportunities, and best practices leading to support for Métis students. The research offers insight into how well Ontario’s 76 school boards are doing in implementing the *Framework*. In this paper, we review literature on Métis education and share the findings from an online survey conducted with school boards across Ontario and key interviews with school administrators responsible for initiatives to support Métis students. The focus is specifically on self-identification.

The *Framework* recommends formal and informal involvement of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit parents, families, and communities in school board policy development. To facilitate dialogue between school boards and diverse Aboriginal communities, the *Framework* suggests

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<sup>3</sup> “Aboriginal” is used as an umbrella term for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit people in the *Framework*. We use the term “Aboriginal” accordingly but also recognize that diverse Aboriginal peoples prefer to be referred to by their respective nations (e.g., the Métis nation) and actual heritages.

that school boards take the lead in forming Aboriginal Education Advisory Councils<sup>4</sup> to develop self-identification initiatives alongside First Nation, Métis, and Inuit parents, families, and communities.

We see from our investigation of the *Framework's* implementation and support of Métis education initiatives that community members and school board staff are to collaborate on promising practices to build safe spaces for learners to self-identify. Vice-principals, principals, superintendents, and directors welcome families at first contact with schools. They create signs and symbols that signal respect for diverse Aboriginal people<sup>5</sup> and open themselves to questions. There seems to be recognition by school boards that Métis learners and their parents, families, and communities must see themselves reflected in school buildings if they are to feel comfortable self-identifying (Cajete, 2000; Government of Alberta, Aboriginal Services Branch, 2005).

Although we support the mandate of the *Framework* to oblige school boards to encourage Métis learners to self-identify, the strategies and practices that it recommends are not above criticism (see LeBlanc, 2012, esp. p. 52). It is true that the self-identification directive is the touchstone to determine programs and support for Aboriginal youth and signals the need for the development of curriculum in concert with community stakeholders, specifically, Aboriginal Education Advisory Councils. Nevertheless, there are also challenges intimately related to the self-identification mandate that we describe. For example, school-community relations inform histories of Métis, but educators may not always differentiate among First Nation, Métis, and

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<sup>4</sup> A few school boards prefer to call their working groups Aboriginal Education Advisory Circles. The appellation grows out of good working relationships between staff and Aboriginal communities.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the welcome wheel created by the Durham District School Board (DSB), which is to be displayed in all schools. There is a link to this visual on the Spirit Calling Web site at <http://spiritcalling.ddsbschools.ca/ddsb-initiatives/self-identification.html> It is the result of a collaborative effort between the school board and Aboriginal Advisory Circle (including Métis elders and teachers).

Inuit, and parents, families, and communities, some of whom may not always trust the school system or educators (McGregor, 2009).

As another example, the *Framework* asserts: “It is important for educators to understand the First Nations perspective on the school system, which has been strongly affected by residential school experiences and has resulted in intergenerational mistrust of the education system” (p. 6). We suggest that Métis parents, families, and communities also lack confidence in Ontario’s schools. Similarly, schools’ demeaning of traditional knowledge systems (see Battiste, 2000; Battiste & Henderson, 2000) has hindered many people from fully living and experiencing their cultures in respectful ways within the dominant educational system.

Since the *Framework*’s launch, Aboriginal community members have participated in the development of fact sheets on First Nation, Métis, and Inuit history in some school boards and regions to accompany self-identification forms. Similarly, some community members have formed good working relationships with school board members, to the point that some Aboriginal Education Advisory Councils have become Circles to reflect sharing between staff and community partners. Collectively, we have learned from our interviews with school boards’ staff that such initiatives all help to fill in gaps in the historical record and revise misleading and offensive interpretations. However, the initiative and even the *Framework* is only a beginning and, to ensure its effectiveness as Ontario education policy, it must be grounded in recognition of Métis knowledge systems.

In schools, directors, superintendents, principals and vice-principals, teachers, and support staff influence directly and indirectly the learning journeys of Métis students. They may be thought of as nurturing guides (*First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model*, 2007) who work alongside Métis parents, families, and communities to support learning. In recognition of

the crucial link between students' home and school experiences, and the requirement that the knowledge that schools share with learners is additive to their being (Battiste, 1998), the *Framework* mandates schools to develop climates that support Métis children and youth. In this paper, we focus on schools' ability to enable Métis student self-identification.<sup>6</sup> Self-identification of Métis students in K-12 schools is integral to the *Framework's* initiative to support Aboriginal youth. This paper focuses specifically on the formal process of self-identification through enumeration on registration forms developed and implemented collaboratively by school boards and their Aboriginal community partners.

### **The Study**

As stated above, the ministry believes that “remarkable progress has been made” (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 5) in the implementation of the *Framework*.<sup>7</sup> Such a statement obligates Jon—a non-Aboriginal historian of Métis education with research interests in spirituality and lifelong learning—and Laura-Lee—Métis, Aboriginal Education Advisory Council/Circle member, teacher, and professor of education, with research interests in educational policy, critical literacy, Indigenous education, and sociology of education—to question if such progress includes Métis education, specifically, conditions ripe for self-identification of Métis students. Usually, this happens when Métis students and their parents, families, and communities see themselves reflected in the school community, a finding consistent with arguments by Pueblo scientist and education scholar Cajete (2000), who says that

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<sup>6</sup> To identify as Métis, one only needs to self-identify or recognize one's Aboriginal ancestry, and does not need to be a citizen of the Métis Nation of Ontario.

<sup>7</sup> To read more on the history of the Métis Nation of Ontario's involvement with the Ontario Ministry of Education and the development of the *Framework*, see our full report on the *Framework* and Métis education in Ontario (Anuik & Bellehumeur-Kearns, 2012). We also received ethics approval for the survey, site visits, and interviews from Lakehead University, Jon's former institution, and St. Francis-Xavier University, Laura-Lee's current institution.

learners need to see themselves reflected in the mirror: in their schools. The Ministry of Education (2007) is broadly committed to this principle: “It is essential that First Nations, Métis and Inuit students see themselves and their cultures in the curriculum and the school community” (p. 6).

In 2010, the ministry supported the Education and Training Branch of the MNO to commission research to look at Métis education barriers, challenges, opportunities, and best practices to enable Métis student self-identification and success. This paper reports on one part of the investigation: the mandate for Ontario school boards to develop self-identification procedures for Métis learners and their families and communities, to find out the numbers of students who self-identify as Métis, and the significance of the numbers according to school board staff. Therefore, we discuss Métis student self-identification since its inception in 2007.<sup>8</sup> This paper reports on the school boards’ progress in the implementation of self-identification policies and forms and supporting documents such as fact sheets. We share stories on development, operationalization, and results. In sum, this paper is an opportunity to probe the effectiveness of self-identification initiatives called for by the *Framework* in the 76 school boards responsible for the education of Métis learners. We concentrate on the stories from the respondents and put less focus on the actual numbers of students identified as reported in the survey. This position respects the wishes of our school board collaborators whose focus is on the establishment of safe and caring school communities and less on the numbers generated from surveys. This further recognizes the value that school boards place on identification being voluntary and that there will probably be a discrepancy between census data and school board data until more trust and awareness of the new initiatives take place.

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<sup>8</sup> The report on the project on the MNO website (Anuik & Bellehumeur-Kearns, 2012) elaborates in more detail on the components of self-identification forms. See also a mini-study conducted by the Keewatin-Patricia District School Board (Ontario Human Rights Commission, n.d.).

### *Data Sources and Questions*

This investigation of Métis student self-identification in Ontario draws on an online survey completed by 33 Ontario school boards, transcripts from four in-person interviews with six participants and one telephone interview, field notes from two site visits, and published and unpublished documents prepared by school boards.<sup>9</sup> We surveyed and interviewed directors and superintendents and principals and vice-principals responsible for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit educational initiatives within school boards.<sup>10</sup> The surveys were signed, and respondents were asked if they wished to be identified in publications that result from the data collection. In this paper, we have coded the responses. The survey and interviews took place in the winter of 2011. The method enabled us to extract contextual data on the implementation of the *Framework's* self-identification directive, in particular the steps that school boards have taken to consult with Métis community members in the development of self-identification policies and forms,<sup>11</sup> and suggest promising practices from school board staff.

We sent the school boards the survey and followed up with the school boards twice to elicit responses to the survey. We requested interviews from school boards that gave us substantive information in their responses, especially in the third section when we asked if there was anything else that they would like to add for consideration. We attempted to interview respondents from public, Catholic, English, Francophone, urban, and rural school boards including regions where we conjectured that there would be visible and less visible Métis student

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<sup>9</sup> The MNO assisted in the development of the questionnaire, and the ministry endorsed both the survey tool and research methodology.

<sup>10</sup> Administrators lead in the development of the self-identification forms and supporting documents in concert with community partners, and administrative assistants and secretaries employed by school boards are responsible for distribution of such information to students and their families, usually when families register their children in school.

<sup>11</sup> Our focus is on school boards with self-identification policies and forms.

populations. Usually, lead teachers, managers, and superintendents with First Nation, Métis, and Inuit education responsibilities answered our survey.

The exploratory nature of the proposed research enabled us to use a mixed research method (quantitative and qualitative) in collecting and analysing data. According to Creswell and Plano-Clark (2006), a “mixed method research provides more comprehensive evidence for studying a research problem than either . . . [method] alone” (p. 9). The quantitative methods have the advantage of collecting data in a short time, but cannot inquire deeply into a participant’s perspectives as in-depth discussions. In the survey we tried to address this issue by having a number of open and closed responses that would help respondents story more of what was or wasn’t happening in their school boards. The site visits and follow-up interviews further allowed us to construct knowledge (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) and inquire into the experiences of individuals (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996) who responded to the survey on behalf of the school boards.

*Survey of school boards in Ontario.* To address the gap in knowledge of Métis education in Ontario, we asked, through an online survey of directors, superintendents, teachers, and staff responsible for Aboriginal education in Ontario’s 76 public (n=35), Catholic (n=29), Franco-Catholic (n=8), and Franco-Public (n=4) school boards<sup>12</sup> to share contextual and programmatic data on Aboriginal learners, their parents, families, and communities and schools. Specifically, we asked each school district how many Métis learners self-identify, what efforts are made to encourage self-identification, and promising practices from within and outside of school that facilitate self-identification. A cognate topic probed within the survey was parental,

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<sup>12</sup> Six other school boards registered with the ministry were sent surveys, as well. None of these schools replied to our survey.



family, and community involvement through Aboriginal Education Advisory Councils and Circles. Thirty-three out of 76 school boards replied to the survey.

The survey distributed to the school boards consisted of three parts.<sup>13</sup> The first focussed on the school boards' implementation of the *Framework* thus far, the second on content and courses that included Métis voices and perspectives, and the third on promising practices in schools. The presence or absence of school board self-identification policies and numbers of Métis, First Nation, and Inuit students, definitive and approximate, generated through school board calculations, and commentary on accuracy of numbers, were asked in part one.

Respondents were also asked to identify staff dedicated to Aboriginal education, such as officers, coordinators, and teachers, and their work arrangements, describe mechanisms for community input, and policies on hiring First Nation, Métis, and Inuit staff. This data depicted a composite of schools, communities, and Métis in Ontario's schools since the *Framework's* introduction in 2007. In part two's questions, we asked participants to report on institutional data such as numbers of secondary schools and offerings of Native Studies courses and units within existing subject areas. This part then asked if special initiatives were in place to facilitate Métis student achievement outside of class, at both the elementary and secondary levels. Finally, questions were asked about grants to fund First Nation, Métis, and Inuit programs in school boards. The final section asked school boards to speak of promising practices at the elementary and secondary levels, including involvement of community stakeholders and financial investments to support their involvement, infusion of Métis knowledge in the curriculum, and dedicated Métis resource people. The survey questions were the backbone of the investigation and completed first, and interviews enabled us to elaborate upon the responses. Completed surveys were

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<sup>13</sup> The full report (Anuik & Bellehumeur-Kearns, 2012) contains the survey and interview questions as appendices.

returned from all regions of suburban, rural, northern, north central, northwestern, and northeastern Ontario.

Table 1: Total Ontario School Boards

Ontario School Boards	Anglophone Public School Boards	Anglophone Catholic School Boards	Francophone Public School Boards	Francophone Catholic School Boards
76	35	29	4	8

Table 2:  
*Total Ontario School Boards: Returned Surveys*

Ontario School Boards	Anglophone Public School Boards	Anglophone Catholic School Boards	Francophone Public School Boards	Francophone Catholic School Boards
33	14	14	2	3

*Interviews.* Key interviews, using semi-structured qualitative research methods,<sup>14</sup> set in an appreciative inquiry format (Pinto & Curran, 1998), captured educators' comments, observations, reflections, and ideas concerning Métis education in Ontario. Interviews occurred formally, through face-to-face and telephone discussions, and informally, through site visits. We conducted in-person interviews with personnel from four school boards, identified as School Board Public 1 (SBP1), School Board Catholic 2 and 4 (SBC2 and SBC4), and School Board Franco-Catholic 3 (SBFC 3). An interview was also carried out with an Aboriginal Education Advisor in a fifth Public School Board (SBP 5). Finally, two site visits happened, in Public School Board 6 (SBP 6) and 7 (SBP 7), respectively. Through interviews and site visits, we

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<sup>14</sup> Conversations around a set of questions.

discussed and experienced the outcomes of the *Framework*, gaining data on its implementation and learning of promising practices in an atmosphere of knowledge exchange.

The high response rate to the survey may be attributed to the support for our research from the Aboriginal Education Office of the Ministry of Education. The office sent a memo to school boards announcing the survey and endorsing its methodology. It encouraged school boards to respond. We tried to recruit participants representing all of the above regions of Ontario.

Collectively, the survey and interview questions were written from the position that self-identification is the touchstone to developing school communities that reflect the presence of historic and contemporary Métis children and youth, who are part of families and communities. Métis have, for too long, been on the margins of involvement in schooling, in both the mainstream (Anuik, 2010) and Aboriginal education systems. For Métis learners to be at the centre, which includes achievement in schools, they, and their parents, families, and communities, must be able to self-identify confidently as Métis. Hence, we must check to ensure that the *Framework's* recommendations and the self-identification procedures for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit learners and their families and communities are effective education policy.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *School Board Engagement*

The survey responses and interviews enable us to chart the recent history of educational initiatives to support Métis students' self-identification. One of the most concrete initiatives within the *Framework* concerns self-identification. We asked who was responsible for the workload in school districts associated with the *Framework*. We found that teachers and

administrators have been either reassigned or hired to facilitate the self-identification of Métis, First Nation, and Inuit learners.

Thirty-two of the 33 respondent school boards confirmed that they have self-identification policies. Twenty-six boards have collected data on First Nation, Métis, and Inuit learners through self-identification forms. Six boards are in the process of implementing self-identification policies and forms. Finally, one school board declined to develop a self-identification policy.

We wanted to know the roles that various individuals in school boards played in advancing the *Framework*. Respondents were asked if their respective boards had education officers/coordinators (n=17) or lead teachers (n=19) responsible for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit learning. Boards who had both of the above positions were surprisingly rare (n=12), with around 30% of boards reporting such arrangements.<sup>15</sup>

We were interested in learning about community connections. Sixty-seven percent of English public and Catholic boards (22 of 33) that responded to the survey (out of a possible 76 school boards) reported having an Aboriginal Education Advisory Council or Aboriginal Education Advisory Circle. This is an encouraging level of engagement, but the Francophone boards do not have such advisory groups. Only 52% of all the boards that responded had a Métis representative (n=17) who is involved with some aspect of school governance, with some of these schools having active and ongoing relationships with local Métis councils.

*Self-identification policy development.* School boards have refined their voluntary self-identification policies (Aboriginal Education Office, Ministry of Education, 2007a, 2007b). Since “the ministry has to report on the data” (SBC 4) gathered in voluntary self-identification

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<sup>15</sup> Boards were asked if these officers or coordinators worked specifically on Métis education and more broadly, on initiatives connected to Aboriginal education.

forms in every participating school board in 2016 (see also Ministry of Education, 2009, especially p. 10), it is up to each individual school board to develop its own self-identification policy, forms, and supporting fact sheets. Every school board is responsible for defining clearly First Nation, Métis, Inuit, and cognate terms, if it chooses to, and “to determine how it would implement the ministry initiative with the funds provided” (SBC 4). Most school boards often consulted with other boards and community members, groups, and agencies when developing the policy, forms, and fact sheets. Many of the self-identification forms were created and revised in consultation with Aboriginal Education Advisory Councils and Aboriginal Education Advisory Circles. Several boards exchanged forms with others (SBP 7), and one did so with two neighbouring school boards, one public and the other Catholic. This school board wanted to get “the [Aboriginal] community together so that we were not getting the community back more than once” (Aboriginal Education Advisor, SBP 5). Therefore, these two boards co-facilitated the consultation sessions. Finally, all school boards “have to emphasize . . . that the completion of the form is voluntary and, therefore, the form has to conform to human rights legislation . . . in accordance with data collection protocols” (Aboriginal Education Advisor, SBP 5).

One school board reported that the first consultations with First Nation, Métis, and Inuit concerned revision of the questionnaire. “The opportunity to self-identify existed previously,” but:

the difference was that the option was “Native ancestry” and without intending to restrict participation, such a category was subject to interpretation with the potential to eliminate the majority of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students, based on government definitions. (SBC 4; cf. McGregor, 2009, especially p. 58)

In one school board, consultations in the 2008 to 2009 school year consisted of revising the policy to reflect the wishes of community stakeholders for more inclusive and accurate terms;

this appears in the literature as school boards obtained “feedback and direction in regards to the implementation of a Voluntary Self-Identification policy” (McGregor, 2009, para. 2). An Aboriginal education lead interviewee remembers that “the boards west of here . . . were ahead of us by a year so we adopted a lot of their strategies” with regard to self-identification forms. A vice-principal led the initiative, “a person of Aboriginal descent, a Métis, I think . . . and I worked with him on developing the policy that was adapted from those boards west of our board.” Then “we vetted it through all of the community agencies” at “a big meeting,” working closely with the neighbouring school board. “We had Métis representatives, a lot of Métis representatives among the advisors who worked on the self-identification policy” (SBC 2).

Although “guide posts were set out by the Ministry in a document called *Building Bridges to Success for First Nation, Métis and Inuit Students* (2007)” (SBC 4), school boards exchanged ideas, templates, and samples, reviewing existing self-identification policies as part of their efforts to craft forms that reflected community needs yet resembled forms used in school boards throughout the province. SBC 2 referred to the policy and forms of the SBP 1 when developing its own voluntary self-identification protocol, and SBP 1 drew from the self-identification form devised by SBP 8. Then, the board “went out to the communities and consulted and met with the leadership, education counsellors, and parents” (Aboriginal Education Leader, SBP 1).

Community consultations were motivated by the desire to ensure that the language on revised self-identification policies and forms was accurate. SBP 1 “went through that process for a few months . . . it took a good year, year-and-a-half, to get it developed to the point where everyone was comfortable . . . all the stakeholders were comfortable with it” (Aboriginal Education Leader, SBP 1).

*Complexity of Métis identity(ies).* There are official definitions of Métis in Canada. In our experiences with school boards, we found local contexts are the first of all considerations when it comes to self-identification. Students and their families must not be pressured to measure themselves against Canadian definitions offered by the 1982 Constitution and the Métis National Council. Section 35(2) of the 1982 Constitution recognizes Métis, First Nations, and Inuit as the three Aboriginal peoples of Canada. The school boards profiled in this paper prefer a generative definition of Métis that conforms to the stories shared by families and communities; school boards interviewed shared that no official documents are needed or required for students to self-identify as Aboriginal on their school forms. Many school boards who have collaborated with Aboriginal community members did this consciously as they understand that identity is complicated. Métis may identify and be identified in a number of ways. And state official documentation procedures to obtain “official” status are not always reflective of those who have Aboriginal ancestry and who identify or could identify as First Nation, Métis, or Inuit.

School boards wanted community agencies and community members to trust them and, similarly, these same boards wanted to ensure that the questionnaire, and fact sheet accompanying it, had accurate information. Reflecting on the development of its self-identification policy, form, and brochure, part of its *Making Good Tracks* project, one school board says that it “lead[s] the project from behind—in essence, [it is] a community-driven process with the understanding that a . . . Métis family’s priority is Métis. . . . [O]ur project communications material, self-identification policy, and brochure were all developed with stakeholder input” (SBC 4). The consultation format enabled “stakeholders to bring their issues and concerns forward in a safe and meaningful way. . . . Community members were clear about a

preference for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit, and that has been incorporated on the registration form” (SBC 4).

The exercise was valuable, as staff, in concert with First Nation, Métis, and Inuit, gathered information on the Indigenous history of the board’s region. During the development of self-identification forms for SBC 4, defining terms was “the most emotional part of the process. Adults were very emotional about identity and terminology, [and] that spoke volumes about their own experiences” (SBC 4). Sharing sample policies and forms led “[o]ne Elder ... when he looked at some of the pamphlets that the other boards had . . . looking at the definition of Métis” to conclude “that many of them were not adequate, and some were offensive” (SBC 4).

*Recognition of Aboriginal cultures.* The development of the forms and brochures enables students to feel “confident knowing their culture is recognized, accepted and respected by others” (Aboriginal Education Advisory Circle in McGregor, 2009, p. 8). Having this locally generated history reflected in school buildings and lessons is likely to result in students self-identifying. An Aboriginal education leader requires teachers to “push . . . hard on the local curriculum,” understanding the importance of “learn[ing] the history of the Métis in Ontario” to enable learners to make the connections with their Métis heritage (SBP 1). “If there is not a local connection with the kids, they don’t make that connection” (Aboriginal Education Leader, SBP 1). Similarly, the school grounds must reflect the local ecology. In this school leader’s region,

there are ten First Nations banners hanging there. . . . [A]bout one–two years ago, [we] raise[d] the Métis flag so that it hangs alongside the Canadian flag, the Ontario flag, and the banners that are in the atrium. So when you come in, if you are a Métis person, you see that Métis flag and know you are represented in this community. (Aboriginal Education Leader, SBP 1)

The presence of the Métis nation can build a more welcoming atmosphere at school, where learners, and their parents and families, feel confident to self-identify. Several flag raising



ceremonies are now taking place at school boards. For example, on Louis Riel Day, members of the Oshawa Durham Region Métis Council raise the flag at the Durham District School Board (DSB) schools.

As school boards operationalize self-identification policies, it is imperative that they include Métis parents, families, and communities in their classes and activities. As community members' contributions reflect Métis heritage, they help to build environments where families feel comfortable self-identifying. This way, involvement is the shared responsibility of school boards, schools, community agencies, and Métis people, including elders, senators, educators, youth, and resource people.

*Operationalization of self-identification policies.* The act of self-identification is more than checking a box—it is not a one-time action. It happens several times, formally, on a self-identification document, and informally, when “students . . . show their status card to their teacher and classmates for the first time during or following a class presentation” (SBC 4). In addition to sending forms home with students, teachers build a welcoming atmosphere to encourage self-identification. For Métis learners and their families not yet ready to self-identify, knowledge exchange through the sharing of personal stories may even encourage students “to learn more about their culture and apply for Métis citizenship” (SBC 4). Similarly, though, some students may self-identify but not wish “to be centered out for being Aboriginal,” and so teachers must take “into consideration and respect” it (Aboriginal Education Advisory Circle in McGregor, 2009, p. 11). The in-class practices of teachers and overall school and board tone must encourage and nurture self-identification even when students are not yet ready to share this knowledge about themselves, their families, and their communities.

School boards regularly update the community on implementation of self-identification forms and supporting documents, in person and through the Internet. Many boards maintain web sites where their self-identification policies and practices appear, explaining First Nation, Métis, and Inuit education and the benefits of self-identification; the information is most often available in print, but one school board went so far as to make a video to encourage self-identification and pride in Aboriginal heritages.<sup>16</sup> Fact sheets are often available for download and distribution, the outcome of collaboration with Aboriginal Education Advisory Councils and Aboriginal Education Advisory Circles. Such fact sheets also accompany the self-identification forms.

School boards often send the self-identification forms and supporting documentation home with students as part of school registration. However, one participant reports that his board initially sent the self-identification forms home with students in the middle of the school year, “asking parents to self-identify their children, and the forms would come back; we actually employed a secretary to work from 4–8 p.m. to do follow-up calls. . . . Now it is a big part of the registration process” (Aboriginal Education Leader, SBP 1).

However, many school boards still find that it is sometimes a challenge to know who Métis students are. An Aboriginal education project manager reported that after meeting with several Métis families that “families believed that they needed ‘official’ papers to prove that they are Métis and we cannot officially approach them about this until they have self-identified . . . a conundrum” (SBC 9). Conventional wisdom among board officials suggests that development of definitions of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit within a school board’s region happens once, with the understandings then being transferred to fact sheets and brochures sharing local Aboriginal history. However, the Aboriginal education coordinator at another board reminds educators that

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, a YouTube video made by the Kawartha Pine Ridge DSB (2010) explaining the benefits of self-identification.

“there is still confusion about ‘who is Métis’ or how one determines if they are Métis” (SBP 10).

The coordinator continues to stipulate that this observation is not unique to the SBP 10 area, as several of her provincial colleagues share similar gaps in knowledge of Métis. One respondent wrote,

locally, there is much confusion around what it means to be Métis. The majority of people of mixed First Nation and European ancestry . . . identify as First Nation. The actual numbers of students who come from the specific Métis traditions rooted in the West is very low. (SBP 10)

The misperception that Métis are only from western Canada is a real barrier to Métis education in Ontario. A special assignment teacher, Aboriginal education, says,

there seems to be confusion over the identification of Métis learners. Specifically, does the designation include anyone of mixed ancestry or is it more formally those who trace their descent to mixed European and First Nations descent. As well, while it is suggested that the Métis people developed their own culture and spirituality, the particular details of these distinctions remain unclear. (SBC 12)

The Aboriginal education coordinator at SBP 10 says, “I know some people think they are Métis when one parent is Native and one is non-Native and no one has status—so they identify as Métis sometimes.” As noted above by the SBP 11, and implicitly by several survey respondents and interview participants, there is a larger confusion as to the historical and contemporary experiences of Métis in Ontario’s schools. To address these misinterpretations, school boards recognize that encouragement of Métis family members, especially parents and elders, to visit schools regularly, acting as helpers, resource people, role models, and consultants, helps to improve the chances of Métis learners, and their parents, families, and communities, self-identifying, and understanding that official state documentation is not a barrier to doing so.

Families must believe “that the data is going to help their children, and that is the test that we, as a school board, must pass to secure the trust of parents. . . . [T]he results come by

always promoting the self-identification policy” (Interviewee B1, SBC 2; see also Aboriginal Education Advisory Circle in McGregor, 2009, especially p. 27). School boards attempt to review and revise the forms every year, getting “more information out” and “more brochures out” (Interviewee B1, SBC 2).

We received survey responses and met with staff dedicated to the facilitation of self-identification of Métis students and their parents, families, and communities. They make space for knowledge exchange. They ensure that school board policies reflect community comprehension of Métis histories and identities. Such practices give credence to the importance of community-based leadership when defining educational policy at the school board level. There is recognition that Métis identity defies essentialisms that may be perpetuated in existing literature (see Belisle, 2006). Consequently, when administrators promote self-identification, they must be considerate of how history informs contemporary contexts of the Ontario school communities.

*Reflections on findings.* The ministry’s procedures require school boards to keep track of the numbers of students who are self-identifying, in anticipation of the Ministry of Education reviewing the progress on the Framework in 2016 (SBC 4; see Ministry of Education, 2009, esp. p. 10). However, the initiative runs much deeper, to the actual philosophies, curricula, and practices of schools and their staff. Some school boards now encourage parents, caregivers, and guardians to self-identify their children as Métis and to lead in the development of school board policy to advise teachers’ practices.

School boards gathering self-identification data for more than one year indicate that the number of families who identify their children as Métis continues to grow in each consecutive year that the self-identification policy is administered. First Nation, Métis, and Inuit learners and

their parents and families seem to feel more comfortable self-identifying. Families may see their own history reflected in self-identification policies, enabling school boards to encourage students, as well as their parents, caregivers, and guardians, to voluntarily self-identify as having Métis ancestry.

Some school boards now rely on the self-identification data when allocating resources to support Métis students. School boards that now have two to five years of records identifying First Nation, Métis, and Inuit “are able to draw on . . . [the] data” (B1 SBC 2). In one interviewee’s board, there are dedicated counsellors and a literacy resource teacher for “the schools where there is a large population of Aboriginal students” (B1 SBC 2). The Aboriginal education leader at SBP 1 concurs: “Now, if I want to find out how the Métis kids in grade 10 are doing, I can go in and see this data. It takes not even 30 seconds to find out how they are doing in grade 10 math, for example.” Having the data ensures that money is spent wisely. A few years ago, two people from the MNO were

looking at doing some sort of alternative education program, adult learning, with students. And when we pulled the data from the board, we found that the Métis kids were doing much better than the non-Aboriginal kids. . . . [I]t is nice to know. Therefore, there was no need to stick a bunch of money into that type of program. (Aboriginal Education Leader, SBP 1; see also Aboriginal Education Advisory Circle in McGregor, 2009, especially p. 7; and see Ministry of Education, 2009, especially p. 10)

Beyond administrators, teachers “want to know more about the Aboriginal people in our schools because if they know more, they will teach them better” (Aboriginal Education Leader, SBP 1).

Much of this is very positive; however, the number of self-identified students is far below the actual number of students of Métis ancestry in Ontario’s schools. Some educators suggest that families are awaiting confirmation of Métis ancestries through receipt of official Métis citizenship from the MNO. The SBP 1 explains that “some families are in the process of

attaining Métis status through local Métis associations. The process is fairly lengthy, and I think some families are not self-identifying until they have their official . . . status.”

Some families may have simply forgotten or remain silent on their ancestry. Historical forces have shaped and limited Métis identities (Government of Alberta, Aboriginal Services Branch, 2005; Kearns, 2013). The Aboriginal education officer at SBP 7 maintains that “due to years of assimilation policies, families prefer not to participate or are no longer aware of their own ancestry (kept hidden from offspring).” For a French, Ojibwa, and Métis Aboriginal outreach coordinator of SBC 2, “if you learn who you are, you walk with pride.” However, “parents did not want to acknowledge their Métis ancestry.” This is a shared experience for many Métis (Absolon & Willett, 2005; Anuik, 2009; Kearns, 2013).

Some survey respondents and interview participants believe that the low numbers are due to the persistence of racism in Ontario against Aboriginal peoples. For these Métis parents, families, and communities, the benefits of self-identification remain elusive. The Aboriginal Education Leader at SBP 1 explains:

There are still a lot of barriers because a lot of parents and the grandparents of our students right now still went through the negative experiences of the public system, not only residential schools, but the public system in general, and I think there are still barriers there.

The road to self-identification requires patience, as learners still distance themselves from their Aboriginal ancestries (Government of Alberta, Aboriginal Services Branch, 2005), becoming “‘faceless and invisible’ to avoid racism and being bullied” (Aboriginal Education Advisory Circle in McGregor, 2009, p. 5). Some boards know that families face racism outside of school, “specifically, the Métis in . . . [one town] we heard from a lot of people that if you were a businessperson, you did not promote yourself as being Métis because it would have hurt your business” (SBC 4). In one city,

all First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people [are put] into the bucket, like a bunch of crabs. . . . If you move into . . . [a neighbourhood in the city], you have a label, you are in subsidized housing and you are an Indian, same story goes if you live in . . . [another neighbourhood], the label [is put] on your forehead. . . . [T]he labels are so strong here because we are a smaller community. (B2 SBC 2)

Consequently, school board staff must understand, as one Aboriginal Education Leader (Interviewee A1) says, the racial history that affects learners' decisions to self-identify, being aware of how history affects contemporary expressions of racism, both subtle and blatant.

Educators and their community partners develop the policies in school communities where Aboriginal parents, families, and communities fear and do not trust schools. Aboriginal Education Officer SBP 7 suggests that “families may be hesitant about participating in the program due to a historical distrust with institutions . . . [asking] ‘why do you want this information and what will you do with it?’” An Aboriginal education leader (Interviewee A) adds that “some people ask why we need to be counted again.” However, in another board, it was counting the “200 graduates at [the high school] going across the stage, and [seeing that fewer] than five of those kids would be Aboriginal” that resulted in recognition of “the need for an Aboriginal voice in leadership positions,” and the self-identification initiative being developed locally (Aboriginal Education Leader [Interviewee A1]).

Fear and mistrust have emerged as concerns shared by school boards. One survey respondent noted that discrepancies between census and self-identification data indicate that “parents do not see a specific reason related to their child’s needs and/or they do not trust how the data will be used” (SBP 13). However, even though “data shows a significant increase in the number of students voluntarily self-identifying” (SBC 4), voluntary self-identification by families at registration and throughout the school year cannot be the only source of data, especially since Métis families may not yet be ready to self-identify on the forms provided by

school boards. Thus the ministry is “not going to have data that is representative of the actual number of students” (SBC 4).

The forms have not always yielded substantial numbers of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit learners and their families in school boards. “[T]he first year that we had it [the voluntary self-identification forms], we did not see that many people who were checking it off; however, we knew [of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit families in the board] but we also respected the fact that this was voluntary” (CI, SBFC 3). The low self-identification numbers are not unique to SBFC 3, as the above quotation may suggest. SBC 4, SBC 2, SBP 5, and SBP 7 all reported lower than expected self-identification numbers. One Aboriginal education advisor (SBP 5) finds that “with the Métis population, the numbers are not as strong [as] . . . First Nations groups,” and Métis currently represent only 1.4% of the self-identified population of students in the board, even though the number of self-identified Métis families with students registered in the schools has doubled since inception of the self-identification policy in 2007.

In January 2011, interviewee B1 reported 1,100 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students registered in his school board, which is 13% of registered students. Eighty-one of the students were Métis and enrolled mainly in two of the city’s high schools. Interviewee B1 believes “that the percentage of Aboriginal students” registered in SBC 2 schools “would be closer to 15%,” or 1,200 students, as opposed to the current number. He attributes the success to increased enrolment in the board’s schools: “I think we are getting more Aboriginal students, so that is part of it.” Although the boards noted that the self-identified youth on forms is sometimes lower than the number of Métis children and youth given in census data, all boards reported increased self-identification in each consecutive year that the surveys are distributed throughout the schools in the board.



Aboriginal Education Leader SBP 1 notes that “unless a person voluntarily self-identifies, you cannot count the individual. . . . You cannot count people unless they check off the boxes.” Aboriginal education advisor SBP 5 sees self-identification as a journey for learners and their families: “Some people don’t even know that they are Métis, or the definition, and that comes with awareness and understanding.” Self-identification data begs the following questions: “Are parents who self-identify their children the ones who are engaged in the system? And so they are involved in the school, and their kids are doing well?” (SBC 4). However, the school board needs also to focus on learners whose parents and legal guardians may not self-identify on the form. Therefore, the SBC 4 has “been downplaying the use of the ministry data” as only “what they need to do” (and see Ministry of Education, 2009, especially p. 10) because the board does not “want to stand up and say that . . . [Métis students] are doing great based only [on] a small number of students.” There is a lesson here: school boards need to find even better data on First Nation, Métis, and Inuit learners to enrich data generated from self-identification policies and forms.

Census data “provide[s] a wealth of information pertaining to First Nation, Métis, and Inuit population[s] for each city, town, or rural community” (SBC 4). The 2006 Census data has caught the attention of managers, directors, and superintendents who are now aware of “a group of students whom they have not served well” (SBC 4), helping directors and superintendents raise awareness of Métis learners among principals, vice-principals, teachers, and staff and to facilitate achievement of Métis learners “because the self-identification numbers are not as high as we had hoped them to be” (SBC 4). After reviewing data from the 2006 Census, the SBC 4 became aware of

a high First Nation and Métis population in one of our schools and explored options to have an additional resource person placed in this school. . . . [W]e

applied to the Métis Nation of Ontario Training Initiative for funds to provide training while meeting an important need for our students.

Similarly, the SBP 5 has extracted data from the 2006 Census to support its conclusion that the number of Métis families who have self-identified on school registration forms is much lower than the Census 2006 numbers of Métis in the board's catchment area. Interviewee B1 has examined the SBC 2 self-identification data, along with "numbers from a lot of school boards in the province," finding that they are not "anywhere close to the [2006] Census numbers partly because of the short period of time since the initiative has come out; the school boards need more time." However, the extrapolation of numbers from 2006 Census data enables the school board to forecast enrolment in its schools and thus raise awareness, develop services, and coordinate professional development in First Nation, Métis, and Inuit educational initiatives.

School boards are beginning to rely more and more on the self-identification data that they are generating to allocate resources to support Métis students. However, board directors and superintendents also cross reference the numbers with census data and consult with community organizations to address questions of accuracy. Underreporting is likely to continue, and additional research is needed to determine when self-identification data may be considered reliable, possibly on its own. However, it is likely that the self-identification data is never to be used in isolation from additional sources of data, such as the census returns.

Regardless of the total population of Métis in the classroom and student body, though, schools must still reflect the history and contemporary presence of Métis in Ontario for all students (Ministry of Education, 2007). The SBC 4 argues that teachers must always build an atmosphere in class open to self-identification by students, regardless of whether or not the family has already self-identified. "It is important to note that if we feel we do not have any students of First Nation, Métis, or Inuit ancestry in our classrooms, what we're actually saying is

that we have preconceived notions” (SBC 4; see also Ministry of Education, 2009, especially p. 18). The Aboriginal education advisor responsible for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit education in SBP 5 says that since learners are not always aware of their Métis ancestries, teachers need to be educating all learners to help students become comfortable with their Indigenous backgrounds.

Even though it is necessary to target supports to schools with high numbers of self-identified students, colleagues from SBP 1, SBP 5, SBC 4, and SBP 7 expect teachers to infuse First Nation, Métis, and Inuit knowledge in all subjects and school activities and for all learners, regardless of the number of self-identified students in schools and classrooms: “That is where we want go as a board, away from having special things for certain groups of students to instead sharing with all students” (Aboriginal Education Leader, SBP 1).

The act of self-identification is more important than the numbers generated by the school-board-level self-identification policies. Such grounding is implicit from the interviews. Teachers and staff must live the policy’s commitment to nurture self-identification in learners and their parents, families, and communities. In classrooms, schools, and school boards, educators must be alert to the opportunities to incorporate Aboriginal content, regardless of the number of self-identified students. In this way, educators may be nurturing guides for Métis students, facilitating their achievement and self-identification in the school community (*First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model, 2007; Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Model, 2007*).

### **Métis Student Self-identification as Living Policy**

The *Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Model* (2007) positions learners at the centre of communities that include schools. It contains a stylized graphic of a tree suggesting that the policies that sustain schools are living. From the stories shared by participants in interviews and

in select survey respondents' substantive responses to our questions on promising practices in Métis student self-identification, it is clear to us that staff have to live the *Framework* policy for it to be effective in schools. Policy as seen through the worldview of the learner as centre of the *Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Model* (2007) is alive and evolving to the environment of the learner. And learners must feel comfortable within the school community to self-identify. The school's teacher and support and administrative staff become part of the school community and are the nurturing guides for learners (*First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model*, 2007). The teachers, coordinators, lead teachers, vice-principals and principals, and superintendents and directors enable the policy to be living. The *Framework's* mandate for school boards to initiate, through collaboration with Aboriginal parents, families, and communities, self-identification mandates is living policy. Staff shared reflections and promising practices on the development and implementation of self-identification policies in their school boards, the operationalization of the policies, and the results and outcomes.

Policy is often written in documents and reports. *The First Nations and Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Models* offer a new format for enumeration of policy. They suggest to the reader how the *Framework* fits in the existing systems of learning that go on in Aboriginal communities. They position the modern school system in Indigenous educational realities. They show educators how an optimal environment to support learning may be nourished. In this way, learners may be more comfortable to self-identify at school and in the community. The challenge for teachers and staff responsible for implementation of the *Framework* is to generate culturally grounded (Absolon, 2011) fact sheets and questions on self-identification that reflect the communities' knowledge bases of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit. There are good and local initiatives that acknowledge and are beginning to engage diverse Aboriginal communities. To

achieve remarkable progress obligates all communities to story the Métis knowledge of the region.

### **Conclusion**

This paper explored the effectiveness of the Ministry of Education's 2007 *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* to promote self-identification of Métis learners and their parents, families, and communities at school. Self-identification policies now exist in 48 out of the province's 76 school boards.<sup>17</sup> Such initiatives sometimes result from collaboration between school boards and Aboriginal Education Advisory Councils and Aboriginal Education Advisory Circles. Since self-identification numbers currently underrepresent the number of Métis in Ontario's schools, and not all schools have self-identification policies, the mandate to gather voluntary self-identification data as contained within the *Framework* is insufficient. School boards must gather self-identification. It should also be noted that Métis learners and their parents and families tend to be mobile (Kathy Hodgson-Smith Infinity Research Inc., 2005; B2 SBC 2), and it is necessary to consider how to support learners as they move across schools and communities, sometimes within the same school year. All learners change schools at least once, when moving from elementary to high school, for example, and so it is necessary to use self-identification across the school system to continue to support the needs of learners (LeBlanc, 2012).

Some of the directors, superintendents, vice-principals and principals, teachers, staff, Métis, and the ministry believe in their shared role in implementing the self-identification mandate of the *Framework*, and all initiatives tethered to it. From our surveys, personal

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<sup>17</sup> The number is generated through review of school board web sites and responses to the survey.

interviews and site visits, we see that some boards are showing that steps can be taken toward recognizing Aboriginal people and implementation of the *Framework*; however, it would appear from the lack of engagement and responses that many boards (well over half) need to begin to work on the initiatives set forth in the *Framework*. As one Aboriginal education leader stated, “one of the important things that is important is the culture of the schools and finding that everybody belongs, and you can.”

The self-identification mandate may be more effective when curricula and practices enable learners, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to be proud and resilient. On the school level, there is a continued need for Métis learners to see themselves reflected in school buildings, staff, pedagogy, and curricula to achieve academically and feel comfortable self-identifying, growing up to become adults who are balanced holistically (Government of Alberta, Aboriginal Services Branch, 2005; Cajete, 2000). And actions to represent Métis must go on regardless of the number of self-identified students. In this way, self-identification is more than the didactic act of checking a box; rather, it is the outcome of larger processes in schools and school boards where learners are proud to be Métis. There is still a lot of confusion about what it means to be Métis and, therefore, promising practices on representation of Métis in curricula and in class require attention. The conditions under which all Aboriginal youth learn about their history, knowledge, and culture must change to respect the present and living perspectives of contemporary Aboriginal people who seek a decolonizing space that respectfully engages the whole learner. The MNO can help to work to ensure the dissemination of contemporary perspectives to the public.

Nevertheless, the legacies of racism, colonial educational systems, and social and economic hardship continue to be felt by Aboriginal families in Ontario. Consequently, for self-

identification initiatives to be effective education policy, parents, families, and communities must feel comfortable in schools. To position the learner as centre and teachers as nourishing guides (*First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model*, 2007) can bring Métis students and their parents, families, and communities to the place of self-identifying. From our surveys and personal interviews and site visits, we see that some boards are showing that steps can be taken. However, it appears from the lack of engagement and responses that many boards (well over half) need to begin to work on the initiatives set forth in the *Framework*.

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