

# ReconciliACTION through meaningful Indigenous-led Indigenization in Québec Cégeps

by Michelle Smith

I have worked in English Cégeps in and near Tiohtià:ke/Mooniyang (Montreal) since 2011, as Coordinator of the Aboriginal Studies Certificate at John Abbott College, Coordinator of the Journeys First Peoples Transition Program at Dawson College, and teacher at both. I am Principle Investigator of the *First Peoples Post-Secondary Storytelling Exchange* (FPPSE)<sup>[1]</sup> and am completing my PhD on the topic of Indigenous Educational Sovereignty. I am a guest on unceded territory here in the east, and I have deep respect and gratitude for the custodians of this land and the many nations that call this place home. As a Métis woman working in Kanien'kehá:ka territory with Indigenous students from diverse nations in a largely western educational framework, my experience is one of extremes. I get very frustrated by the slow pace of change at the institutional level and some days are a battle, but most days are filled with deep learning and I'm profoundly grateful for the lessons from the land, from colleagues, community members, and especially students, who help me to become a better teacher, and add meaning to my own journey as a Métis woman far from my homeland.

*This article was written during the pandemic, before more tragic deaths of Black and Indigenous people at the hands of police, the rise of Black Lives Matter, the murder of Joyce Eschaquan, and tragically, the discovery of children's graves at the sites of residential schools across Canada. Colonial violence and its impacts have been extensively documented in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report (TRC) and subsequent calls to action including the Public Inquiry Commission on relations between Indigenous Peoples and certain public services in Québec (Viens Commission); Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) National Inquiry's Calls to Action about education; and Joyce's Principle. Yet it continues.*

*As Cégep educators we have an essential role to play in denouncing colonial violence, and equipping our students with an understanding of colonization and systemic racism so they can contribute to building a more just, equitable society. Years after the initial writing of this article, the recommendations I make here are not only still relevant, but all the more urgent.*

I am Michif, or Red River Métis on my mother's side, with settler ancestry (English, Irish and Dutch). I am a member of the Manitoba Métis Federation and descend from Scottish halfbreeds and French Métis with family names including McMillan, Bruce, Dease, Perrault and others. I grew up in Treaty 1 territory, also the Métis homeland, on the banks of the Assiniboine River in what is now Winnipeg, near the site where my relatives guided red river carts and buffalo hunters across the river fords over a century ago. They lived, hunted and farmed here, until the lands were appropriated by speculators and homes burned down to make way for suburban development. While the houses went up in flames around them, my Granny Mac refused to leave, and the story goes her home was hauled away with her in it.

I attended elementary school nearby, in a small community of oak trees and bungalows. My school life was mainly positive; I tried to colour within the lines and got good grades. But our contemporary and past experiences in the very place the school was situated were at best invisible, at worst, shameful. By high school, Riel was a traitor and the Métis apparently died out with industrialization. My experience and identity as a young Métis were irrelevant, invalid, an embarrassment. Keeping quiet about it and fitting in was a survival strategy.

Making art and telling stories was a way back to community for me, and before landing at John Abbott College then Dawson, I spent many years travelling across Turtle Island and abroad making films. Métis, Inuit and First Nations stories of language and culture revitalization, social change and resistance featuring dynamic youth, elders, teachers, artists, athletes and community leaders defied the stereotypes and personified the pride, creativity, strength and resurgence taking place across Indian Country. I found

this reality was not reflected in public life in Québec and Canada, and when I started teaching at Cégep I was taken aback at the lack of Indigenous presence at sites of higher learning in Quebec.

Today, as an educator and advocate for equity in education, I am motivated to make the invisible visible, and counter the shame and silence that so many of us experienced in 'mainstream'/off-reserve/western style schools. This means providing positive experiences and relevant content and pedagogy for Indigenous students in post-secondary. It also means working towards transforming educational institutions into inclusive places of learning which recognize, celebrate and honour Indigenous values, cultures and knowledges that are embedded in this land so many of us call home.

This work is deeply personal, and intensely connected to who I am and where I come from. But why should this matter to everyone?

## **A duty to make amends**

It's been almost ten years since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission revealed horrific truths that had been mostly hidden from many Canadians for decades, truths magnified by the discovery of children's graves at residential school sites. Thousands of Indigenous children were harmed at these schools. Thousands of families were broken apart. The effects of residential schools, land theft, and colonial laws and policies are still palpable in many families and communities, including my own. This is not ancient history. The last residential school closed in only 1996.

These crimes are no longer secret, and institutions implicit in these crimes, whether in the areas of health, social services, government or education cannot continue to function in the same way. People cannot continue to act in the same way.

*Reconciliation must become a way of life. It will take many years to repair damaged trust and relationships in Aboriginal communities and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Not only does reconciliation require apologies, reparations, the relearning of Canada's national history, and public commemoration, but it also needs real social, political, and economic change. Ongoing public education and dialogue are essential to reconciliation. Governments, churches, educational institutions, and Canadians from all walks of life are responsible for taking action on reconciliation in concrete ways, working collaboratively with Aboriginal peoples. Reconciliation begins with each and every one of us. (TRC Report vol. 6 p 20)*

Many post-secondary institutions have taken up the call<sup>[iii]</sup> and change is happening slowly. Required Indigenous curricula, land-based education, Indigenous protocols and governance are becoming part of higher education, especially in western Canada. Cree-Stoney Educator William Lindsay, Former Senior Director of Indigenous Directions at Concordia University stated: "Indigenizing physical spaces in the academy, Indigenous specific recruitment materials, Elders programs, Indigenous cultural sensitivity training, hiring of Indigenous people in faculty and administrative positions, and especially Indigenous advisory councils across the whole institution and in specific departments – this is where great success happens. These are par for the course out west and *it's coming this way* [to Quebec]" (2019). It's no longer a choice. Indigenous people are here, demanding change, accountability, and a place in higher education. Many allies are joining the movement for reparations and a more inclusive, fair, and diverse education system.

This is an exciting and important moment for Quebec Colleges to be leaders in this process; to engage in profound learning with Indigenous partners. It will make us all better humans, better teachers, better students, better communities. It's not about assigning guilt or blaming individuals. Systems need to change, and everyone can contribute to making it right.

## Indigenous pedagogies benefit all

Indigenous pedagogies offer innovative approaches to teaching and learning that can benefit all students and enrich the experience of every instructor, whether teaching math, physiology or social sciences.

Each nation holds values that are intrinsic to all aspects of life, especially teaching and learning. Métis values of kindness, generosity, humility and humour for instance, are as essential to learning as the intellect, and open our hearts to meaningful interactions and life lessons. Holistic and experiential learning, the importance of relationships and responsibility, incorporating mind, body, heart and spirit teachings in and outside the classroom provide openings for deep connection and understanding of self and others yet are typically excluded from western educational systems. Indigenous pedagogies also value the unique gifts of each person. Everyone has something to offer and everyone belongs. As educators working with students of diverse backgrounds and experiences, classes, genders, identities, and abilities, an inclusive approach helps us reach every student with compassion and love.

An Indigenous educator and parent who shared her story for the First Peoples Post-Secondary Storytelling Exchange reminds us that each student brings complex experiences and histories into the classroom:

*When you get older and you're a teenager, you know there's so much happening to you on different levels that it's even more challenging because you're getting pulled and tugged in different ways. Socially, emotionally, your body, you know, your family. Maybe your economic status or your social status, what's going on in the community, you know if your family's in distress. All of these issues are so important and pertinent to the factors of what that student walks into your class with. What are they presenting, what do they have in their pack? What rock is there that's weighing them down? And as a teacher, I think you don't have the sole responsibility of teaching a curriculum, you have the responsibility of being acquainted to your student and knowing the strengths of your student as well as the emotional pitfalls or whatever struggles that they're going through. Because if you don't, then you're not reaching them, you're not reaching all of them. And it doesn't take much to reach them. It just takes a bit of your time, compassion and understanding. FPPSE Storyteller, July 2018*

I call on teachers to engage with pedagogies of care and compassion in and outside the classroom.

## Post-secondary education remains inaccessible to many Indigenous students

Until we create our own self-determined post-secondary schools, Indigenous students seeking higher education have little choice but to leave their communities to attend Cégep and university. While there are new initiatives such *Iyescuwiuu*, a Cree College transition program in Eeyou Istchee and the beginnings of an Arts Literature Communications (ALC) DEC in Nunavik, most students go to a college in the city.

*Moving to a new community without family support can be overwhelming. Many Indigenous students come from isolated and remote areas. They don't have the same opportunities as their counterparts elsewhere. The environment is not equitable. As a result, far fewer First Nations, Métis and Inuit in Canada have a post-secondary degree than non-Indigenous Canadians (Universities Canada, 2017).*

Indigenous students in the FPPSE shared experiences of courage, transformation and success in Quebec colleges and universities but ongoing structural challenges, racism and inequity have significant impacts on mental health and well-being (Smith et al., 2022) and ultimately retention and graduation rates.

Cégep admissions procedures pose barriers for many students, all the more so for students in remote areas for whom English is a second or third language. Many Indigenous students are at a disadvantage before they even get in the door. At college, students are expected to adapt to a different culture and language. Many may be living with the impacts of intergenerational trauma, grieving, or leaving behind difficult circumstances at home that can add additional stress to their experience as a student. Certain course requirements create other obstacles. The CAQ's Law 14 is requiring all students in English Cégeps to take additional French courses, meaning more stress on students and their families, and added barriers to

post-secondary success. Students are speaking out, denouncing this “assimilationist” law and demanding support to learn their own languages.

Classroom experiences can also be triggering. A number of students sharing stories with the FPPSE spoke about being traumatized or re-traumatized when learning about topics like suicide, violence against women, and foster care (Smith et al., 2022). For many Indigenous students these are not abstract social issues but affect their own lives and the people close to them.

It’s important to reiterate that inequity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in college graduation rates, and the numerous barriers outlined above, belie the determination and many successes of Indigenous post-secondary students. Indigenous culture and identity are sources of strength, and the commitment to our community and nation is the motivation (Smith et al., 2022).

## **Making change**

There is a lot of work to do. From my experience working with Indigenous students and talking and learning with colleagues and community members, I suggest some places to start.

## **Access to relevant and culturally safe education**

Access means supporting students and their families as they navigate admissions processes. Individualized communication and guidance is essential.

Access means recognizing that many students may not have followed a linear educational path prior to Cégep. I suggest a holistic admissions process, which goes beyond grades to consider students’ experience, skills and context and provides accessible pathways for obtaining missing pre-requisites. Seats can be allocated in desired programs like STEM where Indigenous students are vastly underrepresented. This is not favouritism, this is restitution.

Access also means providing gathering spaces, and culturally relevant supports, including access to elders and ceremonies. Colleges like the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technology (SIIT) and the British Columbia Institute of Technology offer comprehensive services to each Indigenous student from pre-application to post-graduation. *Student Opportunity Achievement and Life skills* (SOAR) at SIIT involve a “barrier reduction process” that includes “wrap around” services. The impact on retention and student success has been resoundingly positive. “95% of students assisted with SOAR graduated” (CIC 2018). The CIGan Indigenous Education Symposia are spaces for Cégep educators to learn about these initiatives and meet the people behind them. Many Quebec Cégeps have Indigenous Student Resource Centres but may lack the sustainable resources to offer similarly comprehensive services.

Access is also about providing culturally safe<sup>[iii]</sup> classrooms and relevant content and pedagogy. Many non-Indigenous teachers are working hard to do this in a respectful way, with guidance from Indigenous scholars and teachers. It can be daunting, and can involve “unlearning” and discomfort, but teachers have shared that it makes for richer, more challenging and rewarding experiences in the classroom as well as more engaged students. There are so many resources available and good work to draw from. Read, attend community events, meet other colleagues doing this work and talk with your students about how to fulfil a commitment and responsibility to the land and the traditional stewards of this territory.

## **Indigenous Language Learning as a Right**

As I got older and went to university in Montreal, my grandpa started speaking to me in Michif. I’m not sure why at that time, maybe because of the French aspect; maybe because I was older and wanted to learn more about our culture. Michif is a unique language, which combines French, Cree and Anishinaabemowin. It’s the language he spoke on the land with Granny Mac. I never heard him speak it in public or when we were growing up. Michif, like so many Indigenous languages, was looked down on. Michif, like so many Indigenous languages, is in danger yet there are very few opportunities for Indigenous language learning in post-secondary.

That students are not able to study their own language in higher education in Québec violates fundamental human rights. Article 13 of UNDRIP states: “Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their languages... ” and “States shall take effective measures to ensure that these rights are protected.” Advocacy with the Québec ministry, especially in light of Law 14, is essential to prioritize Indigenous language learning in our colleges and make courses in French or English as a second language courses a choice for Indigenous students rather than an obligation.

## **Governance, Meaningful relationships, Key roles and Decision-making**

There continues to be a lack of diversity in Cégep faculty. Indigenous students and students of diverse origins need to see themselves reflected in classroom instructors and college leadership. All students need to learn authentic content from Inuit, Métis and First Nations peoples, in particular the people of this land. Building relations with community partners can help make this happen.

Educational partnerships between Indigenous communities and Québec CÉGEPS are leading to successful innovative programs. *Nunavik Sivunitsavut* – a one-year transition program for Inuit with Inuit history, culture, language, and land-based learning, evolved out of a partnership between Kativik Ilisarniliriniq (Nunavik school board) and John Abbott College. Kativik regional government partnered with CÉGEP St-Félicien to offer the *Arctic Guide in Nunavik* AEC program for Inuit. The one-year program for skills development in Nunavik land-based tourism takes place in the community of Kangiqsujaq, Nunavik. These programs reflect community needs and aspirations. We need more!

To make real change, Indigenous peoples – faculty, staff, community members, students - must be present in college governance and decision making at all levels. *Nothing about us without us*. Period.

It’s a lot to do. But there really isn’t a choice. We are here. As what was once invisible in Québec colleges becomes visible, it is time to learn, listen and act together, to honour and build relationships of solidarity and collaboration for a shared future. The impact of climate change makes it apparent that our planet is in crisis. The deep knowledge of the land that we as Indigenous peoples have carried across generations is essential to everyone’s survival – plant, animal and human. At our colleges we have the great privilege of working with young people who bring their varied lived experience to spaces of learning and critical reflection. Youth can see injustice and unfettered ways forward. We in colleges can contribute to nurturing accountable citizenship and just social action for equitable futures.

Ekoshi maga (that’s all for now)

Michelle Smith

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[i] First Peoples Post-Secondary Storytelling Exchange (FPPSE) (2016-2022) aims to advance a new conversation about post-secondary education through storytelling exchanges, talking circles, and filmmaking workshops. This multi-institution project funded by SSHRC aims to contribute to more responsive post-secondary education for Indigenous students, honour Indigenous approaches to teaching and learning, and build capacity of young Indigenous scholars. See stories and videos at [fppse.net](http://fppse.net)

[ii] *Reconciliation* remains contested, as a term and a process. How can Indigenous peoples and settlers reconcile so long as we are on unequal footing? If reconciliation suggests restoration of good relations, what is there to reconcile if the relationship started as control and oppression? The TRC report acknowledges that there are multiple meanings and interpretations of Truth and Reconciliation. Almost a decade since the report was released, critics say that the deep learning called for by the TRC report has not happened, and there lacks political will. Without substantive change reconciliation is only lip service.

[iii] The term “cultural safety” was developed in the 1980s in New Zealand in response to Māori discontent with nursing care. Applied to education, it involves an awareness on behalf of the teacher of his or her own position of power and the colonial history and relations that impact students’ learning experiences. A key element of culturally safe practice is establishing trust with students and having understanding of their cultural backgrounds and context. Culturally safe care values each person’s knowledge and reality. For more see NAHO Cultural Safety Fact Sheet 2006.

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