Education Leadership in K–12 Systems from a Métis Worldview: Infusing Education Leadership with an Understanding of Wâhkôhtowin

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Abstract

The education system in Alberta has been struggling for years to provide quality education within increasingly complex learning environments. Gaps in student knowledge and skills, neurodivergencies, background learning experiences, language competencies, social and emotional regulation levels, differing parental expectations, and other complexities all contribute to the difficulties facing today's educators. This article explores how Métis and First Nations ways of being, knowing, and doing may be infused within a transformative approach to education leadership, which may serve to meet the challenges of the current Alberta education system. Wâhkôhtowin is discussed as a guiding principle within an education leadership framework, along with decolonializing, social justice, and culturally responsive policies as requirements to make substantive and sustainable changes within the current Alberta education system.

Keywords: transformative, education leadership framework, decolonization, social justice, anti-oppression, relationality, Wâhkôhtowin, Métis education

Résumé

Le système scolaire albertain peine depuis des années à fournir une éducation de qualité dans des milieux d'apprentissage toujours plus complexes. Les lacunes dans les connaissances et les compétences des élèves, la neurodiversité, les expériences d'apprentissage antérieures, les compétences linguistiques, les niveaux de régulation sociale et émotionnelle, les attentes divergentes des parents, etc., contribuent aux défis qui confrontent les éducatrices et éducateurs d'aujourd'hui. Cet article compare certains cadres éducatifs proposés pour répondre à ces complexités et décrit comment les modes d'être, de savoir et d'agir des Métis et des Premières Nations peuvent être intégrés dans une approche éducative potentiellement plus efficace. Il soutient en outre qu'une transformation profonde et durable du système scolaire actuel exige une véritable décolonisation accompagnée de changements sensibles et adaptés à la culture.

Mots-clés : éducation métisse, éducation autochtone, décolonisation, éducation adaptée à la culture

Positionality

I am a daughter, sister, niece, wife, mother, grandmother, and aunt.

I am a Métis woman whose ancestors moved from the Red River settlement in Manitoba to northern Saskatchewan, from where they were forced to relocate following the 1885 Resistance, and eventually established a new life in rural Alberta during the 1950s. Consequently, I was raised in a time and place where the ability to remain hidden within White society was valued and Métis ways were buried. I witnessed racist attitudes along with unprovoked fear directed toward First Nations and Métis people. Racist beliefs were perpetuated and made acceptable by subtle and direct messages within our public schooling community. For example, I recall being taught that Louis Riel was a Métis lawyer who led his people in a "rebellion" against the Canadian government and was hung for his "treasonous" crimes. I did not learn about Riel's many attempts to engage the government in peaceful negotiations for land upon which the Métis had been living for generations (Ens & Sawchuk, 2018). I heard how settlers were attacked by First Nations people, and how treaties were made to keep people safe. I did not learn how First

Nations people were forced to stay on reservations while promises of government support were not kept. I did not learn about Residential Schools, despite their existence within 200 kilometres of my home. As Marie Battiste (2013) reminds us, "no educational system is perfect, yet few have a history as destructive to human potential as Canada's with its obsession with assimilation" (p. 180).

I am reclaiming my heritage as a citizen of the Métis Nation of Aberta and building my knowledge of Métis understandings, history, and culture; of ways of being, knowing, and doing. I am internalizing Métis values and understanding. I am driven to help mitigate such injustices and, in turn, act relationally. It is in my blood. It guides my thoughts and actions toward what is happening in our education system and fuels my desire to be a changemaker. I see a way forward through the application of a Métis worldview and the practical embodiment of Métis and First Nations ways of being, knowing, and doing within K–12 educational leadership policies and practices.

As a teacher I have observed the rise of disrespect and ambivalence toward learning within classrooms and schools. The rising rates of teacher burnout, lowered levels of academic achievement, increased incidences of violence and disruption within schools, and decreased parent satisfaction with the school system will eventually overwhelm our ability to educate all children in Alberta (Agyapong et al., 2024; Kendrick et al., 2025). Without significant changes to the education system, the downward spiral will continue and likely gather speed considering the additional impacts of climate change, global political uncertainties, advancing digital technologies, and increasing poverty in many countries. As stated in a 2021 UNESCO report,

> education systems often reproduce and perpetuate the very conditions that threaten our shared futures…they have emphasized values of individual success, national competition and economic development, to the detriment of solidarity, understanding our interdependencies, and caring for each other and the planet. (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021, p. 11)

Such international reports call for transformative changes and align with the benefits of infusing the education system with the principle of Wâhkôhtowin, a fundamental principle centred on interconnectedness and relationality that guides Métis and Nêhiyaw (Cree) people.

As an emerging Métis academic researcher, in this article I examine transformative frameworks for education leadership in K–12 schools through the application of my worldview in relation to discussing how we might infuse the principle of Wâhkôhtowin within education leadership policies and practices. Such decolonization efforts afford curricular and pedagogical opportunities "for generating a postcolonial education system in Canada and disrupting those normalized discourses and singularities and allowing diverse voices and perspectives and objectives into 'mainstream' schooling" (Battiste, 2013, p. 107).

Troubling Issues in Education

Teaching has become reminiscent of a game of "whack-a-mole," in which the teacher is forever dealing with immediate problems, leaving little time for effective planning, reflection, and refinement. This analogy also applies to school administrative leadership roles. In a recent study conducted in Alberta, Kendrick et al. (2025) found increasing rates of symptoms of burnout among teachers and administrators related to continuous underfunding and increasing reporting/assessment expectations. My experiences led me to ask: How can educational research make a difference in how students are educated within their school system? Is the development of sustainable, socially just policies and practices to support adaptable, flexible, culturally responsive, and effective teaching possible through the identification of transformative changes within education leadership in K–12 systems?

Leadership in education is interconnected with stakeholders, government and district policies, physical spaces, financial responsibilities, academic achievement outcomes, community expectations, and other less tangible aspects. If you consider one element of this education system—for example, a student's Individualized Program Plan—you will begin to see how many educational elements are interconnected, and the complexity of the role of an educational leader. Consider the following example based on my personal experience:

> In Alberta, a student's Individualized Program Plan (IPP) is developed as the result of a parent or a teacher identifying a challenge a student is experiencing, typically something that significantly impacts their ability to successfully achieve a learning outcome in accordance with the Special Education Coding Criteria (updated each year). Learning outcomes are designed

> through government policies and implemented through a teacher's pedagogy. The teacher's pedagogy has developed through their university education experiences, personal experiences, and hopefully, with the guidance of their instructional leader, the principal. Their ability to accurately assess whether the student's learning challenge is part of the student's past learning experiences, or something more specific to their ability to learn impacts whether this child is referred for assessment or confirms what was already put forward by the parent and perhaps concurred by previous teachers. The physical space in which the student is learning may also impact their ability to learn skills and content, as well as their interactions with other students and staff members. All of which must be considered before the actual creation of the IPP, which requires the approval of the principal and a meeting with the parent(s) or guardian before it can be designed and put into place.
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> This, however, is only the beginning stage of this process at the school level and does not consider the development of government or district policies leading to the requirement of Individualized Program Plans as documentation for the provision of support for students with exceptional needs. The vastness of educational elements and interconnections becomes apparent when considering this problem and consulting the various resources on K-12 Instructional Supports (Government of Alberta, 2025).

Jason Schilling (2024), the current president of the Alberta Teachers Association, stated, "public education needs serious and systematic changes if we are going to make a difference in the lives of our students, our classrooms and each other" (para. 5). However, change is often stymied by the level of complexity within the current administrative structure of the Alberta educational system as determined by the provincial government. The increase in classroom complexities such as undiagnosed learning disabilities, increased inattentiveness, low motivation levels, outdated curriculum objectives, and limited support, as well as a perpetual lack of time to complete tasks and follow district or school mandates, has increased the efforts required by educators while often resulting in lower feelings of job satisfaction (Stelmach et al., 2021).

The structure and organization of the current education system was developed in response to events happening over a hundred years ago, during the Industrial Age.

The people organizing the system were colonialists who believed that education was an institution that could be run and managed like any other type of business (Bates, 2010). According to von Heyking (2006), Alberta's early education goals vacillated between preparing future citizens who were employable and able to meet the needs of a capitalist society; producing patriotic, rule-following citizens; and maintaining the status quo for European settlers' educational expectations. Much of the bureaucratic nature of the Alberta education system remains tied to its history with British-style governance, as evidenced in Adams and Burns's (2023) discussion of the training and evaluation of new teachers. Their study demonstrated the continuation of a hierarchical system struggling to reconcile its need for efficiency and standardization of qualifications with "a drive to control society more concretely through instrumentally rational mechanisms that seek order and control" (p. 415).

While some may argue about shifts in perspective driving the focus of policies toward or away from the human side of education, the core institutional approach of education management remains the same (Bates, 2010; Murphy, n.d.). This top-down, patriarchal, bureaucratic education system was not designed to allow for adaptability, fluidity, or responsiveness to a world that changes abruptly with natural disasters, global economic crises, technological advances, and increased interconnectivity between geographically, economically, politically, linguistically, and culturally diverse communities around the world.

"Inclusive education" was a major shift in the implementation of educational programs, as equitable education was fully supported by the United Nation's "Education for All" movement and the 1994 Salamanca Statement (Ainscow, 2020). Ainscow (2020) outlined how the shift to inclusive education was supported by three rationales: "educational justification," which sees students benefit from learning to work with students of diverse abilities; "social justification," which sees students receive equitable learning opportunities; and "economic justification," where maintaining one school system is cheaper than providing institutions based on student learning needs (p. 8). Whatever the intentions behind the shift to inclusive education, the current educational issues are largely connected to economics and underfunding, as well as the inability of governing educational structures to develop a shared set of values and processes focused on providing equitable learning opportunities for all students (Ainscow, 2020).

My Métis Worldview

Parallel to broadening my knowledge of education leadership theories and system administrative practices as a doctoral student in education, I began a journey into discovering my Métis roots. Developing my understanding of historical, cultural, and spiritual practices through reading and connecting with other Métis people broadened my mind to possibilities outside of the traditional settler-colonial approach, through which the current education system came into being. Brewing in my mind was a rudimentary knowledge of First Nations and Métis ways of being, knowing, and doing, and how they may influence the development and implementation of inclusive educational policies and practices within school systems and encourage education leaders to be flexible, culturally responsive, and in tune with the needs of their community of learners and stakeholders.

Because the Métis are a diverse people, identifying a singular Métis worldview is impossible. According to an excerpt of the book *Aboriginal Perspectives*, re-published in the Government of Alberta (2004) online resource *Walking Together: First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum*:

> There is no single worldview common to all First Nations, Métis, and Inuit individuals any more than there is a single worldview common to all European or African individuals. Differences in viewpoints exist between individuals within a single culture or community. (p. 1)

Therefore, my understanding of a Métis worldview has been developed through personal cultural experiences, information from the Rupertsland Institute's (n.d.) "Métis Foundational Knowledge Themes" course, readings about Wâhkôhtowin, and knowledge gathered from reading the work of Métis authors and scholars. Working with Métis values and principles, I believe that a Métis worldview incorporates spirituality, adaptability, fluidity, respectful relations, strong work ethics, self-determination, community focus, and connection with the Earth. An education leadership framework developed through a Métis worldview could be called Wâhkôhtowin-infused education leadership. In other words, through acknowledging the interconnectedness of all elements of our world and our responsibility toward helping each other and our environment, an education leader would strive to develop education policies, pedagogy, and system administrative procedures with respect to the potential impact of these choices and actions now and in the future. This education leader would also understand that this work cannot be done alone, or with only like-minded individuals; rather, it must be done with community.

Maria Campbell (2007) described Wâhkôhtowin in terms of its simplest meaning: "kinship, relationship, and family as in human family" (p. 5). Moreover, she traces its traditional meaning by Métis and Nêhiyaw (Cree) people to the interrelatedness and interconnectedness with all things, living and non-living, and our reciprocal obligations to be respectful and cognizant of our responsibilities to each other. Therefore, as I understand the nature of leadership in education, the importance of infusing this responsibility with the spirit of Wâhkôhtowin becomes apparent. In turn, through the understanding of intersectionality, interrelatedness, and the interconnectedness of people with their physical environment, efforts can be made toward making sustainable changes within education leadership policies and pedagogy, as well as system administrative policies and procedures.

In what follows, I explore how Wâhkôhtowin and Métis ways of knowing, being, and doing may be used to develop a transformative education leadership framework to support the enactment of sustainable, equitable, and adaptable education policies and practices by education leaders within K–12 schools within my context. In turn, I provide an overview of some of the literature describing education leadership frameworks focused on shifting policies and practices away from traditional, authoritarian education systems centred on assimilation and toward socially just, culturally responsive, and community-centred approaches to education.

Wâhkôhtowin as a Guiding Principle

Wâhkôhtowin (sometimes spelled wahkootowin) has been applied as a guiding principle to research methodologies and leadership, such as community-based participatory research, genealogical and historical research, Indigenous relationality research, and community leadership governance (Gokiert et al., 2017; Macdougall, 2010; Wallin & Scribe, 2022; Wildcat & Voth, 2023; Wildcat, 2018). Brenda Macdougall (2010), Gokiert et al. (2017), Dwayne Donald (2021), Dawn Wallin and Christopher Scribe (2022), Matthew Wildcat (2018, 2023) and Daniel Voth (Wildcat & Voth, 2023), as well as Maria Campbell (2007), have all contributed to my understanding and internalization of Wâhkôhtowin. Forsythe (2023) provides a thoughtful connection between Nêhiyaw (Cree) and Métis understandings of Wâhkôhtowin through the acknowledgement of matriarchal knowledge sharing. She reminds us that "Maria Campbell and Brenda Macdougall brought the Cree concept into the collective Métis consciousness" (p. 121). The depth and complexity of Wâhkôhtowin and its relevance to educational leadership may be understood through Macdougall's (2010) statement:

> As an expression of cultural identity, wahkootowin provides structure to society; infuses institutions with meaning; establishes protocols and frameworks for interaction and behaviour; is the foundation for pursuing any economic, political, social, or cultural activity; and is essential for the creation of an alliance. (p. 7)

Support for this statement may be seen in Gokiert et al. (2017) and Alexander First Nation's community-based participatory research project, which centres reciprocity and collaboration with the understanding that "Wâhkôhtowin encompasses more than simply relating to others; it provides the basis for individuals to function well together" (p. 3). The value of Wâhkôhtowin within educational structures may also be seen in Wallin and Scribe's (2022) Wâhkôhtowin teacher preparation model focused on "relationality, ceremony, language, and child-centredness" while intentionally educating with "love, respect and humility" (p. 64). Elsewhere, Dwayne Donald (2021) describes how Wâhkôhtowin supports our actions, stating how "in a practical way, Wâhkôhtowin describes ethical guidelines regarding how you are related to your kin and how to conduct yourself as a good relative" (p. 58). Educational leadership must therefore be grounded within an ethical framework and built around adherence to one's moral conduct to support individuals working well together.

A recent change to the educational structure within four First Nations communities demonstrated how Wâhkôhtowin facilitated the development of community leader governance. The Maskwacîs Education Schools Commission (MESC) grounded their work in Wâhkôhtowin in the development of a multiple-school organizational plan for four First Nations communities (Wildcat, 2018). Historical experiences with governmental bodies have made negotiations and collective agreements between First Nations communities difficult, so by agreeing to follow the principle of Wâhkôhtowin, the political leaders were able to succeed with creating a self-government education agreement. As Wildcat (2018) stated, "Wâhkôhtowin also includes the obligations and responsibilities people have to maintain good relationships" (p. 14). The members of the MESC described their process as a "Wâhkôhtowin-inspired governance model" (Wildcat, 2018, p. 20). When dealing with emotionally charged and/or complex topics, understanding and internalizing the responsibilities and obligations of Wâhkôhtowin may support the participants in acting respectfully and honourably. This example of Wâhkôhtowin in action aligns with Macdougall (2010)

and inspires my consideration of how Wâhkôhtowin may support impactful educational leadership and transformational change within other educational systems.

Understanding Transformative Education Leadership

Leithwood (2021) conducted a review of current research regarding school leadership deemed to be effective within contexts of schools focused on the provision of socially equitable and inclusive education. This review provided an interesting perspective into effective equitable practices of education leadership through the lens of a researcher familiar with contemporary models of education leadership such as instructional, transformational, integrated, culturally responsive, and distributive leadership. While the focus was not specifically on Indigenous school leadership, Leithwood (2021) discussed the Indigenous, decolonizing school leadership (IDSL) framework designed by Khalifa et al. (2019), contending that contemporary leadership was not as dissimilar as they portrayed. Leithwood (2021) found that approximately 10 of the 29 leadership practices discussed by Khalifa et al. (2019) were comparable to this review's guiding framework, with the remainder able to be framed within "three broad Indigenous leadership practices" (p. 29). These three practices included fidelity to Indigenous ways of knowing and attention to decolonizing practices, alignment of curriculum and pedagogy with Indigenous knowledge systems including spirituality, and practices that emphasize the importance of developing community and family relationships "in culturally appropriate ways" (Leithwood, 2021, p. 29).

Moreover, Leithwood (2021) discussed Capper's (2015) review of critical race theory (CRT), which led to six interrelated tenets of education leadership, three of which support understanding the transformative approach: "Tenet 3: Counter storytelling and majoritarian narratives," "Tenet 4: Interest convergence," and "Tenet 6: Intersectionality" (Leithwood, 2021, p. 27). Capper (2015) compared counternarratives with majoritarian narratives as the former presenting the perspective of the non-White group in depicting history and issues of racism, while the latter serves to maintain White privilege, or the status quo, by reframing stories of racial inequities. Through Tenet 4, Capper (2015) explained how alignment between goals to improve education for minoritized and White students would help "foster an acceptance of slow, incremental equity gains" (p. 815); thus manipulating the education system for the better by implementing change that is beneficial to all students, where previous practice may only have benefited White students.

Finally, an important consideration in most educational contexts is Tenet 6: Intersectionality, which refers to how race, sexuality, identity, gender, neurodiversity, and socio-economic status interconnect and consequently have a greater impact on the life of an individual or group of individuals. For example, a Métis woman with ADHD may experience greater difficulties getting learning support than a Métis man with ADHD, who in turn may have more difficulty getting support than a White man with ADHD. To deepen my understanding of transformative education leadership in terms of equitable change, I turned to the work of Caroline Shields (2017).

Shields (2017) described the need for different leadership in terms of living in a VUCA world—meaning, a world that is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous—especially with our global interconnectivity and the ability for immediate transmission of events in real time to affect decisions being made across the globe. Transformative leadership as described by Shields (2017) involves eight tenets:

- The mandate to effect deep and equitable change;
- The need to deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and injustice;
- The need to address the inequitable distribution of power;
- An emphasis on both private and public (individual and collective) good;
- A focus on emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice;
- An emphasis on interdependence, interconnectedness, and global awareness;
- The necessity of balancing critique with promise; and
- The call to exhibit moral courage. (pp. 20–21)

The need to address the inequitable distribution of power is especially important when considering the transition from a traditional colonial education system to one that is designed to avoid privileging one group over another. The ability to decide what will be taught, how it will be taught, when it will be taught, how to measure success, how funds will be allocated, and so on has been in the hands of privileged settlers since the formalization of education. Thus, decisions about education have been made with the goals of the dominant culture in mind—namely, creating an effective workforce to ensure a profitable economy. Little variation from this goal has ever been realized in terms of educational direction.

A Comparison of Transformative Education Leadership Frameworks

The goal of infusing Métis principles and ways of knowing, being, and doing into an education leadership framework for K–12 school systems first requires an examination of research into existing frameworks that align with centring relationality, adaptability, community responsibility, and anti-oppression efforts. To identify relevant "education leadership frameworks" I used the following additional terms: Wâhkôhtowin, relationality, decolonize/decolonialization, Indigenous, Métis, social justice, equity/equitable education, inclusive education frameworks, and community. To limit the scope of this research, I looked for literature pertaining specifically to Canada.

What emerged from this literature review were frameworks that aligned with decolonization, relationality (self-reflective), and social justice goals. Three articles were directly connected with Wâhkôhtowin as a guiding principle, though did not incorporate their understandings into an education leadership framework.

Table 1

Education Leadership Frameworks

Author(s)	Education Leadership Framework (ELF)	Focus/Themes
BC Compassionate Leadership Network	Compassionate School Leadership (CSL)	Relationships; youth-centered
Briscoe, P., & McIntosh, E.	Responsive Leadership	Decolonizing; culturally responsive; self-reflective
chanicka, j., & Logan, C. (2021)	Inclusive Design	Social justice; equity; democratic process; anti-oppression; student-centred
Katz, J., & Lamoureux, K. (2018)	Ensouling our Schools	Inclusive education; Indigenous values and knowledge; social-emotional learning
Khalifa, M. A., Khalil, D., Marsh, T., & Halloran, C.	Indigenous, Decolonizing School Leadership (IDSL)	Overcoming imperialism through decolonization; self-determinism; community focus
Williams et al. (2018)	Indigenous Leadership	Relationality; self-reflection; Indigenous knowledge-building

Decolonizing Education Leadership Frameworks

Evidence of the need for a direct connection to "Indigeneity" within the education leadership framework was provided by Csontos's (2019) recounting of a recent personal experience attending a principal leadership program in Ontario in which there was no Indigenous content or reference to colonialism, while also including a video as part of the program in which a statement was made that denigrated Indigenous knowledge. According to Csontos (2019), "maintaining the invisibility of Indigenous voices in Canadian schools affirms the assimilatory goals of residential schools and strengthens limiting stereotypes of Indigenous people that are founded in the imaginations of settlers" (p. 167). When education leadership frameworks incorporate First Nations, Métis, and/or Inuit knowledge and ways of being, and use them to guide development and implementation of policies, procedures, and operations, the education system will begin to overcome the inequities and oppressive practices inherent in how it serves its stakeholders. Khalifa et al. (2019), Briscoe and McIntosh (2023), and Williams et al. (2018) contributed strongly to my understanding of what must be considered when contemplating a Wâhkôhtowin-infused education leadership framework through my Métis worldview.

Khalifa et al. (2019) discovered five common threads through a review of worldwide research on educational leadership, including Western and non-Western spaces, in relation to colonization, decolonization, and Indigenous people, which they labelled as the Indigenous, decolonizing school leadership (IDSL) framework. Central to this framework is:

> Prioritizing Indigenous ancestral knowledge, enacting self-reflection and self-determination, connecting with and empowering the community, altruism, and spirituality as expressed through servant leadership, and inclusive communication practices. (Khalifa et al., 2019, p. 572)

Therefore, the IDSL framework aligns with the previously described Métis worldview.

Khalifa et al. (2019) raise an interesting point regarding how current education leadership structures were designed to assimilate all citizens, thereby eliminating any cultural differences, in their statement, "in other words, educational leaders inherited colonial leadership structures and practices that were meant to wipe Indigenous cultures, norms, languages, spiritualities, and epistemologies clean of 'indigeneity'" (p. 572). In

developing the IDSL framework, the authors struggled with pan-Indigeneity, the nature of Western academic practices, and maintaining their dedication to decolonizing efforts through following Indigenous ideological processes (Khalifa et al., 2019). There is an inherent difficulty in comparing education leadership approaches when the colonial-based education system is generally predicated on individualism, while Indigenous knowledge systems are grounded in relationality (Hohepa, 2013; Khalifa et al., 2019).

The findings of Khalifa et al. (2019) have afforded me an opportunity to conclude that, because of these foundational differences, education leadership frameworks designed to work within a traditional "colonialized" school system—even when focused on school improvement outcomes for marginalized students—would be less likely to share the characteristics of a Wâhkôhtowin-infused education leadership framework (W-IELF) than one designed to be used within school systems that primarily serve Indigenous students. Top-down–style leadership is so pervasive that it is necessary to include a "work-around" within an educational leadership framework grounded in Wâhkôhtowin, some way to acknowledge the interconnectedness between what was and what I foresee, because I work within communities of mixed cultures rather than primarily Indigenous communities.

In a more hopeful direction, Khalifa et al. (2019) pointed out that "school leaders who embrace and affirm Indigenous ways of knowing resist the persistence and ubiquitousness of colonial oppression" (p. 599) and reaffirm the inappropriateness of traditional colonialist education practices that continue to perpetuate the inequitable and discriminatory treatment of Indigenous and other minoritized students. The difficulty is ensuring that school leaders are aware of what policies and practices are rooted in historical oppression when the entire education system was designed by the privileged, dominant leaders. Providing accurate historical accounts of past oppressive events and policies would fit within the concept of a "work-around" within the W-IELF.

Briscoe and McIntosh (2023) introduce us to a decolonizing responsive leadership framework, that could be applied within any current school structure, aimed at bringing awareness of privilege, historical power structures, and positionality of policies and practices to school leaders. Bringing awareness of personal and organization biases through critical self-awareness may influence the actions of education leaders who do not want to perpetuate colonialist ways of being within their schools. Here, Briscoe and McIntosh (2023) stress:

> the more work school principals (especially White principals) do to learn about decolonizing leadership, the more they can influence others to lead in a culturally responsive way and in turn begin to dismantle colonizing practices rather than perpetuate them in schools – a process that is necessarily focused on the *self*. (p. 17)

What emerges from their study is the crucial role of certain pedagogical activities, such as, but not limited to, using talking circles to develop new understandings of the difference between colonizing and decolonizing ways of thinking (Briscoe & McIntosh, 2023). Two of the other activities involve using self-reflection questions to engage participants in transformative learning and decolonizing the mind through reflecting and discussing "(a) white centering, (b) tokenism, (c) white saviourism, and (d) optical allyship" (p. 26). These activities place the onus on the privileged education leaders to overcome institutionalized colonialist practices and develop culturally responsive, equitable, and socially just ways of leading.

A study by Williams et al. (2018) illustrates how to support and develop Indigenous leadership through a project called "POLLEN, for Promoting our Leadership and Learning and Empowering Our Nations." In the study, POLLEN focused on providing education leadership instruction to American Indian educators (p. 28). The necessity for this program was based on the lack of Indigenous leaders within schools serving Indigenous communities. Their research found that a program that "centered on social/relational content, linked to spiritual/cultural roots, in harmony with Indigenous wisdom, and grounding place and well-being" was most effective with educating new leaders (p. 29). In their words, "The Leadership Tree…serves as a foundation for aspiring leaders to identify and build on their strengths as spiritual, mental, physical, and social leaders and offers a framework that reflects the cultural knowledge and experiences of Indigenous communities" (p. 32). It is a "holistic framework" designed over 12 years using Elders and Indigenous-based models, such as the Medicine Wheel, and connects 16 pillars in relation to the four areas of well-being (social, spiritual, mental, and physical; p. 33). In the discussion of project results, one participant stated, "How are we going to get back in balance?" with regard to handling a difficult situation with a student, which is an excellent example of how an education leader brings cultural ways into practice (p. 39). This is an extremely relevant question to apply within the context of the structure and organization

of the Alberta education system, and one that is unlikely to be addressed within a top-down educational structure firmly rooted in traditional colonialist practices. "Being in balance" would mean practices and policies connect effectively with the context, which aligns strongly with the principles of Wâhkôhtowin and relationality.

A Relational (and Self-Reflective) Education Leadership Framework

Wildcat and Voth (2023) described their understanding of Indigenous relationality in their application of this concept to research methodology. In the authors' efforts to define Indigenous relationality, they acknowledged that "relational worldviews are ultimately embedded in the particular languages and traditions of Indigenous nations," and later explained how it incorporates the "multiplicity of relationships that humans have with each other and the natural world" (p. 476). Wildcat and Voth (2023) also address a global construct of Indigenous relationality as it relates to critical thinking applied to a specific context, and purposeful connections between different Indigenous communities. Indigenous relationality is present in the three frameworks discussed in the previous section in terms of both relationships and contextual critical thinking. The following relational leadership framework is also applicable to education, as well as other child- and youth-serving organizations, and therefore is important to consider in the development of a Wâhkôhtowin-infused education leadership framework.

The BC Compassionate Systems Leadership Network website describes the compassionate systems leadership (CSL) framework, discusses how it is being developed in connection with the Center for Systems Awareness at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and explains how it is applied within child- and youth-serving organizations, including public education systems and First Nations and Métis communities. The CSL framework emphasizes mindfulness, self-awareness, and building and honouring relationships with the goal of addressing challenges facing children and youth while continually reflecting on system efficacy.

Koopmans et al. (2022) used the compassionate systems leadership (CSL) framework to bring together various organizations in the development of a wraparound approach to support families and children in northern British Columbia (p. 3). The CSL framework requires "personal mastery (self-leadership), interpersonal skills (leading rela-

tionally), and systems thinking (connections between individuals, groups and the wider community)" (p. 3). Through using this framework, the researchers found participants built strong connections, engaged in innovative dialogue, and fostered new understandings (Koopmans et al., 2022). This framework highlights the importance of working with other community organizations and demonstrates the need for education leaders to be open to meaningful engagement with outside organizations connected to their students and families. The interconnectedness of supports directly aligns with Wâhkôhtowin-infused education leadership.

Inclusive Education Frameworks: Leadership at All Levels

In thinking about contemporary education leadership frameworks and what would align most closely with the guiding principles of Wâhkôhtowin, transformative leadership as outlined and described by Shields (2017) is at the forefront, along with the inclusive education frameworks of Katz and Lamoureux (2018) and chanicka and Logan (2021). These frameworks embrace the interconnectedness of our lived reality while addressing how to overcome the deficiencies of the current organization and structural processes of a colonialist education system.

Katz and Lamoureux (2018) outlined how to use the three-block model of universal design for learning (TBM of UDL), previously designed and researched by Katz, to include Indigenous knowledge and ways of being and doing. This model outlines the three parts of school organization and operation: "Systems and Structures," "Inclusive Instructional Practice," and "Social and Emotional Learning and Well-Being" (Katz & Lamoureux, 2018, p. 8). This holistic approach to education aligns with First Nations and Métis values, as all parts of the person are taken into consideration through the goal of helping all students to become their best selves physically, spiritually, emotionally, and mentally. For example, "Mino-Pimatisiwin involves walking in a good way – toward being the individual you are meant to be" (p. 24); however, within Indigenous culture, walking in a good way would be in a way that benefits the community and the land, rather than simply the individual. Mino-Pimatisiwin is woven into the organization and lessons of the TBM of UDL; its focus on individual development and its connections to living and non-living things to promote well-being for all.

Katz and Lamoureux (2018) did not address decolonization of the education system, nor did they move beyond the existing theories of education leadership such as

transformational leadership, distributive leadership, and servant leadership. Rather, the focus of their work was enacting change at a school level, mainly through identifying what teachers may do to provide inclusive education within their classes. Their proposed changes and lesson programs centred on how to use pedagogy to provide social equity, address neurological differences, and bring attention to the impact of spiritual, emotional, and physical health on students' ability to engage in learning opportunities. Here, the principal can build capacity by promoting an inclusive culture and being an effective leader through balancing instructional objectives with vision, while also meeting the needs of the school community. The proposed approach to systems and structures includes elements that align with Métis values such as visionary leadership, an emphasis on collaborative practice, and creating a culture of caring and inclusivity (Katz et al., 2021).

In Ontario, chanicka et al. (2018) facilitated a series of changes at a public school to incorporate social justice and anti-oppression knowledge and practices within a pedagogical approach to curriculum implementation. Staff and students engaged in democratic processes utilizing a social justice framework that challenged traditional modes of operation within the school, which also included establishing partnerships with their community (chanicka et al., 2018). In summation of their study, chanicka et al. (2018) concluded, "we are thinking deeply about how we design instruction, analyse data, engage parents/families/elders/community, establish environment as third teacher, build leadership capacity and centre students voices and agencies" (p. 644). The emphasis placed on co-construction of knowledge, collaborative planning, and the relevance of the physical school environment aligns with an approach to school improvement guided by Wâhkôhtowin.

chanicka and Logan (2021) described "Inclusive Design" as an approach to school improvement through the lens of critical education theory and socially equitable practices. The authors stated, "central to Inclusive Design is to honour (recognize or acknowledge) the identities, social locations, families, cultures, languages, abilities, and potential that all students bring to our classrooms and schools" (p. 337). This model includes six threads of action, which require the participation of all stakeholders throughout planning, implementation, and evaluation, while holding students at the centre. The most salient aspects of this framework to Wâhkôhtowin-infused education leadership are the strong focus on collaboration and the inclusion of the physical environment as a thread.

Reflection and Integration of Understandings

> Postcolonialism is not about rejecting all theory or research of Western knowledge. It is about creating a new space where Indigenous peoples' knowledge, identity, and future is calculated into the global and contemporary equation. (Battiste, 2013, p. 185)

An education leadership framework developed through a Métis worldview and guided by Wâhkôhtowin would align with many of the elements of the transformative education leadership frameworks discussed in this exploratory article. For example, it would involve the deconstruction of oppressive administrative policies and procedures, inclusion of relationality, addressing of social inequities, and incorporation of First Nations and Métis ways of being, knowing, and doing (Wildcat & Voth, 2023). In addition to these practices, attention to interconnectedness, intersectionality, adaptability, respect, and responsibility will lead to transformative education leadership practices (Capper, 2015; Wane et al., 2022).

Wâhkôhtowin-infused education leadership in K–12 systems would demonstrate value for reciprocal relationships, collaborative decision making, self-reflection, and relational ways of knowing, being, and doing. Central to a shared educational vision would be the inclusion of student voices and recognition of the diversity of their backgrounds. All members of the education leadership team would need to understand Wâhkôhtowin in relation to recognizing and actively seeking to disrupt the impacts of colonialization on the current education system. Knowledge of the true history of how Canada came to be settled from Indigenous perspectives, how the education system developed, and willingness to "step outside the box" to make progress with the provision of equitable education for all would also be necessary within this relational approach. As I learned from the experience of Csontos (2019), this learning needs to be led by Indigenous people and supported by educational leaders.

Further Avenues of Contemplation

Métis scholarly contributions to the study of education have been growing exponentially. As I move forward in the development of a Wâhkôhtowin-infused education leadership framework, I will look to the work of Drs. Yvonne Poitras Pratt, Jennifer Markides, Janice

Cindy Gaudet, and Lucy Delgado, and artist/educator Leah Dorion for inspiration and guidance. Yet to be explored is the role of Métis women within education leadership and how they may contribute to transformative education system policy development and implementation. Women in education leadership roles, especially those of minoritized backgrounds, have faced significant barriers because of colonial influences and the domination of patriarchal administration. Baskin (2020) described the negative impact of colonization—most profoundly through the Indian Act of 1876—on the power of First Nations women and the value ascribed to their leadership and postulated that women may regain their respected roles within communities as First Nations people reaffirm their connections to traditional teachings. Métis women are making strides toward reestablishing their roles within community leadership structures through participation in governance and academia (DuPré & Fowler, 2023). As DuPré and Fowler (2023) stress, "within the community spaces where we co-produce knowledge, we intentionally reduce barriers for Métis women, non-binary, and Two-Spirit people to not only participate in community gathering and organizing work but to thrive within these (and other) Métis spaces" (p. 144).

The Métis Nation of Alberta reaffirmed the importance of women in leadership roles through the election and support of past President Audrey Poitras and current President Andrea Sandmaier (Otipemisiwak Métis Government, 2024). Reducing barriers for Métis women to access senior educational administration roles is essential in addressing long-term systemic problems through a unique worldview, as well as advancing reconciliation and providing valuable role models for students. Further research into how Métis women are taking up education leadership roles in K–12 education systems would be valuable in adding depth to a Wâhkôhtowin-infused education leadership framework that will ignite systemic changes in education.

Conclusion

While inclusive education in Alberta was originally proposed as a way to ensure all students reach their potential within a respectful, equitable, barrier-free system, these goals remain out of reach (Calder Bateman Communications, 2009). What is needed is a change of perspective and the inclusion of voices who are connected to these lands upon which we live, learn, and grow. With Wâhkôhtowin guiding our relationships and knowledge building, Métis educators and scholars across academic disciplines are finding ways to advocate for socially just and equitable educational changes (Forsythe & Markides, 2024).

The Métis spirit perseveres in the face of such challenges and adversity. It drives Métis people to continue to work hard through oppressive obstacles, to rely on relationships for strength, and to move forward as leaders in education. Wâhkôhtowin-infused education leadership is focused on building and maintaining respectful relationships, adaptive to ongoing changes, grounded with the expectation that everyone brings something to the learning community, and strengthened by a spirit of perseverance and determination. It promises to make a significant future contribution toward enhancing the lives of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Education leaders guided by a deep understanding of Wâhkôhtowin will assuredly contribute to the growth and well-being of their communities and the land upon which they learn.

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