

# Leadership and culture in northern schools

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## **Purpose**

The purpose of this monograph is to report on a study to investigate and analyze the current state of educational leadership, policy, and organization in six northern Canadian schools. Building upon our earlier understandings, reported in a number of articles and conference papers, here we present cross-cutting themes and implications based on our completed study funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The major research question was: what are student, educator, parent, and community member perceptions and expectations of education leadership in northern schools? A secondary question was: how are leadership and culture in northern schools intertwined? Specifically, the objectives of the study were, within a northern context, to analyze and document stakeholder perceptions and expectations of education; to identify and report stakeholder perceptions of effective leadership; and, to determine the extent to which stakeholders perceive the schools adapt to their specific cultural contexts. In this report we bring together a summary of those themes that emerged from and across the six case studies. We also present a reflective view of the study, grounding the findings within the cultures of northern Canada and within other culturally diverse contexts.

### Context and Relationship to the Literature

There is a growing body of literature that stresses the importance of leadership in providing quality education in Canadian schools serving predominantly Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> communities (Bear-Nicholas, 2001; Carr-Stewart, 2001; Corson, 1999; Friesen & Friesen, 2002; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Carr-Stewart, for example, citing the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), argued that:

First Nations education must reflect the language, traditions, and culture of their communities and receive the resources necessary to ensure quality programming, and to ensure education attainment and foster the ‘crucial skills for self-governance and economic self-reliance (RCAP, 1996, vol. 5, p. 3).’ (Carr-Stewart, 2001, p. 141)

She concluded by stating that education is not only a long-neglected treaty commitment, but is crucial to the rebalancing of political and economic power between Aboriginal nations and Canadian governments (p. 141). Despite a growing recognition of the critical role of leadership in improving Aboriginal schooling, there has to date been a tendency to privilege the perspectives of political analysts, educational theorists, and politicians and policy makers (Assembly of First Nations, 1988; Hawthorne Report, 1966/67; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Kirkness (1998) emphasizes why this is problematic:

I would like to suggest that we consider a 4<sup>th</sup> ‘R’, namely rhetoric. It is common to hear our political leaders and educators speak eloquently about the importance of education and what we must do to improve it not only for today, but future

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<sup>1</sup> Following Statistics Canada’s definition (cited in Kanu, 2001, p. 98) Aboriginal is used

generations. We all know the right words; we sound like experts, but we fall short when it comes to putting our rhetoric into action. (pp. 12-13)

A further complication is that the scant empirical research of leadership in schools serving predominantly Aboriginal communities is most often informed by theories and models that assume “leadership is being exercised in a Western cultural context” (Goddard & Foster, in press; Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996, p. 100). To date, few researchers have explored the implications of Western models in situations where the local cultural milieu is different from that of the dominant society.

Within the Canadian experience, many such situations exist in the north. This is especially the case in the northern areas of the prairie provinces, where predominantly Aboriginal communities are served by schools that are primarily staffed by southern educators and operate under legislation and policies established by the provincial or federal levels of government.

North as we use it here refers to the area coterminous with the boreal forest region south of the arctic (Bone, 1992). This northern area was chosen because, despite an increase in research that examines schools serving Aboriginal populations in the territories of the Yukon, Nunavut, and the NWT, and in the communities of the settled rural and urban areas of the southern parklands and prairies, there is a relative absence of empirical study from this area.

In addition, this region is economically and geographically different from the more heavily researched northern territories and western prairies. The numerous lakes and rugged, heavily forested terrain, for example, support a healthy logging industry and

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in this monograph to describe individuals of First Nations and Métis ancestry.

plentiful wild life population, both mainstays of the local economy. As well, the communities where this study was conducted are racially and ethnoculturally different from each other, and from those in most other areas of the province in which the community is located. People of Aboriginal ancestry comprised the only racial group in three instances, the largest racial group within an ethnoculturally diverse community in one instance, and the largest minority racial group in two other instances. These demographics are not the norm in the southern regions of the three provinces. Given the relatively small size and remoteness of these northern communities, it follows that the delivery of K-12 education in these places involves issues of school organization, and of teaching and learning, that are substantively different from those encountered in the rest of Canada.

The study reported in this monograph was conceived and designed within this context. The intent was to address the gap in the education literature by investigating educator, parent, student, and community member perceptions and expectations of educational leadership in northern schools serving largely Aboriginal students, and to examine the relationship between leadership and culture

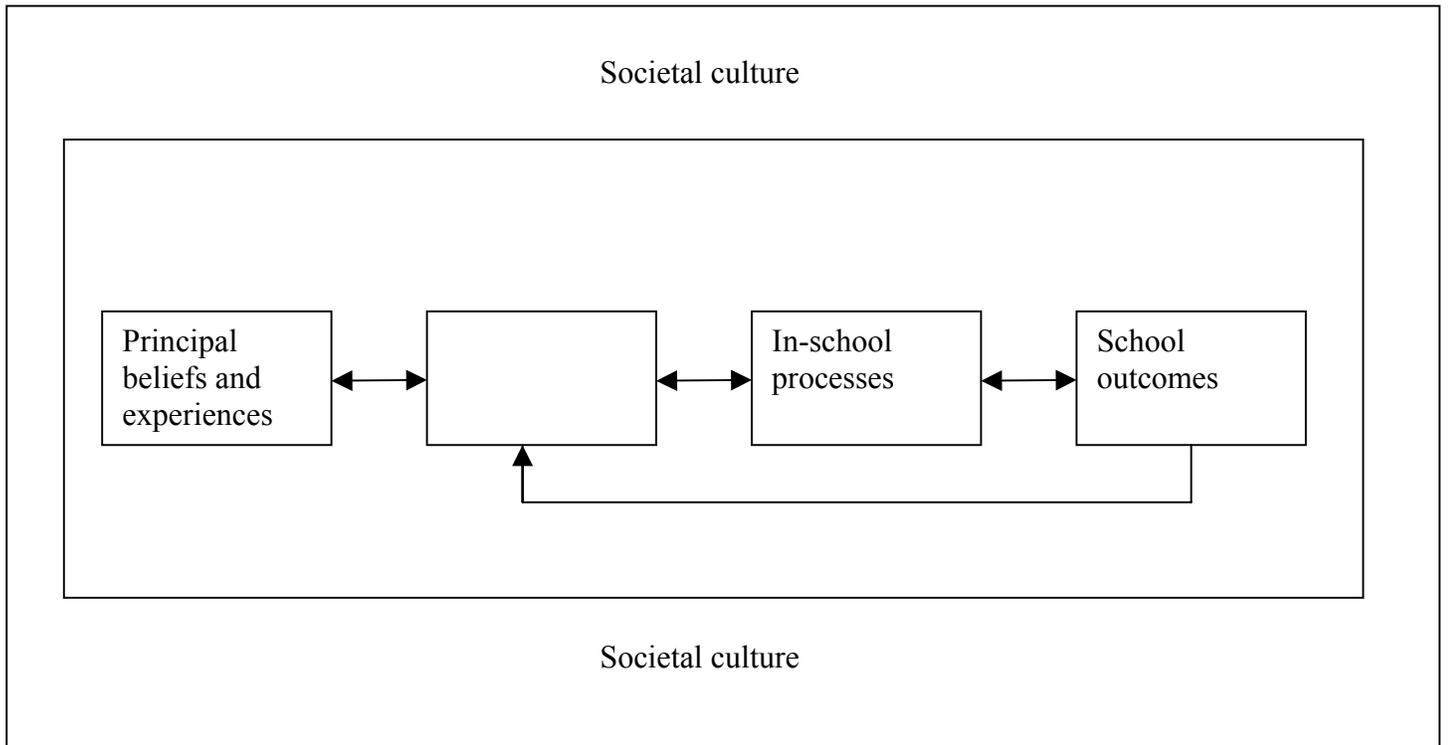
## Theory Development

Within the field of educational administration there has developed recognition of the role played by culture in the formulation and exercise of educational leadership. Walker and Dimmock (2002) noted that “theory and policy in educational administration and leadership are more strongly contextually bound than many researchers and policy-makers in the Anglo-American world are prepared to acknowledge” (p. 2). These authors and others (e.g., Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996; Heck, 1997) observed that culture refers to more than the idiosyncratic climate of the school but rather includes the broader societal culture within which the school is located and functions.

In response to this critique, Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) developed a preliminary model of leadership and culture (see Figure 1) that recognized the effect of the majority or dominant societal culture on leadership processes within the institutional structure and culture of the school. To date, few researchers have explored the implications of the model in situations where the local cultural milieu is different from that of the dominant society. We have identified research located in the United Kingdom (Male, 1998), Mexico (Paradise, 1994), Singapore (Stott & Tin, 1998), the Marshall Islands (Heck, 1996), and Malaysia (Berrell & Gloet, 1999). Although Bryant (1996), Capper (1990), and Shields (1996) have addressed educational leadership within an American Indian context, examinations of the issue do not appear to have taken place in northern Canada.

Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) hypothesized “that the societal culture exerts a significant influence on administrators beyond that of the specific organization’s culture” (p. 106). In northern schools, the extent to which “societal culture” is reflected in community life is problematic. There is a difference between the cultural realities of the

Figure 1: Leadership and culture: A preliminary model for investigation  
(Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996, p. 106)



Dene, the Cree, or the Métis, for example, and those of the white Anglo-European majority culture of the south. Hallinger and Leithwood suggested that “cultural values shape followers’ perceptions of leaders” (p. 107) and “how people approach space, time, information and communication are shaped by the cultural context” (p. 108). As most of the teachers and administrators in northern schools are from a cultural background different to that of the people in the community served by the school, it is important for researchers to explore the ways in which the culture of the community affects and is affected by the wider culture of the school. Further, it is important to distinguish between how the differing perceptions of leadership held by students, educators, parents, and community members are influenced by and responsive to the idiosyncratic societal culture of the community and the majority societal culture of the country.

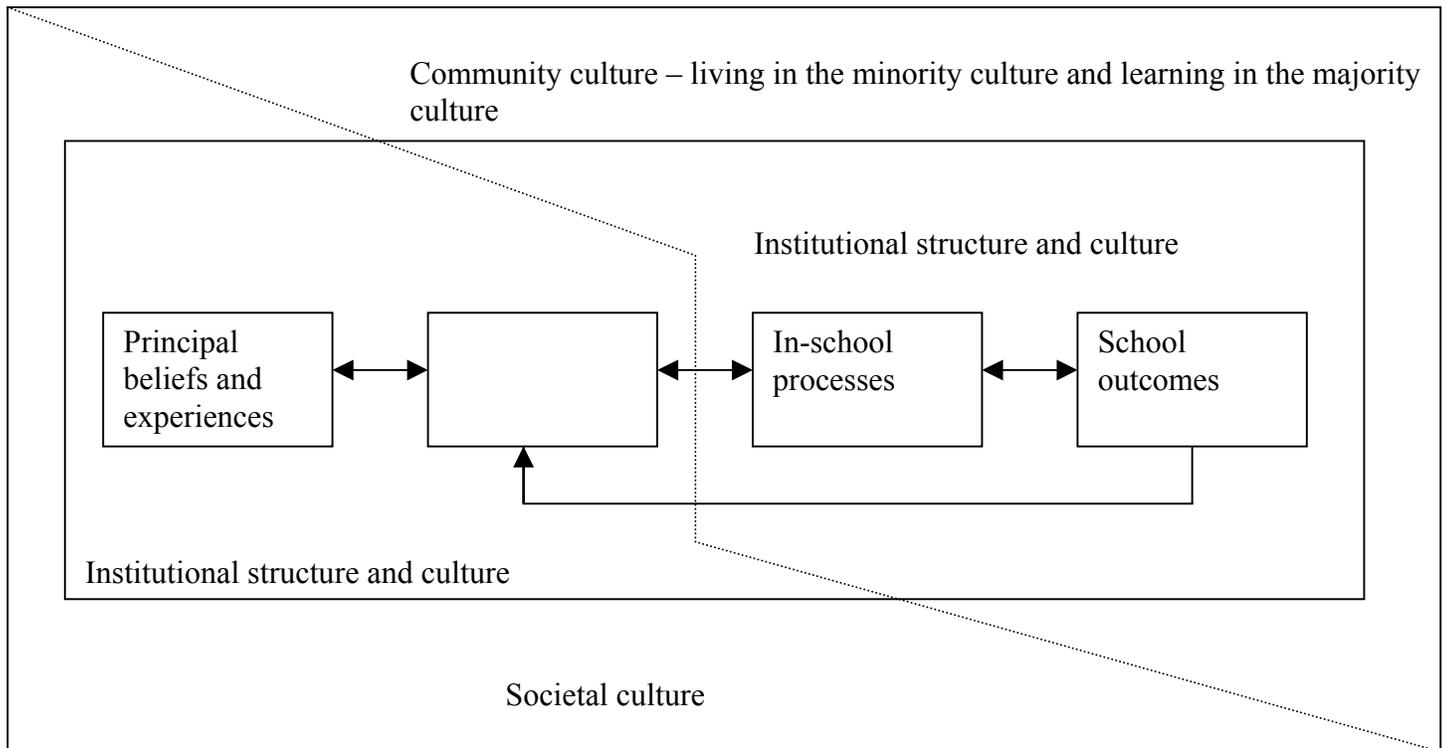
One objective of the research was to adapt the locus of leadership model (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996, p. 107) in order to determine whether it was possible to show how both the idiosyncratic societal culture of the community and the majority societal culture of the country at large can be separated into two dimensions, the lived and the learned, each of which impacts differently on the various stakeholder groups within the school. In this revised model (see Figure 2) the principal is situated in the centre of a web of relationships with staff, parents, students, and superordinates. In the northern communities discussed here, most of the administrators were members of the white, Anglo-European majority culture. They were categorized as ‘living’ within that dominant culture and ‘learning’ within the minority culture of the community. In contrast, almost all of the parents and students were members of the minority First Nations and Métis cultures. As such, they were ‘living’ within the minority culture and ‘learning’ within the

dominant culture. In all six instances these lived realities affected the perceptions and expectations that were brought to bear on the institutional culture and structure of the school and on individual interactions within that structure and culture.

As the model is developed and refined, so it may be possible to identify the skills, knowledge, and expertise required of those who would be effective administrators in schools serving ethnoculturally diverse or minority communities. This knowledge will be useful to those responsible for designing and implementing the curricula for administrator preparation programs, as well as to those responsible for hiring new administrators and providing in-service education to those already appointed.

Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) presented their model as a preliminary idea, for further testing. In this first iteration, we have shown that the model has potential but needs to be extended in order to meet the diverse conditions of schools serving minority communities. Although it is a robust model, its efficacy is limited to situations where the local community context reflects the dominant society. The research described here continues to build on this model and attempts to develop one more suited to examining effective leadership in schools serving ethnoculturally diverse or minority communities.

Figure 2: An adapted version of the Hallinger & Leithwood (1996) model



The intersection between the two solitudes is shown by .....

The principal must move between the two realities. It is at this intersection that effectiveness is established and understood.

## Method

The research reported on in this paper focused on six select schools - two each from northern Alberta, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan. Following Stake (1994, 1995), we adopted a collective case study approach that was instrumental in nature and emergent in design (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Merriam, 1988). As the objective of the investigation was to examine stakeholder perceptions, data were collected primarily through in-depth individual and focus group interviews, direct observation, and field notes, supplemented where appropriate by document analysis. Data were collected over a two and one half year period. The research team spent an intensive week in each of the sites. In order to allow for individual differences and the diversity of experiences, the interviews and focus groups sessions were semi-structured and followed an emergent design.

Interviewing is a technique that permits the researcher to understand the experiences of other people and to develop an awareness of the meaning(s) they make of that experience (Seidman, 1998). In the study described here, the interview questions were developed before the interviews took place. They served as a framework which guided the interviews, and the semi-structured design allowed us to explore ideas and issues not anticipated in our original plan. A core set of questions were common to all the interviews, but the ancillary questions evolved over time as we came to better understand the issues as experienced and understood by northern educators.

All interviews and focus group sessions were audio tape recorded and transcribed. Individual in-depth interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and returned to each interviewee for “member check” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 313) before being analyzed as data. A constant comparative method of analysis was employed, with individual team

members independently reviewing transcripts in an iterative fashion. As categories emerged from the data these were recorded, then subsequently shared and discussed between team members. The team meetings enabled the researchers to engage in periods of intensive discussion, analysis, and writing.

Following on from our earlier individual and collaborative work (e.g., Goddard & Foster, 2001), we framed the research within a paradigm grounded in critical pragmatism (Macpherson, 1996, 1997; Maxcy, 1995). This approach employs the methods of critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996) and recognizes the ideological, socially critical, and value-laden nature of leadership (Bates, 1995; Greenfield & Ribbins, 1993; Ryan, 1997). As researchers immersed in issues of Aboriginal education, our purpose is to raise critical questions that address issues of power, voice, ethnocultural diversity, and social interactions. The objectives of the study were to report the extent to which educators, students, parents, and community members perceived that their local school aligned with the cultural norms, values, and goals of the community. Given this, we selected as sites schools in northern Alberta, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan, with predominantly Aboriginal populations. In the following section are descriptions of the school sites and their communities.

### **The Communities**

In this study we explored issues of educational leadership and culture in six schools, two from each of Alberta, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan. Initially we had intended to focus on the three prairie provinces and include schools from Manitoba in the study. Unfortunately the two field visits that were planned had to be cancelled due to the changing political situation in the school board, which was in the process of being amalgamated with another jurisdiction. Eventually, in the interests of completing the study within the time available, the researchers decided to move the focus to the three western provinces, and to include British Columbia in the investigation. As a general method of recruitment, the researchers drew upon people already known to them and asked them if they could suggest schools that would be suitable to the study.

In Saskatchewan and British Columbia, the schools were identified by the local school superintendents. In Alberta, the researchers contacted the schools directly, inviting principals who had attended a presentation at an educational conference (Goddard, 2001) to participate in the study. In all cases we were pleased to receive full and immediate acceptance of the concept of the study from those whom we invited to participate. In all instances, we also subsequently received approval from the appropriate school board, local school committee, or Band Council. We negotiated the dates of the field visits with each individual principal, taking into account such factors as other planned school activities, teacher conferences, assessment periods, and the weather. The two primary researchers visited all six schools, accompanied by a graduate student in several instances.

## **Alberta**

**Moose River.** This community of approximately 500 was located at the southern edge of the boreal zone, 50 kilometres north of a large urban centre. At the time of our study, Moose River School housed 70 students in grades nursery through six, with six professional staff. All six teachers were white females who lived in the nearby urban centre; all made the 45 minute drive along a country road to and from the school each morning and evening. The principal, a non-Aboriginal male, had been at the school for more than 25 years. Originally from Eastern Canada, the principal had married a Cree woman from a prominent family in Moose River. Although he and his wife had lived in Moose River and raised their children there, at the time of the study they lived in the nearby urban centre. The three para-professionals working at the school were Cree or Métis and lived in the community. The students at the school all lived in Moose River. Most residents and students in the school were Cree or Métis.

The community of Moose River stretched along a river with the same name. Despite a long history of hunting, fishing, and trapping, most families earned their living by working for one of two large oil companies with headquarters in the nearby urban centre. By all reports, jobs were “easy to come by” and it was believed that students as well as parents had a great deal of disposable income. In spite of perceived monetary wealth, the community did not appear prosperous. Repeatedly, we heard the claim that the oil industry had disrupted hunting, fishing, and trapping traditions, and that the environment had become polluted. By way of example, all residents drank bottled water and were discouraged from eating fish from the river, or moose that drank from the river.

The school was older but in good repair. Although there was student work displayed

throughout the school, there was little that would distinguish this school from other schools in the province. There were some artifacts representative of the Cree and Métis heritage of the students. Nonetheless, the principal, teachers, parent, and community members all commented on how difficult it was to make the indigenous culture “real” and “alive” for the students. By all accounts, students identified first and foremost with the culture they observed in the popular media, namely that which was representative of a Euro-Canadian (Western), white, English-speaking and middle class society. Following grade six, students were bussed into the nearby urban centre and had the choice of attending public or Catholic schools, with most choosing to attend a Catholic school. The principal indicated that students did not do well once they left Moose River School to attend the city schools. Students, he claimed, often felt overwhelmed; many subsequently dropped out or left school. The principal’s adult daughter, who had attended Moose River and then went to the city for high school, shared the memory of how difficult a transition it had been, and how overpowering to be surrounded by “so many white faces.” Few students from Moose River School, it was reported, had in recent years completed high school.

**Church Point.** The second Albertan community was in a more isolated location. During the summer months there was some access by boat, and for ten weeks during the winter a road was constructed across the frozen lakes and rivers. For most of the year, however, the community of 3000 was accessible only by air. Located on the northern shore of a large inland lake not far from the tree line, Church Point was spared the pollution and environmental disruption evidenced in more southerly communities like Moose River. Church Point School had 20 professional staff who taught approximately

240 students from kindergarten through grade 12. Students were predominantly Dene, Cree, or Métis. Four of the 20 teachers were Dene or Cree from the community of Church Point; the rest were of mixed ethnicity originally from large urban centres in the south of Alberta or other provinces. All students and the teachers lived in Church Point.

Like Moose River, many of the residents worked for one of two oil companies. People employed by these companies were flown to and from the urban centre near Moose River in order to work. By all reports, residents enjoyed a relatively high standard of living. Despite the prosperity of the northern community, there was considerable debate and concern about the goals and purposes of schooling and education. The principal, a non-Aboriginal male, had left teaching and moved to the north a number of years before this study was conducted. He had worked as an economic advisor to the community of Church Point for several years before becoming principal of the kindergarten-grade 12 school. According to this principal, there had developed considerable resistance during the change from federal governance and residential schools to provincial governance and local schooling. The community had transferred its resistance from the residential to the provincial school. The architect's decision to base the design of the provincial school on that of a fur traders' fort, complete with palisade had exacerbated the situation. Although the community decided within the first year of operation to remove the palisade from the school, resistance and resentment, it was believed, still remained.

Even though the school paid some attention to the Dene, Cree, and Métis heritage of the students, there was little that distinguished this school from other schools one might encounter in the province of Alberta. Respondents shared the same view as those in Moose River; it was difficult to engage students in learning about their local culture and

heritage when students seemed more interested in the youth culture they encountered through the media. Concern about provincial examinations and the latest innovations in pedagogy were topics of conversation in the staff room. Few students completed high school; based on reports of students and long time teachers, we concluded that fewer than 10 per cent of students completed public education in Church Point.

### **British Columbia**

**Salmon Run.** At the time of this study, this small school offered pre-school to grade six to 68 students. Normally, there would be a grade seven class, but at the time of the study there were no students enrolled at that grade level. There were five professional teachers and seven paraprofessional staff. The teachers, all non-Aboriginal, lived in the nearby town. The paraprofessionals were all Aboriginals from the community. The principal, a non-Aboriginal ethnic minority male, was born in northern British Columbia and had been at the school for five years. The students were drawn from the immediate community of Salmon Run, a village of approximately 600 residents. The community was part of the Nesting Eagle First Nation, a Carrier nation in north-central British Columbia. All the residents of the community and all students in the school were Carrier.

The community of Salmon Run was located in a forested area on the east side of a large inland lake. Most of the homes were wooden structures located near the sandy waterfront. Although there was forestry and the remnants of a logging industry in the area, the local sawmill had been shut several years before. Many residents had lost jobs with the closure of the mill. In the community of Salmon Run there were few signs of visible employment beyond fishing, hunting, and trapping. Demographics ranged from several families living below the poverty level to around 10 per cent who were

economically comfortable.

The school was a relatively new building constructed in two stages. The final portion was completed in 1993. Nestled amidst evergreen trees on a point overlooking the lake and community, it was in good repair, clean and airy, and had a grey board façade and a cedar roof. Inside the school there was artwork representative of the northwest First Nations, photographs of the elders and school staff, and other cultural and historical artifacts of the region. At one point, Salmon Run School had housed students from kindergarten to grade nine. Currently, following grade seven the children were bussed into the nearest town, 60 kilometres away.

The town, called Lynx Bay in our study, had just one high school, which was operated by the same school jurisdiction of which Salmon Run was part. The principal indicated that once students were bussed to town for high school, things “started to fall apart.” It was felt that the students experienced difficulty fitting into the large high school because they were “behind” the town students in their learning. Once discouraged, the students from Salmon Run stopped going to school, and spent their days in the town’s shopping mall or stayed at home. The principal confirmed that in recent years few students had successfully completed grade 12.

**Douglas Klar.** This was a large elementary school with over 260 students receiving an education at the grades one to seven levels. The 10 full time teaching staff and four paraprofessional staff lived within the community of Lynx Bay, and had worked at the school for several years. Only one of the paraprofessional staff was Aboriginal; the rest of the staff was white. The principal was also a white male originally from a southern region of the province. He had lived in the community and been at the school for 15

years. The educators and staff were very proud of the school. Many had sent their own children to the school. Some had attended the school themselves as students.

Lynx Bay, a town of approximately 3500 was located on the southeast shore of a large inland lake and was surrounded by evergreen forest. The majority of students at the school lived in the town with some coming from the rural areas. Demographics in the school mirrored the ethnoculturally and racially diverse population of the town. For example, the principal reported that approximately one half of the student population was of Aboriginal ancestry. These students along with the white children whose families had lived in the community for several generations were considered to be “low income.” The descendants of East Indian families that had migrated to the area in mid-twentieth century were referred to as “middle class.” Once the children from these families had completed public schooling, they would often go to southern centres for post-secondary education. Some returned to Lynx Bay but many did not.

There was as well a small minority of children from professional families who were for the most part white and employed in managerial roles at the logging, mining, and service enterprises in Lynx Bay. The transience among this group reflected the economic ups and downs of companies that were resource-based and market-driven. Few of the children from these families spent their entire childhood and K-12 schooling in Lynx Bay. According to the principal and several of the staff respondents, the different racial and ethnic groups comprising the town’s population interacted in two places only - the local arena and the school.

Douglas Klar School was built in 1973 and named after one of the first white settlers in the Lynx Bay area. A photograph of Mr. Klar was displayed in the front foyer of this

clean and well-kept school. There was a calm atmosphere in the building, yet there was very little that recognized the racial and ethnocultural diversity of the student population. There were no visual indications, for example, that one half of the student population was Carrier. When asked how the school integrated the various groups that stayed divided and to themselves in the town, the principal explained that it was indeed a “balancing act.” Following grade seven, students from Douglas Klar went to the town’s only secondary school. It was the same school as students from Salmon Run attended after completing grade seven.

### **Saskatchewan**

**Char Creek.** This school, located on the northern reserve of Char Creek, served a small village of 260 residents on reserve. The community was part of the Running Waters First Nation, a large Cree nation in north-central Saskatchewan. Char Creek, which was some 40 kilometres north of the nearest large town, had had Band operated schooling since 1974. The new school was constructed in 1994 and offered nursery to grade seven to some 60 students. At the time of this study, all the students were Cree and from the community. There were six professional teaching staff, two white and four Aboriginal, either Métis or First Nations. On graduating from the school, students were bussed into town and attended one of the two high schools there. One of these was operated by the Running Waters First Nation and the other was part of the provincial school system. The principal, a non-Aboriginal woman, was married to a member of the community and lived in Char Creek. The other teachers did not live in Char Creek and commuted from the local town.

The school was relatively new and centrally located in the community of Char Creek.

Although pictures of local elders and well-respected educators were prominently displayed in the foyer of the school, Cree was not spoken by teachers or students. The principal and teachers all commented on the difficulty of integrating the local indigenous culture into provincial curricula. The education experience of students in Char Creek, in many respects, seemed no different from that of students in other parts of the province.

**Rotunda.** Rotunda was located in the town of Tundra, a northwestern Saskatchewan community with some 5000 residents. The majority of the students were drawn from the town and surrounding farms. At the time of our study, this was a large junior high school, with over 600 students receiving an education at the grades six to nine levels. The principal estimated 20% to 25% of the student population was of Aboriginal background. There were 26 professional teaching staff members. All but one of the 26 teaching staff was white; the majority of the staff, however, was from this ethnoculturally and racially diverse town. The principal and staff were very proud of the school; indeed, the principal had helped design the school. Built in the early 1990s, the school was architecturally pleasing and well resourced. By all accounts and our observations, Rotunda was well managed and offered a broad curricular and extra-curricular program. Other than an optional course in Cree language in culture, however, there was little to suggest that 25% of the students were of Cree or Métis heritage.

The principal described himself as a “disciplinarian”. That he had no computer in his office, and a “one way” mirrored glass window of the front playground, was a mystery to us, which we take up elsewhere for discussion.

## **Cross-Cutting Themes**

Although each community had its own individual characteristics, this research project revealed a multiplicity of common themes. These are presented here in an introductory fashion, and are described more fully in subsequent sections of this monograph.

### **Organization and Governance**

In all six schools, the physical structure, governance model, and prescribed curriculum reflected dominant Western assumptions about “teaching”, “learning”, and “schooling.” The students were organized into age-similar cohorts who were then exposed to the same curriculum as any other students in the province. The school buildings were constructed in the dominant manner, with a central office area, corridors, and individual classrooms. Those rooms designated for Aboriginal language or culture classes, where these existed, were either converted office spaces in some remote corner of the school or else a “regular” classroom decorated with an Aboriginal calendar and some photographs and pictures clipped from magazines or old textbooks. In two of the schools, Salmon Run and Char Creek, photographs of elders from the community were prominently displayed, but generally there seemed little recognition and celebration of the local Aboriginal heritage.

In all three of the smaller elementary schools, Char Creek, Moose River, and Salmon Run, the children were bussed to the local town for their high school education. The distance, in all communities, ranged from 25 km to 80 km. Although each school reported high student participation and completion rates, they each also reported that fewer than two per cent of their graduating classes over the previous ten years had completed the grade 12 academic program at the local high school. The school bus ride appealed to us as a metaphor for divide between the community expectations for

education and the realities of the dominant system.

In these schools we found evidence to suggest that the hopes and dreams of Band-controlled education had not been realized. Schools which had sought to provide new directions for Aboriginal peoples were instead acting as vehicles of assimilation. In all six communities there were examples of “tokenism”, with Aboriginal people being placed in positions of authority but not being provided with appropriate training or support.

The abject failure of most students who were bussed to high school is a cause for great concern. This is a tremendous loss of human capital, and it would appear that schools across the three provinces are ignoring this issue. At the same time, questions also arise concerning the value placed on first language and culture in these schools. It seemed that neither students nor teachers saw the importance of first language instruction and that timetabling, room placement, staffing, and in-school status reinforced this attitude.

Threaded throughout the study were themes related to the organization and structure of the school, curriculum and assessment, governance structures, and the role of the principal. These are examined in more detail in the following sections of the report.

### **The Goals and Purposes of Schooling**

The various constituent groups in all six communities contested the role of the school. We found a lack of congruence between the expectations of the professional educators and those of the community. All groups had their own understanding of the goals of the school. For community members, schools were simply there, a mandated institution to be endured. For many educators, their role was perceived to be that of pedagogical missionaries who recognized that the cause, while possibly just, was nonetheless often lost.

All six schools were organized around the same goals and curricula found in southern, urban centres. In these northern schools, educators had adopted curricula and assessment programs prescribed by the respective provincial Ministry of Education. In this process they were limited by regulations prescribing the percentage of the curriculum that could be locally developed.

**Beliefs about the purpose of curriculum and schooling.** Even though the principals and teachers in all six schools saw teaching the standardized provincial curricula as their professional responsibility, there was a general admission that the “fit” with local needs was not ideal. Each of the British Columbia schools, for example, had put in place special programming to support what were perceived to be “special needs” of students. Salmon Run School had chosen to implement a “Headstart” program with the belief that students’ literacy levels could be enhanced if children developed language arts skills in their pre-school years. Although the program had been in place for just a few years, teachers and the principal felt encouraged. The principal stated, “Our division one students are ahead of our division twos because of the Headstart program.” The grade one teacher who had taught both groups also believed the program had made a difference. She stated, “Headstart is a good program. We are hopeful these kids will have a better chance and not fall behind.”

At Douglas Klar, there was an elaborate special education program staffed by one full time coordinator, two part time teachers, and three paraprofessional staff. When asked, the principal and teachers explained that adaptive programs were critical given the high percentage of children who were “language-delayed” and “below grade level”. The special education coordinator tested the entire student population at the beginning of each

school year and recommended classroom placements based on the results. In her words:

According to last year's figures approximately 20 per cent of our students were identified as special needs and funded by the school district. The main focus of the special education program, beyond the physical disability needs, is to bring basic literacy skills to a level that is age appropriate. Our Native students make up the largest group of language-delayed students. Their culture is one of observation rather than one of talking, so school can be hard for them.

Such a comment reflects a broad generalization, familiarity misconstrued as cultural knowledge. Many First Nations students across Canada, and many indigenous students in other colonized societies, have achieved academic success. In locating the "problem" in the student, rather than in the structure of the school and the education system itself, the special education coordinator was accepting of the stereotype. This topic is further explored in the discussion section.

The school district endorsed the current provincial curricula with its emphasis on basic literacy. To support the initiative, the school district provided extra funding for special education programs and provided what educators believed was "generous" funding for teacher professional development. There were few professional development activities, however, that focused on successful pedagogies for ethnoculturally and racially diverse classrooms. The revenue-generation aspect of having high numbers of designated special needs students is discussed later in this monograph.

Although parents and community members shared the belief that the current focus on literacy was an important aspect of the curriculum, implicit in these respondents' accounts were more fundamental purposes of schooling. By way of example, the

education consultant at Salmon Run was an Aboriginal woman who had left and then returned to the community. She believed that education was the key to improving the social and economic future of Salmon Run. She stated:

We have so much potential here. It is important that our school provide the foundations for our students to be successful in high school. It's important to get people educated so they are able to run their own businesses and then the tourism. That's one of our goals. But right now, in order for them to be successful with their businesses, they have to go out and get their education and come back and develop their plans from there.

In a similar vein, a parent who had three children in Douglas Klar school also believed that schooling was key to improving the social and economic future of the town. In her words:

I think that in the school there should be good role models that show kids how to be solid citizens. We need to teach kids about the real world and that it's not always fair or equal. They have to learn how to function in the real world and school's the beginning. This is a good place for kids to intermingle with others who have disabilities and are of different races. Hopefully they will grow up accepting one another and stop making the huge racial divisions.

This parent along with others voiced a concern that the local high school to which both the Klar and Salmon Run students would go had done poorly in the Ministry of Education ratings. This group of respondents believed that it was urgent that the community and school address issues including bullying, high school attendance, and completion rates.

When student respondents at Salmon Run were asked what they liked about school, they replied, “the teachers and principal”. What they did not like was having to come to school everyday. One student explained:

If I don’t come, the school sends the bus to pick me up. The bus driver waits until I am ready and takes me to school. School is boring. Some days I would like to stay home and help my grandmother.

Similarly, students at all the other schools “liked their teachers”. These students claimed to like the extra-curricular “activities” offered through the school, but like their counterparts at Salmon Run found learning could be “boring”. When asked, several at Klar school believed that to improve their lives as students, the town should build a “mall” and a “swimming pool; students at Char Creek believed more time spent on the trap line would improve their learning. The discrepancy between the students’ and other respondents’ accounts raises questions in our minds about the relevancy of the curricula in these schools.

All six schools exhibited a sense of despondency, perhaps even despair. In Alberta, educators and community members of both communities agreed that the schools had poor reputations. One teacher at Church Point, an Aboriginal woman who had been raised in the community and who had returned after some years teaching elsewhere, observed that “we’ve been getting lots of flack, really harsh, negative things thrown at us teachers here and administrators.” In her opinion, the parents found it “easy to condemn and criticize” but rarely came to the school to see what role they could play, or accepted responsibility for their children’s perceived lack of success in school. Similar attitudes were reported at Moose River. Noting the lack of community involvement in his school, Jason, a 16 year

old student, commented that “people don’t volunteer to be in our classes”. Edwina, the chair of the local school board, observed that “frustration’s all over the place here because the people aren’t coming out and you can’t do everything yourself. I’m really tired.”

The idea that the school is the responsibility of the teachers is widespread in Aboriginal communities. For some, this belief is a result of past experiences with a paternalistic government or church authority (e.g., Adams, 1975; Dickason, 1992; Kirkness, 1992; Rampoul, Singh, & Didyk, 1984). At both Moose River and Church Point, people referred to the “residential school experience” as having a negative impact on the community. According to the principal at Church Point, this impact was intensified during the transition period from federal to provincial governance when:

Kids were taken from the residential school [and] were moved over to the [Church Point] school, but as well some of the nuns who were teachers moved with them. ... So even though it changed buildings and organization ... for a couple of years it was still perceived as the same thing. (Neil, principal, Church Point)

In Church Point, the community transferred its resistance to the residential school to the new school. The architect’s decision to base the design of the new school on a model of a Hudson’s Bay Company trading post, or fort, complete with palisade, exacerbated the situation. The community quickly tore down the physical wall that separated the school from the village. The psychological walls, however, remained. In four of the six schools, a locally elected school board assisted and advised the principal on the day-to-day operations of the school. This apparent devolution of power to the local level did not

significantly affect the operations of the schools because the actual range of decision-making power available to the local board was quite limited and the principal retained a significant role. According to one principal, “the local board has the autonomy of setting things like the school calendar and anything that’s not curriculum related, expenditures and everything, the local board has to approve it. ... I don’t have to go to them if I want to buy something.” Such freedom, however, was a double-edged sword. The arrangement, although perceived to be advantageous because of the ability to meet informally and regularly when making decisions, did result in problems. As one principal continued, “it does break down if you’re not getting along with the local board, or their ideas, and they have a personal agenda that isn’t fitting with what that of the school would be, then it becomes very difficult.” We found it strange that this administrator did not acknowledge that community members might have reasonable expectations for the future of the school, and saw no conflict in privileging his own, outsider opinion over those of the community.

The diverse and conflicting perspectives of the goals for schooling prompted us to investigate at greater length stakeholder perceptions and expectations of school leadership in general, and the role of the principal in particular.

### **Role of the School Principal**

In the schools we studied, the principals believed their chief responsibility was to provide a bridge between the school and the community. The challenges in doing this, however, were unique to each school. At Salmon Run, for example, the principal felt one of the greatest issues was the high rate of turnover of staff. He explained the impact on students and parents in the following way:

It’s a huge disadvantage. By the time the kids hit grades five, six, and seven, they

have had so many different teachers that they don't even try and learn the teacher's name. They call their teachers, "Teacher" and not Miss, Mr., or Mrs. so and so. Parents lose confidence in the school and don't see it as important.

To address this situation, the principal along with the community's education committee had negotiated with the school district and earned the right to recruit and hire teachers from outside of the pool of unionized staff within the school district. After two years of this practice, the principal was very hopeful. He explained:

I can hire teachers who are enthusiastic and who choose to come here, rather than try and work with assigned staff who have been identified as surplus in other schools within the district. The teachers we hire are outsiders in most cases, but they are open to what they find here. When staff is enthusiastic, we can develop school wide plans and build a team.

At Char Creek, teachers were recruited by the Running Waters First Nation (RWFN) in consultation with the local school committee. As members of the wider professional collective teaching within the seven schools of the RWFN, however, some teachers saw Char Creek as their entrée to a position in one of the larger schools in the system. Teachers were hired based on their expressed desire to work in the Char Creek school, but this desire was sometimes mediated by other circumstances.

In the past, when many northern schools were under the jurisdiction of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, it was perceived by many educators that weaker or malcontent were moved progressively further north. To many teachers, isolated First Nations schools are not places in which they wish to spend a significant amount of their career. In some jurisdictions, the sense that a posting to such a school is a

disciplinary action still remains. To move beyond such a perception requires an ability to recruit directly to the school, outside the normal staffing policies of the division. This ability had been achieved at Salmon Run and, to a lesser extent, at Char Creek.

The principal at Salmon Run also believed that by having community groups hold meetings in the school, and by hiring local members of the community, he had built understandings and support for the school. He stated:

They still want me to look after the education agenda, but more and more there are people coming into the school. There have been funerals held in the gymnasium. Having community people working here as support staff helps too. They tell others what they see. This way school becomes more a normal part of the rest of life.

The principal from Douglas Klar school felt that an important way that he bridged the gap between the school and the community was through the parent advisory committee. In particular, he referred to the representation on that committee:

Everyone is welcome to come to the PAC [parent advisory committee] meetings and everyone who is there has a vote if we are making decisions. I have learned over the years to encourage parents from all racial and economic groups to come out and get involved. For the most part, the different groups stay separate in the town, but when there is trouble, you can sense it in the students. Because there are people from all of the different groups on the PAC, we can make decisions that help keep people working together and safe at school.

The cultural diversity of the PAC claimed by the principal was not evident in the meeting we attended. A wholly white, female, managerial-class cohort met to discuss the

pressing issues of the day. All had spouses who were at senior levels in the various resource-industries around town, or were members of families whose connection to the school went back to a relationship with the man after whom it was named. There were no First Nations or East Indian parents at the PAC meeting, even though these cultural groups constituted a significant minority within the school. The challenge of ensuring “the full participation of members of traditionally disenfranchised groups” (Shields, 2002, p. 226) is explored further in the discussion section of this monograph.

By way of illustration of the role of the PAC, the principal talked about the bullying program that had recently been started at Klar school. The PAC had approved the curricula that teachers would use to help students develop strategies for dealing with aggressive behaviour. At the time of this study, the teachers’ union had taken an action vote. Although the result of that vote was a decision not to go on strike, there was considerable tension in the school. The principal was not a member of the teachers’ union and felt it was his role to mediate between what parents expected of teachers and what teachers perceived to be reasonable expectations. This, he admitted, was one of the most difficult bridging roles that he had assumed during his 15 years as principal at Douglas Klar. Indeed, his role at that particular time seemed more akin to walking a high wire and performing a “balancing act”.

The balancing act analogy was also invoked in Alberta. Paula, a grade 12 student, observed that a good principal “needs to be concerned about the children’s needs. They’ve got to be fair.” A teacher at Church Point school explained that, in his experience, good principals “were liked by the community. They were liked by the kids.” At the same time, a new teacher in her first position argued that teachers “just want to

teach in a safe and fair environment. And if the principal ... [appears] to be sitting on the fence, not rocking the boat, then they are not going to get the support from the teachers.” The northern principal, therefore, must pay more attention to local needs than perhaps is expected of their southern counterparts. The teachers, however, expect to be the key consideration in any administrative action. The delicate act of balancing these competing roles is elaborated upon in the discussion section.

### **Academic Achievement of Students**

In considering the success or otherwise of northern schools, it is necessary to examine the level of academic achievement of the students. The irony that this is an imposed, southern, dominant-culture criterion is not lost on the researchers. However, such is the hegemony of the Anglo-American education system that no other alternative measure is readily available.

**The veracity of provincial achievement tests.** Much tension occurred between the teaching of standardized government curricula and the indigenous languages in the First Nations communities. In the publication and ranking of provincial examination results in Alberta, both Moose River and Church Point received very low rankings (Alberta Learning, 1999). Many factors influence the scores on academic achievement tests. Among these, socio-economic status is recognized as a major determinant of achievement (Edington & Di Benedetto, 1988; Young, 2000). Edwina, who had been chair of the local Moose River school board for 18 years, commented on this point:

You know the tests that the grade three, sixes and nines have to take every year? I get so frustrated with them. Because our kids, in these communities, the small ones, they haven't seen a city, they've never seen an escalator or an elevator, or

how big a city block is, and some of these tests that come in have some of those things in them. Some of our kids have never seen these things and don't know what they are. So we work toward achieving some of the tests so that we could probably be able to have our kids be competitive but we haven't been successful. (Edwina, school board chair, Moose River)

It follows, therefore, that the assessment measures and processes used in the school ought to recognize and address aspects of the community environment within which the students live. As Jamieson and Wikeley (2000) proclaimed, it is not enough "for schools to have simple goals like academic achievement, they have also to attend to the social and sub-cultural" (p. 449) facets of the community.

In the schools examined in this study, we did not find much evidence of such adaptation. Indeed, we were often told by administrators and teachers alike that one measure of the school was that it closely replicated the curriculum and assessment processes of those found in southern schools. Such convergence was considered to be an indicator of a good school, evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. The fact that many children were not exhibiting success on provincial achievement tests was considered a failing that could be remedied by a closer adherence to provincial processes and procedures. That many of the children who were deemed to be failing were of Aboriginal background was perceived to be a problem that was located in the individual, the home, or the community, not the school.

**Language and communication.** A second determinant of academic achievement is English language proficiency. That many indigenous languages in Canada are being lost is no longer a matter of debate among scholars (e.g., Battiste, 1998; Blair, 1998; Fredeen,

1991; Kirkness, 1998; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000), many of whom argue that schools must play a significant role in the maintenance and protection of Aboriginal languages.

Conversely, we found that many First Nations parents and educators maintained that teaching the students' first languages was primarily the responsibility of the community, not the school. Although teachers gave lip-service to the need to teach Aboriginal languages, the perceived difficulties in providing trained staff and adequate resources, and in meeting a wide range of curricula needs, limited the Carrier, Cree, and Dene languages to subservient positions on the school timetable.

At Rotunda, the principal explained that Cree was given equal status to French – it was even timetabled at the same time. The French program followed the provincial curriculum, was well supported with books and other materials, and was marketed to students as an important way of improving their skill-set in a bilingual country. The Cree program had a qualified teacher assigned, which is of note as she was the only such teacher in all six schools. In the others, the Aboriginal language was taught by an elder or a teachers' aide recruited for the purpose. Even at Rotunda, however, there were no texts and few resources for Cree language instruction. As a result, the Aboriginal language was not perceived by students as being equal to French, and indeed had the reputation of attracting those low-academic students who might have trouble with the rigors of learning French. As a result of this complex set of factors, all the schools limited their focus on issues of indigenous language in the school.

The low prioritization of indigenous languages within the schools had had predictable results. The language and culture instructor at Church Point, Tom, observed, “none of the kids are speaking their language here.” A community liaison officer, Brenda, went even

further:

There's no language here, in the school, the community. Even the elders hardly speak a language. They speak broken English, there's the odd one that could speak to you fluently in Chipewyan, and there's the odd one that could speak Cree fluently with you. But most of them can't speak anything properly. (Brenda, community liaison officer, Moose River)

Such despair undermines the argument that language is a community responsibility. Indeed, Tom suggested the school had resources that teachers could apply in non-traditional situations. He noted that "I had some feedback from the community. They wanted Dene language and the Cree language, like after hours, for parents." If the schools made available the time and other resources for such a project as Tom's, perhaps one bridge could be established across the school-community divide.

**Educational success.** The poor attendance, achievement, and high school completion rates reported in these schools confirmed the stereotypes of northern communities.

Priscilla, a grade-12 student at Church Point, described her community:

There are about 1600 people in this town. Let's say about 900 adults and about 400 of them have grade 12 and that's all. No one else has probably up to grade 10. That's how it is around here. Nobody graduates. You see, like this year, we have how many people, and there's only 3 graduating. Last year, there were only about 4 people graduated. The year before that there were only 4 that graduated. You see, people don't care. The people who care, they are gone. They go and try to make something of themselves. ... I'm 18 now and I'm trying to do something for myself and ever since I've been 14, I've been in and out of jail. But now I'm

trying to straighten out, before it's too late. I'm not going to be like everyone else, have kids and do nothing. ... I want to do what I want to do. I don't just want to sit around Church Point. (Priscilla, grade-12 student, Church Point)

In Moose River, Edwina placed responsibility for low student attendance on the parents.

Talking of the students in her community, she said:

I don't think they're achieving. I don't think they're trying. Maybe a few of them do. Now it seems like kids are home alone a lot. Once they get to be about 12 years of age, it's like they are their own 'bosses'. The parents just let them be. If they don't want to come to school, they don't come to school. (Edwina, school board chair, Moose River)

A similar situation existed in Church Point, as a grade-9 student reported: "My friends don't have discipline. They don't come to school. They go home and sit. Their parents don't say, 'do your homework now.' They just leave their kids to do what they want to do."

As a result of these haphazard attendance patterns, many students missed a great deal of the prescribed curriculum, making it very difficult for the teachers, who found themselves dealing with uncooperative and recalcitrant students without any pre-requisite learning. The voluntary nature of school also contributed to the students' diminished performance on provincial examinations. Darlene, a graduate from Moose River, noted that the school "has a bad reputation in terms of performance on standard tests, but a lot of kids have trouble reading. A lot of them have disabilities." In addition to interrupting the learning process, irregular attendance at school limited the opportunity for specialists to administer the appropriate diagnostic assessments to identify learning disabilities.

Church Point was a consolidated school offering all levels to grade 12. In contrast, students from Moose River had to travel to a nearby city for high school. This transition brought other problems of identity and self. Darlene, one of the few students from Moose River to complete grade 12, commented:

When I went to high school in [the city], I had not been exposed to a lot of white people. I felt really isolated from them. It just seemed that everything was so structured and unfamiliar. It was a really hard transition. I like the comfort level of this school [at Moose River]. You know everybody and everything. (Darlene, grade 12 graduate, Moose River)

Wilson (1991) suggests that “cultural discontinuity” (p. 367) and macrostructural factors such as “the overwhelming frustration and isolation of students ... [and] the lack of understanding of cultural conflict on the part of school personnel contributes to student failure” (p. 379). These matters are further elaborated in the discussion section that follows.

## **Discussion**

### **Centering Educational Leadership**

One goal of this research study was to investigate the applicability of Hallinger and Leithwood's (1996) model of leadership and culture. Through observations and data gathered in this investigation, it is possible to consider the usefulness of the model within the context of schools serving predominantly minority ethnocultural populations in northern Canada.

The Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) model becomes problematic in schools serving homogeneous but minority culture populations. It is apparent that the wider societal culture impacts upon the institutional structure and culture of the school, and on the processes within. Hallinger and Leithwood assumed that the principal and the community share the values, mores, and beliefs that under-gird the policies and actions of the wider society. In northern schools this is patently not the case.

In our study the sometimes conflicting understandings between the imported educators and the indigenous parents reflected the significant linguistic, cultural, and worldview differences between the dominant national society and the minority society of the community. Such differences were manifested not only in the administrative personnel but also in the very underlying fabric of the education system. The teachers, the curriculum examinations, the governance structure, and even the very concept of school itself were foreign interventions into northern communities. As a result, the role of the principal tended to be one of mediator and interpreter, attempting to explain to the community the policies imposed from outside and also explaining to the educational hierarchy the reactions of those affected by the imposed policies. The bridging role of the

imported principal was made more difficult because she or he was perceived to share the values and beliefs of the external agencies that developed policy statements which were often in contradiction to local thoughts. Whether acting as a policy filter or cultural interpreter, the value-ladenness of the translation process ensured that neither act was truly representative of the original intent. Similarly, the principals' role was made more difficult because one group expected them to reflect the community position while the other expected an adherence to systematic perspectives. This conflict between the insider and outsider role expectations required a delicate balance as a response.

It was informative to note that although all six schools served significant – in some cases wholly – First Nations populations, none of the principals were of Aboriginal descent. Of the six, only one was a woman, and only one was from a visible minority.

Two of the principals were married to Band members. For one of these, Betty, the marriage had given her Aboriginal status under law. The second principal Steve, had married an Aboriginal woman but had not received any special citizenship status.

Tony, the principal at Rotunda, and Jack, who was at Douglas Klar, had similar leadership styles. Both were no-nonsense administrators who prided themselves on being “old school”, and who felt that they ran “a tight ship”. On this vessel all were treated equally, and were expected to conform. Failure to do so was perceived as the sign of a potential trouble-maker. To these two gentlemen, any student who could not abide with or follow the rules of the school was simply setting him or herself up for failure. That the rules might not be equally applicable to all students was a concept never considered.

Frank, the principal at Salmon Run, was a member of the East Indian community that had settled into the region in the 1960s and 1970s. He was from a neighbouring town, and

loved the north. The final principal, Brian, had initially arrived in Church Point as a community economic advisor. An ex-teacher, he had left the profession some years earlier due to personal reasons. He was invited by the Education Committee to apply for the principalship when it became vacant for the third time in four years. This, the community felt, was good reason to appoint a person with local knowledge.

These six individuals were all caring individuals, passionate about their schools and wanting the best for their adopted communities. Nonetheless, they worked within structures that symbolized the hegemonic dominance of the Euro-Canadian culture and value system. This finding prompts us to encourage policy-makers to commission forums where they, along with practitioners and university researchers design and develop a model of educational leadership that centres on the values, beliefs, and aspirations of the local context.

### **Local Knowledge and Professional Expertise**

At Salmon Run, the exterior of the school was decorated with Aboriginal symbols. These stylized designs were drawn from those of the sea-going First Nations peoples of the Queen Charlotte Islands and the northwest coast. Unfortunately the only links between this coastal people and the Carrier Nation are the salmon that travel upstream each year. The Carrier people have a proud and significant artistic tradition that has developed among the forests, lakes and mountains of the central plateau. This tradition was not represented at Salmon Run School.

At Church Point, the Cree language and culture room proudly displayed magazine cuttings of war chiefs in full regalia. Photographs of Big Bear and Poundmaker were present, together with student depictions – using “trade store beads” – of war bonnets and

eagle headdresses. Such images were clearly Aboriginal in nature. However, they are representative of the Plains Cree culture, not the Woods Cree or Dene (Chipewyan) peoples of Church Point.

In Saskatchewan, the Rotunda School students were assigned to one of four houses, each distinctively named. One of the houses was Amik, or Beaver. This was the only Cree word in evidence. The use of Amik, however, was lost on the students. We asked some two dozen Aboriginal and other students if they knew what Amik meant; none did.

The misuse and interchangeable nature of First Nations symbols indicates a disturbing lack of awareness concerning the multi-faceted nature of Aboriginal culture. That this should be evident in schools serving predominantly indigenous populations is quite unnerving. Suina (2000), cited in AhNee-Benham and Napier (2002, p. 148), argued that “any philosophy of education for indigenous people must be rooted in spirituality and in the oneness of all indigenous people.” Recognizing that First Nations peoples share a common history of colonization and marginalization, however, does not necessitate the imposition of a pan-Canadian cultural heritage. This assumption of “cultural homogeneity within national boundaries” (Walker & Dimmock, 2002, p. 192) is problematic. There are over 600 First Nations in Canada, each with a distinct language and culture. It is critical that educational leaders recognize and celebrate this diversity in their schools. The six schools in this study did not fully develop in their potential to celebrate the language and culture of the Aboriginal communities they served. Indeed, both Rotunda and Douglas Klar took active steps to assimilate all students and view them as “equals”. The principals here, and to a lesser extent those in the other four schools, did not accept that “the place of schools ... has become contested terrain, a place of conflict,

struggle, and negotiation over ontology, epistemology, and pedagogy” (AhNee-Benham & Napier, 2002, p. 150). To these administrators the role of the school was, clearly and simply, to provide the provincially mandated curriculum and facilitate as high a graduation rate as possible. In Alberta, a third goal was to improve the standing of the school in the annual “rankings” published by Alberta Learning. In this atmosphere, the needs and aspirations of the students were subservient to those of the schools and its professional staff. Where there were disagreements over ontology, epistemology, and pedagogy, then the dominant voice of the educators prevailed. Students who rebelled against the structures of the school were considered trouble-makers and were encouraged to pursue their education elsewhere.

In the classrooms, the teachers strove to implement pedagogies learned at university or in professional development seminars. The touchstone of validity employed in this pedagogy was that of acceptance within the educational culture. Drawing on examples of “best practice” described in books and presentations, teachers continually adjusted their work in an attempt to meet the needs of their students. They rarely, however, questioned whether such new ideas were transferable or whether closer communication with their students would identify more useful strategies.

Current theoretical and practical considerations of the adoption of “best practices,” or of any other strategy not developed at the local level, suggests that any such transposition “must surely take into account the full cultural and contextual conditions of both host and adopting systems” (Walker & Dimmock, 2002, p.197). This consideration is applied when international exchanges of ideas are being proposed. Such accounting was not in the past, nor is in the present, applied when policies and practices are transposed from the

dominant to indigenous school communities. The continued marginalization, subjugation, and assimilation of Aboriginal peoples continues even in those places that purport to reflect local control and governance.

In light of the above, we argue that principals and teachers must have expert knowledge of the history, language, and culture of the communities they serve, and that they be ever vigilant of the impact of their own bias and worldview. Again, forums involving policy-makers, practitioners and university researchers are suggested as a mechanism for designing professional preparation and development programs that support principals and teachers as they acquire knowledge of, and expertise for, their local communities.

### **Reinventing Schooling**

The issue of power and authority roles within the schools raises questions concerning the adaptation of these schools to their communities. Both Char Creek and Salmon Run had schools of a distinctive architectural design. Wide hallways and an open-plan office were decorated with photographs of elders and with Aboriginal language posters. Nonetheless, these buildings were recognizably schools. If the buildings were physically relocated to a different community, for example Calgary or Toronto, no visitor would be confused as to their purpose. The school, as a collection of connected spaces designed to hold age-appropriate cohorts of young people, reflects a design for mass education in urban communities that was instituted in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the communities we studied, there was no evidence that stakeholders understood they could take advantage of local governance and reinvent the school as a community appropriate venue. We believe this is key if northern schools are to provide relevant education in and

for their communities.

In her discussion of the need to recognize a “community of difference”, Shields (2002) suggests that community usually implies commonality. She argues that “the membership of each community is different, reflecting a wide range of personal experiences as well as multiple and diverse values, hopes, and goals” (p. 214). Shields stresses that difference is more than the visible attributes of skin colour and ethnicity, and will include the invisible “differences of class, religion, sexual orientation, or ability” (p. 214). As such, a series of sub-communities exist within any given community, which becomes recognizable as one of difference. Some of these sub-communities could, logically, have as few as one individual member. While generally agreeing with Shields’ arguments, we believe that there is a danger, here, in reducing any notion of community to a constellation of individuals, with no collective identity. While such a distinction may have conceptual clarity, it somewhat muddies the waters of practice.

If one accepts that there are certain overarching criteria that help identify and define a common group, then one can draw distinctions between such groups. In this study, the children at Salmon Run, Char Creek, and Moose River schools were all members of an identifiable collective. They were members of a particular First Nation, lived within a tightly bounded physical community, shared a common language and lifestyle, and had similar experiences of growing up in such a community.

The students at Douglas Klar, Church Point, and Rotunda schools did not belong to such a collective. These students came from multiple ethnic backgrounds, were often bussed in to the school from outlying communities or else boarded with relatives in town, had different first or home languages, and had grown up in a variety of contexts ranging

from remote or isolated hamlets to urban streets. The student body at these three schools did represent Shields' (2002) community of difference.

The teaching staffs at Salmon Run and Moose River were also members of an identifiable collective, albeit different from each other. At Moose River the staff were all non-Aboriginal women. All had taught for most of their career in a northern school. All were outsiders to the community of Moose River, not having been born or raised there, and all lived in a local town, commuting daily to the school. At Salmon Run all the teachers were also outsiders to the community. None were representative of the Carrier people who constituted the student enrollment. All commuted from the local town.

The teaching staff at the other four schools in this study represented visible communities of difference (Shields, 2002). They were a collection of teachers drawn from local and distant environments. Some were born and raised in the community, others were newly arrived. All these schools had at least one teacher who was a visible minority or a representative of a Canadian First Nation. The staff had varying degrees of experience in working with Aboriginal children.

From these observations we can develop a matrix to differentiate between the schools (see Figure 3). Such a matrix is useful when considering issues of role, goals, purpose, and belief systems in educational settings.

It would be intuitive to assume that the shared language and culture of the student body found in Char Creek, Salmon Run, and Moose River would facilitate and prioritize the instruction of the language and culture of the collective. Although the Aboriginal language of the community was still spoken by the adults, especially the elders, when conversing amongst themselves, the language of the school was English. Classes were

Figure 3: Cultural differentiation in school

		Staff	
		Collective	Community of difference
Students	Collective	Salmon Run Moose River	Char Creek
	Community of difference		Church Point Douglas Klar Rotunda

conducted in English, even by those teachers who spoke Cree, Dene, or Carrier. All communications home, whether from the classroom teachers, the administration, or the local school board, were in English. The Aboriginal language of the area was timetabled, but was taught by a community member, not by a qualified teacher. There were few resources available in the indigenous language, and none at all in any of the scientific subjects (mathematics, biology, and so forth). As Brody (2001) reported in his description of the Inuit people of Baffin Island:

[The adults in the community believed] that jobs in the future would go to those who spoke English, and by a sense that, without English, social or political effectiveness was limited. At the same time, many parents complained that their children spoke too much English at home and were not gaining a rich enough fluency in their own language. People ... had been persuaded, by both intangible historical forces and the activities of southerners, of the need for Christianity, Canadian law, compulsory schooling, southern-style political organizations and even Canadian cooking – all of which were tied to the power of English. (p. 29)

We found similar sentiments expressed by Aboriginal members of the communities in this study.

Jaspaert and Kroon (1991) claimed that there are three clusters of functions surrounding the teaching of minority languages in schools. First, for the maintenance of the language itself, to ensure that the next generation grows up with the ability to communicate in their first language. Second, that knowledge of one's first language can assist in the acquisition of the dominant language, which in the communities of this study would be English. And, third, that an ability to communicate in a minority language

might have an economic benefit in the commercial marketplace of employment (pp. 8-9). To varying extents these three functional clusters apply to all the schools in our study.

The ability to communicate in the first language of the community, be it Carrier, Cree, or Dene, was considered an important skill for students to achieve. Parents and educators alike stressed their dismay at the fact that so few of the younger generation were able to communicate in their own language with any degree of fluency. The teachers also lamented on the poor command of the English language displayed by their students. Here the lessons of the Maori language nests (Nicholson, 1997; Reyhner & Tennant, 1995) and other successful attempts to facilitate first language development might be heeded and, indeed, emulated. The Head Start program at Salmon Run was the only evidence of such a press towards early first language acquisition. Finally, as First Nations begin to take a more interventionist role in their own economic and educational development, so there may be individual advantage in being able to communicate in an Aboriginal language. However, we found little enthusiasm for the necessary allocation of resources - material human, financial, and philosophical – required if Indigenous languages are to be fully present in the schools.

That is not to suggest that these schools lacked resources. To the contrary, the schools appeared to be well positioned to be able to offer a high quality educational program. Three of the six schools were relatively new, being less than ten years old; one was about to undergo a significant renovation; and the other two were spacious, basic-plan elementary schools. In four of the six schools the teacher-student ratio was much lower than that experienced in southern communities. In Moose River, for example, class sizes of four to ten students were common. In the high school program at Church Point, seven

students were enrolled in a compulsory grade 11 social studies course. It would appear that the teachers in these schools had the opportunity to develop intensive student-centered lessons.

Such a laudable goal was considered difficult to achieve. The teachers argued that student attendance was poor, that attitudes toward schooling were negative and combative, and that many of the children were socially, medically, or psychologically unfit for school. The teachers turned to the gurus of pedagogy, the school psychologists and other specialists, who diagnosed various ailments and categorized the children as having learning disabilities of one form or another.

Such diagnoses may, in many cases, be correct. The incidence levels of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, poverty, and other indices of dysfunctionality are extremely high among Canadian Aboriginal populations (see, for example, Lupart, Goddard, Hébert, Timmons & Jacobsen, 2002). However, the schools in this study were not privileged to have on-site specialists as support staff. Rather, these specialists were chronically over-worked, with case responsibilities that covered large geographical areas, and often were only able to visit a school once a year. They therefore relied heavily on the observations and professional, but not clinical, assessments made by classroom teachers. These reports, supported by the case histories developed in the course of a fleeting visit to the school, then became the basis for a diagnosis that followed the student for the remainder of his or her educational career. The school, however, benefited from the additional funding that often resulted from such a diagnosis. These funds permitted the school to supplement its basic per-student operating grant in a myriad of ways. Rarely, however, did those ways include any significant investment in curriculum

development, teacher education, or resource allocations pertaining to Aboriginal language and culture.

We have argued earlier in this monograph that in locating the “problem” of educational under-achievement in the student, the school is able to resist calls for structural change. Further, it would appear that the additional funding generated from coded First Nations students is contributing to general school resources. As such, any challenge to the status quo would have negative repercussions on the operations of the school. We would argue that there is a need for such funding to be “tied” to the particular needs of the students from whom it is generated. Although this recommendation goes against the current focus on school based management, we nonetheless believe that the perilous progress of Aboriginal students under the current structure will not be remedied without drastic action.

The findings of this study have implications for practitioners, policy makers, and researchers. The investigation reported here supports Shields’ assertion that leaders:

Have to develop sensitivity to issues of power and control, and understand the implicit rules that operate in each unique context to marginalize and exclude people from full participation in the life of the community. They will have to interrogate privileged domains of knowledge and cultural reproduction by learning to ask questions of themselves and by identifying their own roles in the perpetuation of inequality. (Shields, 2002, p. 227)

Based on the above, we again argue that policy-makers, practitioners and university researchers must work together in the design and development of not one, but multiple models of “schooling” that honour difference within communities.

## Conclusion

Through this monograph we have addressed the major research question guiding this study, which was: what are student, educator, parent, and community member perceptions and expectations of education leadership in northern schools? We have discovered that perceptions and expectations are different across the various stakeholder groups. However, there are many similarities among the groups, even when separated by school or province. Thus the educator perceptions of what constitutes effective educational leadership are common to teachers and administrators across the three provinces. Similarly, parents share common expectations of the role of the principal in a school, no matter where that school is located. These findings suggest that the cultural influences of place and background are important factors in determining understandings about education. Such a conclusion provides empirical support to the revised theoretical model presented on page 13 of this monograph.

We have separated the idiosyncratic societal culture of the community and the majority societal culture of the country at large into two dimensions, the lived and the learned, each of which impacts differently on the various stakeholder groups within the school. This revised model recognizes that the principal is situated in the centre of a web of relationships with staff, parents, students, and superordinates. In the communities discussed here, and in many other communities across the north, most administrators are members of the white, Anglo-European majority culture. As such, they can be categorized as 'living' within that dominant culture and 'learning' within the minority culture of the community. In contrast, almost all of the parents and students in these communities are members of the minority First Nations and Métis cultures. As such, they

are 'living' within the minority culture and 'learning' within the dominant culture.

This model has implications for those who are responsible for the training, recruitment, and ongoing professional development of northern educators. This research study has begun to identify the skills, knowledge, and expertise required of those who would be effective administrators in schools serving ethnoculturally diverse or minority communities. This knowledge will be useful to those responsible for designing and implementing the curricula for administrator preparation programs, as well as to those responsible for hiring new administrators and providing in-service education to those already appointed. The strength of the present study would be increased through a comprehensive survey of stakeholder groups in northern schools from across Canada. Such a large-scale quantitative study will perhaps be undertaken by future researchers.

A secondary question guiding this study was: how are leadership and culture in northern schools intertwined? Specifically, within the context of six communities in the northern regions of the three western provinces we analyzed and documented stakeholder perceptions and expectations of education; identified and reported stakeholder perceptions of effective leadership; and, determined the extent to which stakeholders perceive the schools adapt to their specific cultural contexts.

We found little evidence that such adaptations were taking place. In the two larger schools, each serving an ethnoculturally mixed population, it was made quite clear to us that the goal was to provide an educational experience identical to that found in the south. There were no attempts made to change the physical or social culture of the schools so that the Aboriginal reality would be represented. That said, there were few such attempts in any of the other schools, including those that served a wholly Aboriginal population.

The teaching staff were consistent in their beliefs that a focused academic experience was a necessary precursor for educational success. There were few efforts to interrogate the curriculum and discuss the appropriateness or otherwise of this model. Rather, the sense seemed to be that if only the teachers instilled more classroom discipline, and the students paid more attention to their lessons, then all would be well. As a result, teachers sought to do more of what they had always been doing, and trusted that through this approach they would achieve significantly different results. Such an approach would appear to run counter to what we know about the demographics of the north, and about the importance of first language learning.

The demographics of the western provinces are changing, particularly with respect to the number of Aboriginal children of school age (5-19 years). According to Statistics Canada (2002) data, at a national level the Aboriginal proportion of this age group is 32.5%. In the western provinces, the total of Aboriginal students as a proportion of full 5-19 age cohort ranges from 31.1% in British Columbia through 33.5% in Alberta to 36.9% in Saskatchewan. The increasing number of Aboriginal students at the K-12 level has been discussed for some years, with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (1997) predicting a 24% increase between 1995 and 2005 in on-reserve children attending K-12 schools. The higher frequency of Aboriginal students in northern schools such as those included in this study suggests the need for a vigorous response.

The need for a comprehensive and sustainable strategy on Aboriginal languages and culture appears to be one necessary response. It is apparent that there are extremely low levels of academic success among children from small communities with no local access to high school education. As we have described in this monograph, the school bus ride to

town can be seen as a metaphor for the divide that exists between the educational aspirations and expectations of members of northern, pre-dominantly Aboriginal communities and those of the professional teaching class. This is not to ascribe some Rousseau like nobility to the experience of growing up in a northern hamlet. However, there is a certain security in the extended family, and in the freedom that comes with living outside an urban area. The transfer to a school serving the dominant society can be a difficult one indeed.

One method by which academic achievement might be improved is by enabling students to obtain fluency in their own language. Over the years there have been many calls for a focus on the development of quality First Nations language and culture programs for both on-reserve and off-reserve students. A recent federal report (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2002) has stressed the need for such program development to include teacher training as well as the provision of appropriate pedagogy, texts, and so forth. To date, however, it would appear that such an approach has not existed. Although some attempts to deliver teacher education in the north have been initiated, for example the very successful Northern Teacher Education Program (NORTEP) in Saskatchewan, there is a distinct paucity of texts and other materials available in an Aboriginal language.

There remains the tendency for school governance to be considered the domain of the educated authority class, those who already wield power in the system. The changes in governance towards local control have not resulted in a greater role for those who were traditionally marginalized, disenfranchised, and excluded from the decision-making system. None of the school administrators in the schools in our study perceived the need to share decision-making authority with the community. They were willing to take

advice, but retained the right not to act on that advice should they deem it to run counter to what they determined were the best interests of the school. In this act they were declaring their steadfast belief in the supremacy of the formal authority system.

The policies that pertain to Aboriginal and northern education fail under the purview of many different authorities. We urge provincial and federal government departments, Band councils, provincial school boards, local school committees, and others to review their educational policies. To what extent do these policies further marginalize and exclude those who constitute the community that the school is supposed to serve? To what extent is cultural discontinuity in curriculum recognized and amended? In what way is the professional knowledge of teachers considered a contribution to the educational discourse, rather than the sole voice?

At the level of policy implementation, there is a need for resources to be targeted to the purpose for which they were allocated. The small enrollment figures and low pupil-teacher ratios of many northern schools ought to be considered opportunities for innovative practice. Schools can design new pedagogies that recognize the language and culture of the local community, that permit the inclusion of the community into the school, and that stress the role of elders in the school.

It is apparent, however, that such fundamental change is not and cannot be the responsibility of the school alone. The transformation necessary for schooling to become relevant and vital in northern communities will require a collaborative inquiry process at the local level. Only recently have researchers begun to document local stakeholders' perceptions and expectations of educational leadership and schooling within these communities (Corson, 1999; Daigle, 1997; Wildcat, 1995). Although there are

compelling arguments that educators must be better trained and more research undertaken in effective pedagogical practices, it is also important to address societal issues through community development.

In this manner the emancipatory nature of schooling (Freire, 1970) can then become a lever for transformational change. The deficit model of education, evidenced in this study by our findings related to the identification and funding of special needs students, tends only to perpetuate the status quo. It is imperative that communities move from this model to one that builds on the hopes and aspirations of the community itself. An approach such as the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) model (Mathie & Cunningham, 2002) is one that might be considered.

Through the ABCD model, community stakeholders are encouraged to determine what they consider to be the essential outcomes of the educational process. With the assistance of an external facilitator, a role that might be embraced by the school, members of the community identify what they perceive to be the essential learnings all children ought to acquire. They also identify how to assess such learnings, and in that process to challenge outsider assumptions of education.

It appears to us that educational transformation in northern communities will not succeed if the catalyst for such change is the school alone. Rather, there is a need to adopt a multidimensional approach. It is only through the emergence at the community level, and in a community-specific way, of agreements on the essential elements of school that effective strategies might be developed and implemented. The sustainability of educational change requires agencies such as the school to become the supporters of transformational processes rather than the sole vehicle for such change. Educational

practitioners and researchers alike must find a model that addresses the strengths of northern communities and builds on those strengths. Such a model will help develop local accountability while simultaneously permitting the identification of effective practices derived within the context of each community.

From a research perspective, the communities of the boreal forest offer many opportunities. There is a great deal of research conducted among the towns and cities of the south, and in relative terms among the people of the three northern territories. Such a focus has been lacking in the near north, and provides an opportunity for researchers to examine new aspects of educational practice. Here too lies the potential for comparative educational research, for other educational systems across the boreal forest are wrestling with similar issues of language, culture, and assimilation. The Sámi communities of northern Sweden, for example, are attempting to better design curricula that meet their needs rather than those of policy makers in Stockholm (Olof Johansson, Personal Communication, April 2003). In the many conferences presentations we have made related to this research (see Appendix 1), we have continually been approached by educators from around the world whose own work links in some way with our own.

Through this study we have explored perceptions and expectations of education leadership in northern schools. Through this examination we discovered that educational leadership and culture are not only intertwined in northern schools, they are virtually inseparable. Our revisions to the Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) model reflect this finding. We argue that it must not be assumed that the values, mores, and belief systems underpinning the majority culture curriculum will be of equal relevance to northern communities serving ethnoculturally diverse or different populations.

In addition to the theory development made possible by this research, we identified four cross-cutting themes. These were related to matters of organization and governance, the goals and purposes of schools, the role of the school principal, and academic achievement. In all six communities we discovered people who wanted to talk about these matters and who hoped that improvements to the school system would have a direct impact on the children. A key finding of the study was that understandings about these six themes were common across same-role groups, irrespective of location, yet there were differences between different-role group perceptions even in the same community.

In the last part of this monograph we discussed these findings through three lenses. These were the centering of educational leadership, the need to balance local knowledge with professional expertise, and the question of reinventing schooling. We close with the caution that educators must recognize the foreign nature of the educational intervention.

This process, from the existence of the building itself to notions of curriculum, teacher qualifications, student assessment, appropriate pedagogy, and adequate resources, is one designed and developed for a much different environment. The educational results have been highly disappointing, and the social capital losses have been huge. It behooves all who are engaged in the educational process to critically analyze their practice, and to return the needs of the students to the center of the pedagogic model. This is important in all schools, but is critical if the children of the north are to be full and equal contributors to Canadian society.

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## Appendix 1

### Related publications and presentations

- In development  
Goddard, J. T., & Foster, R. Y. Stakeholder perceptions and expectations of education leadership in northern schools in three western Canadian provinces. *Educational Administration Quarterly*.
- In Press  
Goddard, J. T., & Foster, R. Where cultures collide: A case study of educational leadership in northern Alberta. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 27 (1), 21-40.
- Accepted  
Goddard, J. T., Foster, R. Y., & Finell, J. *Leadership and culture in northern schools: A summative report*. Paper accepted for presentation to the annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, Winnipeg, MB. May 2004.
- Accepted  
Goddard, J. T., & Foster, R. Y. *Educational leadership in northern Canada: Community perceptions of schooling*. Paper accepted for presentation to Division G of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, California. April 2004.
- 2003  
Foster, R. Y., & Goddard, J. T. Leadership and culture in northern British Columbia: Bridge building and/or balancing act? *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 17. [Online. Refer to the following URL:  
<http://www.umanitoba.ca/publications/cjeap/issuesOnline.html> ]
- 2003  
Goddard, J. T., & Foster, R. Y. *Leadership for learning: Lessons from northern Canada*. Round-table presented at the annual convention of the University Council for Educational Administration, Portland, OR.
- 2003  
Goddard, J. T., Foster, R. Y., Finell, J., & Martineau, C. *Leadership and culture in northern Canadian schools: Cross-cutting themes*. Paper presented to the annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, Halifax, NS. May 2003.
- 2002  
Foster, R. Y., & Goddard, J. T. *Case studies from the edge: Leadership in ethnoculturally diverse northern Canadian schools*. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 48 (4), 368-370.
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## Appendix 2

### The Training of High Quality Personnel

Throughout the study the researchers were privileged to work with a number of graduate research assistants. These individuals were involved in all aspects of the study, and were provided with training as appropriate. Although none were engaged in the research for the duration of the project, they all participated and made important contributions at different stages. Specifically, as members of the research team, the graduate research assistants joined with the researchers to: (i) continually update the literature review; (ii) participate in two school site visits per year; (iii) assist in conducting interviews, accumulating documents, recording field observations, and engaging in other data collection strategies; (iv) transcribe interviews and field notes; (v) help to develop and refine appropriate coding schemes; (vi) participate in two team meetings per year; and (vii) prepare and present papers at scholarly conferences.

The particular outcomes for the students included the development of: (i) skills in designing and conducting a research study; (ii) “micro” research skills such as interviewing, transcription, coding, interpretation, analysis, and reporting; (iii) skills in working collaboratively as a member of a research team; (iv) skills in the development, writing and editing of scholarly papers, professional seminars, and journal manuscripts; and (v) the opportunity to further understand the relationship of leadership and culture in northern region schools. The opportunity to collaborate in the proposed program of research, under the mentorship and guidance of the primary investigator and the co-investigator, complemented the students’ formal course work and academic training.

<b>Student</b>	<b>Degree Program</b>
Amy M. Burns	MA / PhD
Fernando Davalos	MEd
Angie Hart	MA
Jill Koch	MA
Christine Martineau	MA
Cassandra White	MSc

## Meet the Authors

### **J. Tim Goddard**

Tim Goddard was born in Leeds, England, and completed his teacher training in the UK. He has worked in three countries (England, Papua New Guinea, and Canada) as a teacher, principal, superintendent of education, and university professor.

Tim's research is in educational administration, broadly defined, with a focus on educational leadership and administration across cultures. He is currently engaged in five major research projects, is coordinator of the leadership component of the Kosovo Educator Development Project, has published in a variety of journals, and is a regular presenter at national and international conferences.

Tim is Associate Dean (Research & International) at the University of Calgary.

### **Rosemary Y. Foster**

Rosemary Foster was born in Guelph Ontario and completed a Bachelor of Arts in English and français at Glendon College in Toronto before moving to Quebec where she undertook her teacher training at the Université du Québec. She began her career in education as a lecturer at the Université du Québec before moving to Alberta in the late 1970s. In Alberta, Rosemary was a high school teacher, department head and administrator for more than 20 years before moving to Winnipeg and the University of Manitoba as a professor of educational administration. In 2002 she returned to Alberta and is currently a professor of educational administration and leadership at the University of Alberta.

Rosemary's research interests and academic writing are in the area of school leadership, bilingual education, and poverty education.

### **Jeff Finell**

Jeff Finell was born in Ponteix, Saskatchewan and completed his teacher training in Saskatchewan. He has worked as a teacher, consultant, principal, superintendent and director of education in varied locations throughout northern and rural Saskatchewan, and in federal, band and provincially operated school systems. Additionally, he taught in an international setting in Tripoli, Libya.

Jeff is currently the director of education at the Davidson School Division located in central Saskatchewan. The division is participating as a pilot in a program connected with Saskatchewan Learning's School<sup>Plus</sup> Initiative. The pilot involves the engagement and collaboration of teachers, students, parents, community members and organizations, as well as other human service organizations, in an improvement program for the purpose of supporting and enhancing student learning.