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**Leadership and culture in schools in northern British Columbia:
Bridge building and/or re-balancing act?**

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**Context and Purpose of the Study**

There is a growing body of literature that stresses the importance of leadership in providing quality education in Canadian schools serving predominantly aboriginal(1) communities (Bear-Nicholas, 2000; Carr-Stewart, 2001; Corson, 2000; Friesen & Friesen, 2002; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Carr-Stewart, for example, citing the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), argues:

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 educational 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 concludes 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 emphasizes why this is problematic:

I would like to suggest that we consider a 4th "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 generations. We all know the right words; we sound like experts, but we fall short when it comes to putting our rhetoric into action. (Kirkness, 1998, 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, forthcoming; Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996, p. 100). Only recently have researchers begun to document local stakeholders' perceptions and expectations of educational leadership and schooling within these communities (Corson, 1999; 1997; Daigle, 1997; Wildcat, 1995). In addition, promising evidence from studies of Aboriginal students' perspectives of schooling in urban settings has begun to appear in the education research literature (Haig-Brown et al., 1997; Kanu, 2001; Weber-Pillwax, 1992).

The purpose of the study reported in this article was to address the gap in the education literature by investigating educators', parents', students', and community members' perceptions and expectations of educational leadership in northern schools serving largely Aboriginal students. A secondary purpose was to examine the relationship between leadership and culture within these schools. In the third stage of this investigation, presented here, we draw on data from two schools located in northern British Columbia. North, as used here, is 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 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 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. People of Aboriginal ancestry comprised the only racial group in one instance, and the largest racial group within an ethnoculturally diverse community in the second instance. Given the relatively small size and remoteness of these northern communities, it follows that the delivery of K-12 education involves issues of school organization, and teaching and learning that are substantively different from those encountered in the rest of Canada. By way of illustration, both schools reported on in this article (i) were operated under British Columbian provincial jurisdiction and were part of the same geographically large school division, and (ii) were a considerable distance from the school division's office and had little contact with other schools, central administration, or school trustees. In the First Nations community called Salmon Run in this article, for example, the Band Council had taken over the management of the education programs. Although the school was part of the provincial education system, for all intents and purposes it was "locally-controlled" (Friesen & Friesen, 2002, p. 142). The Chief and Band Council hired teachers, and a locally elected school committee managed the programs and daily operations of the school. The second school, named Douglas Klar in the study, was located in a small ethnoculturally diverse regional center, and was organized in the fashion of most other schools in the school division.

The specific objectives of the study were to analyze and document school members' (educators, parents, students, community members working in and with the school) perceptions and expectations of education. The case studies of the two schools reported in this article investigate and analyze three themes related to school members' perceptions of (i) the purposes of curriculum and schooling, (ii) the role of the principal, and (iii) the relationship of schools to their communities.

**Conceptual Framework**

Researchers in educational administration are developing recognition of the role played by culture in the formulation and exercise of educational leadership (e.g., Foster & Goddard, 2002; Foster & Goddard, 2001; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996). The notion of culture we use here is informed by Hoopes and Pusch's (1981, p. 3) definition:

Culture consists of a dynamic and complex set of values, beliefs, norms, patterns of thinking, styles of communication, linguistic expressions and ways of interpreting and interacting with the world that a group of people has developed to assure its survival in a particular physical and human environment. (as cited in James, 1999, p. 194)

We use the term in the first place to denote the local community culture, and in the second instance to refer to the broader societal culture within which these communities were located. Adler (1997) points out that:

The cultural identity of a society is defined by its dominant group, and this group is usually distinguishable from the minority sub-groups with whom they share the physical environment and the territory they inhabit. (as cited in James, 1999, p. 196)

The terms "dominant group" and "minority group" as used here refer to the relative relationship of each group to the societal power structure, with the dominant group tending to "influence the economic, political and social participation of other members of society" including all belonging to minority groups (James, 1999, p. 197).

Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) hypothesized "that societal culture exerts a significant influence on [school] 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, for example, between the cultural realities of the First Nations, Métis, and non-Aboriginal inhabitants of northern communities, and those of the dominant white Anglo-European majority culture of the rest of Canada. If "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), then it is important for researchers to understand the culture of the communities served by northern schools. Further, it is important for researchers to explore the ways in which the culture in northern schools reflects the culture and conditions of the local communities and the broader Canadian society. The relationship between schools and their communities, we contend, is to varying degrees shaped by, and responsive to both local community conditions and the broader societal culture.

Following on from our earlier individual and collaborative work, we have framed this research program within a paradigm grounded in critical pragmatism (Macpherson, 1996, 1997; Maxcy, 1995a, 1995b). We adopted as well a critical stance in the analysis of our data, recognizing the ideological and value-laden nature of leadership (Bates, 1995; Greenfield, 1978; Greenfield & Ribbins, 1993; Ryan, 1997). Our research through its approach and analysis addresses issues of race, culture, language, and social class. Elsewhere (Goddard & Foster, 2001) we have termed this a critical constructivist approach. Such an approach allows us to explore issues and has as a primary goal, recognition of the racial and ethnocultural diversity of our society, and the desire to effect change in and through societal institutions, such as schools, so as to better reflect and respond to that diversity.

**Method**

The research reported on in this paper focused on two select schools within the provincial education system of British Columbia. Following Stake (2000), we utilized a collective case study that was instrumental in nature and emergent in design (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Merriam, 1988). Data were collected through in-depth individual and focus group interviews, direct observation, and field notes, supplemented where appropriate by document analysis. We spent an intensive week in the school sites. In order to allow for individual differences and the diversity of experiences, the interviews and focus group sessions were semi-structured and followed an emergent design. This allowed the research to be grounded within the contextual realities of respondents within each school.

**School Sites**

In determining the schools where research would be conducted, we relied on previous contacts in the field to identify possible sites. The superintendent and local school board gave permission for us to visit two schools within a geographically large school jurisdiction in north central British Columbia. We have used the pseudonyms Salmon Run and Douglas Klar for these schools.

**Salmon Run School.** 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 four 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 logging industry in the area, the local sawmill had been shut several years before. Many 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 artefacts 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 home. The principal confirmed that in recent years few students had successfully completed grade 12.

**Douglas Klar School.** This was a larger 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 descendents 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. Klar's picture 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.

**Data Sources**

The chief aim of this program of research was to investigate stakeholder perceptions and expectations of school and educational leadership. For that reason, focus and individual interviews comprised the primary data sources. In the stage of the study reported here, data were collected through 28 in-depth individual and three focus group interviews. In each school individual interviews were conducted with select teachers, school administrators, and parents or community members who volunteered or worked in the schools. Focus group interviews were conducted with senior students. As mentioned previously, in order to allow for individual differences and the diversity of experiences, the interviews and focus group sessions were semi-structured and followed an emergent design. Other data sources included direct observation, and field notes, supplemented by document analysis.

**Salmon Run School.** At Salmon Run we interviewed the principal, the four teachers, and three teacher assistants. The principal was male and all the others were female. The four teachers were white, and the others were of Aboriginal ancestry. We also interviewed five community members, two male and three female. All were employed in a paraprofessional capacity at the school. Finally, we interviewed an Aboriginal female employed as an educational consultant at the Band Council office. All were in-depth individual interviews that were from 30 minutes to one hour in duration. In addition, we conducted one focus group interview with students from the senior grades. All students in the class were provided with parental consent forms and those that returned with the forms completed were invited to be part of the focus group.

**Douglas Klar School.** At Douglas Klar school we interviewed ten teachers, including the principal. All were non-Aboriginal, with eight women and two men being interviewed. We also interviewed a senior male student and three female community members, one of whom was Aboriginal. All three of these community members worked or volunteered in the school. We conducted two focus group interviews with senior students. In-depth individual interviews were from 30 minutes to one hour in duration. Students were provided with parental consent forms and those that returned with the forms completed were invited to be part of the focus groups.

**Data Analysis**

The individual and focus group interviews were audiotape 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. The member check process allowed participants the opportunity to revise or edit the transcripts of their interviews. Two participants from each of the schools requested editorial changes to their transcripts.

A constant comparative method of analysis was employed. We independently reviewed transcripts in an iterative fashion. As patterns emerged from the data these were recorded, then subsequently shared and discussed. The primary method of communication throughout this period was via telephone and e-mail.

**Key Themes and Critical Questions**

The iterative nature of qualitative research ensures that data analysis is continuous and on going. From the analysis undertaken during this stage of the study, we have identified and constructed a number of key themes. These themes are grounded in the respondents' perceptions with respect to the purpose of curriculum and schooling, the role of the principal, and the relationship of schools to their communities. In this section, we have included a discussion of these three themes and the critical questions implicit in our interpretations.

**Purposes of Curriculum and Schooling**

Both schools were organized around the goals and curricula developed and prescribed by the Ministry of Education in British Columbia. At the time of this study, there was a thrust from the Ministry to increase accountability at the school and school district levels with regard to basic literacy in the English language.

Educators' beliefs about the purposes of curriculum and schooling. Even though the principals and teachers in both schools saw teaching the standardized provincial curricula as their professional responsibility, there was a general admission that the "fit" with local community and student needs and goals was not ideal. In particular, language proficiency among Aboriginal students was a concern. Officially, Carrier was the first language and was still spoken by the older generation of Aboriginal people in each community. English, however, had become the predominant language among the school-aged children and their parents. In an attempt to bridge the perceived gap between provincial mandates and student aptitudes and skills, each school had put in place alternative programming designed to address perceived "special needs" of many of the students. Salmon Run School, for example, had chosen to implement a Headstart program with the belief that students' literacy levels could be enhanced if children developed English 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 two students 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 acquire strong English language skills, and have a better chance of not falling 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 Aboriginal 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. (Special education coordinator, Douglas Klar School).

Historically, claims James (1999), "Canadian governments have sought to bring about Anglo-conformity through the assimilation and integration of ethnic and racial minority groups and Aboriginals" (p. 205). This has been accomplished, he contends, "through the legal, political, economic, and cultural institutions," (p. 205) especially schools. In emphasizing the impact of the dominant societal culture upon minority cultures including Aboriginals, he argues:

The fact that some ethnic and racial groups reside in enclaves, whether in large urban centres or on rural reserves, does not mean that they do not undergo this "integration" process. While it may be true that many still practice aspects of their ancestral cultures to varying degrees, they all reside in Canada...members of these groups must attend educational institutions in which they are taught the dominant values, norms and behavioural practices. Like other Canadians, minority group members are socialized to elements of culture through the textbooks used, the languages spoken, and the daily routines of educational institutions. (p. 205)

James concludes, as have others (Binda, 2001; Weber-Pillwax, 1999), that at best schools provide Aboriginal and ethnic minorities the opportunity to become competent "bilinguals" and "biculturals," and at worst schools marginalize and undermine the full participation of Aboriginals and other minorities in mainstream Canadian society (James, 1999, p. 216). Though well intentioned, the predominantly white middle class educators in Salmon Run and Douglas Klar schools were through their professional practice promoting cultural conformity without questioning the barriers and structural inequalities inherent in curricula and schooling modeled on dominant Anglo-Canadian norms and values. Further, in their modeling and privileging of the broader societal culture, they did not question what aspects of the local community life students would be required to relinquish in order to "fit into" (p. 198) and benefit from the dominant culture.

Parents' and community members' beliefs about the purposes of schooling. Although parents and community members shared the belief that the current focus on literacy and English skills was an important aspect of the curriculum, implicit in these respondents' accounts were more pragmatic purposes of schooling. The education consultant at Salmon Run was an Aboriginal woman who had left and then returned to the community. She believed that education was 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. (Education Consultant, Salmon Run School)

In a similar vein, a white 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. (Parent 1, Douglas Klar School).

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 ranked poorly in Ministry of Education standardized achievement examinations. None expressed fear about loss of cultural identity, but all expressed concern about the future of their communities. In their responses was a recognition that economic "success or upward social mobility is dependent on being able to operate within the larger society" (James, 1999, p. 198).

Students' perspectives of schooling. When student respondents at Salmon Run were asked what they liked about school, they replied, "the teachers and principal." What they didn't like was being obliged 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'm ready and takes me to school. School is boring. Some days I would like to stay home and help my grandmother. (Student 1, Salmon Run School)

Similarly, students at Klar School "liked their teachers." These senior students claimed to like the extra-curricular activities offered through the school, but like their counterparts at Salmon Run found learning could be "boring." The discrepancy between the students' and other respondents' accounts, combined with problems of attendance, retention, and low rates of completion among Aboriginal students at the local high school, raised further questions about the relevancy of the curricula and the goals for schooling in these remote communities. There are scholars who claim that the Indigenous way of viewing the world is unique because of traditional core values that include (i) a holistic, global perspective, (ii) an appreciation for life and family, (iii) a caring and sharing society, and (iv) a spiritual sense of community (Friesen & Friesen, 2002, p. 77). Recent research supports the argument that these values, "all of life," must be incorporated into curricula if schooling is to be relevant to Aboriginal students (Corson, 1999; Friesen & Friesen, 2002; Isbister, 2002; Smith, 2001; Swan, 2002). In particular, recent studies of urban Aboriginal students' perspectives support the claim that integration of traditional cultural values into school curricula and approaches to teaching contribute to the relevancy of learning for many Aboriginal students (Haig-Brown et al., 1997; Kanu, 2001). Burns (2001) points to the increased use of Aboriginal curriculum materials and pedagogy as key factors in rising retention and completion rates across Canada. The "proportion of Indigenous children who remained in school until grade 12," he claims, "increased from 39 percent in 1988/89 to a 1997/98 rate of 75 percent" (p. 66). Given that retention and completion rates among Aboriginal students in both Salmon Run and Lynx Bay were considerably lower than the national average, we argue for further research that examines the perspectives of Aboriginal students living on reserve and in northern communities. In a similar vein, drawing on her research and teaching experiences, Weber-Pillwax (1992) explains and challenges researchers, policy-makers, practitioners, educators, and parents:

My conclusion is essentially that every individual who is somehow directly or indirectly connected to the situation of native children in school will hold a view and a definition of native education. Each one uses the term unhesitatingly as if it had a "shared meaning." This conclusion leads me to suggest that the way out of this maze is to see education from the child's point of view. We must question what we are doing in schools by looking at this beautiful flower of ourselves and asking ourselves: Whose reality is this? Whose vision are we involved in? Will his/her experiences here support him/her on his/her own journey? Will I be a true teacher and guide him/her on the path which has already begun? Will I help him/her to remain connected with his/her ancestors and his/her grandchildren? Will this experience be a part of his/her becoming? (p. 54)

Given the diverse and conflicting perspectives of the goals for schooling among the school members we interviewed, we made the decision to investigate at greater length perceptions and expectations of school leadership in general, and the role of the principal in particular.

**Role of the School Principal**

As in the other Canadian provinces, in British Columbia the role of the principal is defined through legislation. In brief, the chief role of principals in public schools is to ensure a safe school environment in which students are taught provincially developed curricula by provincially certified and competent teachers.

Perceptions of the principals. Somewhat ironically, in both Salmon Run and Douglas Klar schools, the principals believed their chief responsibility was to provide a "bridge" between the school and the community. Implicit in their use of the word "bridge" was recognition of differences and potential tensions between the cultural norms and values students experienced in the school, and in their homes. The challenges in doing the work of "bridge building," 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, which in turn he believed had undermined confidence in the school. 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. He explained, "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. It's better for kids." This principal also believed that by having community groups hold meetings in the school and hiring locally, he had built understanding 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. 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. (Principal, Salmon Run School)

This principal's optimism and hopefulness are mirrored in The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples' (1996) report on the success of band-managed schools on reserve. Brady (1995) as well argues that because of greater autonomy and flexibility, band-managed schools are better situated to meet the expectations and goals of both students and the local community.

The principal from Douglas Klar School felt that an important way that he built bridges 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 groups to come out and get involved. 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. (Principal, Douglas Klar School)

By way of illustration, he talked about the anti-bullying program that recently had been started at the school. The PAC had approved the curricula that teachers would use to help students develop strategies for dealing with aggressive behaviour. When asked whether there were any Aboriginal parents on the PAC, he said currently there was "none." When we asked about the current composition of the committee, it became apparent that although multi-ethnic, members were exclusively from the influential middle and wealthy social classes of Lynx Bay. 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 the community expected of the school, and what teachers perceived to be reasonable. This, he admitted, was one of the most difficult bridging roles that he had assumed during his 15 years as principal at Douglas Klar. Mirrored in these two illustrations were the tensions among social, racial, and ethnic groups that existed in this small town where the "different groups did not mix," and where middle class and wealthy community members comprised the dominant group. Although Aboriginals were the most numerous in Lynx Bay and Douglas Klar School, the vast majority was of low income and had become marginalized. Kanu (2001) explains this tendency and its impact:

In provincial schools where most Aboriginal students outside of the territories attend school (Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1994), parents and Aboriginal community members have little direct access to decision making (Brady, 1995); no special effort is made to make them feel part of the life of the school, and the vast majority of teachers in these schools belong to the dominant mainstream culture...[resulting] in negative learning experiences for Aboriginal students. (p. 101)

Teachers' and paraprofessionals' perceptions and expectations of the principal. There was a high degree of correspondence among the perspectives of the teachers and paraprofessionals regarding the chief role of the principal. Not surprisingly, in both schools, these respondents praised the skillfulness each principal demonstrated in building bridges between the school and the community; all claimed to feel supported in their work in the school. At Salmon Run when asked what kind of principal the school should hire if the current principal retired, one teacher stated:

Someone who supports the teachers and gets to know the community as well as our principal has, would be really important. If we are having trouble with a student and tell him, "I need you to talk to that parent," he doesn't hesitate. He'll drive you to the house. He's really, really good at including parents and the community members. (Teacher 3, Salmon Run School)

At Douglas Klar when asked who might replace the current principal when he retired, one teacher responded:

It would have to be someone who knew the community very well and could be firm if need be. Our principal is very good at doing what has to be done so that teachers can concentrate on teaching. He consults, listens, and supports teachers. (Teacher 2, Douglas Klar School)

Parents' and community members' perceptions and expectations of the principal. When the parent and community members were asked about the role of the principal, they also emphasized the need to build positive connections between the school and the community. At Salmon Run, for example, one parent stated:

We are very fortunate to have this principal. He is not from the community but he has energy and vision. He develops the teachers and plans for the future. He works well with parents and is respectful of everyone. (Parent 2, Salmon Run School)

At Douglas Klar, parents and community members believed the principal not only had to build bridges to the community, but also mediate competing interests. One parent commented, "I wouldn't want his job for a million bucks." When asked who might take his place, another parent commented:

Somebody who is extremely open-minded and aware and respectful of the balancing act going on in the town and school. There are distinct groups with different agendas here. It probably would be better if the person came from the outside and didn't have connections to any one group. (Parent 1, Douglas Klar School)

Students' perceptions and expectations of the principal. Once again, students' views differed significantly from the views of the other school members. Even though students had first hand experience of the differences between the school and the community, none was aware of what other respondents saw as the "bridging role" played by the principal. At Salmon Run, for example, students believed the principal was there to help them, like a counselor might be. All students called him by his first name. One grade 6 student commented:

If I have a problem or just need a break, I go down to the principal's office. He lets me sit there as long as I want. He doesn't force me to go back to class. (Student 1, Salmon Run School)

In contrast, the students at Douglas Klar School felt that the principal was distant and saw him as a disciplinarian. In the words of one grade 6 Aboriginal student, "Only the bad kids end up talking to the principal. We do not want to know the principal."

In each of the two cases, there was a general consensus among adult respondents that the chief role of the principal was to address issues that arose when the values and norms of the school were in conflict with those of the dominant group within the community. Through their "bridge building," each principal was successful at maintaining harmony between the school and the community. This finding, coupled with issues of attendance, retention, and low graduation rates among Aboriginal students in both of these communities, however, prompted us to question assumptions and beliefs about the current and future role of the school. In particular, we wondered whether respondents expected these schools to be institutions that worked toward replicating the status quo, or lead in rebalancing political and economic power in the community, through increased educational opportunities for Aboriginal students.

**School and Community**

Implicit and explicit in the comments made by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators, parents, and community member respondents in both schools was the belief that the future of these remote communities depended on the schooling and educational achievement of their youth. This assumption fueled a frustration among these respondents, as they also believed the school system did not serve all students, especially Aboriginal students, very well. This failure has been documented and explained in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) and elsewhere "in terms of the rupture between the home culture of Aboriginal students and the processes and environments of the formal school system" (Kanu, 2001, p. 100). In this section, we draw on evidence that illustrates the ways and degree to which these communities and their schools were leading in restoring continuity between the home culture of the Aboriginal students and the culture of the school. In particular, we focus on attempts to deal with the "barriers to participation," and "barriers to success for" the Aboriginal students (James, 1999, p, 216), and suggest implications for future research and practice.

**Salmon Run School.** At Salmon Run, there was growing evidence that by planning together, the Band Council, educational committee, and school were improving opportunities for learning by removing barriers for students and parents. The education consultant explained the on going efforts:

We have the health care unit and the daycare. We have Headstart, and we have our school. So, we are covering several directions with our students and parents. Amazingly, the younger parents are responding. In ten years I believe there will be real differences. (Education Consultant, Salmon Run School)

Similarly, the principal explained:

I see things developing in the school community. If we went five years back, and I think back to my first kindergarten class, we didn't have a Headstart and daycare. The kindergarten teacher was crying by 10:00 a.m., and students caused chaos. We tried to put in supports, but kids had never been in any kind of a structured setting prior to school and it was unbelievable. So the difference that this Headstart and daycare programs have made has been immense and I truly think that that's going to count. When I look at the younger group, I am encouraged. (Principal, Salmon Run School)

In Salmon Run with its homogeneous First Nations population, there was a blurring of home and school issues. The yellow school bus that ferried students to and from school was a vehicle that bridged the barriers between school and home without judging. The presence of cultural artifacts and community members within the school also contributed to respondents' belief that the school was supporting students in their learning. Where there was hopefulness, however, there was also caution. It was felt that as long as the students remained in the community school, their development would evolve in an environment that honoured their culture and identity. The test would come after grade seven, when they would take the long bus ride to the town high school. Here, by all accounts, they would have to "fit into" a school where many students failed and most Aboriginal students "dropped out." Based on the contrast between the two schooling experiences, we suggest that researchers and northern educators must continue to search for ways in which schools and their communities can address the rupture between the home and school cultures. Further, we argue that the school must provide an environment that recognizes racial and ethnocultural difference, and supports the positive development of young people's cultural identity as well as the academic and technical skills required to successfully participate in the economy and broader society. Although in a very early stage, research of indigenous community-based educational initiatives reports the positive effects of such efforts on "the retention of indigenous students, and more broadly, the retention of indigenous language and cultures" (May, 1999, p. 1). Citing Daigle, Corson (1999) defines community-based education as "a form of social action within a community framework that extends beyond schools as institutions" (p. 10). In support of our argument for continued study of indigenous community-based educational initiatives in both national and international aboriginal contexts, we cite May:

Without community consultation and involvement in planning, schools will always yield to outside pressures to conform to the dominant culture, so that important cultural values weaken and die. However, when schools become organic to their local indigenous communities, such communities are able to insist on the insertion of their own values into the school's organization, management, pedagogy, curriculum, and modes of evaluation. (1999, p. 3)

**Douglas Klar School.** The tensions among the various social, racial, and ethnic groups in the town of Lynx Bay had led the school personnel over time to promote a dominant mainstream culture within Douglas Klar School. At best, the school accommodated the diverse student groups through its special education and extra-curricular programs. It did not, however, recognize or celebrate the diversity within the student population. In particular, the Aboriginal students comprising one half of the school population were "invisible" in the mainstream classes, and over-represented in special education classes. There was no aboriginal representation on the parent advisory committee. May argues that schools, through their policies and practices, are assimilatory, and:

Closely allied to this assimilative, often coercive, educational process directed at indigenous peoples has been a long-standing disparity between the educational success of indigenous and non-indigenous students...there is no little doubt after the welter of research on the subject, that the proscription and diminution of indigenous languages and cultures in the schooling process has contributed, in no small part, to the subsequent limited success of many indigenous students. (1999, p. 1)

In further support of our contention that schools in predominantly aboriginal communities must consider alternative models of schooling, including community-based educational models, we cite James (1999):

Any approach to education that intends to provide students with the opportunity to succeed in our society must acknowledge the inherent structural inequalities that operate as barriers to participation and the role of institutions, such as schools, in perpetuating these inequalities. Insofar as ... education does not interrogate the cultural values and norms upon which the school system operates, then it will be ineffective in addressing the educational barriers to success for minorities. (p. 216)

Research on successful indigenous community-based educational initiatives suggests that radical changes to mainstream schools can confront structural inequalities and barriers to participation (Corson, 1999). Drawing from his own research and Daigle's 1997 study of predominantly aboriginal communities that had transformed their school system, Corson argues that for authentic change to occur, schools need to persist in their work toward (i) two-way communication between home and school, (ii) written policies that legitimize community involvement, (iii) collegial and collaborative relations among staff and among parents, (iv) unstinting willingness to share leadership with the community, (v) involvement of the community in all phases of planning and implementation, (vi) daily commitment to maintaining community involvement over the long term, (vii) local political leadership that eases links between staff and community, (viii) administrative support and funding to carry out community involvement, and (ix) on-going training for staff and community to strengthen the partnership (p. 17). Based on the research to date, Corson in concluding emphasizes the potential of indigenous community-based educational initiatives to transform whole communities:

When their own cultural values influence the organization of a school, the aboriginal members of that community become the experts... Local political mobilization with real purpose can begin to occur. Community attitudes are laid bare and discussed. (p. 17)

Based on our findings in Salmon Run and Douglas Klar schools, we urge researchers, educators, and policy makers to continue to examine, from a critical perspective, to what extent and in what ways northern schools can support the full participation of all students in both the local and broader economy and society.

**Conclusions**

In this article, we have reported our findings from the third stage of an investigation of educational leadership, policy, and organization in northern Canadian schools. These findings suggest that among stakeholders in these northern schools, there are multiple and often conflicting perceptions regarding the purposes of curriculum and schooling, the role and effectiveness of the principal, and the relationship between school and the community. In brief, we argue that there is a widespread belief among northern educators that dominant Western notions of schooling and leadership are preferable, and that this belief often is in conflict with parent, and community expectations that the schools provide all students, including those of Aboriginal ancestry, (i) with the requisite skills to participate in the economic life of their communities and the Canadian society, and (ii) with knowledge of their culture and language that will allow them to "assume the responsibilities of their nations" (Kanu, 2001, p. 100). In addition, we contend that further examination of student perspectives of schooling would be informative as educators develop curricula that are relevant in a northern environment. More precisely, the arguments here are that (i) "our education system must provide opportunities for students to actively participate in their educational process" (James, 1999. p. 216), and (ii) "educators have a responsibility to acknowledge, not only the student's cultural perspective, but that of their own, which will influence the teaching-learning process" (p. 216). We have used these findings as a context for our discussion, and in order to raise questions about the potential of indigenous community-based education initiatives to address structural inequities and promote full participation of all students in the broader society.

In concluding, we suggest that it is a critical moment in the history of Aboriginal people living in Canada. Current debate surrounding the Indian Act (1876) and the proposed First Nations Governance Act raises critical questions about leadership models and practices in First Nations communities (Beltrame, 2003, pp. 37-38). The time is right, we contend, to reconsider leadership in these communities. Traditional Western models informed by positivist assumptions have influenced, for too long, the way in which leadership is conceived and exercised in the north, with undue emphasis placed on designated leaders and their abilities to bridge ruptures between the dominant and minority cultures, and "complete administrative tasks" (Napier & Muth, 1995, p. 6). We argue, as have others (Corson, 1999; Wildcat, 1995), for a redefinition of leadership that is more "holistic and collaborative," "inclusive" and "sensitive to issues of culture, ethnicity and gender" (Napier & Muth, 1995, p. 1). In particular, we urge researchers, policy makers, and practitioners to consider ways in which traditional indigenous beliefs and values might inform models of leadership that contribute to the rebalancing of economic and political power in northern communities and their schools.

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**Endnote:**

1 Following Statistics Canada's (1996) definition, Aboriginal is used in this article to describe individuals of First Nations and Métis ancestry.