

**STORYTELLING AS AN INSIGHTFUL TOOL
FOR UNDERSTANDING EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP
IN INDIGENOUS YUKON CONTEXTS**

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This article is based upon a 2006 review of the research methodologies identified in the articles of two educational leadership journals. It found the use of narrative and biographical approaches specific to the field of educational leadership appears rare. This article examines the stories told by Yukon school principals in Indigenous contexts to accomplish three things: first, it presents narrative and biographical research as a promising approach to expand current conceptions of educational leadership. Second, stories illuminate the transformative nature of learning that can occur when non-Indigenous principals reflect on their lives and work in Indigenous contexts. Finally, narratives and biographies are offered as tools to assist the development of future educational leaders.

Introduction

In 2006, I conducted a review of two similar academic journals, one American and one from England, each focused on educational leadership. The purpose of this activity was to illuminate the research methodologies extant in current educational leadership articles in the 21st Century. The journals were the American-based *Educational Administration Quarterly (EAQ)* and the *Journal of Educational Administration (JEA)*, located in England. Both journals share many similarities and have a long history of publishing articles addressing research in educational leadership, the JEA commencing publication in 1963 and EAQ in 1964. Both are refereed, publish five issues per year, and have a diverse editorial board that includes scholars from universities around the world. This is particularly so in the case of the JEA.

The two journals were chosen from a short list of potential candidates. Three journals rejected for review were the *International Journal of Educational Administration*, *Educational Leadership*, and *Educational Management and Leadership*. Their exclusion was based on the range of articles being so broad in one, and in another the strong focus on addressing issues in Higher Education. *Educational Leadership*, while offering a highly accessible journal which presents a particular emphasis on K-12 public school education, seeks shorter articles in the 1500-2000 word range and does not specifically employ a peer review process for selecting its articles.

The time frame of seven years, spanning the first issue of the new millennium, published in February 2000, to December 2006, was chosen. Specifically selecting this period provided a finite timeframe leading to insights into the research traditions in educational leadership employed at the beginning of the 21st Century. The importance of engaging in such a study was prompted by Heck (1998), who questioned: “What types of methodological issues are likely to surface in conducting studies across cultural or national settings?” (p.54). Exploring further the role of methodology in educational leadership research, I identified Heck and Hallinger’s (1999) review of research methods for the study of leadership and school improvement. They revealed that there are lines of inquiry that appear absent in the study of leadership. In particular, their review indicated that there “has been surprisingly little research that is either cross-cultural or that employs Indigenous conceptions of leadership in non-Western cultures” (p.149).

Based upon my experience as a school administrator in rural and isolated Yukon contexts, Heck and Hallinger’s finding gave me cause for concern. I therefore conducted a review of educational leadership articles in each journal to determine the research methodologies prevalent in them. This was done by examining each article and identifying the methodology

stated by the author(s). Not all articles in a journal explicate a research study, thus, some of the articles (introductions, editorials, obituaries, summaries) did not require specific review. As a result, a total of 183 educational leadership articles were identified as suitable for examination. Out of the total number, 83 employed quantitative methodologies and 83 employed qualitative methodologies. Seventeen articles expressed the use of mixed methods research.

Creswell (2005) defined the biographical aspect of narrative research as “a form of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives” (p.15). Dhunpath (2000) draws upon Ball and Goodson (1986) to describe the narrative in relation to the study of the lives of educators in the following manner:

The narrative element refers to the subjective, narrative form in which educators present their career experiences. The focus is not on the factual accuracy of the story constructed, but on the meaning it has for the respondent. In this regard, the approach is also constructivistic since the story is a composition of construed meanings and self-representations. (p.545)

Out of the 183 articles reviewed, only two indicated that they employed the use of narrative or biographical research. In light of Heck and Hallinger’s (1999) assertion that the study of educational leadership has been biased through a reliance on quantitative methods, and that there exists “blind spots in our picture of school leadership” (p.141), the narratives and biographies of educational leaders, could be powerful learning tools to foster the broadening of conceptions of educational leadership in light of Heck and Hallinger’s indication that theoretical perspectives on educational leadership have also been limited by their focus primarily on the role of the principal.

A Brief Review of the Literature

A central challenge facing both researchers and practitioners specific to the topic of educational leadership is the confusing epistemology (that is, lack of clear meaning regarding the notion of leadership) and the limitations of the current body of educational leadership literature. The mystifying epistemic foundations and conceptual vagueness in regards to educational leadership is perhaps best described by Allix and Gronn (2005):

Almost no area of inquiry or interest has shown itself to be more elusive, or more controversial, to human understanding, than the notion of leadership. It has been, and remains, a notoriously perplexing, yet tantalizing preoccupation for those who research it and/or expound upon it, and for those who, more pragmatically, wish to embrace it and master it, to effect change or effect organizational performance. (p.181)

Allix and Gronn's assertion is reinforced by English (2003) who, with respect to educational leadership identifies "the frailties, complexities, contradictions, and discontinuities embedded in the knowledge base" (p. 33). Similarly, Rayner and Gunter (2005) argue that "we draw on very limited knowledge claims: we tend to discount the self and our experience as being meaningful to such a question; we tend to comply with established norms about how organizations work" (p.151). As a result, answers to educational leadership questions can remain elusive. The inability to define leadership is further reinforced by the findings of the *Fostering Tomorrow's Educational Leaders* report (Stack et al., 2006). Based in part on interviews with Deans of Education at institutions that offer educational leadership and administration (ELA) programs to educators in British Columbia (BC), Canada, this report concluded:

Despite much promotional activity, there is no widely accepted definition of leadership and no consensus on how to best develop it or foster it. Our participants disagreed substantively about what leadership means and how it is related to management or administration. (p.31)

Participants in educational leadership and administration programs have strong opinions with respect to the lack of effectiveness and transferability of what they have learned relative to the needs of the position. In an American study of school principals, Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, and Gundlach (2003) found that most administrators felt that they were short-changed by the training they received:

Principals saw their preparation programs as unhelpful because the course work emphasized only instructional and managerial leadership. Most said their training programs did not touch on the more complex combinations of leadership skills used in cultural, strategic, or external development leadership. Moreover, managing the complex push and pull within districts and district directives wasn't part of the curriculum either. (p.38)

In a national examination of the nature of educational administration programs in the United States, Levine (2005) sheds light on a number of factors which may underpin the dissatisfaction expressed by school administrators who have engaged in post-graduate study. Stating that the quality of American-based educational programs was poor, Levine arguably offered the most comprehensive condemnation:

The fact is that the mission of educational leadership development programs has been unclear since their earliest days. Their curricula are disconnected from the needs of leaders and their schools. Their admission standards are among the lowest in American graduate schools. Their professoriate is ill equipped to educate school leaders. Their programs pay insufficient attention to clinical education and mentorship by successful practitioners. The degrees they award are inappropriate to the needs of today's schools and school leaders. Their research is detached from practice. And their programs receive insufficient resources. (p.23)

This description does not paint an encouraging portrait. Providing a North American historical perspective to this current dissatisfaction, Murphy (2005) suggests that the school leader as manager of the corporate enterprise (“and its apotheosis, the CEO,” p.156) is a concept that emerged in the early 20th century. Much of the language of the educational leadership field is reflected in these roots. “Management by walking about,” “management by objective,” “best

practices,” “benchmarks,” are all borrowed terms or concepts that may not serve current and future school administrators very well.

The *Fostering Tomorrow’s Educational Leaders* report (Stack et al, 2006) presents an examination of 12 educational leadership and administration (ELA) programs at British Columbia-based universities. When describing the nature of what and, crucial to this examination, how students are taught, this report found that:

The majority of programs offer courses that draw on social science, learning, leadership, administration and research rather than philosophy, psychology or policy. Programs differ extensively in their emphasis on research; and how research is defined. Finally, ELA graduates remain underserved in terms of learning opportunities that could inform their professional practice. (p. 46)

Educational leadership literature is often marked by a diminished focus on descriptions or explanations relating to the contexts, situations, and the nature of constituents (students, teachers, parents, community) that may influence and be influenced by educational leadership. The educational leadership literature base focuses more on what a specific leader “does” and less on the “how” and why” he or she chooses to do it. Therefore, explorations regarding conceptualizations of educational leadership employing a broader sense than its sole embodiment in one person, the school principal, are warranted. This is reinforced by Spillane et al. (2004) who argue that:

We know relatively little about the how of school leadership, that is knowledge of the ways in which school leaders develop and sustain those conditions and processes believed necessary for innovation. While there is an expansive literature about what school structures, programmes, roles, and processes are necessary for instructional change, we know less about how these changes are undertaken or enacted by school leaders. (p.4)

When examining educational leadership, the self and experience has been discounted or diminished (Rayner and Gunter, 2005) in favour of external training and development programs focused on knowledge and skill development and less so on what may constitute educational

leadership when including the perspectives of context and culture. Reinforcing this crucial point, as indicated in the British Columbia (BC)-based *Fostering Tomorrow's Educational Leaders* (Stack et al., 2006) report, there exists a cultural 'silence' specific to educational leadership programs in BC. Given that the Yukon relies heavily on BC school curricula and educational initiatives, the same can be assumed in this northern Canadian Territory (Blakesley, 2008). More broadly, when attempting to examine the nature of educational leadership in northern and Indigenous Canadian regions, as indicated by Goddard and Foster (2002), there is a lack of research focusing on northern educational contexts.

At this point, clarification on the use of the word 'Indigenous'¹ and 'indigeneity' in this paper, is required. Hocking (2005) defines indigeneity in a multifaceted way, stating that: "Indigeneity is an attribute. A person has indigeneity by holding Indigenous status. People's indigenous status adheres to particular places of the earth. Indigeneity is also an aspect of personal self-identity, and as such, carries special meaning of particular places" (p.191). Employing this definition, indigeneity presents as a complex and nuanced construct, carrying with it attributes specific to place or geographic location, legal status, and identity.

From the perspective of Indigenous cultures in North America (including British Columbia and the Yukon), teaching stories and oral histories form an important teaching and learning method with both moral and factual purposes (Hampton, 1999). This presents in contrast to Euro-western culture, where the value of the story is diminished in relation to

¹ In this paper, the term 'Indigenous' is used with the understanding that it refers a diversity of distinct Indigenous peoples, including Aboriginal peoples, First Nations, Inuit, and North American Indians. Its use is in no way intended to essentialize this diversity. With respect to the term, its diverse usage is evident between the countries of Canada and the United States, where the terms First Nations, Indigenous Peoples, or Aboriginals are predominantly employed in the former, and the term Indian for the most part in the latter (Friesen and Friesen, 2002). In the Yukon, the term First Nations is primarily used when self-governing First Nations refer to themselves, as in the case of the Carcross-Tagish First Nation. In this paper, the terms First Nations and Indigenous predominate, though others are employed dependent upon what is being referred to: i.e. Aboriginal languages. In every case, unless specifically cited, all terminology is capitalized as a vital and important means of respecting and valuing the identity of those described, much as should be expected and required of any ethnic group or by a citizen of any nation.

professional learning and reflective practice. Stories appears absent in programs designed to ‘teach’ educational leadership and administration. Reinforcing this perspective is Danzig (1999) who states that:

The appeal to scientific rationality has led the professions to remain skeptical, even hostile, to stories as part of professional training. Traditionally, education programs in the professions have been built around a knowledge base of theory connected to future performance skills. (pp. 118-119)

As a result, despite the significance of stories as a knowledge transfer method, both the life histories of educational leaders and the stories they acquire over years of experience in Indigenous contexts (and reflection upon this experience) are not often used as a teaching tool resonant with Indigenous teaching methodologies, limiting the extent to which they may serve to inform the current educational leadership field. This is despite Danzig’s (1996) assertion regarding the merit of stories: “Stories lead to new understandings of how expertise is gained in the real world by linking the study of leadership to professional practice” (p. 123).

The Relative Absence of Culture in Educational Leadership

With respect to the use of the term ‘culture’ in this paper, one definition is “The normative glue that holds a particular school together” (Sergiovanni, 2000, in Goddard and Foster, 2002, p. 3). I prefer the broader definition employed by Agar (1996, in Goddard and Foster, 2002.) who describes culture as: “The knowledge you construct to show how acts in the context of one world can be understood as coherent from the point of view in another world” (p. 3). This important distinction avoids the view of culture as a school-centric one, encouraging the inclusion of the cultural aspects of society and communities within which schools are embedded. This viewpoint is particularly suited to the Yukon educational research context in order that the school itself not be viewed in isolation from the community. To view the school as an entity

separate from the community would only serve to further entrench the historical disparity and dissonance existing between Indigenous communities and state-run schools as a result of Canadian government residential school policies.

Reflecting upon the beginning of my career within the field of educational leadership in Canada's north, my professional practice and experiences as a school principal were most certainly disproportionately influenced by my development and a perspective limited to that described as a Euro-western perspective of leadership. In short, there appeared no other perceptible frame through which to view or conceptualize leadership. Such a limited orientation may serve to explain why tensions existed between the school, the principalship, and the broader school community, given that such conceptions and perceptions did not necessarily "fit" with those situated in Indigenous Yukon population and community contexts. As I learned from conversations with colleagues, this was not solely my own experience, and served as a factor which further reinforced my desire to illuminate, understand, and hopefully alleviate such tensions through engagement in locally-situated educational research.

These reflections upon my experience most certainly resonated with Hallinger and Leithwood's (1996) assertion that culture is a missing variable in leadership, and served as a vital point of departure for my engagement in critiques of Euro-western conceptions of leadership. Understandably, caution must be exercised when employing such a broad term as "Euro-western," given that while there are leadership concepts that are culturally endorsed in Europe, within such a designation there can exist much variability (Brodbeck et al., 2000). Despite this, Eurocentric thought, broadly defined, has been transported and carried throughout the earth by colonization (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). Related to my own experience and professional development as a school administrator, this dominant conception was assumed to be the only one

related to considerations of how educational leadership may be construed and enacted, with little, if any room for others to be contemplated and examined, even if they were known and acknowledged to exist. This reflection and observation of “one right way” aligns well with Battiste and Henderson’s assertion that, “Although these assumptions have been challenged by both Eurocentric and Indigenous thinkers, they remain the foundations of orthodox educational and political thought” (p. 29).

Specific to educational contexts, Hampton (in Battiste & Barman, 1999) offers the following example, illustrating how, in contrast to Euro-western views, Indigenous conceptions of education focus more broadly on the well-being of many, rather than the accomplishments of one:

The second standard of Indian education is *service*. Education is to serve the people. Its purpose is not individual advancement or status. As Levine and White point out, Western society and education too often promote and glorify individual options for achievement at the expense of the social connections that make achievement meaningful. There is an inevitable conflict between Western education and Indian education on this point. The competitive success of the individual is an implicit value of Western schools and, as such, is in direct conflict with the Indian value of group success through individual achievement. (p.21)

Transposing such views onto the concept of leadership reinforces further the direct contrast between Indigenous perspectives and much of the business and science-based literature that has underpinned the knowledge base of Euro-western educational leadership models. Assumptions regarding the natural world and how we relate to it reinforce the Euro-western epistemic view of the world and the nature of reality that are identified by Battiste and Henderson (2000):

Within modern Eurocentric thought, humans can have no access to a world independent of their beliefs and experiences of it, so they cannot check, in a God-like manner, upon the truth of their assumptions. The elusive justification for holding these assumptions in Eurocentric thought has been that it has just been useful to do so. (p. 24)

Offering an historical underpinning for educational leaders to culturally adapt their practice Friesen and Friesen (2002) identify the need for a reversal of the historical assimilation of Aboriginal peoples into mainstream society. As indicated in the 1967 Hawthorn Report, they urge that educators should be integrated into Aboriginal ways of knowing, getting to know the background, culture, and identify of their students more thoroughly. These authors also base this assertion upon the findings of Taylor (1995) who estimates that “90 percent of Native children will, at one time or another, be taught by a non-Native teacher” (Friesen and Friesen, 2002, p. 27).

Coming to know deeper understandings of Indigenous conceptions of leadership is further hampered by the elusive and controversial nature and inability of those from the Western world to define leadership within their own context (Allix & Gronn, 2005), and by the unwillingness of educational thinkers to accept contradictions within the field (Maxcy, 1991). The historical conceptions of leadership underpinning Euro-western conceptions, as outlined by Storey (2005) and Yukl (1999), are limited in their ability to understand and accept the roles that gender, race, and culture play in what may constitute leadership. Through such a perspective, not all knowledge may count or matter in this regard: “What counts as knowledge in a given context is relative to what is known in that context” (Fenstermacher, 1994, p.4). This raises a serious limitation specific to Euro-western leadership models: If other perspectives, including gender, race, and class, count for little when examining leadership employing a Euro-western perspective, the question thus arises as to why Indigenous conceptions of educational leadership would matter and be considered of import.

It is here that two schools of thought come into obvious conflict with each other in direct relation to educational leadership: the first typified by the belief that leadership is culturally,

contextually, and situationally located, the second by the certainty that leadership can be prescribed, standardized, and reduced to quantifiable traits or characteristics generalizable across contexts. Despite the aforementioned significance of culture and context specific to attempts at broadening notions of educational leadership, efforts made to quantify, codify and simplify educational leadership practice are very strong, particularly in the US. These efforts and policy trends influence educational leadership in Canada, particularly given the recent publication of leadership standards in the province of British Columbia which do not include Indigenous culture as a significant component of leadership despite 8.4%, or approximately 51,000 students in British Columbia self-identified as Aboriginal and who may be clustered in rural school settings (BC Ministry of Education, 2005). Given that British Columbia lies directly south of the Yukon, and given the attendance of Yukon teachers and administrators at courses and professional development, the aforementioned under-emphasis of culture in relation to constructions of educational leadership gives cause for concern with respect to the local and contextual relevance of such activities.

Educational Leadership Research in the Yukon

In 2008, I conducted a research project involving non-Indigenous principals working in Indigenous Yukon contexts. This project employed a critical ethnographic approach, where a series of semi-structured interviews, extensive observations, and a document review of pertinent school-based publications (e.g., parent/student handbook, school newsletters, and notes from the principal to the staff) were conducted over a six month period. Interview transcripts were returned to the participants for their review, input, and further comment. In a series of interviews, I asked the principals to share their stories framed within the context of how they constructed

their professional identities and roles as educational leaders based on their life experiences.

These experiences included reflections on their engagement with public school as students and later as post-secondary students. In the interviews, we also focused our conversations around questions which illuminated their educational leadership theory and practice.

To write these narratives, I employed Foley's (2002) framework or approach in order to present this critical ethnographic work:

The narrative is organized like a series of documentary-style, realistic snapshots of specific groups and specific topics. It conveys a vivid, "I was there" sense of what it must be like to be [there]. After presenting long, relatively unedited segments of interviews, the authors then interpret these testimonies. They consciously foreground the voices of the [participants] and minimize extended theoretical discussions. This makes their text much more readable and accessible to a general audience, politicians, and public policy makers. (p. 152)

This flows from Smith's (2002) description of the interaction of the researcher and participant where the researcher is "the research instrument and the techniques she uses [sic] must proceed naturally from the interacting between her and the field context in which she is working" (p. 174).

The following excerpts, taken from the series of interviews conducted with one participant named Jim², weave together to form a rich and detailed educational leadership story. The stories Jim shared serve to illustrate how the narratives presenting his biography, career engagement, and reflections on over 35 years as an educator and elementary school principal in northern and Indigenous contexts meld together to construct his professional identity as an educational leader.

The depth of insight and experience that emerged underscores the power of life experience and the telling of stories as a means of teaching and developing educational

² All names and geographic references have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

leadership in ways which is both culturally and contextually relevant. In keeping with Foley's aforementioned framework, Jim's narratives are first presented, followed by an analysis and theoretical discussion.

Jim's Reflection on His Experience as a Child in School

It was more of a factory than a school... So I left school, I had to repeat grade 9 and then left school at the end of grade 10 so I did not graduate. I like to think that I was smart enough but school just did not work at all for me after a while.

I also think that school to me was a relatively unwelcoming place as a kid. It wasn't horribly hostile, but I mean you could see it in your parents. Your parents were tense when they walked into the school that I can remember to this day, and I think it's just institutional, that's how institutions work.

My school had a few hundred kids. I can remember and count maybe two native kids in my high school. That was it. They were like ghosts. They drifted off the bus in the morning and never said a word to anybody and went home again. But when I walked, our school was K-11 and when I walked through the school sometimes I would notice large First Nation boys sitting in little, little desks in Grade 4 and 5. These were kids who were waiting for the school-leaving age of 16 to finally vote with their feet and get out. They were being failed repeatedly and they were basically strapped into submission, so "if you shut your mouth we will let you sit at the back of the room until you are old enough to quit school." That was my first encounter with First Nations learners, students, and it was a terribly negative one.

From there, years later to go to [a rural British Columbia community] which served, among other places, the Ruby Creek Reserve. I was a high school teacher then and to see kids in my class who were obviously from Ruby Creek, and obviously in most cases really were at a loss to figure out what they were even doing in the school. They were for the most part ignored. Again, they were just part of the woodwork, the furniture. And as long as they didn't cause any trouble nobody said too much to them. So that was my first real look at First Nation kids in school and it was only after that I started thinking that there has to be something more to this.

What a formative memory that whole business of being in a school which included kids from Oka. That really has shaped how I look at First Nation kids in school. And in many ways, my whole early education in the public system in the '50s has shaped the way I look at kids in school. My schooling wasn't terrible by any means, but the word repressive comes to mind pretty fast and it is not to say that school was any different than any other school but that is the way we looked at kids in those days. They were seen,

hopefully they weren't heard, they were beaten or strapped all the way through school along with most of my male compatriots.

Not only are the stories and reflections upon his own school experiences influential, but as important are how his stories inform how he sees himself and his role as a school principal:

So I think it really affected me and later on when I started to have responsibility and that I could actually shape a school I remember those lessons. And the question I always ask myself is how do you make people more relaxed in the school, which sounds like a very simple idea but it is actually very complicated. It just seemed to me to be such a restrictive atmosphere at my school. Even the building. I think over the years as I've actually had the opportunity to be an administrator and realize that I had the power to affect change. Those are the memories that directed me.

Working and Learning as a Principal in Indigenous Contexts

One of the things I learned very slowly over the years was how First Nations kids and families, how many of them looked at school and that view is radically different from non-First Nations just because of their own experience and their own worldview, the way they educated kids in their own society for thousands of years. It is diametrically different from what we're trying to do in schools right now.

What I think has transferred to me from life in general to the school is say living in Tincup Lake where I spent eight years. I spent a lot of time talking to elders (older native people in town), I spent a lot of time sitting in kitchens, and talking to people, having coffee with families and so on. One of the things that struck me every time was the gentleness of the people that I worked with, that I talked to. The indirect way they had of dealing with almost everything in life. Whereas culturally we are attuned to just the opposite, to be very direct, let's get the job done, and it took me a long time, listening to some of these people to understand that they were really teaching me through these long involved stories that I had trouble sometimes getting the point out of. So the stories are one thing, but the technique is something that I think I was able to gradually absorb. So in the school, I think it is conscious now, at one time it was unconscious, I do practice that approach with kids. There are times when you need to be very direct but often I take a roundabout route and in order to do that you need time. So if you're an administrator you have to somehow in the course of the busy day carve out enough time to work with kids in that manner, because if your day is so chopped up and fragmented and full of jobs, you never get that quality time with the kids, and it's that time that really makes the difference. The kid in crisis who I need to

spend an hour with, I have to have that hour, I can't say, hey – 10 minutes and if your problem isn't solved you're out the door, and off to someone else, and yet we do it all the time. That's enough, and off we go. And yet a whole hour or an hour and a half is what's going to help that kid.

Learning from Elders

I would say that would be one [story]. There are so many others - there are so many speakers. My formative time would have been the 1970s. A guy named Bob Sterling, a First Nation speaker from down south came up to our school and I remember him spending a day talking to the teachers in [my school district] about the sorts of things that we talked about really openly now, cultural validation, about how native kids seem to be lost within the system and as educators we have the responsibility to turn that around, to allow their culture to be reflected within their own school.

Again this is not seen as anything terribly new, but for 1973 or whenever it was an astounding revelation for a person like me. I remember walking away from that thinking that for the first time that what was a nagging thought in the back of my mind was suddenly in the forefront. That same period an elder from Cassiar, her name was Mary, approached me one day and asked if she could come into my Grade 9 home room, come into my class and talk to the kids. Again I said “yes” without giving it any real thought, but watching her sitting very quietly and what she was doing was beading and doing crafts and at the same time talking very gently to the kids. Again there was that revelation that the way we thought we should be teaching kids has to be examined. Here she was teaching, but teaching in a very gentle and indirect way that was working far better with those kids than [teaching] was when I started teaching.

Jim’s Reflections on Post-graduate Engagement

I do a lot of reading always, but you put your finger on something. I don’t do a lot of reading about leadership in education or leadership theory. School is life and life is school.

...I just want to underline the fact that it is rarely that I am asked to talk about the more subjective side of running a school, but I feel so passionate about the fact that schools are very subjective institutions filled with people, and we have to keep that foremost in our minds. There is nothing in the university post-graduate or teacher training curriculum that I am aware of that actually shows young educators how important this is. Maybe they are not ready for it when they are starting off - you’ve got to have some life experiences first. That’s the kernel of the school is those personal relationships.

Even though I had been a principal for a number of years I hadn't really reflected on my practice very much at all. You know what that is like. You're working, and

you're not watching yourself work. You are just trying to run your school. To take a year, to spend time in Victoria, and to spend time in that course and to actually sit and start reflecting on what I was actually trying to do was transforming for me, because when I left there I wasn't any wiser I guess, but I suddenly had a tool that I didn't have before and I guess it's metacognition to step outside myself and watch myself as a leader, and ask myself all sorts of questions about what I was doing.

Educational leadership in rural, Indigenous contexts

The other thing I see about being a principal as a leader of course, is that you are not only leading the school, you are leading a community, and I learned that from being an administrator in small towns where you truly are a community leader by ipso facto - there is no question.

My orientation is so much principal/teacher it seems to me that if we took a teacher and a principal and set them side by side, the way I look at the model, we are both doing jobs that are very similar...I was thinking right away that I have to work with parents, I work with groups, but so do teachers. And so I think the term principal teacher is a very strong one, a good one, because it is simply a matter that one teacher on a stack becomes then, what's that expression? "First among equals" and that is the way I like to see it. I see myself as a teacher, so I don't see a great difference in skill set or attributes between the two.

Jim's philosophy of educational leadership

I forget which educational philosopher, I think it is Thomas Greenfield, [who] emphasizes that in his writings that principals should have a certain degree of life experience because why should there be a distinction between life out there and school? It's all really the same package. And I think in my case just living in the North, and all the experiences I've had in the North, outside the school as well, shapes the way I look at kids in the school - formal training, very little indeed in that area at all.

My own feeling is that most parents, whether they are First Nation parents or not, are somewhat intimidated by school and that has a lot to do with the way they went to school themselves. You cannot assume they are going to be happy and relaxed when they come through the doors of the school. School has a tendency to try and twist this around a little bit. So anything I can do as the administrator to counteract those forces, I do.

The only thing at university, I mean I enjoyed my time there, but the only thing that really jumped out at me was a philosophy of education seminar with Christopher Hodgkinson. I had taken philosophy of education before but the level

we worked at allowed me to take a look at some of the more unorthodox philosophers. The course was actually leadership and so a lot of what he was introducing was for educational philosophers who specialized in leadership, he being one. This is where [I encountered] Thomas Greenfield, the first time I had read any of his work. But what he did was encouraged us to, I know it's a cliché, but to think outside of the box.

Finding a balance working in a cross-cultural environment

Certainly in the attempt to bring those two worlds (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) together there have been some pressure points, not so much lately, but in the past we've had a small number of parents who have felt that we were over-emphasizing one over the other, for example too much first Nation content, or not enough. There is always that tension. I have had a few First Nation parents over the year tell me they didn't send their kids to school to learn traditional dancing and all that - they can teach them that themselves, they are here to get their ABC's. We've had non-First Nation parents who will tell me that there is way too much culture in this school; again they need their ABCs.

Judgment, experience, and expertise

Working with Children

It happens every day, all day - that is the job. That is truly the job. It is not a systems job. I don't know how people can turn it into one. It is judgment call after judgment call, after judgment call. The reason for that I think is that if you know your kids and know your staff, and know your families - life is not black and white. Why wouldn't you make these judgment calls? A good example today was there were two little boys here in the office who were scrapping during PE outside. I mean, the letter of the law says we tell parents that if a kid fights they go home. But it is 20 to three in the afternoon, what good is that going to serve? Secondly, I know those boys. I know what happened, I heard them both, and I understand the situation. I don't like knee-jerk reactions. What worked way better was to talk to them for a while, to take away their PE tomorrow, there is a direct consequence for this behaviour, but don't make it more than it is. They are two little boys who got angry with each other. Yes, they should know better, but it's a pretty normal thing to do.

Working with Teachers

And to me [judgment] is a huge part of our job. There are so many examples. We are in the last week of the term, everybody is absolutely exhausted, and the

judgment call today was let's not have a staff meeting. Let's wait until April... it is such a simple idea - I get to school this morning and my mind-set is staff meeting because every first Wednesday of the month is a staff meeting. The agenda is ready, I'm ready to remind people, I put in on the Monday bulletin. A teacher comes to me and says "do you really think we should have one?" My first reaction, I'm out supervising with him, and busy, my first reaction is "of course we should have one." But you see again, we know each other so well and that teacher was persistent, others may not be, he said "you know, we have one scheduled for April 2nd, we have two weeks coming off now for Spring Break, you're going on the Bison Hunt"... and the light just went on. Do we want to have a staff meeting now? So I just thought about it, walked around and asked a couple of teachers "Would your heart be broken if we didn't have a staff meeting today?" And they cheered... how much more of a signal did I need?

Despite being over 60 years of age, Jim did not feel that he wanted to retire. His work with children and their families is vitally meaningful and important to him. As his responses reflect, continuing on as principal of his school would suit him well:

So I think what I represent generally is what I appear to be when I'm in the school. In other words, kids are the most important component of the whole process. People are the most important component of the larger process and I think, I hope, this is what I bring to the school every day. And one of the major reasons why, for example, we open up early, we close late, we're always available for kids, for parents, for teachers is because we have to honor that philosophy. If you don't put people first you can then fall back on systems and the non human side of the job to the detriment of the relationships, but because relationships are key, everything we do, everything I do, has to be connected to that philosophy.

...First Nations language, it needs to dovetail more with a growing experiential education movement which this school and many other schools are beginning to develop now where we've always understood why hands-on is really important for learning, but we're actually beginning to do more than talk about it... And if you think of the way kids, First Nations children, learn - before we came along with this "great" educational system of ours, for thousands of years kids learned by walking out, working out in the bush with their uncle or their dad and their mom, learned their language and learned how to apply it because Southern Tutchone is a language that is rooted in the land... And it makes no real sense without the land. And so looking five years down the road I think we have to spend way more time and energy on the land with kids and connecting that their language, whether it's their language or whether it's just *the* language because a lot of the kids who take Southern Tutchone here are not Native kids, not First Nations kids, but that whole business of separating the language from the land

that's a tremendous problem that occurred over the years, and it's starting to dovetail, it's starting to come back through the schools now, which is great.

My work is my life, my life is my work and I don't mean that in a workaholic way at all. It's pure pleasure to come to school in the morning... [that perception is] entirely wrong because it is truly a labor of love. It has been for most, I would say all, of my career, but especially since I've come to this school. I find meaning in it, which is good, I think. I think I'm doing an effective job. I'm working well with people, with kids, with parents, etc. I feel tremendously fulfilled by my work. I mean I know it sounds Pollyannish but I literally love coming in in the morning and when we have a PD day and the kids aren't pouring through the doors, I go into almost a depression, if I'm still in the school.

I may just be at the end of my career and maybe I'm very relaxed about it, but I see a seamlessness in our relationships that I didn't see even five years ago. That the parent who comes in and chats with me, has the same contribution to our overall success as I do. You know, the more I listen to parents, the more I learn about how to work with their kids. That's a huge lesson for an educator. And it only comes about, I mean I can say that, but it only comes about when the parents are relaxed enough to share how they feel with you in a positive way... I have such a sense of doing good in school with kids that that's really what it's all about right now at the end of my career. I see the results, I see the positives, I see the sort of the fruit of all the years that I have spent with kids and with parents developing these relationships and it's a wonderful feeling. You know, it's sad in a sense that that's the end of [my career] it.

Analysis

The Role of Identity

The principal in this study relies on his re-constructed childhood and adolescent experiences as a child in schools to communicate his professional identity. Emphasis was placed on negative school experiences. These memories, vividly reconstructed in the stories he told, served, in part, to underpin how Jim construed his role as principal and why he enacted educational leadership in the present in the way he did. His recollections of schools were marked by fear, discrimination, and an oppressive organizational culture. Based upon these experiences, he is motivated to ensure that his school is not like the ones they recall from his childhood, but instead is welcoming place for children and their families, and is free of fear and oppression.

This finding interrogates the narratives that underpin much of the study of educational leadership from a Western-centric point of view and which are limited to a-historicized notions of organizational power, control, and authority (Maxcy, 1991). Rather, what emerges from this study is that, the self – its scrutiny, articulations and organizational enactments – stands at the centre of a professional journey which seeks to situate educational leadership in relation to one's experiences. This resonates well with Foucault's (1988) useful definition of the technologies of the self as the forms of knowledge and strategies that:

permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (p.18)

The understanding of self, and its relationship to the social world, Foucault argued, was central with respect to how individuals represent themselves. In the present study, Jim presented his identity through the vivid memories surfaced, and which served as foundational to his construction of his professional identity. Clarke (2009) presents the concept of identity with respect to teachers as one that is marked by a growing body of research, suggesting that, "the trend towards employing identity as a conceptual tool in teacher education has been paralleled by an increasing emphasis on identity in education generally" (p.185).

But, what is meant by the term 'identity' in relation to the constructions of professional notions of educational leadership? Clarke (ibid.) offers the following definition which is germane to this study: "Identity references individuals' knowledge and naming of themselves, as well as others' recognition of themselves as a particular sort of person" (p 186). With respect to the self and experience, he further posits that, "Identities are formed at the nexus of the individual and the social" (Clarke, ibid, p.189). With respect to the identity of the non-Indigenous principal in this study, Clarke's assertion is highly relevant in that Jim identified himself through the

reconstruction of himself, based upon his experiences with Indigenous school communities in relation to schooling and the larger social contexts in which he operates.

Jim did not expound upon the value and benefits of his post-graduate development, other than it creating a space away from the exigencies of the principals where he could reflect upon his practice in rural and isolated Indigenous communities. This is similar to the findings of Portin et al. (2003) in their study of American principals. Much the same as the participants in this American study, the decontextualized and depersonalized curricula of the educational leadership and administration graduate program Jim engaged in, with their emphasis on ‘training for skills’ rooted in managerial and business fields, underemphasized the importance of life experiences.

If practice is indeed informed by the identity of the leader, identity appears marginalized in university educational leadership programs as a result of the emphasis placed on the teaching of management and administrative aspects. Thus, identity presents as not considered by those who study leadership or expound upon it as one vitally important pillar of an interconnected triad comprised of theory, practice in context, and the individual. This finding reinforces Murphy’s (2007) assertion that practice is marginalized in the fostering of educational leadership. He describes the education of school administrators in the following manner: “...prospective school leaders have been largely miseducated because universities, especially research universities, have constructed their programs with raw materials acquired from the warehouse of academe. In the meantime, they have marginalized practice” (Murphy, 2007, p.583).

The implication of this finding is that formal educational leadership education underemphasizes or dismisses the importance of identity, and what Foucault calls ‘care for the self’ as instruments of professional growth and identity formation, as Clarke (2009) and Le Coure and Mills (2008) suggest. Rather, programs focus instead on the delivery of course content

in disciplinary clusters such as policy, administration, leadership, curriculum planning, and psychology (Stack et al., 2006). On this very point, Le Coure and Mills (2008) propose that, for Foucault, “the taking care of ones self is a constant evaluation of one self in relation to the society in which one belongs” (p.6). Yet, as Clarke also adds, it is the basis on which care for the other emerges (2009). Therefore, recognition and articulation of the self and the role of identity in the construction of educational leaders presents as an important facet that could be taken up by formal educational leadership development programs.

What then, does the invocation of previous school experiences and professional learning have to do with the educational leadership field? What do these aspects contribute to? From an epistemological standpoint, these findings illuminate a dimension that has remained underrepresented in the extant educational leadership literature, with its prevailing emphasis on the examination and explication of the managerial and administrative aspects of leadership in schools: the influence of the self and life experiences of educational actors as a variable mediating how educational leadership is construed and enacted in the educational field. This finding serves to broaden substantially the way that educational leadership can be understood and examined. Therefore, educational leadership in northern and rural locations needs to be conceptualized through a lens that focuses upon the identities of non-Indigenous principals. Reinforcing this point, Clarke (2009) offers the following with respect to the identities of teachers in schools:

... if the commitment to identity is not just a metaphysical proposition but a serious recognition that our work as teachers shapes and is shaped by the very mode of our being, then thinking about the formation of our identities is crucial for all of us in education. (p.186)

Applied to this study, the individuality of experience, and the role it plays, serves to reinforce the importance of non-Indigenous principals to acknowledge, reflect on their

experiences, and act upon dissonance encountered in relation to their role as principal in Indigenous contexts of practice, and second, to begin to articulate their own context-based definitions of educational leadership.

Transformative Learning

In his narratives Jim describes how he came to question his experiences first as a student in school, and later as a teacher and principal. Spending time listening and watching Elders as they worked with children presented him with new ways of conceptualizing teaching and learning that were dissonant with the way he had seen Indigenous students marginalized and ignored. How he felt about his own school experiences, his reflections on what he witnessed, and their influences on how he learned to construe and enact his role as principal are captured by Mezirow (2003) who describes the transformative nature of learning that Jim experienced in the following manner: “Learning to decide more insightfully for oneself what is right, good, and beautiful is centrally concerned with bringing into awareness one’s own purposes, values, beliefs, dispositions, and judgments rather than acting on those of others” (p.1).

Learning through reflection on the world and then acting to change it is referred to as praxis by Dirkx (1998) who draws upon Freire’s theory of conscientization, or consciousness raising, to illuminate the emancipatory and liberating power of transformational learning. This is evidenced in Jim’s poignant recount of his own transformation over a period of years, where he first encountered the disorienting disequilibrium emerging from his own experiences in schools, followed by his reflection upon them in the space created by his leaving his work to attend graduate school. The power of such learning is captured by Brookfield (1986):

It will be the case, then, that the most significant personal learning adults can undertake cannot be specified in advance in terms of objectives to be obtained or

behaviours (of whatever kind) to be performed. Thus, significant personal learning might be defined as that learning in which adults come to reflect on their self-images, change their self-concepts, question their previously internalized norms (behavioural and moral), and reinterpret their current and past behaviours from a new perspective...Significant personal learning entails fundamental change in learners and leads them to redefine and reinterpret their personal, social, and occupational world. (pp.213-214)

At the final stages of his career, Jim conceives his role of principal not as that of a manager or administrator, but in his own words as “first among equals.” Rather than viewing parents as on the periphery with respect to the education of children in schools, he sees a vital role for parents and believes that educators can learn much from them with respect to working with their children. In contrast to the oppressive and assimilating schools of his youth, for Jim, school should not be a place distinctly different from the community with respect to the presence of Indigenous language and culture. He questions the foundations of the present educational system when it is held against Indigenous learning systems that have been in place for thousands of years, and in doing so has come to the realization that more time must be spent on the land where language and learning can converge. From his perspective school and the lives of children and families should be representative of each other and seamless in nature, affirmed by his assertion that “school is life, and life is school.”

Conclusions

With this article, I have presented the findings which emerged as a result of a study of two educational leadership journals. This review identified a relative absence of narratives and biographies as a means of illuminating and expanding conceptions of educational leadership in the articles they publish. Despite this finding, as the conversations with Jim convey, the use of narrative and biographical research shows promise as a rich and insightful approach through

which to illuminate conceptions of educational leadership which extend beyond the Euro-western frame. The interviews illuminate the telling of one's story as an insightful tool, both for broadening understandings of educational leadership in Indigenous Yukon contexts and as a means with which to articulate and transfer the knowledge, experiences, and insights gained over an extensive career. Jim's rich narratives present valuable examples through which much can be learned by the next generation of educational leaders. Learning from stories has the potential to enhance what is taught through coursework in educational leadership development programs, offering the ability to explore what is a dynamic educational field that is adapted and reshaped as society, communities, and the educational ends of schools shift over time.

How Jim construes and enacts his educational leadership practice is mediated by his critical examination of western notions of leadership, and grounding theory and practice instead in conceptions of leadership which are congruent with Indigenous ways of teaching, learning, and leading that he has come to know over the life of his career. Narratives such as Jim's illuminate the richness of what Rayner and Gunter (2005) suggest is discounted in educational leadership development: the examination and inclusion of the self and experience when attempting to define leadership, particularly in educational settings.

With respect to the identities of non-Indigenous principals, Jim's stories illuminate the dynamic effects Indigenous culture may have over time on the habitus of non-Indigenous educational leaders in Indigenous contexts. Lynham et al, (2006) describe Bourdieu's concept of habitus:

His term for this aspect of culture is *habitus*, which refers to features of the individual, his or her viewpoints, and physical 'dispositions' towards navigating the social world. Bourdieu's writings characterise habitus as our 'comfort zone'; the physical places and social spaces in which we do not need to 'look for clues' to know how to participate. Habitus is generally acquired in the home context, but

extends to a range of social environments and the relationships that characterise them. (p. 29)

By his own admission, Jim's experiences in schools and communities over the length of his career and engagement with Indigenous populations clearly form an integral part of his growth as a person and have shaped and informed his thoughts, perspectives, and practices. As he described in his own words, the time he has spent listening to and learning from Elders precipitated a revelation in terms of how he believes teaching and learning for children should be approached. For him, the experiences he described have informed his beliefs about the role of schools and how to work with children and families in more meaningful and insightful ways than has his engagement in post-graduate study.

Despite the value of such experiences and their transformative nature, post-graduate students in educational leadership and administration programs appear to be underserved in terms of learning opportunities which foreground the experience and expertise of practitioners such as Jim. With this in mind, this paper presented the biography and leadership stories of an experienced educational leader who has spent the majority of his career working in northern and Indigenous contexts as a means of illuminating the depth of wisdom and expertise which has accrued over 35 years as a principal. Opportunities to share this wisdom and insightfulness appear rare and thus need to be identified and developed in order that the lessons learned over an enriching and meaningful career can be shared, discussed, analyzed, and learned. Doing so may serve, in part, to change the way that educational leadership development programs are thought about to one that is more positive and related to the needs of practitioners in the field.

This article identifies the powerful and transformative influence that Indigenous contexts can exert on the educational leadership practice on non-Indigenous principals. While Jim's is the

only story presented here, it signals an area which is worthy of further research in contexts extending beyond Canada's Yukon Territory. There are many non-Indigenous principals working in Indigenous contexts across the Canadian North, therefore Jim's narratives may be representative of others yet to be articulated and learned from. Further, it is hoped that this article triggers reflection and further disequilibria on the part of both scholars and practitioners with respect to the role of the principal. As Jim illuminates, a principal should not primarily be a manager who attends to organizational or system imperatives but instead is a central figure who is key to leading educational change, shifting power relationships and influencing program delivery in ways that make schools more consistent with the hopes and aspirations of their respective communities.

To conclude, the main intention of this article was to present storytelling as an insightful tool for increasing understandings of educational leadership by drawing on the experiences of a non-Indigenous principal who works in Indigenous contexts in the Yukon. Congruent with Hampton's (1995) assertion that storytelling is a teaching and learning methodology resonant with North American Indigenous cultures, based upon the stories presented in this article, the use of narrative and biography holds promise as a means of expanding conceptions of educational leadership to include cultural frames. This finding has bearing not only on the ways in which educational leadership is thought about, examined, and understood, but also on the role of the principal in Indigenous contexts, and on design and delivery of post-secondary programs for the next generation of educational leaders.

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