

## Adapting to Diversity: Where Cultures Collide — Educational Issues in Northern Alberta

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In this article, we report a case study of educational issues in northern Alberta. Using interviews and observations, we provide the different perspectives held by educators, students, parents, and community members about the goals and purposes of schools, the curriculum, and the language of instruction. Practices in the schools tended to maintain the status quo: a southern approach to education, with an emphasis on a provincial curriculum and English as the language of instruction. These schools did not reflect the realities of northern communities, such as a concern for Aboriginal languages, in spite of policies that provided for local control.

Keywords: school leadership and culture, northern education, Aboriginal education, Alberta education, First Nations education

Dans cet article, nous présentons une étude de cas axée sur des enjeux pédagogiques propres au nord de l'Alberta. À l'aide d'entrevues et d'observations, nous avons exploré différents points de vue exprimés par des enseignants, des élèves, des parents et des membres la communauté au sujet des buts de l'école, des programmes et de la langue d'enseignement. Les pratiques décrites au sein des diverses écoles participant à cette recherche avaient tendance à maintenir le statu quo : une approche de l'enseignement provenant du Sud avec une place de choix accordée au programme provincial et à l'anglais comme langue d'enseignement. Ces écoles ne reflétaient pas les réalités des communautés du Nord, tel le souci des langues autochtones, en dépit des politiques qui prévoient un contrôle local.

Mots clés : leadership et culture de l'école, éducation en régions nordiques, éducation aux autochtones, éducation en Alberta, enseignement aux Premières nations.

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In this article<sup>1</sup> we report on a study conducted in two communities in northern Alberta, defined as the area coterminous with the boreal forest region south of the Arctic (Bone, 1992). These communities are ethnoculturally different both from each other and from those in most other regions of Alberta. Educational leadership in these communities involves issues of school organization, governance and delivery of K-12 education, teaching, and culture that are substantively different from those

encountered in most of Canada. The objective of the study was, within a northern context, to report the extent to which constituents (educators, students, parents, and community members) perceived that their local school adapted to the cultural norms, values, and goals of the community. We have presented and discussed the different perspectives held by these constituents with respect to the goals and purposes of schooling and the curriculum and language of instruction found in the schools.

#### CONTEXT

In many northern communities, First Nations<sup>2</sup> have taken over the management of their own education programs. The chief and band council hire teachers and principals. Locally elected school committees govern daily operations of the school. In some instances, educators revise provincial curricula and challenge assessment practices in striving to overcome centuries of colonialism, neglect, and oppression (see Berger, 1991; Dickason, 1992; Titley, 1986). In other situations such revisions do not occur. Teachers and administrators, the majority of whom do not share the cultural, linguistic, or socio-economic backgrounds of their students (e.g., Goddard, 1997; Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993), are reluctant or unable to question the status quo. They recognize the education system as being similar to the one they experienced and intuitively accept the rightness of that system. Such acceptance of a model developed by and for the dominant cultural group merely serves to exacerbate and perpetuate what Hesch (1999) has described as "settler interests" (p. 371).

In the communities where we conducted this phase of our research, the First Nations had elected to enter into the provincial education system.<sup>3</sup> Serving ethnoculturally diverse populations of Aboriginal and non-autochthonic peoples, these two provincially operated schools responded in similar ways to problems analogous to those experienced by First Nation schools. Although situated within the provincial education system, these schools often experienced greater degrees of freedom and greater expectations for community relevance than their southern counterparts. Students in these public schools shared the same linguistic, cultural, and historical traditions of those in band schools.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the field of educational leadership and policy, there is little literature that examines issues particular to schools in the northern regions of Canadian provinces. As Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) observed, "Most

published theory and empirical research in [educational] administration assumes that leadership is being exercised in a Western cultural context" (p. 100). This situation exists as much in minority culture communities in North America as it does with respect to non-Western cultures, particularly in considering involuntary minorities (Ogbu, 1987) such as First Nations. Researchers such as Bryant (1996), Capper (1990), and Shields (1996) have addressed educational leadership within an American Indian context. Although Goddard and Shields (1997) included a Saskatchewan perspective in their comparative analysis of governance in Cree and Navajo communities, examinations of school leadership grounded in Canada's northern region are few. There is a lack of scholarly inquiry focusing on tensions and issues in the relationship between school educational leadership and a community's northern cultural context.

Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) hypothesized "that societal culture exerts a significant influence on administrators beyond that of the specific organization's culture" (p. 106). In a preliminary model, they suggested that institutional structure and culture and the wider societal structure affect beliefs and experiences of principals, their leadership, in-school processes, and school outcomes. As has been argued elsewhere (Goddard, 2001), the efficacy of such a model is limited to situations where the local community context also reflects the culture of the dominant society. In northern schools, the extent to which community life reflects societal culture is problematic. A difference occurs between the cultural realities of the Dene, the Cree, or the Métis,<sup>4</sup> for example, and those of the white Anglo-European majority culture of the south. If "cultural values shape followers' perceptions of leaders" (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996, p. 107) and if "how people approach space, time, information and communication are shaped by the cultural context" (p. 108), then researchers need to understand the culture of the communities that northern schools serve, and explore ways in which the majority culture backgrounds of most of the teachers and administrators in northern schools are resonant and dissonant with the local cultural context of these schools.

Following Hallinger and Leithwood (1996), we acknowledge that "there is much conceptual leverage to be gained from employing culture as a variable in a theoretical framework for educational leadership" (p. 114). However, we found that locating the notion of the minority culture of the local community and the dominant majority culture of the state within an exploration of education in northern schools revealed other problematic issues.

This article addresses these issues. In case study research such as that described here, there is an inherent "challenge [to] contemporary center-

periphery relations" (Dimitriadis & McCarthy, 2001, p. 109). We do not presume that the world view and actions of the dominant majority are correct simply because of their dominance. Yet neither do we unquestionably accept the perspectives and understandings of the minority by virtue of their marginalization. Undoubtedly such verisimilitude exists and is found in a great deal of similar research. We are aware that our work enters sites of "cultural warfare" (Deyhle, 1995, p. 406). Schools are not culturally neutral or value-neutral arenas but rather reflect the dissonances of the wider society. As white researchers we take solace from Smith (2001), who accepts that "there have been some shifts in the way non-indigenous researchers and academics have positioned themselves and their work in relation to the people for whom the research still counts" (p. 17). We believe that our experiences as teachers and administrators in northern and other culturally diverse communities have given us some insight into the ways that schools function. We move beyond viewing culture simply as "the normative glue that holds a particular school together" (Sergiovanni, 2000, p. 1). Such particularity appears, to us, to perpetuate a closed-system schema of schools. Culture, in the sense used here, refers to more than the idiosyncratic climate of the school and includes the broader societal culture within which the school is located and functions.

#### METHOD

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

One community, Moose River,<sup>5</sup> is located at the southern edge of the boreal zone and has full-season road access. Moose River School housed approximately 70 students from nursery through grade 6, with six professional staff delivering instruction to the predominantly Cree and

Métis student population.

The second community, Church Point, was in a more isolated location. During summer months there was some access by boat, and for 10 weeks during the winter a road was constructed across the frozen lakes and rivers. For most of the year, however, the community was accessible only by air. Church Point School had 20 professional staff who taught about 240 students from kindergarten through grade 12. Students were predominantly Dene, Cree, or Métis.

#### *Data Collection*

Following Stake (1995, 2000), we adopted a collective case study approach that was instrumental in nature. In collective case study, Stake (2000) explains, "cases are chosen because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorizing about a still larger collection of cases" (p. 437). Collective case study is instrumental, he contends, because the case "is of secondary interest . . . it facilitates our understanding of something else . . . a phenomenon, population, or general condition" (p. 437). The study was emergent in design to allow the case reports to be grounded in the contextual reality of each school site (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Merriam, 1988, 1998). As Day, Harris, and Hadfield (2001) have argued, much of the research on school leadership has relied overwhelmingly on the perspectives of the leaders themselves. This is limiting in that the source of the data is also the subject of the investigation. We therefore included a "multiplicity of perspectives" (p. 21) and interviewed a wide variety of constituents within the two schools. Chief data sources consisted of in-depth individual and focus group interviews, direct observation, and field notes, supplemented where appropriate by document analysis. At Church Point we interviewed the two school administrators, six of the eleven teachers, two grade-10 students, and one member of the community. At Moose River we interviewed all five teachers and the principal, six students from various grade levels, a secretary, and two members of the community. The research team spent an intensive week at each site. To allow for individual differences and diversity, we used semi-structured interviews and followed an emergent design, conducting at both sites 19 interviews and two focus group sessions.

#### *Procedures*

We audio-recorded and transcribed all the interviews and focus group sessions. Before analyzing the transcripts of the individual in-depth

interviews, these were returned to each interviewee for "member check" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 313). We received no requests for changes or edits to the transcripts. Employing a constant comparative method of analysis, we independently reviewed transcripts in an iterative fashion, subsequently sharing and discussing between team members the categories that emerged from the data. Our communication was mainly by telephone or e-mail.

At a research team meeting held after the weeks of intensive data collection, a research collaborator with extensive experience as a northern educator provided his analysis and interpretation of the transcripts. Because he had not visited either school, his perspective provided the fourth member, working with the original transcripts and observer interpretations in a setting separate from the ethnocultural milieu where the data were gathered, the opportunity to provide for researcher triangulation, the "search for additional interpretation more than the confirmation of a single meaning" (Stake, 1995, p. 115). Two graduate students who analyzed the data with the QSR-4 NUD\*IST software program also contributed to the identification and discussion of emergent themes.

From each series of analysis, themes emerged. Through discussion we clarified and refined these themes, then subjected them to further examination through an iterative review process. Throughout we proceeded "not on the basis of comparing each individual person or 'case' with another but on the basis of comparing 'instances' or examples in our data or particular circumstances in which we were interested" (Finch & Mason, 1990, p. 39). The team meetings enabled the researchers to engage in periods of intensive discussion, analysis, and writing. Trustworthiness was achieved through attending to issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as described in Lincoln and Guba (1985).

#### EMERGENT THEMES AND INTERPRETATIONS

The iterative nature of qualitative research ensures that data analysis is continuous and ongoing. From the analysis to date, we have identified and constructed several themes, two of which are presented and discussed here. We have grounded these themes in the respondents' differing perceptions with respect to the role of educational leadership in determining the goals and purposes of schooling and the curriculum and language of instruction in the schools.

*The Goals and Purposes of Schooling*

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

*Responsibility for schooling.* Both schools exhibited a sense of despondency, perhaps even despair. Educators and community members in both communities agreed that the schools had poor reputations. One teacher at Church Point, an Aboriginal woman who had been raised in the community and who had returned after some years teaching elsewhere, observed that “we’ve been getting lots of flack, really harsh, negative things thrown at us teachers here and administrators.” In her opinion, the parents found it “easy to condemn and criticize” but rarely came to the school to see what role they could play, nor did they accept any responsibility for their children’s perceived lack of success in school. Similar attitudes were reported at Moose River. Noting the lack of community involvement in his school, Jason, a 16-year-old student, commented, “People don’t volunteer to be in our classes.” Edwina, the chair of the local school board, observed that “frustration’s all over the place here because the people aren’t coming out and you can’t do everything yourself. I’m really tired.”

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

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

In Church Point, the community transferred its resistance to the residential

school to the new school. The architect's decision to base the design of the new school on a model of a Hudson's Bay Company trading post, or fort, complete with palisade, exacerbated the situation. The community quickly tore down the physical wall that separated the school from the village.

*A double-edged sword.* The psychological walls, however, remained. The governance structure of both schools was the same. A locally elected school board assisted and advised the principal on the day-to-day operations of the school. One member of each local board represented the community on the regional school board, which acted as the policy-making body for the whole region. This apparent devolution of power to the local level did not significantly affect the operations of the schools because the actual range of decision-making power available to the local board was quite limited and the principal retained a significant role. According to one principal, "the local board has the autonomy of setting things like the school calendar and anything that's not curriculum related, expenditures and everything, the local board has to approve it. . . . I don't have to go to my superintendent if I want to buy something." Such freedom, however, was a double-edged sword. The arrangement, although perceived to be advantageous because of the ability to meet informally and regularly when making decisions, did result in problems. As the principal continued, "it does break down if you're not getting along with the local board, or their ideas, and they have a personal agenda that isn't fitting with what that of the school would be, then it becomes very difficult." This administrator appeared oblivious to the idea that community members might have reasonable expectations for the future of the school, and saw no conflict in privileging his own, outsider opinion over those of the community.

*Professional knowledge vs. popular acclaim.* The geographical isolation of these communities exacerbated the lack of checks and balances in the development of school goals and purposes. Access to Church Point was only by air for much of the year, and to both communities it was a complicated journey from the central divisional offices to the schools. As such, the principal became the *de facto* representative of the board within the local community, often usurping the role of the elected representative.

This phenomenon has been reported elsewhere. In a comparative study exploring governance structures in both a Cree band-controlled school in Saskatchewan and a state school serving a Navajo community in northern Arizona, Goddard and Shields (1997) reported that enhanced levels of local community awareness and participation did not appear to have a concomitant effect on the daily life of the schools. Indeed, what happened in the buildings was "associated more with the priorities of site-based educators than with the local control of governance structures" (p. 40).



Thus, even increased community participation in school governance did not change the underlying locus of power within the school. We found a similar situation in the two schools reported here.

*Insider-outsider role expectations.* The Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) model becomes problematic in schools serving homogeneous but minority culture populations. It is apparent that the wider societal culture affects the institutional structure and culture of the school, and the processes within. Hallinger and Leithwood assumed that the principal and the community share the values, morés, and beliefs on which the policies and actions of the wider society are based. In northern schools this is patently not the case.

The sometimes conflicting understandings between the imported educators and the indigenous parents reflected the significant linguistic, cultural, and world-view differences between the dominant national society and the minority society of the community. Such differences were manifested not only in the administrative personnel but also in the very underlying fabric of the education system. The teachers, the curriculum, the examinations, the governance structure, and even the very concept of school itself were foreign interventions into northern communities. As a result, the role of the principal tended to be one of mediator and interpreter, attempting to explain to the community the policies imposed from outside and also explaining to the educational hierarchy the reactions of those affected by the imposed policies. The bridging role of the imported principal was made more difficult because she or he was perceived to share the values and beliefs of the external agencies that developed policy statements, which were often in contradiction to local thoughts. Whether acting as a policy filter or cultural interpreter, the value-laden nature of the translation process ensured that neither act was truly representative of the original intent. Similarly, the principals' role was made more difficult because one group expected them to reflect the community position while the other expected an adherence to systematic perspectives. This conflict between insider and outsider role expectations, and the delicate balance required as a response, is an area we are continuing to investigate in our research.

#### *The Curriculum and Language of Instruction*

In our study we found conflict between dominant and minority world views in the curriculum and language of instruction in the schools. Both Moose River and Church Point used the Alberta provincial curriculum and English as the language of instruction. The schools gave limited

recognition to the indigenous languages (Chipewyan, Cree, and Michif) or cultural reality of these northern communities. The schools expected students to follow the established curriculum, achieve the mandated number of high school credits, and pass fluency examinations in English.

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

You know the tests that the grade three, sixes and nines have to take every year? I get so frustrated by them. Because our kids, in these communities, the small ones, they haven't seen a city, they've never seen an escalator or an elevator, or how big a city block is, and some of these tests that come in have some of those things on them. Some of our kids have never seen these things and don't know what they are. So we work toward achieving some of the tests so that we could probably be able to have our kids be competitive but we haven't been successful. (Edwina, school board chair, Moose River)

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

*Language and communication.* A second determinant of academic achievement is English language proficiency. That many indigenous languages are being lost is no longer a matter of debate among scholars (e.g., Battiste, 1998; Blair, 1998; Fredeen, 1991; Kirkness, 1998; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000); many argue that schools must play a significant role in the maintenance and protection of Aboriginal languages. We found that many First Nations parents and educators said that teaching the students' first languages was primarily the responsibility of the community, not the school. Although teachers gave lip service to the need to teach Aboriginal languages, the perceived difficulties in providing trained staff and adequate resources, and in meeting a wide range of curricula needs, limited Cree and Dene to subservient positions on the school timetable. As a result, the schools limited their focus on issues of language in the school.

The low prioritization of indigenous languages within the school has had predictable results. One language and culture instructor, Tom,

observed, "None of the kids are speaking their language here." A community liaison officer, Brenda, went even further:

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

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

*Educational success.* The poor attendance, achievement, and high-school completion rates reported in these schools confirmed the stereotypes of northern communities. Priscilla, a grade-12 student at Church Point, described her community:

There are about 1600 people in this town [but] nobody graduates. You see, like this year, we have how many people, and there's only 3 graduating. Last year, there was only about 4 people graduated. The year before that there was only 4 that graduated. You see, people don't care. The people who care, they are gone. They go and try to make something of themselves. . . . I'm 18 now and I'm trying to do something for myself and ever since I've been 14, I've been in and out of jail. But now I'm trying to straighten out, before it's too late. I'm not going to be like everyone else, have kids and do nothing. . . . I want to do what I want to do. I don't just want to sit around Church Point. (Priscilla, grade-12 student, Church Point)

In Moose River, Edwina placed responsibility for low student attendance on the parents. Talking of the students in her community, she said:

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

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

As a result of these haphazard attendance patterns, many students

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

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

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

Wilson (1991) suggests that "cultural discontinuity" (p. 367) and macro-structural factors such as "the overwhelming frustration and isolation of students . . . [and] the lack of understanding of cultural conflict on the part of school personnel contributes to student failure" (p. 379).

*Crossing a bright line.* Notwithstanding the above, it must be recognized that education takes place within the public sphere of the communities served by the schools. In both Moose River and Church Point the social fabric was rent by the vicissitudes of contemporary life.

In both communities there was an unequal distribution of the growing level of per capita income. In Moose River, Spot, a local health nurse, estimated that two-thirds of the families had at least one member who enjoyed a high-paying job in the oil industry. In Church Point, many adults commuted away for weeks at a time, working in the oil patch and returning to the community for their break periods. In both communities the jobs were some distance away and parents who were working often had no choice but to leave their children with relatives or babysitters. To us it appeared that they tried to compensate for their absence with money. In Moose River, Edwina commented that one 13-year-old girl "always has a fifty dollar bill or a hundred dollar bill on the weekend, her mother works

[at the oil refinery] in the kitchen, she gets paid twenty-five dollars an hour." In Church Point, high-school students joked about writing off a four wheeler (all-terrain vehicle) every two or three months, then buying a new one.

Contrasted to such relative opulence were persistent social and health issues. Spot explained, "Nutrition is a big concern in the community . . . ear infections, breathing disorders. I'd say that 95% of the community are smokers . . . marijuana, there's a lot of crack, a lot of coke." The community liaison officer, Brenda, extended the description, observing, "there's a lot of people in this community that are really sick, like emotionally, spiritually." Although many Aboriginal communities across Canada report similar social issues, they are normally associated with a culture of poverty and alienation. In both Moose River and Church Point, a high proportion of the adult population had successfully integrated into the provincial economy, and yet social maladjustment prevailed.

The combination of high levels of disposable income, an unhealthy lifestyle, and limited recreational opportunities led to systemic problems. One high-school graduate in Moose River observed that "I think that's why a lot of kids get involved in drugs and alcohol, out of sheer boredom." This, in turn, led to other problems. Edwina commented that "a lot of young parents spend time in town, their children have babysitters but they don't care." She suggested, "If we could have parenting classes and our younger generation came to those, it would be really good." The cultural discontinuities experienced by students were not the result of poverty but of more deeply entrenched socio-cultural realities. These issues might be addressed through changes to the curriculum of the schools, which did not reflect the life of the communities in any meaningful way.

Unfortunately, as Dimitriadis and McCarthy (2001) have explained, "mainstream educational thinkers . . . have tended to draw a bright line of distinction between the established school curriculum and the teeming world of multiplicity that flourishes in the everyday lives of youth beyond the school" (p. 3). The students at Church Point and Moose River found themselves in "conflict economically, politically, and culturally in both the schools and the workplace" (Deyhle, 1995, p. 406). They lived in communities with money but no recreational activities. They had easy access to drugs and alcohol but had to leave the community for employment or post-secondary education. They lived in homes that were often dysfunctional and where parenting skills were poorly developed. At school they followed a curriculum of limited relevance to their lives and experiences, which to a great extent ignored their language and culture. They wrote provincial standardized examinations that did not take into

account their situation, their language, or their abilities.

The findings from our study indicate that educators need to extend their horizon of understanding. Only when they recognize and act upon the spiritual, emotional, physical, and cultural aspects of the schooling experience will their students cross this "bright line of distinction" (Dimitriadis & McCarthy, 2001). The calls for curricula that provide parenting classes for youth and for evening classes where adults and children alike can learn Cree or Chipewyan are a prompt for action. This will require these two schools, and others like them, to restructure their timetables and to reallocate their resources. The current focus on covering the provincial academic curriculum to the exclusion of all else is symptomatic of the ongoing struggle for legitimacy and recognition that is taking place in northern schools.

#### IMPLICATIONS

Our work to date would support earlier research findings (e.g., Cummins, 1986; Goddard & Shields, 1997; Wilson, 1991) that the educational organization and daily practice of Canadian First Nations' schools reflect an Anglo-conformity in their pedagogy, cultural/linguistic incorporation, community participation, and assessment. Certainly Moose River and Church Point illustrate "cultural discontinuity" (Wilson, 1991), and the schools in these communities demonstrate a lack of understanding of their role in the cultural conflict. If schools are to serve the legitimate needs of their communities, then efforts must be made to review and shape not only the institutional structure and culture of the school but also the culture of the community within which the school functions. It is incumbent upon school principals to take a lead role in this effort, for as Day et al. (2000) observe, effective principals remain "highly responsive to the demands and challenges within and beyond their own school context" (p. 35). In removing the planks from the palisade, the community of Church Point redefined the school as an integral part of the community. Principals in northern schools are well situated to take a catalyst role in such a reconceptualization of schools.

This is no small task. A community member, Brenda, observed that the principal at Moose River had been there for nearly 30 years. She said:

His wife's from here, his children are here. He has been here so long, he teaches the grandchildren of parents he had here before, the kids that were his students are now grandparents, and he has those kids, a third generation. He takes part in the church and the care program, but it's not him that should be there. It's the people in the community,

community members. (Brenda, community liaison worker, Moose River)

Notwithstanding these efforts, the principal and the community were still caught between the aspirations of a marginalized people and the hegemonic legislation of the dominant class. In their efforts to facilitate the development of schools that serve multiple constituencies, policy-makers must attend not only to the voices of the professional and educational elite but also to the voices of those who are generally marginalized, dispossessed, and ignored.

Through such inclusive discourse, educators might interrogate the taken-for-granted nature of contemporary schooling. A number of critical questions emerge from the findings of this research. Who, for example, is questioning the validity of standardized tests and provincial examinations administered with no sensitivity to local context, to language skills, to dominant cultural knowledge? Who is responsible for challenging the hegemony of the dominant culture or for seeking a rationale to support a foreign governance structure? To what extent do teacher-education programs that cater specifically to indigenous communities contribute to the perceptions of teacher quality held by members of those communities? To what extent is curriculum adaptation perceived as a watering down of the academic program, rather than a meaningful adjustment to local needs? These are all urgent questions that demand focused investigation and further study.

At the governance level, discursive marginalization of the legislative arena exacerbates the elision of such trenchant issues. Within provincial legislation, the principal is responsible for student learning and teacher competency. In northern communities, where the rhetoric of the policy environment implies local control at the possible expense of administrative authority, to what degree and in what ways is this legal mandate operationalized? To what degree ought a school serve the social as well as the educational agenda of a community? As a teacher at Church Point observed:

I think there is always a need for a scapegoat and this school is the only place where you can point fingers and that people point fingers and not feel any responsibility for themselves. . . . We are a successful school, but not as perceived by the community. (Agnes, teacher, Church Point)

How might these contested interpretations and understandings of power, control, or voice be reconciled?

In our interpretations we have started to address relationships of power,

voice, and social interactions, and how they contribute to and are supported by a discussion of educational issues within ethnoculturally diverse communities in northern Alberta. These interpretations should also prove informative to practitioners and policy-makers intent on improving student learning in regions with characteristics similar to those of Canada's north.

#### CONCLUSION

In this article we presented and discussed the perspectives held by a range of participants with respect to the goals and purposes of schooling and the curriculum and language of instruction of the schools. Data were drawn from a collective case study conducted in the northern Alberta communities of Church Point and Moose River. It would perhaps be simple to conclude that the schools reported on here had unclear goals and functioned as neo-colonial instruments of oppression, and that they maintained a focus on the "settler interests" decried by Hesch (1999, p. 371). Certainly there was a tendency in both schools to support the status quo and attempt to provide what the southern educational system would describe as a suitable educational experience. We found a striking dissonance between this experience and that which might be considered useful and appropriate in a northern community.

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#### NOTES

- 1 In this article we report on the completed second stage of an investigation and analysis of the current state of educational leadership, policy, and organization in northern Canadian schools. The larger, ongoing study is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and explores student, educator, parent, and community member perceptions and expectations of educational leadership in northern schools in three western Canadian provinces.
- 2 We are conscious of and sensitive to the fact that different groups of aboriginal people use different terms to speak of themselves. In Canada, the terms "First Nations" and "Band" enjoy general use, rather than "American Indians" or "Tribe." We have therefore used these terms in this paper.
- 3 In Alberta, education is generally a provincial responsibility but the federal



government has responsibility to deliver education to First Nations' people on reserves. In some communities, the local First Nation has negotiated agreements where a provincial school board takes responsibility for staffing and delivering on-reserve education programs. The school boards are provided with funding from the federal government to pay for these services.

- 4 The Dene and Cree are two of the indigenous First Nations peoples of Canada. The Métis were initially the children of relationships between indigenous and immigrant people. Over time this mixed-race or "half-breed" (Adams, 1975) community became established as a separate culture and received government recognition as an Aboriginal people. As Purich (1988) recounts, whether one is considered Métis is largely through self-definition and acceptance by the wider Métis community.
- 5 Following the conditions of the Ethics Review Process at our universities, pseudonyms are used for all communities, schools, and individuals named in this paper.

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