Teacher Recruitment, Retention and Pedagogical Issues Confronting Indigenous Students and Communities in Northern Saskatchewan Schools

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This chapter describes the objectives, methodology and findings of a research project completed for the Northern Lights School Division (NLSD) of northern Saskatchewan in 2009-2013. The research team utilized an Indigenous research model that incorporated qualitative practices, including open conversations and sharing circles. Accordingly, they engaged with teachers, school administrators and other individuals with substantial experience and knowledge regarding the needs of rural northern schools, Indigenous Saskatchewan communities and Indigenous students. More specifically, the project investigated challenges and opportunities regarding NLSD teacher recruitment and retention. In the process, we found ourselves addressing questions relating to culturally relevant pedagogies that honor students' Indigenous heritages.

This Chapter provides an overview of research related to teacher recruitment and retention issues facing the Northern Lights School Division (NLSD), which serves northern and Indigenous/First Nations Saskatchewan communities and students. It also considers questions that arose during the research related to the utilization of culturally responsive pedagogies. We begin with a description of the issues that led to the study, which we situate within the current literature around teacher recruitment and retention in rural schools. We then outline the research objectives before describing the methodology that underpinned this study. Next, there is a discussion of the key findings to emerge from the data analysis. The chapter concludes by proposing that it would be helpful to view current northern and First Nations community conditions as providing opportunities for improvement rather than dwell on deficit theorizing surrounding Indigenous student achievement levels. By focusing on what works well in these contexts, NLSD schools may be better prepared to resolve their current teacher retention, recruitment and pedagogical challenges to meet the needs of their Indigenous students.

Literature Review

This section begins with a discussion of literature relevant to the interrelated issues of rural schools, poverty, student achievement and teacher effectiveness (globally and in NLSD settings). It then explores the literature on teacher recruitment and retention in both the larger world and in northern Saskatchewan

communities that are home to many Indigenous students. There is wide variation in what a rural community may look like, differing in ethnicity of the population, range of poverty and location in relation to other urban communities (Lichter & Graefe, 2011). Although rural communities are frequently identified in different ways, they typically share common issues related to small populations, geographic isolation and the narrowing of choices. In particular, rural schools commonly face a number of shared challenges with teachers teaching outside of their certification areas (Lazarus, 2003), teachers without graduate or Master's degrees (Hammer, Hughes, McClure, Reeves & Salgado, 2005) and a predominance of beginning teachers (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2014).

Research also indicates that rural communities tend to have higher incidences of poverty (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Mattingly, Johnson & Schaefer, 2011; Miller, 2012), which affects teacher retention and recruitment. Teachers in rural schools have noted the difficulty in acquiring classroom supplies, a lack of resources, and less professional support is available to them than teachers working in urban communities, owing to the lack of proximity to professional development opportunities (Burton & Johnson, 2010; Reyhner, 2006). Thus, rural schools historically have had great difficulty in recruiting and retaining teachers. This, in turn, affects student academic achievement levels. We explore this relationship below.

Socioeconomics Issues

The Coleman report of 1966 found that a significant relationship existed between student achievement and student socioeconomic levels, profoundly shaping attitudes regarding the value of schools as a means of addressing socioeconomic inequality. Since that time, a plethora of research has found that low socioeconomic status (SES) students, or those living in poverty, tend to have lower rates of academic achievement (Berliner, 2006; Berliner & Biddle, 1995). For instance, research has shown that as the number of low SES students in a school increases, the average academic math and science scores decreases (Gonzales, Guzman, Partelow, Pahlke, Jocelyn, Kastberg & Williams, 2004). Other research has found that low SES students consistently perform lower on academic assessments and intelligence tests than their same aged, higher SES peers (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Kirby, Berends & Naftel, 1999).

To acknowledge the impact of SES on student achievement does not negate, however, the impact of a high quality schools on student success. In fact, a growing body of research has shown that several school-level factors can also significantly influence student academic achievement levels, even in high-poverty schools. For example, research in the United States by Grissmer and Flanagan (2006) and others suggests that both the level of expenditures per pupil, as well as their allocation, affect student achievement levels, particularly in areas with higher levels of minority and less-advantaged students. Related research also suggests that the provision of enhanced support in areas such as student or special education services resulted in enhanced student learning. Other research suggested similar results with respect to First Nations education. Richards (2008)

indicated that, in the province of British Columbia, the quality of schools and student educational experiences do make a positive difference regarding Indigenous student achievement. His work further indicated that increased attention to primary and secondary education for Indigenous youth should perhaps be the most important priority for provincial and federal governments.

Other research supports these findings, suggesting that educational investment in economically disadvantaged, vulnerable populations has produced improved student achievement levels (Grissmer & Flanagan, 2006) and that enhanced student support services can lead to improved learning outcomes for Indigenous students (Steeves, Carr-Stewart & Marshall, 2009). Not only is there a relationship between expenditure per student and student achievement, a well-known meta-analysis by Hattie (2009) found that teachers can indeed make a difference in student learning, despite the presence of other circumstances that may serve to limit student success. Likewise, Marzano (2007), using a meta-analysis of student achievement, found that within classroom variations can range up to 59% and that those students who experienced weak teachers two years in a row were not likely to catch up to their peers during their schooling experience.

Of further interest, Nye, Konstantopoulos and Hedges (2004) found that the difference between having an effective, as opposed to a less effective, teacher contributed to over .35 standard deviations in reading and .48 standard deviation in mathematics. Meanwhile, Adams' (2010) study of mentoring programs in Alaska, found that student's test results improved with increased length of service and experience by teachers. Hence, over the past decade, recruitment, training, and retention of high quality teachers has increasingly become the focus of education systems around the globe, promoted by reports from international research on educational systems that have improved over time (Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Mourshed, Chijioke & Barber, 2010).

Yet, rural schools characterized by poverty, continually struggle to recruit and retain teachers (Hammer, et al., 2005), with teacher turnover rates up to 50% higher than schools with higher SES students (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Ingersoll, 2001). This is particularly true in "schools serving low income, non-White, and low-achieving student populations" (Ronfeldt, Loeb & Wyckoff., 2013, p. 5). Low SES schools also tend to have difficulty in developing and maintaining solid organizational structure as well as amenities that could attract teachers to the school (National Education Association, 2002–2019). For example, Miller (2012) found that community amenities affected the recruitment and retention of teachers. This, among the other already stated factors, creates a revolving door of teachers in rural schools. Literature relevant to exploring strategies for improving teacher recruitment and retention in rural Saskatchewan settings are explored in further detail below.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

In 2005, Hammer, et al., published a literature review on teacher recruitment and retention in rural schools, which also included results from a rural superintendent survey and case studies from state of Virginia programs. Their review

of the literature revealed the following 14 strategies for recruiting and retaining high quality teachers in rural classrooms:

(1) collect state and local data on teacher supply and demand,

(2) base recruitment efforts on data analysis,

(3) increase the pool of candidates by expanding or refining recruitment efforts,

(4) include all vital partners in collaborative efforts,

(5) offer targeted incentives,

(6) evaluate efforts regularly,

(7) invest in grow-your-own initiatives to develop teachers,

(8) encourage universities to customize teacher education programs,

(9) include building level staff in the hiring process,

(10) institute formal induction programs,

(11) offer incentives for staying on past the first year,

(12) improve the school's culture and working conditions,

(13) involve the community in welcoming new teachers, and

(14) invest in leadership development. (p. viii)

Of these strategies, mentoring and induction programs have historically had positive effects on teacher retention (Kapadia, Coca & Easton, 2007; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004), providing much needed pedagogical, emotional, and personal support to new teachers—which, in turn, benefits their students. For instance, in a National Centre on Education Statistic's study, Gonzalez, Guzman, Partelow, Pahlke, Jocelyn, Kastberg & Williams (2004) found that there was a 10% higher retention rate for teachers mentored in their first year of teaching. Research has also found teacher mentoring to have positive effects on student achievement (Adams, 2010; Fletcher & Strong, 2009). In Rockoff's 2008 study, it was found that beginning teachers who received more mentoring had students who scored higher on their English language arts and mathematics standardized tests. Fletcher and Strong (2009) found the same results when comparing beginning teachers and the amount of mentoring received. Notably, a strategy not listed by Hammer, et al. (2005) is the implementation of culturally-relevant place-based pedagogies. This is significant because as Kawagley and Barnhardt (1999, p. 117) observed:

Students in Indigenous societies around the world have, for the most part, demonstrated a distinct lack of enthusiasm for the experience of schooling in it conventional form—an aversion that is most often attributable to an alien school culture, rather than any lack of innate intelligence, ingenuity, or problem-solving skills on part of the students. The curricula, teaching methodologies, and often the teacher training associated with schooling are based on a worldview that does not always recognize or appreciate Indigenous notions of an interdependent universe and the importance of place in their societies.

As Ogbu (2008) and Peshkin (1997) note, Indigenous and other minority students can come to see schools as places for becoming white and adopt oppositional identities that reject schools and test the resolve of the most experienced and talented teachers.

Azano and Stewart (2015, p. 9) similarly proposed that in "enact[ing] a pedagogy of place, we can help [teachers] learn to create classroom communities that welcome each student's passions, interests, and specific experiences into the learning environment." This creates a place-conscious learning environment where teachers may have more success in relating to their students, communities, and schools (Manning, 2011). Additionally, Bishop and Berryman (2010) discussed the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy to Indigenous student achievement, suggesting that implementation of the Te Kotahitanga program, conducted in New Zealand schools, required three years to clearly demonstrate maximum student learning gains.

As a consequence, White and Reid (2008) suggest that exposing pre-service teachers to the ways of life in rural communities is critical to their understanding, sensitivity, attitudes, skills and knowledge about the communities they may work in. This would help create a workforce cognizant of the challenges of working in rural, and notably Indigenous, communities; appreciative of students' familial funds of knowledge (see e.g., Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992) and alert to deficit theorizing about rural/Indigenous communities and schools. Hence, culturally relevant place-based pedagogies could provide a significant tool in equipping pre-service and in-service teachers to become more effective in northern Saskatchewan rural and Indigenous communities, which may in turn address some of the retention issues addressed elsewhere in this chapter.

The issue of teacher recruitment and retention has certainly generated much concern within northern Saskatchewan communities. For example, in previous work conducted with the Yorkton Tribal Council (YTC), recruitment and retention of effective teachers was an important issue among local stakeholders (Steeves, Carr-Stewart & Marshall, 2011). Yet, an initial review of research related to teacher recruitment and retention in northern and Indigenous schools yielded a limited base of literature. Within the small body of research that could be identified, teachers repeatedly cited inadequate salaries, lack of job security, discipline problems among students, geographic isolation, lack of affordable housing, weather, distance from larger communities, distance from family and concerns about personal safety as deterrents to remaining in Indigenous and northern schools (Collins, 1999; Williment, 2003).

In another study, McNinch (1994, p. 4) found that, "those in band schools speak of the value of working [in the schools] but are also quick to point out some of the negative elements of working on the reserve, notably the lack of STF [Saskatchewan Teacher Federation] representation… [and] the lack of contract security from year to year." McNinch suggested that retention of teachers depends very much on relationships built in and outside of the school. Other studies (Agbo, 2007; Wotherspoon, 1998) also identified the importance of building effective relationships between teachers, students, and Indigenous communities

for successful student engagement. These objectives cannot, however, be realized in rural schools characterized by high teacher turnover. In such schools, high rates of teacher attrition "generate problems of maldistribution of the teaching service across a region ... thereby creating pockets of limited or poorer quality educational provisions" (Macdonald, 1999, p. 842).

It is essential, therefore, for decision-makers to better understand the key factors contributing to teacher attrition in northern Saskatchewan. There is anecdotal agreement that high teacher turnover rates exist within First Nations schools and provincial schools with substantial Indigenous student enrolment. Nevertheless, a relatively limited research base supports these conclusions.

Research Objectives, Background and Methodology

This study sought to investigate challenges and opportunities regarding issues related to teacher recruitment and retention within the NLSD. The research team was cognizant that an extensive body of North American (and other international research) had already documented the importance of a stable teaching body, especially if student achievement rates are to improve. The team, accordingly, sought to build upon that body of literature by documenting the specific challenges related to teacher recruitment and retention faced by schools in rural and northern Saskatchewan locations serving Indigenous communities and students. To that end, it sought to build on research already conducted with the YTC regarding teacher recruitment and retention. Finding and retaining talented teachers is critical to ensuring student success and this study was specifically designed to identify strategies related to improving teacher recruitment and retention in those northern Saskatchewan locations concerned.

This study arose from previous research related to the examination of relationships between second level funding and improved student learning in First Nations schools located within the YTC. An unanticipated outcome emerged from this research, indicating that critical issues associated with teacher recruitment and retention and the negative impact on educational outcomes for Indigenous students in community administered schools, had largely been ignored. This resulted in further research with the YTC which intended to explore and better understand the teacher recruitment and retention issues in First Nations schools. The results of this additional research suggested that teacher recruitment and retention issues were very real and appeared to have a negative impact on Indigenous student learning outcomes. Discussion of these findings with the then Director of Education with the NLSD produced an invitation to conduct similar research with teachers employed within their jurisdiction. Research costs were shared by the NLSD and Saskatchewan Instructional Development and Research Institute (SIDRU).

The research, central to this chapter was informed by a philosophical stance that integrates aspects of critical and interpretivist paradigms (Kovach, 2005). A qualitative design characterized by Indigenous methodology (Berryman, Soohoo, & Nevin, 2013; Kovach, 2009) as well as analysis informed by principles of grounded theory (Chamez, 2006) was adopted for the research method. Within

this paradigm, attention was paid to Indigenous ways of knowing through the use of open-ended data collection methods. This included conversations with six senior educational officials, including the Director of Education for the NLSD, three Superintendents, one Director of Education from a federal jurisdiction with related experience, and a final individual with extensive experience in northern and Indigenous education as both an academic and an administrator. In addition, three sharing circles were conducted: one including newly recruited teachers located within one northern community, a second comprised of more experienced teachers located within another community and a large group including most of the school based administrators employed within the NLSD. All data were subjected to a thematic analysis and a research report, which also informs this chapter, was provided to the NLSD upon completion of the study.

Findings

Teacher Turnover and Student Achievement

As mentioned previously, a clear relationship exists between student achievement, teaching effectiveness and the length of teacher tenure (Nye, Konstantopoulos & Hedges, 2004; Marzano, 2003, 2007; Adams, 2010). Further to this, recent research by Leithwood and Louis (2012) references the relationship between teacher, family and community collaborations in relation to increased student achievement. Similar relationships were demonstrated by Bishop and Berryman's (2010) work in New Zealand between the application of culturally relevant pedagogy and improved Māori secondary schools' student achievement levels. Similar research findings were drawn elsewhere in New Zealand by Manning, Macfarlane, Skerrett, Cooper, Andreotti and Emery (2011).

However, in the absence of an experienced, stable teaching force, the research literature suggests it will be difficult to build collaborative relationships or effective culturally relevant Indigenous teaching practices in northern Saskatchewan settings. Comments by study participants reinforced this finding; one young teacher stated, "you leave and then the next year another person is there that doesn't really fully know what they are doing and then the next year someone else is there" (Personal communication, November, 2012).

School administrators shared a similar view. One administrator said: "Every time there is turnover …the kids have to learn to read that adult for the learning process to exist" (Personal communication, August, 2012). These comments reinforce research findings elsewhere regarding the relationship between length of teacher tenure and student achievement.

Teacher Turnover in the Northern Lights School Division

In the absence of comparative data from a southern school division, the comments provided here are some-what speculative. However, anecdotal feedback tended to be encouraging; with teacher turnover rates in the NLSD apparently moderating. An individual from central office best summed up the current situation, saying:

Although we have a retention issue, it is not as great as I thought it would be. From our statistics. That's good news. That said, I think the retention issue [is] we continually lose our newer teachers. It is like we are the "farm club" for other places.

That becomes an issue because you get an aged teaching staff who [are] comfortable where they are. But you need that new blood … If it was a retention spread across all our teachers, you know, evenly; that would probably be a healthier environment. (Personal communication, August, 2012)

The issue of length of service once a teacher joins the NLSD also generated a fair bit of discussion. One school administrator indicated that, "it takes you about 3 years after they graduate to get a teacher that is proficient—that is classroom proficient. It is like any other job – you have to do some things before you become proficient at it" (Personal communication, August, 2012). A system administrator took a somewhat different perspective, suggesting that:

The ones that stick around one year, they are going to go no matter what. They took the job because that was the only thing they could find. The ones that stay 3-5 years are the ones who have the commitment … It is usually because somehow or another they tie into the community. They get married or something. The 3-5 years are the ones I look for. This year, we had a lot of the 3-5 years leave us. Stolen by the Southern schools, I should tell you. We had huge turnover into the South. (Personal communication, August, 2012)

The proclivity for teachers leaving after 3-5 years caused one system administrator to express a desire for the recruitment of Saskatchewan teachers, simply because less time is required to become oriented to issues such as curriculum.

Recruitment Issues in the Northern Lights School Division
Certification of out of province candidates from areas such as Ontario generated much comment from newly employed teachers. The need to improve the web presence of the NLSD, including more information related to the northern life style and culture received a good deal of discussion. The value of recruiting visits to universities was reinforced with suggestions that focussing on culturally relevant sites (such as northern Ontario universities) and bringing recently employed teachers to these visits were considered as potentially helpful. Challenges related to the recruitment of Saskatchewan teachers were discussed, including the limited number of graduates from the Northern Teacher Education Program (NORTEP) and the difficulties in attracting candidates from Saskatchewan universities.[1] A system level administrator referred to these topics as "hygiene" factors, suggesting that "there are probably ways in which we can entice, or make it attractive; either through free housing or travel expenses. Or some other provisions of support that maybe the candidates wouldn't receive somewhere else" (Personal communication, August, 2012).

A number of comments from the teacher sharing circles also pertained to this area, primarily focussing on housing and financial issues facing new teachers. The issue of housing received attention with references of appreciation for division housing but some concern regarding maintenance issues. Comments referred to mould issues and broken furniture, with one teacher suggesting that, "any kind of maintenance request takes forever because we have to put it in, get it signed and then wait for it. Never know when they will show up" (Personal communication, November, 2012).

Frequent references to personal financial challenges occurred, including comments regarding moving costs, particularly for those coming from out of province. While one teacher suggested that assistance from the NLSD, "helped with moving up here" (Personal communication, November, 2012), other teachers suggested that more generous moving allowances would be beneficial. Another financial challenge to beginning teachers in the NLSD seemed to be "front end" housing charges:

> I think moving up here … in terms of the housing … is probably the toughest thing for newer teachers, first and second year … I know within Northern Lights most people come in for the first three or four months and they are making $1300 or $1400 per month. From that your rent has been taken-off. You pay a damage deposit on your house. You have to worry about oil. I know you have oil when you start but that is all cost when you come in. You lose your first and last on your rent off your pay cheque.… I know coming up here my paycheque was $1367. I have the number in my head because my bills were $2400. I was borrowing, begging; putting it on credit cards. It was horrible. I know two new teachers here, right now, are going through the exact same problem. (Personal communication, November, 2012)

A final area that generated dialogue from newly employed teachers from out of province related to confusion regarding Saskatchewan certification. One teacher captured the issue with the following comment:

> It is very difficult to be certified here because the teacher programs in Ontario are a year whereas here in Saskatchewan they are two.... I actually have a Master's degree so in Ontario I was on the highest pay scale … I took this [job] because I thought it was a bigger school and there would be more professional development and some other things.… I have to take three more university classes and my pay is going to be however many of thousands of dollars less.… They don't make it easy for Ontario teachers. (Personal communication, November, 2012)

Inconsistent information received by out of province teachers regarding this matter was a recurring theme in our study.

Improved Marketing and Recruitment in Culturally Similar Institutions

A number of issues related to improving the marketing of the NLSD were noted. Enhanced usage of the internet for recruitment purposes was discussed, with some participants agreeing that the existing NLSD web site required upgrading. Teachers also reinforced the value of younger teachers appearing at career fairs to provide an insider perspective to prospective teacher recruits. Participants also strongly suggested that emphasizing positive northern life-style opportunities for teachers should be central to NLSD recruitment publicity. One teacher, for example, stressed that: "We love the outdoor lifestyle and that is probably what will keep [teachers] here the longest—the boating, the fishing, the lifestyle" (Personal communication, November, 2012). Encouraging a more constructive perception of northern Saskatchewan might also help offset what one school administrator referred to as, "the violence and the [bad] rap that Northern communities get..." (Personal communication, August, 2012).

A few comments were received about recruiting from institutions that had programs and demographics similar to Northern Saskatchewan. One teacher commented, "Laurentian University at Sudbury, Ontario. That would be a good university to go to…a trilingual university. French, English and Aboriginal… There are other First Nations boards from Ontario that promote themselves there for hiring" (Personal communication, November, 2012). A system administrator also referenced this issue while discussing the challenge of recruiting teachers from southern Saskatchewan: "Go to somewhere where we are likely to hire them like Ontario. Go to the Lakehead, go to Nipissing, go to Brock and say to those kids you can have a job fulltime teaching in our District" (Personal communication, August, 2012). While recent changes to the Ontario teacher-training program may make future recruitment more difficult, such comments merit consideration.

Attracting Saskatchewan Teachers

As noted above, a great deal of discussion occurred about the need to attract more Saskatchewan teachers—and the challenge faced in recruiting them. A school administrator opened their sharing circle with the comment that, "I believe that if we have teachers from the province it is not as urgent a thing for them to get back home [and leave the district] because they are already close to home" (Personal communication, August, 2012). Another administrator reinforced this statement by stating, "I certainly agree with [teacher name] on the Saskatchewan grads…not only because they are staying home but they also have current curriculum knowledge" (Personal communication, August, 2012). This stance was echoed by a system administrator who commented, "I would like to get teachers from Saskatchewan … they should be more familiar with the curriculum which would be a big thing (Personal communication, August, 2012).

Another reason was frequently advanced to explain, (i) the problem of attracting Saskatchewan trained teachers related and, (ii) the lack of experience regarding the North among students at the University of Saskatchewan and University of Regina. There were a number of comments regarding the need for

southern students to have an opportunity to gain more knowledge of northern Saskatchewan. For instance, one system administrator advocated for a dual-pronged strategy: first, recruiting from within the north and outside the province and second, to have internships in northern boards for southern students, as adopted by the University of Regina. Likewise, a second school administrator exemplified this view in the following way:

> How would a U[niversity] of S[askatchewan] student even know about our [NLSD] schools?... For whatever reason they don't come up to our schools to intern.… That is the best way to get them accustomed to the community. (Personal communication, August, 2012)

There was, however, general agreement regarding the value of hiring northern teachers and a comment from a school administrator typified this stance:

> about 60% of the people that are in our community, working as teachers, have come from the community or they are of First Nations or Métis descent and are accustomed to the North, being in the North. Being in environments where the world view has been similar. So having them there in those K-6 positions, the turnover is minimal compared to the turnover of teachers in grade 7-12. (Personal communication, August, 2012)

Yet, even for elementary teachers graduating from NORTEP and similar programs, recruitment can be difficult; one system administrator expressed frustration when stating that, "I would... like to see us... recruit more Aboriginal teachers. We just can't compete with the band system with taxation" (Personal communication, August, 2012). These comments speak to the urgent need to further develop capacity for northern and Indigenous teacher education programs to ensure Indigenous representation across both Band-run and public school systems in the north.

Induction/Orientation to the Northern Lights School Division

Without question, issues related to induction and orientation to northern lifestyle, schooling and community generated the greatest discussion. Administrators and new teachers alike both referenced the difficulties in assisting young teachers from southern communities to overcome cultural shock and make the necessary adjustments to their new surroundings, school administrators told stories of new teachers arriving in the community, driving around and then leaving:

> I will start by telling you a couple of instances that really blew me away. The first one was a girl we had hired from the Maritimes and school was starting that morning and people were asking "where is this girl?" She wasn't showing up for the staff meeting and we were ready to introduce her. The janitor came by and said I saw their vehicle pull out early this morning... I never had a chance to talk to her about why

she left and I don't know where she went". (Personal communication, August, 2012)

This individual went on to comment on the difficulties of recruiting individuals from more distant locations using distance technology such as the telephone or Skype since this did not give prospective teachers any exposure to the community. Numerous comments were also made regarding the value of mentoring as a means of assisting new teachers in the adjustment process. One new teacher commented on the value of his mentoring partner, suggesting that further development would help:

> One program/thing that they have just implemented it last year is the mentorship Program … it would have benefitted me tremendously to have been in contact with my mentor before leaving Ontario. Just so that I knew kind of—even little things like—maybe the person would have talked me out of getting a car and getting a truck instead. … Or things to bring or challenges you are going to face. Things like that. It is a great program but I think definitely that it could be augmented. (Personal communication, November, 2012)

Supports Provided to New Teachers

A number of concrete suggestions were made regarding ways in which new teachers could be supported. Some were typical of teachers everywhere; for example, the issue of child care for both teachers and students was mentioned. Another addressed the need for more supports for new teachers in relation to assisted technology and planning inclusively for designated or struggling students in classrooms:

> Coming from Ontario we are so used to different programs that help us and we don't really have that. When you have a class of 30 and you are trying to help 6-10 students that really need pretty large scale help it is pretty difficult to get across. (Personal communication, November, 2012)

Some comments were received from teachers about the importance of school division central office staff appearing more sympathetic and supportive when contacted. In a more general sense, a system administrator commented on the need to be supportive of teachers new to northern Saskatchewan:

> I think one of the things that is challenging is sometimes the living conditions; the new challenges people have with communities. Sometimes they experience breakins and things like that. There has to be measures of support for people. (Personal communication, August, 2012)

Another talked of a building janitor who does a great deal to assist in this process of offering support:

> We have a fellow by the name of "Mark". Mark … makes it his personal responsibility, for whatever reason, to make sure he is there to provide support to new teachers.... [he'll say] 'You just moved into my town and if you need anything give me a call'.… So all I have to do is pick up that phone and call him and he will help me as much as he can.... I think we need more people like Mark to assist our staff who are transitioning from the world of—from their world …— to this world. (Personal communication, August, 2012)

Teachers also talked about the value of community support to equip them to settle in and meet the needs of their students:

> The community here is very welcoming.… I have made a lot of good friends, I enjoy the people that I work with, I like my job but that is something that comes from the people that are working here and the community environment.… I have heard horror stories from others in more isolated communities about people who don't feel safe in going outside in their communities and do feel extremely isolated in their community. If I lived in one of those I probably wouldn't be staying either. I freely admit that the first four or five months here were a bit of a culture shock.… I got past that and everything was good. (Personal communication, November, 2012)

A useful approach to addressing these challenges was also discussed by one school administrator and her community:

> I just had a meeting here in June with several teachers.… I asked the teachers what are some of the issues? What is going on and how can we correct a lot of what is happening? As well, I was asked by the community to create a wish list as to how they can support education. (Personal communication, August, 2012)

While there are many things that that the NLDS system and schools can do to support new teachers to adjust to a different lifestyle, there is no question that the role of community in welcoming teachers is vital.

Cultural Orientation to the North
    Most agreed that that some means of cultural orientation to the north was required. One participant stated:

> I think they need to know a lot about community.… They are coming in with a different world view, a different set of expectations. Not knowing the environment in which they are going into. So they really need to be prepared properly. They need to know the context in which they are going into. They need to know the challenges that are up here. They need

to know about the culture of the [Indigenous] people. They need to have some sense of the languages to be able to communicate with elders and community people for example. (Personal communication, August, 2012)

A system administrator also referenced this issue indicating:

We are looking for people who show us that they are aware of where we are; that they have the capacity to be culturally sensitive; and that they have the capacity to look at their own strengths and weaknesses in terms of what can they offer (Personal communication, August, 2012)

A second school administrator also discussed the impact of culture, while referencing issues related to recruitment, adjustment to the north and mentoring:

They asked me down south about Métis. "Yes", I said, and, "You know what? Down here you are Métis and you belong to a local. But it is a word. Up there [northern Saskatchewan] it is a lifestyle. That is who we are". She looked at me and she was trying to understand what I was saying.… Down south they talk about connection to the land. But on the other hand [up here] it is the old people, people walking the trap line. They know the water. They know the weather. They know what it is going to take for the environment to survive. It is a lifestyle. These are the things you have to talk about when you are recruiting your teachers. (Personal communication, August, 2012)

It seemed apparent that teachers need an increased understanding of the issues involved in teaching Indigenous students (see e.g., Reyhner, 2015; Reyhner & Jacobs, 2002; Cleary & Peacock, 1998) as well as the cultural aspects of northern life is necessary to address teacher recruitment and retention issues.

Improved Induction/Orientation Programs
   Given the forgoing comments, it is not surprising that the value of improved induction/orientation programming received a good deal of discussion. One system administrator encapsulated a consensus among administrators that over the last 20 years opportunities have been provided prior to (or at) the start of the new school year to bring new teachers to a central location where they can share experiences. This administrator added that, "building of relationships and professional communication" should be ongoing so that, "we can get people back together, again, face-to-face and share experiences" (Personal communication, August, 2012).
   New teachers also had concrete suggestions regarding the potential content within an induction/orientation program. Some providing suggestions regarding about the sort of practical information and support new teachers need to adjust quickly to living in northern Saskatchewan. Other teachers raised the issue of more specific support in dealing with students from different cultural backgrounds:

I think [it] would have been nice if there had been some mandatory PD [professional development) in terms of how to teach in different contexts. Teaching First Nations students.… just the different life up here and how that works. I think it would make us more successful in the classroom and make learning more successful for the students.… There was not one session that we had to go to. (Personal communication, November, 2012)

Similar issues regarding the need for more culturally relevant education have been discussed in other research related to this project. For instance, Ray Barnhardt (Personal communication, June, 2014), an Alaskan educator who is internationally recognized in the area of Native Alaskan Education, outlined details of "culture camps." At these camps, topics such as cultural values and culturally-based pedagogy receive a substantial amount of attention. New teachers from the southern United States are encouraged to attend the camps prior to the commencement of the school year. It seems possible that similar models could be adopted for use in northern Saskatchewan. As discussed earlier in this paper, there is no question that a substantial body of research exists, supporting the value of such strategies, with improved student achievement levels a clearly demonstrated outcome of such initiatives.

Conclusion

Given that positive teacher/student relationships are significant to the success of Indigenous students, teacher recruitment and retention in northern and Indigenous communities warrant further investigation. It appears that educational administrators and policy makers understand intuitively that teacher turnover in the north is a problem, but little research has been conducted to investigate root issues that drive the problem, or to capitalize on the expertise of northern schools that are currently recruiting and retaining teachers effectively. Indigenous community issues in general, and teacher recruitment and retention in particular, seem to be highly problematized by policy leaders; the issues are consequently seen as constituting challenges inherent to either students or teachers.

More effort to understand these issues could be achieved by adopting an appreciative approach. This would involve: (i) identifying Indigenous students' and community strengths; (ii) viewing current northern and First Nations conditions as opportunities for improvement; (iii) focusing on what works well in these contexts; (iv) enabling school systems to become better positioned to develop momentum toward resolution of teacher recruitment and retention issues. The creation of new opportunities for northern internship experiences and additional attention to teacher induction to the teaching and living in the north are areas that are in need of further consideration.

Note

[1] After the completion of data collection for this project, NORTEP ended in 2017. In 2019 a new Northern Saskatchewan Indigenous Teacher Education Program (NSITEP) began as a partnership between the University of Regina, The Gabriel Dumont Institute and the Lac La Ronge Indian Band.

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