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## JUGGLING EDUCATIONAL ENDS: NON-INDIGENOUS YUKON PRINCIPALS AND THE POLICY CHALLENGES THAT THEY FACE

SIMON BLAKESLEY

*University of British Columbia*

This article reports on a 2008 study of non-indigenous principals working in indigenous Yukon contexts. It examines the policy contexts in which Yukon principals are embedded, giving attention to how they address the tensions that exist as a result of operating at the intersections of multiple policy levels. The application of critical ethnography generates the opportunity to reveal and examine the tensions, distinctions, and contradictions underpinning their practice. The principals identify fragmented curricular policy; the competition between instructional time, mandated external curricula, and locally developed curricula; and field trip and hiring policies as being problematic. The principals also describe how they cope with the challenges and tensions that arise as a result of being responsible and accountable to balance competing educational ends, to the satisfaction of multiple external levels of control. The study calls for a re-evaluation of the deployment of externally mandated curricula in the Yukon.

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### Introduction

This article reports on a 2008 study of non-indigenous principals working in indigenous Yukon contexts, presenting the heretofore unexamined policy contexts in which Yukon principals are enmeshed. The importance of understanding the policy contexts in which educational leadership is embedded is reinforced by Bell and Stevenson (2006), who suggest that educational leadership exists in a policy context shaped by its historical and cultural location. In keeping with Bell's and Stevenson's assertion, a goal of this article is to contribute to the field by offering insights into the daily lives of principals working in a particular location in the Canadian north.

The Yukon Territory is in the northwest corner of Canada, located geographically north of the province of British Columbia and east of the state of Alaska. A rugged and isolated land where 11 of 14 Yukon First Nations have settled land claims, the study reveals the extent to which both Yukon and external policy contexts affect the principals, both in their work and in

their personal lives; specifically, their well-being and how they cope with the challenges and tensions they face. It sheds light on the nature and extent of the power relationships between a diverse array of actors: principals, teachers, parents, schools, communities, the Yukon Department of Education, and other external organizations. Further, it identifies the strategies they develop in order to navigate through and circumvent the policies that confine them.

Education policy shapes the structure of schools and what is taught, the languages of instruction, who can be hired as a teacher, how and where teaching may occur, and the treatment of students, to identify a few facets of school operation (Young, Levin, & Wallin, 2008). This gives rise to contradictions and tensions which non-indigenous Yukon principals must address daily. For school-based leaders in general, Leithwood (2001) asserts the effect of educational policies on them: "Among the several contexts in which school leaders are enmeshed, the context created by educational policies is among the most powerful influences on the nature of their work" (p.

227). This leads to the following question: What policy tensions do non-indigenous Yukon educational leaders identify and how do they cope with and address them?

To shed light on this question, this study engages in a critical analysis of the lived experiences of non-indigenous educational leaders working in indigenous Yukon contexts. Not since King's (1967) case study of a Yukon residential school has there been systematic research specifically examining non-indigenous educators living and working in indigenous Yukon contexts. For this study, participants were chosen specifically given that, at the time the research was conducted, only one principal in the territory was of Yukon indigenous heritage.

As a non-indigenous researcher, I wished not to perpetuate the legacy of colonizing ethnographies and Eurowestern domination of thought by early ethnographers (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). Webster and John (2010) point out the history of exploitive research and the negative effects of research conducted in Alaska Native villages, and the ethical, epistemological, and methodological issues arising at the intersection of "Western academic tradition and Indigenous ways of knowing" (p. 176). In particular, I was guided by Smith (1999), who offers: "It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us" (p.1). On this basis I thus could not credibly and legitimately investigate, determine, and proffer a viable and epistemologically consistent understanding of educational leadership from an indigenous perspective. For these reasons, only non-indigenous participants living and working in contexts similar to my own were included in this study.

### **Positioning the author: Acknowledging and addressing bias**

I am a non-indigenous educator and administrator who has worked in rural, isolated schools with predominantly indigenous communities since 1995. Having positioned myself as an "insider", a justifiable argument could be made that I am biased by my own knowledge, experiences, and attitudes. Attuned to this concern, I adopted a reflexive approach as a means of interpreting my own background, biases, and identity. I employed Bourdieu's notion of theoretical reflexivity (Schirato & Webb, 2003), where I examined the social location of the individuals in the study (the researcher included). Banks's (1998) ty-

pology of cross-cultural researchers aided positioning myself in relation to the research contexts based on my experiences, history, and values. To not take into account these aspects would seriously draw into question the depth of insight and legitimacy of knowledge claims made as a result of this study, and run counter to Carspecken's (1996) assertion that critical ethnographers must examine their biases and values when articulating power relationships.

### **The opportunities offered by critical ethnographic research**

Limitations of the Eurocentric leadership paradigm constrain how educational leadership is conceptualized and enacted by non-indigenous educational leaders in indigenous Yukon contexts. The study of how non-indigenous Yukon educational leaders construct themselves is further hampered by a limited array of research tools with which to discuss educational leadership in ways that do not replicate colonizing research practices.

In response, the study of and methods for conducting critical ethnography are informed by Zou and Trueba (2002), who position critical ethnography as an empowering research method which can be of value in diverse educational settings typified by cultural difference and diversity. A critical ethnographic approach generates the opportunity for the participants to tell their stories, offer their perspectives and perceptions, and share their leadership experiences as non-indigenous professionals working in distinct cross-cultural settings. Critical ethnography exposes the multifaceted and conflicted power structures embedded in the relationships between and among educational leaders and the communities they serve.

### **Educational policy contexts**

A number of policy factors affect the practice of Yukon school administrators. Three such contextual factors are identified here: The Yukon Education Act (1990), external curriculum and policies, and external assessment schemes. As a result of these factors, a number of policy paradoxes are presented.

### **The Yukon Education Act**

The Yukon Education Act (1990) takes a greater role than solely that of legislation: it is the predominant policy document that defines not only the powers, roles, and duties of school administrators, but the

broader mandate and the operation of the Yukon educational system as a whole. Specific to the Yukon society, the Education Act recognizes:

...that Yukon people agree that the goal of the Yukon education system is to work in co-operation with parents to develop the whole child including the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, cultural, and aesthetic potential of all students to the extent of their abilities so that they may become productive, responsible, and self-reliant members of society while leading personally rewarding lives in a changing world. (p. 8)

It is important to note the reference made to the development of culture. Further emphasis is given to culture in a subsequent citation:

...the Yukon curriculum must include the cultural and linguistic heritage of Yukon aboriginal people and the multicultural heritage of Canada... (p. 8)

These two references underscore the significance of the need to more thoroughly understand educational leadership and its relationship to learning in Yukon schools and communities, given the role the principal plays with respect to student learning, creating a positive learning environment, and fostering relationships with parents and community (Blair, 2002; Portin et al., 2003), and the importance of the principal understanding the culture of the school community (Escobar-Ortloff & Ortloff, 2003). If the role of the principal as educational leader is therefore one that cannot be underestimated, then a greater understanding of how school principals practice culturally and contextually relevant educational leadership in the Yukon would be an essential endeavour that would assist in the realization of the societal goals recognized in the Yukon Education Act.

## External curriculum and policies

Yukon schools deploy British Columbia (B.C.) Ministry of Education curriculum. Yukon principals are thus charged with the responsibility of ensuring that the expectations of education prescribed by the Yukon Education Act are met using externally generated B.C. curriculum. Principals must therefore reconcile external curricular specifications with the development and implementation of educational programming deemed appropriate at a local level. Facility to do so is provided in the Yukon Education Act (1990):

43(2) Locally developed courses may constitute up to 20 per cent of the educational program offered to any student in a semester or a school year (p.35).

This suggests that B.C.-generated curriculum alone is inadequate to meet the educational needs of Yukon students. The Yukon Education Act mandates a 950-instructional-hour school year. Therefore, 20 percent translates to 190 instructional hours, or approximately two months of school. This substantial allotment of time underscores the import of locally developed curriculum in Yukon schools. Relating this directly to the school principal, Section 169 of the Yukon Education Act further states that it is the duty of the school principal to

(s) ensure that instruction in the school is consistent with the courses of study prescribed pursuant to this Act; and,

(t) include in the activities of the school, cultural heritage traditions and practices of members of the community served by the school if the number of members who possess the cultural heritage so warrant (p.91);

B.C.-based curriculum and locally developed programs must therefore compete with each other for adequate exposure in Yukon schools. Yukon school principals are thus situated at this intersection by the Act, the responsibility resting on them to make certain that B.C. curriculum is adequately delivered while concurrently ensuring that this programming is culturally relevant to students and the community.

## External assessment schemes

External standardized assessment schemes affect the practice of Yukon school principals. Yukon ministers and deputy ministers of education attend the twice-yearly meetings of the Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC). CMEC ensures that the country participates in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) educational indicators projects, which result in quantitative comparisons between countries. These include the School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP) and its replacement, the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP). Nationally, the PCAP program measures student achievement in reading, math, and science as indicators of the high school preparation and readiness of 13-year-olds (CMEC, 2007). Yukon schools are also included in rankings by the Fraser Institute, which

compares them to B.C. schools based in part upon B.C. Provincial Exam results.

How a school scores reflects upon Yukon principals, requiring them to balance the following three demands: they must ensure that B.C. curriculum is adequately delivered to students within a prescribed school year; ensure that locally developed curriculum is designed and implemented in up to 20 percent of the school curriculum in order to ensure cultural relevance to students; and deploy external indicators deemed suitable for all Canadian children as a measure of academic achievement despite a shorter time frame in which to do so. Clearly, the intersection of the local exigencies of Yukon education, external educational policies and curriculum, coupled with broader Canadian initiatives, results in weighty and competing demands.

## Policy Paradoxes

The implementation of educational policies can lead to tensions or contradictions in practice, which Patterson and Marshall (2001) refer to as “policy paradoxes” (p. 372). They identify the apparent irony of granting more autonomy and local control of schools while concurrently employing standardized accountability mechanisms. In the Yukon, such a paradox arises when individual schools are given the ability to employ locally developed curriculum yet are assessed using large-scale standardized tests.

In response to such paradoxes, Patterson and Marshall (2001) question: “How do educators responsible for serving students...manage these pressures and conflicting directives?” (p. 372). At a community and school level, Berger, Epp, and Moller (2006) underscore the “cultural clash” that occurs when northern and indigenous cultures and educational policies encounter one another. Similarly, non-indigenous Yukon school principals must navigate the distinct differences between language, curriculum, and pedagogical practices grounded in western or southern conceptions of instruction and learning, and the extent to which they are culturally relevant. Community conceptions of time, punctuality, and attendance can contrast with the mandated structure of the school day and school year, resulting in tension or conflict between school principals, students, and parents.

## Research design

This study employs a nested case study design where four Yukon schools were included in an overall case

approach (Patton, 2002, Yin, 2003). Extensive and in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the four principals to broaden the understanding of their policy contexts and the challenges the principals faced. The interviews were conducted much as Kirby and McKenna (1989) describe: as more than solely a question-and-answer session with a passive research participant who simply talks of their experience or shares data. As our conversations reveal, interviews are powerful in that they permit a sharing of ideas, philosophies, and the self.

## Participant selection and profiles

There are 31 schools in the Yukon. The selection criteria for these four schools required that they:

1. Be geographically located within the Yukon,
2. Be governed by the Yukon Department of Education,
3. Be located on the traditional territory of a Yukon First Nation, and,
4. Be staffed with a non-indigenous principal.

The four participants were purposefully selected based on a number of specific factors. They were experienced educators with careers spanning from 15 to over 40 years. Specific attention was given to the geographic location as a means of including a diversity of perspectives. Two urban school settings (defined as being located within the Whitehorse city limits) and two rural schools, all located on the traditional territory of Yukon First Nations, were included. Two male and two female principals facilitated inclusion of gendered perspectives on educational leadership and the principalship.

In order to shed light on how non-indigenous Yukon principals cope with and address the tensions arising at the aforementioned policy junctures, we are introduced to Jim, Rose, Bob, and Gina.

### *Jim and Hillside School*

Jim has been an educator and principal in northern Canadian contexts for 40 years. Hillside Elementary School is located in one of the many neighbourhoods of Whitehorse (population 23,638). It offers kindergarten to grade 7 programming to approximately 300 students. Both indigenous and non-indigenous children attend this school.

### ***Gina and Klondike School***

Gina is a Yukon-born and-raised teacher and principal. A long-serving teacher and administrator, she is a grandmother who raised her children as a single mother. Klondike School is located in a neighbourhood of Whitehorse and has between 50 and 100 children enrolled.

### ***Rose and Mountainview School***

Rose has been a teacher and principal at Mountainview School for the majority of her career. Originally from eastern Canada, she moved to the community over 30 years ago. Her children attended Mountainview School, a rural Yukon school offering K–12 programming to between 100 and 150 students.

### ***Bob and Moose Meadow School***

Bob was born in a European country, emigrated to Canada as a youth, and came to teaching and the principalship later in his career. A teacher for a number of years in another Yukon community, he was appointed to the principalship of Moose Meadow School over 10 years ago. Moose Meadow School is located in rural Yukon, and the school serves a population of 50–75 students.

## **Data collection and analysis**

Over a six-month period, a series of five semi-structured interviews lasting 1–2 hours were conducted with each participant. Transcripts were returned to them for their review and comment. Atlas t.i., a qualitative data analysis program, was used to sort data and create field codes, allowing for the generation of themes. Data analysis was conducted in an ongoing and simultaneous fashion with data collection (Glesne, 1999). Prior to commencing, I established a reflective field log, in which I recorded memos to immediately capture my preliminary analytical thoughts and ideas. In this way, I was able to record new thoughts and perspectives as the study unfolded. In addition, I constructed analytical files in order to methodically organize data and thoughts. As the research progressed, additional categories were added. A quotation file also served to capture quotations suitable to specific themes.

### ***In their own words***

As a result of the data collection and subsequent analysis, a number of problematic policy areas were identified. Specifically, fragmented curricular policy and the "curriculum crunch," field trip policies, and human resources staffing policies emerged as dominant themes.

### ***Addressing tensions: "We definitely feel the curriculum crunch"—Jim***

How do the principals in this study address the tensions that arise at the intersections of the delivery of external curriculum measured by external tests, in a policy context that allows for 20 percent of the instructional year to be devoted to locally developed curriculum aimed at making school culturally relevant to students and their communities?

Looking first at standardized testing, Jim highlighted the importance which is placed upon these exams at the elementary school level and the negative effects of them on educators:

Curriculum-wise at an elementary school, I guess the biggest thing in administration would be the YAT tests—the Yukon Achievement Tests for grades 3 and 6, and their interpretation of how we kind of twist ourselves up in knots over how we did and so on. (Jim, Interview 2)

Jim described standardized testing as stressful events for teachers and children. He agreed that there should be some benchmark against which to assess educational activities and attainment; however, based on 40 years of educational experience, he readily offered his opinions on the topic of standardized testing and the effects of them:

I'm not a big fan of that kind of test...although I think we've improved from the days when every kid in the school did the CTBS (Canadian Test of Basic Skills) test every year, which really killed us... I do think we have to have some sort of a benchmark approach to learning, but I think it is better served with rubrics rather than simply running through these multiple choice tests. There is an area where I think there will always be a certain amount of tension in the school and policy. (Jim, Interview 2)

Jim's reference to the CTBS tests describes the standardized tests which have been used over many years in elementary schools across Canada. Although

these specific tests are no longer mandated in the Yukon, Jim notes the tension that is created at the school level as a result of mandated Yukon Achievement Test (YAT) standardized testing regime.

***Fragmented curricular policy: “You don’t muck around” —Rose.***

As a high school principal, Rose has the additional responsibility of overseeing the deployment of an additional form of standardized test: B.C. Provincial Exams. Yukon students must take five mandatory B.C. provincial examinations, in grades 10, 11, and 12, in order to meet the 2004 graduation requirements of the B.C. Ministry of Education. These exams could be considered “high stakes” given that how students fare affects their final mark in a credit-based course, whether they graduate from high school, and the postsecondary options available to them. When asked whether the topic of meeting graduation requirements arose in her practice, Rose replied candidly:

...you can’t have your cake and eat it too, like you can’t say, “I want my kid to have all these cultural opportunities or all these sports opportunities but I want them to graduate with enough credits and enough courses to go on to university.” Well, you know, there is going to have to be a compromise here somewhere. (Rose, Interview 2)

Despite her efforts to ensure that she meets parental academic expectations, she identified the disjointed relationship between school, parent, child, curriculum, and educational programming that she must mediate to varying degrees depending on the individuals involved:

Some parents are phoning you saying, “Well, if my kid takes this math, can they become a lawyer?” And I’ll say, “Well, we have to go online and look at every university because they are all different. But I’ll tell you generally what my thoughts are.” Or “Doesn’t my kid have to have French 12?” And I’ll say, “Well, no.” But you have to keep directing them back to college and university websites to see. And a lot of parents have visions of their children all becoming brain surgeons and the kids aren’t interested in being a brain surgeon. (Rose, Interview 2)

Rose identifies the various fractured and disconnected curriculum policy levels that she must deal with in her practice. First, she must decide what courses to offer, depending on whether they are man-

dated courses or locally developed curriculum that may not necessarily count for credits in the B.C. educational system. Then, she must align B.C. Ministry of Education credit-based curriculum employed by the Yukon Educational system with the course and credit requirements of postsecondary institutions, validating her decisions by these two external measures. Further, at the local community level, she must balance the competition over instructional time between these external factors in ways that allow for the incorporation of local indigenous language and culture. Finally, Rose must accommodate the visions of educational attainment held by parents, despite them being visions not necessarily shared by their children.

Rose identifies the tension arising as a result of the inclusion of locally developed programming competing against instructional time devoted to credit-based courses which are accepted toward graduation:

...you better be really careful because only so many locally developed courses will be accepted towards graduation so I try to avoid those in grade 10, 11, and 12. We have now got Athabaskan as a recognized course, but that used to be called locally developed. Southern Tutchone was locally developed. Now it’s recognized as Athabaskan because in B.C. they have several languages, which I can’t pronounce, for credit... So we have moved a lot away from locally developed just because otherwise you get kids in tight spots trying to graduate. (Rose, Interview 2)

Despite Rose’s efforts, as a result of B.C. Ministry of Education graduation requirements, locally developed and culturally relevant programs are discouraged by Rose as they inadvertently take away instructional time from B.C. recognized subjects, thereby creating an obstacle for Yukon students attempting to graduate in the B.C. system.

Thus, Rose is located at the intersection of disjointed and disharmonious curricular policy spanning territorial, regional, and national levels. She must alleviate local tensions and address the desires of parents and children. As the principal, she is trapped betwixt and between the procedures and structures of multiple systems, with little leeway to maneuver. Her sense of frustration and futility with this construct was apparent with her summation: “You know, I don’t know that there is an answer to that. I just keep trying.”

***Curriculum crunch: “So much is expected and you just don’t have enough time” —Gina***

Curriculum implementation issues grounded in the competition over instructional time are informally referred to by Yukon educators as “the curriculum crunch.” The “crunch” comes as a result of there being a finite amount of instructional time that must be divided among externally mandated educational courses and locally developed programs and initiatives.

Gina shared the practicalities of having x amount of instructional time while concurrently attempting to divide it by y amount of curriculum and programs. She identified the tension she feels resulting from having a range of options and convincing teachers of the merits of one choice over another:

...we definitely feel the curriculum crunch, where there is so much expected and you just don’t have enough time. We’re in the business of academics, so the stuff that comes across my desk of constantly making decisions about what you want to introduce into your school that is going to be part of or enhance rather than take away, and then, you have to present it to the teachers in such a way that they see it as enhancing and not taking away, for example. (Gina, Interview 2)

The aspects of managing time and schedules, or what Gina refers to as the “business of academics,” identifies the managerial and administrative demands placed upon principals, along with expectations that they will make it all fit in and work. This appears as a shared problem amongst schools, given her use of the pronoun “we.” From her perspective, when it comes to the curriculum crunch, principals appear bombarded by a multiplicity of demands to which they must react and address.

The frustration Jim felt arose as he spoke of the consequences of the “curriculum crunch” at Hillside School:

...we’ve succeeded at least in the Yukon that we’re cramming our day full, and fragmenting at the same time. So children are as early as we’d want; even kindergarten[ers] are moved around the school constantly—they are off to Music, back to the classroom for half an hour, off to PE, back to the classroom. There is a certain frustration level I think we all face just from the movement alone. (Jim, Interview 2)

Jim paints a portrait of the fragmented school reality that occurs as a result of the dismemberment of the school day at the hands of the externally driven and mandated “curriculum crunch.” Bob describes similar tensions that exist for him at Moose Meadow School, a rural school where both student academic achievement and culturally relevant instruction are important components of educational programming:

...as much as we hate [it], we can’t afford a five day culture camp. So, we cut it down to three. So, doing the culture camps, the bison hunt...you have to remember just doesn’t take up the five days of the bison hunt. It takes up five days of the HEED (Hunter Education and Ethics Development) program. So, those students are giving up 10 full days...but parents looking at it and going, “There’s 10 full days my kid’s not getting their math, their science, their socials.” They are, in a sense. (Bob, Interview 4)

Bob estimates that up to two months (40 instructional days out of 180) are devoted to culturally based learning that takes place outside of the classroom. The intersection of externally mandated B.C. curriculum, locally developed programming, cultural relevance of education, time, and parental expectations of learning taking place in the classroom converge at this point, leaving Bob to mediate these competing elements:

I’ve got parents... who have said we have way too much cultural stuff. So we bring [a local indigenous artist] in every Friday...10 days for the bison hunt, 10 days for the culture camps, not to mention all the other little cultural stuff we do when we bring stuff in. Over the course of a year between art and the hunting, and all that kind of stuff, we probably devote almost a full month to cultural stuff if you were to add it all up...I think it’s fantastic. (Bob, Interview 4)

How does Bob navigate these distinctions and the seemingly conflicting educational philosophies of classroom-based instruction versus culturally relevant learning beyond the school walls and the competition for instructional time that he identifies? He does so by taking the time to talk with parents and his school council (comprised of elected local community members) about their concerns, reframing teaching and learning as not solely school- or classroom-centric pursuits. When he meets with parents to talk about these matters, he finds that it becomes a positive learning opportunity. His enthusiasm was clear as he described the nature of these conversations:

...but when you sit down—you sit down one-on-one with the parents, or in a case like this when [the concern] came to school council. You sit down and people are...they've got their ears on and they're willing to listen, it's amazing. You can sit down and really rationalize and work it out. Get them to see that those kids are not missing anything, really. (Bob, Interview 4)

Thus, as Bob explains, addressing this tension is done by sharing with parents his educational philosophy that learning is not entirely school-centric and does not happen solely in the classroom. He suggests that curricular ends can still be achieved outside of the classroom. He reframes teaching and learning in ways illuminating that, for children, there is more value to learning when it incorporates local, traditional content and teaching practices not only in the school, but on the land and in the broader Yukon context as well.

This point was underscored by Jim, who works to ensure that, whatever the origin of the curriculum, it is delivered in ways that are engaging for students:

...when I think of curriculum I think of it as a big package, not subdivided into local and even mandated curriculum [which] is going to be open to all sorts of different approaches and challenges in delivery anyway. I guess the other way to look at the question is that it's not so much curriculum itself, but how it's delivered that is part of my job. The whole idea of managing the most effective, or encouraging the most effective way of teaching to engage kids is the issue here. (Jim, Interview 2)

Jim's comments are particularly revealing, presenting the principalship as a job where he is manager of a fragmented, subdivided, and territorialized curriculum. While he believes that the curriculum should not be parsed out as it currently is, he is nonetheless directed as principal under the Yukon Education Act to make it work to a timetable and a defined amount of externally determined resources and staff. Thus, it appears there is little room left to accommodate the educational visions of a principal, let alone the space and resources with which to realize them. Whereas the intentions of stakeholders may be good ones, the principal is responsible for ensuring that the multiplicity of curricular prescriptions are adequately addressed on time, with the resources at hand, and to the satisfaction of students, parents, and policymakers.

Jim identified examples where students were covering the academic curriculum in ways that were cul-

turally and contextually relevant to them. These included a grade 3 pond study where students learned with a fluent elder the indigenous vocabulary and medicinal properties of local plants found near the school. An important distinction for Jim was the difference between process and product in relation to curriculum:

Product is the important part here; in other words, the process is really important and we think the kids are gaining through the process, but some kind of a product is also important...So when I say product, it's not the best word, but it's the only one I can find to describe it. There has to be some kind of an outcome, and those are very tangible ones. When we have our bison feast and the kids from grade 7 get up and talk to the audience about their experience on the land—that's product. In grade 3 we produced a Paddy's Pond booklet. (Jim, Interview 2)

Here, Jim defines the product which can be placed into what he described in a later interview as a "curricular bubble." In order for the bison hunt to be deemed legitimate from the perspective of those inhabiting the outer layers of the sphere of control, it must be packaged and labeled, the curricular achievements clearly identified for all to see. This is done to justify the allocation of time and resources required to engage in this cultural activity.

In summary, the four principals present a detailed portrait of the fragmented and conflicting curricular contexts through which they must navigate. The competition between a finite amount of time and resources is theirs alone to manage as they deploy both locally developed and externally mandated curriculum. Standardized assessment practices require that principals strike a balance between the amount of time dedicated to locally developed and culturally relevant learning practices. When culturally relevant learning is incorporated, it must be packaged, delivered, and performed in ways which meet with system approval by fitting into the curriculum. While doing all these things, principals must somehow strike a balance that incorporates the career desires parents have for their children.

The principals in this study describe how they are placed squarely in the middle of the competition of the creation of local and relevant school experiences while meeting the requirements of a regime of external curricula and standardized assessments to measure educational attainment. Thus, the effect of these curricular struggles on principals is that they appear



to have little opportunity to be educational leaders who develop curricula and instigate new initiatives that are relevant and meaningful to their indigenous children and communities.

***Field trip policies: “There was no input from anybody” —Bob***

The participants identified field trip policies, as they relate to taking students outdoors onto the Yukon landscape, as a challenge. These policies are designed and mandated by the Yukon Department of Education in a detailed directive (Policy 3004, Field Trip Policy, June 2006) indicating a number of standards and procedures principals and teachers must adhere to. Although a specific rationale for field trips is not indicated in the policy document, it does state that the Department of Education supports “enabling and encouraging ‘out of the classroom’ learning experiences as a way of engaging students in the learning process and delivering the curriculum in a more culturally relevant and holistic way” (p. 2).

Given the need to move students between the school and field trip sites, student transportation is an aspect of the field trip policy that is an issue for Bob. On such matters, he feels that there is no consultation with him. His frustration came readily to the surface when asked to what extent he felt included by the Department of Education with respect to policy development, their transmission, and their deployment at the school level:

Well, the van policy was...that just came out of the blue. There was no input from anybody. We had our school vans and we used to have a luggage rack on the top of the school van. We used to have a hitch on the back...It was a 15-passenger van, which was ideal for us because our biggest class size is 15. Then we get this edict, this ruling from above, that says, “Take off your roof rack, take off your trailer hitch, remove the back seat, and don’t you dare put any luggage in the cavity that’s left where the seat was”... making it totally useless. (Bob, Interview 2)

The effects of unilateral policy directives were far-reaching and felt immediately. In this particular case, the response by Bob and other principals resulted in the purchase of new vans by the Department of Education. These aspects of transporting students are not the only issue. As the participants in this study point out, hiring the teachers they feel are best suited to their children and their school also brings them into

conflict with Department of Education policies.

***Hiring protocol: “Sometimes there’s not a good fit. I’m all about good fits” —Gina***

Jim identified the staffing of the school as his biggest policy problem. When asked to identify the challenges he faces in relation to educational policies, he shared two: the Yukon Department of Education hiring protocol and the staffing formula. The Department of Education Staffing Protocol (2009) directs that priority is to be given to First Nations teachers when hiring decisions are made: “This protocol reflects the Department’s commitment to ensuring that First Nations teachers are given priority in hiring decisions” (p.1). Jim describes the balancing act between adhering to Department of Education policy directives and meeting the instructional needs of students in his school:

We never seem to get enough support [in terms of staff]....The other area of staffing is that we have a hiring protocol, which means that certain groups have to be looked at before other groups and it makes a lot of sense, and it’s a good idea, but there are a lot of gray areas. Every year what we try to do is book half of our classroom positions as being taught by First Nation teachers at any given time reflecting our population. But trying to maintain that in light of all the other protocols is sometimes pretty difficult to do. Plus you want to choose the best teacher for the job, not just somebody who fits the protocol. There is a huge issue. (Jim, Interview 2)

Jim describes three important aspects: first, he believes the level of staffing for his school, as determined by the Yukon Department of Education’s staffing formula, is inadequate to meet the needs of the children in his school. Then, within the framework of this policy directive, he strives to balance his staff in order that it is reflective of the student population at Hillside School. This poses challenges as he concurrently hires and assigns people who he believes are the best teachers for his students. These factors combine to make the adequate and appropriate staffing of his school with the best teachers (however defined) for his students a complex and demanding task.

Gina also isolated the hiring protocol as a policy challenge. She believes they constrain teacher transfers between schools and the principal’s ability to select those who they feel are best suited to the school:

...first dibs is for permanent teachers. I don't disagree with that part of it. Then, the hierarchy with First Nations people, with people from [the Yukon Native Teacher Education Program], that kind of thing I do disagree with. I mean, we have to be looking at what's best for the kids and what's best for our school. Sometimes there's not a good fit. I'm all about good fits. (Gina, Interview 4)

Getting that best "fit" for his students and his school despite the application of the hiring protocol is also of primary importance for Bob, and he was animated when it came to this topic. The most reactive of all principals, Bob has deliberately offered jobs to teachers in clear contravention of this Department of Education policy. Regardless of the consequences, he strives to hire who he feels is best suited to his school and the children:

I've broken the rules, I've gotten my fingers slapped many a time by the Department because I didn't follow hiring protocols, but my position has always been: I don't care if they're one-legged, two-legged, black, blue, green, missing an eye, blind, as long as they're the best teacher available for what I need. Now, I know the Department has different rules; they have hiring protocols and all that sort of stuff. I've never used them, and it's got me in trouble, which is fine because for me, the bottom line [is] the kids. I mean, there are rules and, you know, you can always get around [them]. I really, truly do believe, and I know I shouldn't be saying this, but asking for forgiveness is a whole lot easier [than asking for permission]. (Bob, Interview 1)

Such is Bob's disregard for the hiring protocol that he was investigated by the Department of Education after he took it upon himself to offer a teacher a position. He explained his strategy of offering the position to the teacher he wished to select first, thereby making it highly problematic for the HR Department to rescind his offer and present it to another candidate:

I was investigated by [the head of Human Resources] because I hired somebody I shouldn't have hired, because I broke all the protocols of hiring. My argument to her was "I best know my school, I know what I need in this position. I know what the community wants, I know what my School Council wants, and I know what's best for the kids. I'm hiring this [person], I'd already hired her, they couldn't go back [on this offer]." I even said to her on the phone, I said, "Gertrude, I

hope you're asking all these same questions to all the administrators in the Yukon, because I've got a feeling I'm getting singled out here." (Bob, Interview 3)

The battle over who will staff the school reveals an important construct: while Bob and the Yukon Department of Education grapple with each, the involvement of the indigenous community in the staffing decisions of the school appears absent. Through his disregard for educational policy, Bob may wrest control of hiring, yet this presents an instance where non-indigenous decision makers may marginalize indigenous contributions with respect to important workings of the school. In such a way, the fight between the non-indigenous actors over who will staff the school becomes a struggle of substitution: One form of centralization competes with another, in the absence of inclusion of indigenous community input into important decisions such as who will teach the indigenous children attending Moose Meadow School.

Bob reinforced the primacy of his devotion to his students, regardless of the potential for punitive consequences as a result of his actions. He passionately expressed what his job meant to him and what gives him validation as Moose Meadow's principal:

My kids. I'll break every rule, I'll bend every rule. I'll do whatever I can. My only concern is my 60 kids and my staff. I don't give a shit about the Department of Education. I say that with a certain amount of honesty, because I don't think they give a shit about me. As you know from other interviews, there have been a number of situations where I have been cut loose. (Bob, Interview 5)

The principals in this study feel constrained by Department of Education policy, unable to exercise their educational judgment to hire those who they believe are the best teachers for their school. They expressed intense frustration and stress as a result of such policy disjunctures. A description of how they deal with these intense challenges follows.

### ***Coping with challenges and tensions: "I found a counsellor" —Rose***

Depending on the individual, and the degree of challenges and tensions faced at a particular time, each describes personalized approaches to coping with them. Bob made reference to a legal action that he initiated after he believed he had been defamed by one of his School Council members. Doing so exacted

a personal toll on him, the level of stress he experienced compounded by what he perceived to be a lack of support from the Department of Education. For a person of his high energy level, who finds pleasure in his work and enjoys being with his students, his response was to leave the school and his position:

I was so fed up at that point, after those accusations ... The crap I was getting from the Department [of Education] rather than support. It was like, "How dare you say that to one of your school council members?" It was like, "What?!" So, I just took two months off. I went away. I went back home, and I did absolutely nothing. I just stayed with my family and built up my family ties again. (Bob, Interview 3)

Dealing with challenges and tensions requires an ongoing effort to keep busy, pursue hobbies, and engage in a variety of outdoor pursuits. Engaging in a diversity of activities allows Bob to mentally disconnect from the challenges and tensions that accompany his occupation:

I really stay busy with outdoor stuff. When I go sledding or I go four-wheeling, I just leave school behind. I can really compartmentalize things. I can truly block off school. When I leave school, I can really leave it behind me...I sleep like a baby. When I walk out of this door, I don't care what's happening in my school, I have this knack—I've always had it—I shut it out. (Bob, Interview 3)

Rose identified different strategies than Bob for dealing with the challenges and tensions which she faces in her role:

I think experience helps you a lot. After you have lived through the meat grinder for a few years you figure out what's going to get you in [trouble] and what's not, so experience is a big one. (Rose, Interview 3)

Rose describes the conflicts of practice and policy using the metaphor of a "meat grinder." It's important to learn to avoid conflict as a result of being caught between the principalship and Department of Education policies. For her, confidentiality and establishing distance from her community is very important in this regard:

...I found a counsellor who is completely confidential...now I go about every 6 weeks or so. I think for my own mental health I had to have someone that I could speak to about issues, no matter what they were, to understand why a

certain parent saying a certain thing pushed my buttons or why a certain kid doing a certain thing pushed my buttons, and he helped me to do that. (Rose, Interview 3)

On a highly personal and individual level, Rose engages in a number of actions which further assist in her self-preservation and maintenance of mental well-being:

More and more I've protected my personal time from my school time... I've started a book club, I quilt, I ski, I walk a lot, go boating... Walking around in the outdoors and just soaking in the landscape and I think that really helps. So I try to walk to school and walk home. I also sometimes pray during that time. (Rose, Interview 3)

Bob and Rose, as the two principals in rural and isolated Yukon communities, identify the need to separate their work life and personal life as visible principals in their respective communities. Professional isolation as a result of the maintenance of confidentiality becomes a challenge when there is no one else with whom to talk things through. Thus, Bob and Rose engage in relatively solitary activities with small groups of individuals. Regardless of the approaches taken, they are highly personal, largely individualized, and meaningful to each individual.

## Discussion

The strategies the interviewed principals employ in order to address the tensions arising from the policy contexts in which they are enmeshed are not ones that may exist in the broader body of educational leadership literature: in light of the macro level policy challenges they face, the principals employed micro level strategies, including both the subtle and blatant circumvention of policy (such as manipulating and contravening the hiring protocol). Principals also worked to convince parents to shift their views on teaching, learning, and what constitutes "education" with respect to time spent on field trips, thus mediating the tensions that arise as a result of the contradictions found at the intersection of policy and community and parental desires for children. As a result, their practice focuses on the administration and management of these factors. On one hand, they are the policy operatives of the Yukon Department of Education and on the other, the educational advocates for their schools. Not always do these priorities align, and as they indicated, they contradict each other in ways that can be frustrating and disappointing.

The participants reinforce the disjuncture between policy and the actions of educators identified by Renihan (1999) who, offering a British Columbia perspective, asserts: "I believe that a great dissonance exists between the agendas of politicians and policy-makers and the interests and abilities of our educators in the trenches to respond" (p. 211). Similarly, the principals in this study identified a number of policy challenges that they attempt to reconcile in their daily practice. They indicate that being trapped in the middle of the contradictory discourses of curriculum and policies is highly frustrating and stressful: being located at the center of this context exacts a heavy personal toll.

The specific challenges identified by the rural principals suggest that being a principal in rural and isolated locations, where the principal is a highly visible community member, can be particularly challenging based on the complexity of context, human interactions, and negotiations (Clark & Wildy, 2004). Illustrative of this complexity is the difficulty in implementing locally developed curriculum in order that the bison hunt be deemed a worthwhile activity by the Department of Education or the B.C. Ministry of Education. The merge of local and externally mandated curricular priorities is done through the creation of a spectacle or an illusion, referred to as a "curricular bubble" by Jim. Traditional cultural activities must be repackaged and labeled to suit Ministry-approved curriculum. Thus, while local and culturally relevant curriculum is identified as valued by the Yukon Education Act, it is colonized by a larger, externally created, and superimposed B.C. curricular system.

Left unadapted to local context, curriculum delivery takes on the form of a colonizing spectacle that must be shown as being delivered to, and learned by, students to meet external requirements. This was recognized in this study by the "curriculum crunch." In the quest to manage this compacted curricular space and exhibit suitable numerical results for comparative purposes, there is little room created for discussion and debate as to how its meaning is relevant to the children living in indigenous communities.

A result of the policy disjunctures between the Yukon Department of Education and the participants is a distraction and loss of focus on the indigenous communities for whom they work. While struggling with one another, they may not be listening to the voices and engaging with their respective local indigenous communities. Thus, broader educational conversations that include community voices do not

appear to occur. These distractions disempower principals from emerging as educational leaders, able to employ personal judgment in the pursuit of an educational vision that includes the aspirations of the school community. Instead, they are constrained and confined to being small, frustrated cogs in a larger educational machine, responsible and accountable for the management functions required to balance competing educational ends, to the satisfaction of multiple external levels of control.

Thus, while some principals endeavour to push forward an increased presence of indigenous culture and language in their schools, as expressions of indigeneity, they remain constrained and limited in doing so by policies requiring that primary importance be placed on the delivery of mandated B.C. curriculum. Despite Hallinger's and Leithwood's (1996) assertion that, "It is time to enrich theory and practice in education by seeking out the diversity of ideas and practices that have existed largely hidden in the shadows of the dominant Western paradigms that have guided the field" (p. 100), the dominance of externally designed and mandated curriculum operates as a colonizing force in the Yukon.

To varying degrees, the principals in this study have taken up Hallinger's and Leithwood's call, describing ways that they develop and adapt the curricula offered to their students in order that it is culturally and contextually relevant to them. Yet, principals are constrained by time and the current curriculum and policy structure to the point that they are curtailed from engaging in conversations with their communities that could lead to the development of a vision of indigenous education.

At this point, the question thus arises as to whether students and education in the Yukon would be better served by relinquishing externally mandated curricula in favour of Yukon-defined curricula that better allows for locally based development and adaptation. This is in no way meant to imply that the Yukon educational system should disengage from consortia such as the Western and Northern Canadian Protocol curriculum framework. Just as Alberta and B.C. employ their own provincial curricula, so too could the Yukon contribute its own territorially developed curricula to this partnership. In such a construct, space could then be given to indigeneity and indigenous culture beyond its current narration and articulation in a subservient way within the "curricular bubble."

## Concluding thoughts

This article examined the policy contexts in which Yukon principals are enmeshed, identifying the strategies they employ at the complex intersection of multiple policy levels. The study reveals how, in light of the macro level challenges they face, they employed micro level strategies, including both the subtle and the blatant circumvention of policy and convincing parents and staff to shift their views on teaching, learning, and what constitutes "education."

As a result of an organizational relationship where unequal power is the norm, the Yukon Department of Education employs policy as a mechanism through which to maintain an unequal power relationship over schools, communities, and individuals. Thus, despite principals being referred to as educational leaders by the Yukon Department of Education, power exerted by the Department of Education serves to reinforce the managerial and administrative nature of the principal's role.

Beyond the principal and teachers in classrooms are politicians, policymakers, and a complex constellation of mediating variables: resource allocation, recruitment and hiring of staff, professional development, community relations, and competing curricular goals, to name a few. Located at the center of this multilayered, overlapping, and fragmented policy context stands the principal, constrained by the responsibility for ensuring that these aspects avoid collision with each other and that all runs smoothly.

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