

# Defining educational leadership in Canada's Yukon Territory: “Hmmm, that's a good question...”

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## Abstract

Studies examining educational leadership in northern Canada appear rare. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to present findings from a 2010 study of educational leadership in Canada's Yukon Territory. The study adopts a critical ethnographic approach to unpack educational leadership as construed and enacted by two male and two female non-Indigenous principals living and working in Indigenous Yukon contexts. Extensive interviews, observations, and document reviews in four Yukon schools were conducted to shed light upon the research questions. This research reveals how school principals, individuals often referred to as “educational leaders,” define educational leadership despite the inability on the part of universities, the extant body of literature, or educational systems to articulate what this term even means (Allix & Gronn, 2005). The study identifies that these Yukon principals define educational leadership in managerial and administrative ways, referring to themselves as principals who have a “function” and a “job” as they juggle the continuous ambiguity they face while wearing the multiple “hats” of teacher, principal, and community leader.

## Résumé

Cet article présente une étude réalisée en 2010 sur le leadership en éducation dans le territoire du Yukon au Canada. Un objectif de cette recherche a été d'entreprendre une étude critique et ethnographique visant à examiner le leadership en éducation tel qu'il est interprété et édicté par deux hommes et deux femmes non-autochtones, directeurs et directrices d'école, qui vivent et travaillent parmi des populations autochtones au Yukon. Des entretiens approfondis, des observations, ainsi que l'étude de documents ont été entrepris. Un autre objectif de cette étude a été de déterminer comment les directeurs d'école, souvent appelés «leaders de l'éducation», définissaient le leadership en éducation, malgré l'incapacité de la part des universités, du corps littéraire actuel, ou des systèmes éducatifs, d'en donner une définition. (Allix et Gronn 2005). L'étude montre que les directeurs définissent le leadership en éducation d'un point de vue managérial et administratif, faisant référence à eux-mêmes en tant que directeurs qui ont une «fonction» et un «travail» du fait qu'ils jonglent en permanence avec l'ambiguïté existante entre les différents «chapeaux» qu'ils portent : enseignant, directeur, chef de la communauté. L'étude souligne la nécessité de redéfinir ce qu'est et ce que doit faire un directeur en tant qu'acteur éducatif dans le contexte du Yukon.

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**Introduction**

This article reports on a 2010 study of educational leadership in Canada's Yukon Territory. An aim of this research was to undertake a critical ethnographic study which examined educational leadership as construed and enacted by two male and two female non-Indigenous principals living and working in Indigenous Yukon contexts. A goal of this study was to identify how school principals, individuals often referred to as "educational leaders," define educational leadership despite the inability on the part of universities, the extant body of literature, or educational systems to articulate what this term even means (Allix & Gronn, 2005). I embarked on this study based, in large part, on my experiences as a non-Indigenous school principal working in Indigenous Yukon contexts. When I began as a new principal, I observed that studies of principals in similar contexts to my own appeared absent. This is reinforced by Goddard and Foster (2002):

there have been few examinations of school leadership that have been grounded in Canada's northern region. This lack of research focusing on northern education generally, and the relationship between educational leadership and the local culture in particular, identifies a serious gap in the literature. (pp. 5-6)

I was perplexed by the lack of contextualized and culturally sensitive approaches to educational leadership, particularly in the Canadian North. Given my public school teaching experiences in southern Canada and magisterial studies informed entirely by Euro-western leadership perspectives, and despite Escobar-Ortloff and Ortloff's (2003) assertion that "Culture has a powerful influence on how and what people think about knowledge, learning, and

education” (p. 255), I was, at this early stage of my career, unaware that the daily drama of being a principal could be situated within a complexity of broader cultural frames than those in which I had previously been immersed. With these aspects in mind, I set out to conduct an in-depth examination of how non-Indigenous school administrators (principals and vice-principals) working in Indigenous school and community contexts understand leadership in rural, isolated communities; how they establish their identities and what it means to be an educational leader; how they determine what it is that leaders do and why; and how they construct their conceptions of leadership specific to the unique contexts of the Yukon Territory. Thus, this examination is distinct in that it is not a study of cross-cultural educational leadership, but rather a study of educational leadership in Indigenous contexts. Using this point of departure, this research study examines educational leadership in a cross-cultural context situated in an isolated, rural, and diverse region that has not been researched to date: the Yukon Territory, a jurisdiction where the majority of First Nations have settled land claims with the federal and territorial governments in the process of facilitating self-determination.

### **A Unique Canadian Territory**

The Yukon Territory is Canada's westernmost and smallest territory, situated due north of the province of British Columbia. Located north of the 60<sup>th</sup> parallel, its western boundary is shared with the state of Alaska. A rugged and beautiful land that experiences winter temperatures that can drop as low as -55<sup>C</sup>, it also is known informally as the “land of the midnight sun” given that, in summer, the sun may not set at all. It is home to 30,372, or 0.096% of Canada's 31,612,897 people, yet accounts for 5% of the total of the landmass of the second-largest country in the world (Government of Yukon, 2005). Wales can be placed into the Yukon's

geographic space just over 23 times. Studies of educational leadership conducted specifically in this geographic space are rare, further complicating understandings of how education leadership is construed and enacted in this unique Canadian territory.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **The Confusing Epistemology of Educational Leadership**

A central challenge facing both researchers and practitioners specific to the topic of educational leadership is the confusing epistemology, or the lack of clear meaning regarding the notion of leadership, and the limitations of the current body of educational leadership literature. On this point, English (2003) describes the educational leadership field as one marked by “frailties, complexities, contradictions, and discontinuities” (p.33). This confusing epistemic foundation and conceptual vagueness regarding educational leadership is perhaps best identified by Allix and Gronn (2005):

Despite a long history of interest and fascination, and a relatively shorter history of systematic investigation, the phenomenon that is referred to as ‘leadership’ remains in large part a theoretical enigma and paradox... In recent years, doubts concerning the integrity of the concept have raised the question of whether leadership refers to anything real at all, and whether it is even fruitful to entertain such a notion. (pp. 181-182)

Allix and Gronn identify a core challenge to researching leadership, particularly in light of the following question: What is educational leadership? Reinforcing the complexity identified above, and serving to further complicate understandings of educational leadership in the aim of answering such a question, is the historical reliance upon what Rayner and Gunter (2005) describe as “an abstraction of propositions and required behaviours, often derived from non-

educational settings by those at a distance from where this leadership is practiced” (p. 151).

The limited knowledge base of educational leadership further makes elusive the answer, or answers, to the educational leadership question. With respect to the study of educational leadership, Stack and Mazawi (2009) point to “a striking contradiction that students of educational leadership often face: the conceptual and theoretical confusion over what educational leadership stands for” (p. 71). This inability to define leadership is further reinforced by the findings of the *Fostering Tomorrow's Educational Leaders* report (Stack et al., 2006) which concluded:

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

The confounding issues related to what leadership means within diverse educational contexts also creates dissatisfaction and generates tensions on the part of practising school administrators and researchers alike. Practitioners have strong opinions regarding the lack of effectiveness and transferability of what they have learned relative to the needs of the position. In an American study of school principals, Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, and Gundlach (2003) found that most administrators felt that they were short-changed by the training they received:

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

Murphy (2005) provides a North American historical context, suggesting that the school leader as manager of the corporate enterprise (“and its apotheosis, the CEO,” p. 156) is a concept that emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Much of the language of the educational leadership field is reflected in these roots: management by walking about, management by objective, best practices, and benchmarks are all borrowed terms. After World War Two, a science of administration perspective was applied to educational leadership, giving rise to a two-pillared foundation, leading to one branch focusing on management, the other on the social sciences. This bifurcated foundation adds to the epistemological confusion surrounding educational leadership and adds further uncertainty to the lives of non-Indigenous leaders in Indigenous communities. Left to navigate the tensions resulting from the incompatibility of managerial approaches to leadership with educational desires and aspirations embedded within broader cultural frames, principals cannot rely upon their educational leadership development experiences and knowledge alone to assist them, for reasons which will be outlined below.

The aforementioned twinning is evidenced and perpetuated in the “traditional” curriculum content of many educational leadership and administration graduate programs. Expressing his frustration with the inadequacies of administrative preparation, Murphy (2007) argues that, “by design, and by the accumulated sediment of the decades, current structures in the preparation of school leaders have failed and will continue to do so. They cannot be salvaged in any real sense, nor should we continue to pursue that goal” (p. 583).

Adding further to his dissatisfaction, Murphy expresses concern that the historical inadequacies of educational leadership development available to current and prospective school administrators, will translate to practice: “because universities, especially research universities,

have constructed their programs with raw materials acquired from the warehouse of academe. In the meantime, they have marginalized practice” (p. 583). Thus, Murphy’s discontent appears rooted in the identified gap between educational leadership as construed and enacted by principals in the field, and how the phenomenon of educational leadership is understood and taught by university graduate programs in a way that does not include and learn from the perspectives of practitioners.

Reinforcing this inability of educational leadership to emerge as its own “stand alone” discipline or field of practice has been the grafting of ideas and philosophies taken from other areas. The resultant legacy of doing so has served to seriously hinder the development of educational leadership and hampered its emergence as a profession in its own right. It underscores the foundational problem that understandings of educational leadership continue to be limited ones.

Such grafting from other knowledge bases onto the educational leadership field appears to have largely guided and informed the development of the profession, leading to the positioning and replication of school principals into an imbalance that focuses more on management (the term Site Based Management being a representative example) and less on educational leaders and leadership (Lingard & Christie, 2003). Leader traits and abilities have become more the focus than, for example, assisting the development of good teacher practice throughout the school. This is replicated in professional journals and policy documents that focus predominantly on the managerial aspects of the job, with little regard to curriculum, pedagogy, or assessment (as cited in Lingard & Christie, p. 329).

At this point, it becomes clear that two prevailing theories of educational leadership development are dominant: On the one hand, Murphy asserts that practice is a dimension of educational leadership preparation that is underemphasised at the university curriculum level. On the other hand rests the assertion by Stack et al. (2006) that the educational leadership programs examined in their report have not afforded enough attention to the epistemic facets of educational leadership. Such a distinct inconsistency of belief points directly to the following question: Where do non-Indigenous educational leaders in Indigenous contexts locate themselves in such confusing and contested terrain? While it is perhaps safe to wager that the answer to this question lies somewhere in between, one can only assume this to be the case in the absence of specific leadership research involving non-Indigenous school leaders in remote and isolated Indigenous contexts.

Educational leadership literature is often marked by a diminished focus on descriptions or explanations relating to the contexts, situations, and the nature of constituents (students, teachers, parents, community) that may influence and be influenced by educational leadership. Hallinger (1995) underscores this historical absence of culture as a variable of educational leadership, identifying that conceptions of leadership and management are often transferred to different cultures with little concern given to their validity. This is reaffirmed by Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) who point to the dominant application of Eurocentric concepts of leadership and the limitation this poses specific to understanding educational leadership employing a cultural frame:

Without placing blame anywhere, 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)



## **Leadership, Culture, and Context**

In this study, an examination of the literature identifying the historical absence of culture, and in particular Indigenous cultures, frames and serves to reinforce the importance of cross-cultural research and understandings of educational leadership. Offering a basis for this examination as it relates specifically to this research project, Hallinger and Leithwood (1998) assert:

Research outside education suggests that there are differences across cultures in terms of how people define leadership. The early stages of research into cross-cultural conceptions of leadership should try to explore the meaning of leadership from the perspectives of people within a given culture...[Among other techniques, this research should examine] ...the use of different models of leadership in different cultures. (p. 31)

The educational leadership literature base focuses more on what a specific leader “does” and less on the “how” and why” he or she chooses to do it, therefore explorations regarding conceptualizations of educational leadership employing a broader sense than its sole embodiment in one person—the school principal—are warranted. This is reinforced by Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004) who argue that:

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

It is here that two schools of thought come into obvious conflict with each other in direct relation to educational leadership—the first typified by the belief that leadership is culturally, contextually, and situationally located; the second by the certainty that leadership can be prescribed, standardized, and reduced to quantifiable traits or characteristics generalizable across contexts. Despite the aforementioned significance of culture and context specific to attempts at broadening notions of educational leadership, efforts made in order to quantify, codify, and simplify educational leadership practice are very strong, particularly in the US. These efforts and policy trends have an impact on educational leadership in Canada, particularly given the recent publication of leadership standards in the province of British Columbia which do not include culture as a significant component of leadership. Given the proximity of British Columbia to the Yukon and the attendance of Yukon teachers and administrators at courses and professional development (i.e., the annual British Columbia Principals and Vice-Principals Association short course for educational leaders), the reinforcement of the under-emphasis of culture and context with respect to how educational leadership is construed and understood gives cause for concern.

While the question of what constitutes educational leadership is a highly challenging and problematic one to answer, Stack, et al. (2006) add a further important aspect for consideration: “How do we determine which leadership skills, knowledge, and values are required, who decides them, and by what criteria?” (p. 18). These questions further add to the vagueness of what comprises educational leadership, particularly when it comes to Indigenous contexts which have remained on the margins of any systematic consideration.

### **Study Methodology and School Profiles**

I am a non-Indigenous school administrator who has lived and worked for 15 years in the Canadian north, specifically in the Yukon Territory. An aim of this research was to undertake a critical ethnographic study which examined educational leadership as construed and enacted by non-Indigenous principals living and working in Indigenous Yukon contexts. Specific to methodological choice, Glesne (1999) offers, "The research methods you choose say something about your views on what qualifies as valuable knowledge and your perspective on the nature of reality or ontology" (p. 4). The ontological position taken in this investigation is founded upon my belief that there are multiple realities and truths that will be identified, hence the research decision to employ a method which allows for such an inclusion. Glesne affirms such a position stating, "Qualitative methods are generally supported by the interpretivist (also referred to as constructivist) paradigm, which portrays a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever-changing" (p. 5). This description aligns well with the reality in which non-Indigenous school administrators live and work in the Yukon context and underpins the research decisions outlined in the following subsections.

Once Yukon Department of Education approval to conduct research in schools was granted and Research Ethics Board reviews were finalized, four participants (two male, two female) who were experienced principals in rural and urban Yukon schools received in letterform an invitation to participate (which each accepted) and a letter of consent with which to indicate their willingness to participate in the study. These documents explained the background and purposes of the study, the aim and scope of the research, the ethics protocols adhered to, and data gathering methods.

Multiple sources of data were gathered in the conduct of this research project. These data included observations, interviews, and document reviews as a means of examining the patterns of behaviour, interactions with others, way of life, and language and beliefs of non-Indigenous principals in Yukon Indigenous contexts. The purpose of gathering multiple sources of data is not solely to compile and combine them, but rather that they complement each other, add richness to the research, and counteract each other as a means to enhance validity. Prior to the data collection phase commencing, I became conversant in the use of the qualitative data analysis program Atlas t.i. This program was used to sort data and generate field codes from the data gathered through observations, interviews, document reviews, and my reflective field journal. Atlas t.i. was also used to facilitate the analysis of the interviews, the data gathered through observations, and documents, allowing for the generation of themes as a result of this data analysis. Once interviews were transcribed, participants received copies of them for their review and further comment. Throughout the iterative process of gathering data, organizing the information collected, and engaging in the process of analysis, a number of specific themes from the data analysis process were generated. Themes are “abstract (and often fuzzy) constructs that investigators identify before, during, and after data collection” (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 780). Within the data collected, patterned regularities (as cited in Creswell, 1998) were searched for and identified as a result of the data analysis. I then gathered research data through the conduct of fieldwork in Yukon schools. Creswell (1998) describes the actions of the researcher through offering the following definition of fieldwork: “the ethnographer engages in extensive work in the field, called fieldwork, gathering information through observations, interviews, and materials helpful in developing a portrait and establishing ‘cultural rules’ of the culture-sharing group” (p.

60).

With respect to validity, the argument could be made that, having been a Yukon school administrator for 15 years, I am biased by my own knowledge, experiences, and attitudes which have grown and taken shape over a substantial period of time. In acknowledging this argument and responding to it, counterarguments can also be made as to the importance and value of my experiences in relation to this study. For example, the professional relationship I have with Yukon school principals engenders trust and afforded me access to the research sites. My experience also serves as a backdrop against which reflexivity, or the process by which we “are implored to rethink how we interpret and write up our field experiences (Foley, 2002, p. 163) can be reflected. Such a viewpoint is supported by Lassiter (2005) who in reference to ethnographic honesty offers: “...personal experience can be an intimate part of the ethnographic equation which links coexperience, intersubjectivity, and co-understandings, both in fieldwork and the writing of the ethnographic text” (p.115). With considerations of validity at the forefront, verification procedures were employed (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) to ensure trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Built into this investigation were specific strategies to attend to trustworthiness, including negative cases and unconfirming evidence, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement and persistent observation, reflection on my own subjectivity, audit trails, and member checks.

Once the data gathering and analysis phases were complete, “thick descriptions” (Denzin, 1989), or a rich, detailed recount of the responses of the participants were constructed to present

a detailed and nuanced examination of their lives and identities. The four school sites, and their principals, are briefly described here<sup>1</sup>:

### **Hillside School**

Hillside Elementary School is located in one of the many neighbourhoods of the Territorial capital (pop. 23, 638). It offers Kindergarten-Grade 7 programming to approximately 300 students. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children attend this school. Jim, the male principal of Hillside Elementary, is a long-serving “administrator” who also teaches for part of each instructional day. Originally from eastern Canada, Jim came to the Yukon in the early 1990s after being in a rural and isolated northern British Columbia school as principal for eight years. He began a master’s degree in educational administration over 20 years ago, but later switched his focus to curriculum and instruction, based on his belief that doing so had greater applicability to his work. Prior to commencing his first teaching position in a southern Canadian location in 1969, Jim worked for a railway and as a stockbroker. With a career spanning almost 40 years, he expresses no concrete thoughts of retiring.

### **Klondike School**

This school is located in a neighbourhood of Whitehorse and has between 50 and 100 elementary children enrolled. Gina, the female principal of this school, is a long-serving teacher and administrator who teaches for 50% of the instructional day. A single mother of three children, Gina left the Yukon to complete her teacher training. After a number of years teaching in a rural Yukon community and in Whitehorse, she completed a masters degree in special

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<sup>1</sup> The names of each principal and school site have been changed.

education followed by a masters degree in educational administration. The Yukon has been her home all her life: raised in the Territory, Gina is now a grandmother who is devoted to her grandchildren. Prior to becoming principal of Klondike School three years ago, she was a teacher at another Whitehorse school for 15 years.

### **Mountainview School**

This rural Yukon school offers K-12 programming to between 100-150 students. It is situated in the traditional territory of a Yukon First Nation. Rose, the female principal of the school, has been a long-term community resident, teacher, and administrator who teaches high school courses each afternoon as part of her assignment. Originally from a large city in central Canada, Rose worked as an office assistant before deciding to enter the teaching profession. Her teacher training experience covered both elementary and secondary education. Now in her mid-fifties, Rose has been a teacher at Mountainview School since 1979 and was appointed to the principalship in 2001. Similar to Jim, she began her magisterial studies in educational administration, but later transferred to the curriculum stream of the program based on her own admission that “curriculum was way more fun.”

### **Moose Meadow School**

Moose Meadow School is located in rural Yukon. Situated in the traditional lands of a Yukon First Nation, the school serves a population of 50-75 students. Bob, the male principal, was appointed principal over five years ago. Born in a European country, Bob moved with his parents and siblings to an isolated community in the Yukon in 1964. He has been a truck driver, a millwright, a heavy equipment operator, and a small-aircraft pilot prior to pursuing a bachelor

of education degree at a southern Canadian university in his mid-forties. After teaching in another rural Yukon community for 6 years, Bob applied for the principalship of Moose Meadow School. He teaches in the computer lab approximately 40% of the day, where he enjoys working on web-based projects with his students. The only principal in this study without a post-graduate degree, he expressed no desire to commence further studies in education given his intention to retire in the near future.

### **Findings**

Presented here are excerpts from the series of semi-structured interviews conducted over a period of six months with Bob, Rose, Jim, and Gina, as they defined educational leadership, followed by an analysis and concluding comments. In order to shed light on the phenomenon of educational leadership from a number of perspectives, each participant was asked to define educational leadership, to reflect on their experiences as a principal, to comment on how their conception of educational may have changed over the course of their career, and what it meant for them to be a principal

#### **Defining Educational Leadership**

*“Hmmm, that’s a good question” —Bob*

As the participants in this study indicate, defining educational leadership either conceptually or through their own behaviours was not an easy task. When asked to define educational leadership, Bob paused for a moment and then only could share the following attempt at an educational leadership definition: “It is really an almost indefinable...maybe not indefinable, but complicated” (Bob, interview 3).



Bob described how one grows in the role by first becoming a principal and gaining experience and expertise in the role over time. Much of what Bob shed light on, in terms of educational leadership, was grounded in personality traits and experience which helped to develop what he termed “common sense”:

Being happy and bubbly, and people that are outgoing and really friendly with the kids and they're good teachers. As experience comes, you start to grow comfortable in your position. When all is said and done, and I don't care how intelligent you are or how articulate you are, it comes down to common sense. There's no big secret to it. (Bob, interview 3)

Providing specific examples with respect to the application of common sense, Bob elaborated on this, describing how it guided his relationships with others and permeated his educational practice in a multitude of ways:

What I have found in administration is you need a whole lot of common sense. It just doesn't go much beyond that. It's not the world's toughest job. Common sense, keep your cool, develop a great relationship with your parents and your staff and your school council. (Bob, interview 3)

Bob's comments with regard to common sense with respect to the “job” of administration (distinct from any mention of educational leadership) presuppose a common world view for all others. As Bob sees it, there is a universal understanding of what makes sense in the running of a school and relationships with stakeholders. Enunciating a definition of educational leadership, or even components or aspects of educational leadership without invoking administration and management clearly was a difficult task for Bob. When attempting to define educational leadership, Gina identified a number of actions which she viewed as integral to how she saw herself as an educational leader. Much like Bob, defining educational leadership was not an easy

task for her initially. In a similar manner to him, she identified educational leadership's elusive nature, prefacing her comments by referring to the concept as enormous. She then deconstructed educational leadership into the actions or tasks she engaged in on a daily basis:

It's so huge—in any way that I can support teachers, whether it's in terms of resources, in terms of professional development, in terms of encouraging visitations. Whether it's pulling children out of the classroom for learning assistance, or making sure that everybody knows that they do not have to put up with behaviour problems, that that's what I'm there for...I guess, those are my two overall priorities. From there it goes, of course, into parents and community. (Gina, interview 3)

In attempting to define educational leadership, Jim reverted back to what he believes are the origins of the term “principal”: the principal teacher. He made a point of not distancing or removing the role of “principal” from that of “teacher”; thus, a distinction he made is that he carries these responsibilities in addition to (and not separate from) those required of him as a career teacher:

Well, I guess on the basic level as the principal of this school, by definition, even though the term principal means principal teacher, in fact it has evolved in our society to mean actual person who runs the school, there is the obvious answer. I guess I look at myself as the educational leader by virtue of the experience I've had already in education. (Jim, interview 3)

An important aspect Gina identified is the notion of educational leadership as being connected to parents and the community, not solely a school-centric phenomenon. This characteristic of educational leader as community leader was also surfaced by Jim:

The other thing I see about being a principal as a leader of course, is that you are not only leading the school, you are leading a community, and I learned that from being an administrator in small towns where you truly are a community leader by ipso facto—there is no question. (Jim, interview 3)

Based on his experience in small, rural, and isolated Indigenous communities over many years, from his perspective the difference between leader of the school and community leader was an indistinguishable one.

### **Experience and Judgement**

*“That is truly the job”—Jim*

Looking back on a career spanning almost 40 years, Jim identified an important component of his current practice and how he knows himself as a principal: extensive experience in the field of education. For him, his experience is a key piece of what forms how he sees himself. Jim surfaced the concept of *judgement* when attempting to define educational leadership. This is a core aspect of being an educational leader- exercising sound educational judgement. He elaborated on this concept, providing an example of how a principal must employ judgement on a moment-to-moment basis at all times. In the following example, he also illuminated the aspects which served to inform his educational judgement:

It happens every day, all day—that is the job. That is truly the job. It is not a systems job. I don't know how people can turn it into one. It is judgement call after judgement call, after judgement call. The reason for that I think is that if you know your kids and know your staff, and know your families—life is not black and white. Why wouldn't you make these judgement calls? (Jim, interview 4)

The aspect of judgement was very important to Jim, and he elaborated readily on his belief that judgement was foundational to being a principal. He provided a number of examples where the decisions he made were “judgement calls,” or situations where a number of options

were present. In this case, he describes the use of judgement in regards to decisions affecting the staff:

We are in the last week of the term, everybody is absolutely exhausted, and the judgement call today was let's not have a staff meeting. Let's wait until April... it is such a simple idea - I get to school this morning and my mind-set is staff meeting because every first Wednesday of the month is a staff meeting. The agenda is ready, I'm ready to remind people, I put it on the Monday bulletin. A teacher comes to me and says "do you really think we should have one?" My first reaction, I'm out supervising with him, and busy, my first reaction is "of course we should have one." But you see again, we know each other so well that teacher was persistent, others may not be, he said "you know, we have one scheduled for April 2<sup>nd</sup>, we have two weeks coming off now for Spring Break, you're going on the Bison Hunt"... and the light just went on. Do we want to have a staff meeting now? (Jim, interview 4)

In regard to his subjective use of judgement, Jim's conviction was evident. He emotively shared what he felt to be one of the most important aspects of all in terms of his work as principal:

...I feel so passionate about the fact that schools are very subjective institutions filled with people, and we have to keep that foremost in our minds. There is nothing in the university post-graduate or teacher training curriculum that I am aware of that actually shows young educators how important this is. Maybe they are not ready for it when they are starting off - you've got to have some life experiences first. That's the kernel of the school is those personal relationships. (Jim, interview 4)

Jim calls into question the ability of post-secondary education to assist in this formation of judgement. The subjectivities of schools and the importance of relationships based on knowing the people you work with are components he believes are lacking in the post-graduate development of educational leaders. The theme of effective management and administration-

making the correct decisions based on knowledge of context and experience- appears central to the concept of educational judgement as Jim defines it. The decision-making examples Jim describes are immediate, functional, and managerial in nature: whether to hold a meeting now or later, how to discipline students, how to deal with staff on a particular issue. These are the aspects he identifies as the job of running a school.

### **Changing Over Time: Conceptions of Educational Leadership**

*I had no idea principals had so much power.—Gina*

When asked whether his conception of educational leadership had changed over time, Bob reflected back on his early days at Moose Meadow School. Now a school where exciting projects occur and the staff work with the Moose Meadow First Nation, the school council, and the wider community, it was with a great deal of emotion that he recalled the nature of the school when he first arrived a number of years ago:

Well, how it changed over time for me personally, obviously, I can only speak for me, is when I came in it was survival. I had no idea what I'd gotten myself into. This school was out of control. [Kids] were smoking drugs in the bathroom and telling teachers to, "F\*\*k off." I had a staff that was just horrendous. One lady that I fired the second day here smashed a kid's head into the door twice. Stuff like that. So, you go from that whole survival mode—zero support from the [Yukon] Department [of Education] when I was put in here. When I think back it almost sickens me. (Bob, interview 3)

Not being able to define educational leadership at the onset of the interviews, it was difficult for Bob to shed light on how his conception of educational leadership has changed over time. This said, it appears that Bob's practice has changed while at Moose Meadow School: while at first needing to exert control of the school in his early days at Moose Meadow School, he now tries to create an environment relevant to children, fostering an atmosphere where they

thrive in their learning and wish to come each day. Bob's vivid description of his early days at Moose Meadow School sheds light on his early identity as a principal: grappling with a school in chaos developed a mindset of "survival mode" until he was able to get the school stabilized and under his control.

Rose described a similar progression—one from control to that of facilitating learning and supporting staff members. When asked whether her conception of educational leadership had changed over time she replied:

Yeah, I think so. Well, when I started teaching up here I was 23 so I think I view a lot of things differently—that's 30 years ago. So if I didn't figure something out in 30 years, where have I been? So yes my idea of who a leader is and how they lead is different. I looked at someone being the "boss" and I got some "boss" instructions when I first got here...maybe it's just I've developed my own style. (Rose, interview 3)

As someone with fewer years experience as a principal than other participants in this study, Gina's comments focused less on change of conception over time than they did on what could be described as realizations about the principalship once in the position:

I had no idea that principals had so much power. I had no idea...As a principal, you're constantly making decisions, and personal decisions based just on how you think and feel about issues. I mean, within a short period of time, you realize that's why there's such a huge difference between schools, is because the school reflects the principals personality. (Gina, interview 3)

Gina's comments above resonate with Jim's earlier assertions with respect to the nature of being a principal and the managerial aspects that define the position. The principalship is personality-driven and highly subjective, with the subjectivity of the principal mediating how these managerial and administrative functions are carried out. The job is characterized as one that

is functional, with large amounts of administrative decision-making: determining rules, dealing with immediate issues, and wielding of power as issues that are grappled with and kept under control.

Based on the comments of each of the participants in this study, it appears that conceptions of educational leadership change relative to where they find themselves in their careers. Jim highlighted the pressures to make decisions quickly at the start of one's career, and shared what he had learned over time:

You are seen as “fuzzy.” It's a perfectly understandable feeling, and I know when I started as principal, I was more inclined to, you know, the old thing about make a decision right now—and that's probably the worst thing you can do is to make a decision on the spot. And yet that is seen as such a virtue, to be decisive. Something happens—do this [snap]; something happens—do that [snap]. Yet what you really should be doing is reflecting on what you saw, what you heard, and so on. That takes a certain amount of confidence that comes with doing your job well. (Jim, interview 4)

Linking back to earlier comments by the other participants, Jim identifies the emphasis given to managerialism, particularly at the early stages of one's career as a principal. While suggesting that being a quick decision-maker is a trait some admire in a principal, based on his experience of nearly 40 years, he identifies once again the importance of reflection. He disagrees with the perception that rapid decision-making is a virtue, and instead advocates for thoughtful decision-making.

### **What it Means to be a Principal**

To varying degrees, participants were able to either articulate their philosophy or describe the books, stories, or narratives that were most meaningful to them in informing their educational philosophies. The length of time in the profession appears indicative of the depth and breadth of

experiences which serve to inform their educational leadership theory and practice. A case in point: nearly 40 years in education gives Jim an accumulation of experiences from which to elaborate extensively. While this cannot be said of all participants, nonetheless each was able to contribute meaningfully and share insights into their educational philosophies. I asked Jim about the narratives and stories which informed his leadership theory and practice. His responses were deeply insightful and showed how his depth of experience as one of the longest-serving Yukon principals underpinned his expertise:

I know that philosophically the one piece of work that started me off on a certain path was John Goodlad's book *A Place Called School* which by contemporary standards isn't all that radical, but for its day it certainly was. The concept of actually looking at children within the context of school, children as part of school was a fairly radical thing for me to read about. So looking back at that I'm guessing that that is the kind of reading that got me thinking that you cannot separate the child from the school, you can't see them as separate entities at all. (Jim, interview 3)

The educational experiences comprising Jim's formative years carry forward to inform what he sees as two fundamental approaches which can be taken by educators, schools, and educational systems. As we continued, he made what is for him a vitally important philosophical distinction on how to conceptualize schools:

I see education as so much more than systems and I think that many people who write about education tend to write about systems. Kids don't necessarily fit into systems particularly well so historically we have spent a lot of our time trying to make the kids fit. If you follow [psychologist Gordon] Neufeld's writing especially, every child is different to a lesser or greater degree. Many, many children need some kind of modeling in their lives and his contention is that quite a few of these kids aren't getting it at home anymore for various reasons and if there is no significant adult in a child's life, as Neufeld said, then his or hers peers will then become the model. So I think, without giving it a lot of



thought, what we are trying to do is develop that relationship at the most basic level.  
(Jim, interview 3)

Jim's identification of Dr. Gordon Neufeld is the only mention by any of the principals in this study of a book, recently engaged with, which informs current practice. This was the sole identification of a person or resource was despite being asked specifically in the interview series whether there were authors or books that they relied upon. Jim suggested that we had identified something important through our conversation: he does not read very much, if any, pertaining to educational leadership or leadership theory. As he shared this point with me, he tried to locate a pamphlet which he felt reflected his belief above that education is more about students than systems:

I do a lot of reading always, but you put your finger on something. I don't do a lot of reading about leadership in education or leadership theory. School is life and life is school. People have been writing about schooling forever and they are not necessarily educational sponsors at all. I think people's own experience in school is extremely valuable. I have a little pamphlet on this shelf which is from Seven Oaks School Division in Winnipeg. I'm trying to see it here... it is a tiny little pamphlet but what it is are interviews with dozens of middle-aged people in Winnipeg about how they felt and how their lives were affected by failing a grade in school. Very modest little book, but in it, if you read it, it is heartbreaking to realize what has happened to these people. So much of their lives have been turned by the fact that somebody said "you don't measure up, you have failed, do it again." It is personal experience and personal recollection and now we have a body of literature from First Nation saying what schooling has been like for them. That's all I can think of for now. (Jim, interview 3)

This recollection of the resource he encountered years ago and has since kept close reinforced Jim's belief that the needs of students must overcome the needs of the educational system. It signifies the extent to which Jim's educational philosophy is informed not by the formal knowledge presented to him in post-graduate study. Instead, Jim's educational

philosophy is constructed through reflection upon his experiences accumulated over many years, cast back against books he has identified as informing his thoughts and practice. Gina also identified the belief in a student-centred approach where her decisions would be guided by what was in the best interests of her students.

If I look at, in terms of philosophy, what I feel are most important things with me, it would be always—any decisions I make are always based on what’s best for the students. (Gina, interview 3)

Gina’s educational philosophy appears to be situational and mediated by the context of her school and its students. Formal training does not appear to specifically inform and mediate her educational philosophy. In contrast to Jim, Bob did not draw upon books or other writings as informing his educational leadership theory and practice. Instead, most prominent were his own life experiences, and he reflected upon his own immediate family as foundational aspects of his educational philosophy and practice. He described how important his family was to him. In doing so, he connected one specific tenet that he was raised with by his parents as underpinning his beliefs on how to work children in schools:

Our parents, they always taught us about the basic—and you can go out into that hallway, ask any kid—the one thing I say the most, which my parents used to drill into us, “Treat others the way you, yourself, would like to be treated.” Not in a religious way or anything because I’m certainly not a religious person by any stretch of the imagination. It is the one—if we all follow that one rule. (Bob, interview 1)

Bob employs the “The Golden Rule” as a means of providing a mechanism to guide his behaviour and to present as an example for students to model with respect to relationships. For Bob, relationships are key to his educational leadership philosophy, much like how Jim described attachment being key to the relationship between children and adults in schools. This personal

belief is, perhaps, best echoed in the vision of his school and what he wished to accomplish as principal of Moose Meadow School. For him, the goal is not about academic achievement alone, but about fostering a love of school and learning in the children he spends each day with:

I truly believe that with a little luck, I can make a huge difference. Without any luck I can make a huge difference in every kid that comes through here, but with a little luck my making a difference is going to make a difference on a national level, on a local level, on a Yukon level, maybe a world level. Who knows? Maybe one of my kids going through here will have enough creative juices poured into him to make some kind of huge contribution to the world. That would be my dream. (Bob, interview 3)

While Bob showed passion in his description with respect to making a *difference*, he did not elaborate specifically on what that difference would look like, or what would actually constitute making a difference as a result of his actions. Instead, he identifies luck as the crucial ingredient that is the catalyst for producing a difference, however defined. The first participant to articulate a vision for his school, he follows up his uncertainty of whether he will make a difference by stating that he does not care if it is ultimately realized.

### **Analysis**

The non-Indigenous Yukon principals in this study initially found it challenging to define educational leadership. The participants found it difficult to define educational leadership without drawing upon the aspects of administration and management, and thus what emerged was a focus on the managerial, administrative, and functional aspects of their role. The concept of educational leadership presented was that of a teacher who had an expanded role which included many additional managerial responsibilities and duties. Jim referred to himself using the expression “first among equals,” suggesting that there is little difference between being a teacher and being a principal. Bob struggled with the educational leadership question and was

never able to enunciate an answer. Gina suggested that educational leadership was “huge.” Rose described educational leadership as doing a number of things in order to make the school a better place. For the participants in this study, being a good educational leader means being a good administrator and manager who runs the school, ensuring that the daily tasks and functions of the school are attended to so that all performs smoothly. They articulated that an important aspect of their role is fostering and maintaining positive relationships with staff, students, parents, and community. Experience provides the backdrop from which judgement is employed when making decisions. They allocate resources, address behaviour problems, and attend primarily to the managerial functions of the school, referring to themselves as principals, administrators, and managers of their schools in their attempts to define educational leadership. They did not use the term “educational leader” in their narratives, nor do they describe themselves as being educational leaders in a larger educational system, nested within any broader educational framework. By not identifying themselves in this way, they situate themselves as autonomous agents who work largely independent of each other in the Yukon educational field.

The participants in this study speak about what they do in managerial and administrative ways, referring to themselves as principals who hold a “position” and do a “job.” There was little discussion about the purposes and goals of schools and the ends of education, and what discussion did occur was only offered by one participant. Thus, it appears that when asked to define educational leadership, the participants in this study see themselves as principals and do not refer to themselves using the term “educational leader.” Instead, they describe themselves as principals who are problem-solvers and relationship-builders, responsible for dealing with the inconsistencies in the educational system, so that their schools run in an orderly fashion.

Located at the intersection of the principal's office as "administrative manager," the school community as "leader," and the classroom as "teacher," the principals in this study nonetheless navigate the continuous ambiguity that exists in the spaces between being a teacher in the classroom and a principal responsible for the operation of the entire school, particularly when they also carry a teaching assignment. The wearing of these multiple hats produces and reinforces vague and conflicting notions of what a principal is to be and what a principal is supposed to do as they navigate the educational field.

For the three participants in this study who were appointed to their first principalship in the Yukon, power and control appear to be the primary foci when newly entering the position. Of particular note are the similar references to the discovery of the power that principals possess. Over time, they learn to domesticate and apply their power as they come to know their distinct styles of administration and management, to develop their contingent philosophies, and to identify their educational priorities. Their application of their power appears mediated then by the development of educational judgement through experience identified earlier. The non-Indigenous principals in this study do not rely heavily upon educational leadership literature as a means of informing their practice. What mention there was of educational leadership theory, books, or authors was recalled from their early years. It is only in more recent times that Jim mentions reading a book outside of the field of educational leadership that informs and/or reinforces his current philosophy and educational practice. To this point, it appears that the basis upon which non-Indigenous principals ground their practice are created through their experiences both as principals and as teachers. Participants referred to being "dropped" into the principalship, having no idea of what they were getting into, only to become the administrative

and managerial “masters of their own domain.” Thus, professional isolation is a theme that emerges as the participants in this study describe their role and their construction of themselves as non-Indigenous principals working in Indigenous Yukon contexts.

### **Conclusion**

The principals in this study appear trapped in a structure that sees them limited as managers, despite being referred to by policy makers, employers, and the extant literature as educational leaders—whatever the term means. Studies specifically examining non-Indigenous educational leaders working in Indigenous contexts are rare; therefore, this study contributes to the extant body of educational leadership literature in that it illuminates an aspect of education heretofore unexamined: the extent to which the identities, lived experiences, and the specific contexts of non-Indigenous principals mediate their practice. Therefore, a strength of this study is that it provides an insightful window through which to view the lives of non-Indigenous principals working in Indigenous contexts. There is a dearth of similar studies in Canada and, in particular, intense studies that examine principals in the contradictory locations where they are embedded as teacher, administrator, and community leader. This point notwithstanding, the Yukon Territory is not the only jurisdiction in Canada and the United States where non-Indigenous school administrators work in schools attended by Indigenous children. The same configuration may also be found in other Canadian Territories and northern provincial regions. Thus, a future area of exploration exists in that this study could be replicated in other areas, engaging a different group of non-Indigenous principals in other Indigenous contexts.

With respect to the significance of this study, it is the first to specifically explore in depth educational leadership in Canada’s Yukon Territory and one of the few conducted to date on the

principalship in the Canadian North. Currently, principals are referred to as “educational leaders,” despite the inability on the part of universities, the extant body of literature, educational systems, or principals themselves to articulate what this term even means, other through their employment of managerial or administrative terminology. This is not to suggest that the participants in this study cannot communicate a definition regarding what represents educational leadership or explicate how they construe and enact the phenomenon. They have done so in ways that are highly contextual, individual, and articulate the importance of promoting positive relationships with students, teachers, parents, and the community. Given their contributions and insights, in answering the question “what is educational leadership?” posed at the beginning of this paper, the prevailing epistemological foundation of educational leadership in the Yukon Territory is one that is based upon an emphasis not on educational leadership and educational ends, but one on means, administration, and management.

This study points to the need to redefine what a principal is to be and to do as an educational actor in the Yukon context. What is thus required is the development of spaces where conversations can occur that would lead to conceptions of educational leadership in a Yukon context beyond the current managerial and administrative frame.

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