Instructional Leadership in First Nations Schools

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This paper combines a synthesis of an Alberta Teachers Association (ATA) sponsored case study of five highly-effective elementary schools in Alberta and an examination of the leadership qualities necessary to create an effective and successful First Nations School. The First Nations school reviewed in this article is located on a reservation fighting for its Cree culture and traditions where there is a high level of poverty and gang-related crime. The larger research study that preceded and became the impetus for our collaborative review of this highly-effective First Nations school was undertaken over a two-year period, where researchers spent time in five highly-effective schools asking teachers, principals, and support staff two questions: (A) What makes this school such a good place for teaching and learning?; and (B) What does the administration do to help? Data were gathered through interviews, and comprehensive notes were made, organized, analyzed, and synthesized into case studies for each of the five schools. The original study asked and answered three questions: (1) What? {What did we find?}; (2) So what? {What do these findings mean?}; and (3) Now what? {What should we do after we make sense of the findings?}. In this paper we focus on analyzing and sharing findings about the third question, with specific reference to Ermineskin Elementary School. This school is located in Maskwacis, Alberta, formerly known as Hobbema, Alberta. Because this practical conceptual framework suggests principal best practices, the paper we offer here is intended to thoughtfully consider what our research findings suggest for the ethical and practical actions of principals.

Introduction and Research Background

There has been a long tradition of school leadership research, and it is no surprise that this area of study has ample research and literature-rich resources from which to draw. However, it is also important to recognize that leadership in First Nations schools has not specifically received as much attention. The purpose of our article is to better understand how our recent research in school leadership might speak expressly to leadership in First Nations schools. In this paper, two experienced academic researchers partner with the principal of a First Nations school to apply findings from their own research to that school.

We believe a better understanding of school leadership holds a direct correlation to student learning. As Leithwood, McAdie, Bascia, and Rodrigue (2004) note, leadership practices foster beliefs and set tones. In his book, *The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results*, Reeves (2006) further connects the actions of school leadership to student achievement. Hargreaves (2010) agrees; his research on school improvement in Finland and England suggests a number of school improvement catalysts principals help achieve: support networks; useful professional development; expert analysis of achievement data; mentor schools and consultants; data-informed reflection and decision making; and short, medium, and long-term strategies. Clearly, principals impact teachers' and students' lives and, as Wright, Horn, and Sanders (1997) point out, more can be done to improve education by improving the effectiveness of teachers than by any other single factor.

Years ago, Foster (1989) noted the reciprocal nature of leadership. Because leadership resided within community, he believed it was necessarily shared between leaders and followers, and called for community members to create interchangeable actions. Ten years later, Wheatley (2000, p.346) emphasized *working-together leadership*, calling organizational change "a dance, not a forced march." Recently, Shirley (2011) saw the next wave of school improvement supporting extended learning communities where colleagues (including principals) challenged each other's' ideas and worked together to promote school improvement. Our findings suggest that principals working in First Nations schools understand this concept and work to gauge the needs of the community.

First Nations principals need a combination of skills working on or off the reserve. Lambert's (2002) research on high leadership capacity schools emphasized the need for a shared vision, using data to drive decisions, and developing capacity among all members of the school community. Our findings (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2011) mirror Wheatley's (2000, p. 347) belief that people love to work in organizations that "have a sense of history and identity and purpose." For First Nations schools, a shared community vision is a crucial asset. History and culture set First Nations schools apart from other schools. Shared community vision defines mission and provides teachers, support staff, and students clear direction. Shared history sets the tone for the school and the identity of the school flourishes.

Our findings (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2011) suggest that successful school leadership engage very human skills centred upon building strong relationships. Indeed, the leaders we studied worked within their schools to build enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will (Collins, 2001; Fullan, 2003). This blend of building relationships and professional will specifically help Aboriginal leaders mend the gaps of student achievement and build a sense of hope

for the community. It is critical to develop these leadership skills when working at a reserve school. Relationships built upon trust are the first step. The principal's job is to ensure such trust is built between the community and the school. Trust fuels the school's direction. Without trust, the school will never reach the level of success to which it aspires. When strong relationships are built upon trust, school leaders can push status quo or "shake things up" and still maintain the support of the community. In fact, the only way change can happen is when the community trusts the leader who is provoking the change.

First Nations leaders must both push and support teachers to do the work they very much want to do—help children learn. Achieving support in a First Nations school is associated with trust. The community and teachers must trust the school and the systems created within that school. Teachers in First Nations schools must feel supported and validated in their work; they must also trust the school board for whom they work and must believe that the school board makes fair decisions that look out for their, and everyone else's, best interests. These *best interests* include contracts, salary, work standards, and all policies that influence their work in the classroom. All of these factors must be handled before teachers can build the foundational work they do, which is to develop and refine their teaching in ways that provide learning opportunities for children.

The First Nations school leader's responsibility is to advocate for teachers, build trust between the school board and the teachers, and provide opportunities for teachers to express concerns about mistrust if they harbour such feelings. If mistrust is expressed, the school leader must do all he/she can to rectify that mistrust so that trust can be rekindled. It is also important to understand that, once teachers have trust, they will take their professional learning more seriously and will work harder to do what they have been hired to do—help children learn. When this transfer of trust occurs, school leaders must ensure learning opportunities are available to teachers, conversations are rich, and teacher mentorship is provided.

Our research (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2011) suggests that school principals have the potential to make the most impact on school improvement and student learning. When considering leadership in a First Nations school, saying that school principals make *all* the difference is not much of an understatement. Sergiovanni (1992) notes that educational leaders are both ethical leaders and seasoned, knowledgeable professionals who stress trust, honesty, communication, openness, transparency, responsibility, and accountability. They "model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart" (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 64).

Such leadership is crucial in First Nations schools because it is what has been so lacking in the reserve community. Reservations also need to build communities based on trust, honesty, and accountability. Only

through shared vision that encourages the heart can action be taken. First Nations schools are crucial because they help deliver the action. It is important to understand that success in First Nations schools must be supported and fostered by the community, including that community's political leaders. First Nations schools are always community schools; therefore, it should never be forgotten that the community must believe and trust in the school as much as the principal, teachers, and support staff must trust the community. Only this shared sense of trust can help build successful First Nations schools.

Research Context

Alberta schools have been especially fortunate that collaborative communities of practice that engage shared leadership often characterized the work of teachers and principals. During the 14 years of its life (ending in 2013), the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) helped form such communities of practice. AISI had, for 14 years, created an opportunity for schools to engage in funded, action research school improvement projects led at the grassroots by both teachers and principals (Parsons, 2011). AISI team practices and models of distributed leadership, with both teachers and principals, grew to honour expanding leadership processes by encouraging teams of teachers to engage in efficacious decision making. This expanded site-based leadership helped to ensure that teaching became more than unthinking compliance and helped to create a province where job-embedded professional learning became a norm.

However, First Nations schools did not reap the benefits of AISI because they are funded by the federal government (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada) and were not able to access AISI grant opportunities. Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada recognized that reserve schools required more support financially and structurally, and recently provided money into schools across Canada through the *First Nation Student Success Program* (FNSSP). Through FNSSP, First Nations schools can develop structures to support teacher and student learning. The FNSSP calls for a collaborative approach, hoping to build and bridge school improvement actions among several schools generally linked by geography and proximity. The achievement and successes the FNSSP create remain to be seen.

School Background

The First Nations school studied here is situated on the Ermineskin reserve in Maskwacis, Alberta. Ermineskin Elementary School is a Kindergarten to Grade 6 (K-6) school serving 655 students, 190 of which are pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten students. The school is comprised of 24 per cent special needs students who are placed in an inclusive setting, with the exception of 3 Eagle classrooms where there are 8-14 students with very low

cognitive abilities and who are placed with a special education teacher and an education assistant. The school's 69 staff include: 1 principal, 2.5 assistant principals, 2 administrative assistants, 1.5 counsellors, 1 home enhancement worker, 2 hot lunch coordinators/cooks, 2 library staff, 3 Cree instructors, 2 pre-school instructors, 22 education assistants, 2 speech and language assistants, and with the remaining 28 being certified teachers.

All students live in the Maskwacis area and come from all four reserves (Montana, Louis Bull, Samson, and Ermineskin). Miyo Wahkohtowin Education is the school board that oversees the Ermineskin Elementary school, the Ermineskin Junior Senior High School, and the Ephewehpak Alternate School. Miyo Wahkohtowin Education gained local control in 1991 and continues to make great gains in policy development. This school board is comprised of 5 board members, a council member as the Chairperson, and the Director of Education. Ermineskin Elementary School continues to increase enrollment with high retention rates, improved attendance rates, decreased discipline issues, and steady improvement in Alberta's Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs). Overall, Ermineskin Elementary School has been making gains in all areas of their school experience.

Implications of Research Findings for First Nations Schools

In this partnership paper, we synthesize our research findings (Beauchamp & Parsons, 2011) to apply what we have learned in our two-year study of instructional leadership specifically to meet the needs of highly-effective First Nation principals. We hope to use our work to answer the question: "What attributes are necessary to create an effective First Nations school on a reserve?" Our larger work (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2011) outlines our findings about those necessary attributes that align with effective principals, but the following discussion applies these findings specifically to First Nations schools on a reserve. The nine activities that follow are organized in no order of importance.

1. Highly effective First Nations principals foster and nurture a sense of culture and traditions within the school. These traditions are linked closely to the Native culture, whether it is Cree, Blackfoot, or another. Culture and traditions set First Nations schools apart from other schools and help create identity.
2. Highly effective First Nations principals take time to really "know" the community and are comfortable attending community functions, such as tea dances, round dances, and supporting the community in times of bereavement. Highly effective First Nations principals are trusted by the community and by their teachers.
3. Highly effective First Nations principals listen, care, and support the people with whom they work on professional and personal matters. Highly effective principals understand they are strong and vital

supports for staff members who live in the community and play a role in helping the community-building skills for parents and community members.

4. Highly effective First Nations principals create "family-based" working and learning environments, both literally and figuratively. Many local staff members have relatives attending the schools. School is the "home away from home" for many. The statement that the whole community raises a child is most evident in First Nations Schools.
5. Highly effective First Nations principals are organized: they engage in detailed planning and develop procedures that are systematic and sustained. They share this planning and the procedures developed with the staff, the board, and parents.
6. Highly effective First Nations principals understand the communities in which they work, developing a sense of realness about what they do. This understanding includes the impact of historical events, particularly residential schools.
7. Highly effective First Nations principals foster hope in their schools and with everyone associated with the schools. This hope becomes the essence of who community members are and what they stand for within the community.
8. Highly effective First Nations principals are passionate. They stand for what they believe in, never compromising their goals and vision because of community or staffing pressures. However, they do so in a way that is gentle and persuasive.
9. Highly effective First Nations principals are conceptual and use the "big picture" as their compass.

Leadership Beliefs

For the purpose of this paper, we focus specifically on leadership in a First Nations school. When analyzing school leadership in general, it is critical to recognize the overwhelming insight that has surfaced in the research literature globally. It would be unjust not to recognize the impact relationships have on school success. In our larger research findings (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2011), we found that relationships were crucial to success in all the schools we studied. In fact, we came to believe relationships were the key to school success.

With the specific context of Ermineskin Elementary School, where one author (Debbie Stockdale) is principal, considering the Cree meaning of the name of the school board is critical to understand its mandate. In this article, Debbie's voice as both a First Nations principal and author is included to help the reader understand that she is sharing her perspective. There are times during the article where Debbie's more personal voice follows.

'Miyo Wahkohtowin Education Authority' is the name of the school board: 'miyo wahkohtowin' means good relations or getting along. This foundation sets the stage for leaders, teachers, and the community to work towards a similar direction. Thus, the work of the school not only has historical meaning, but also substance and direction.

Building relationships is also about building trust. Relationships are challenging to build when the community, the parents, and even the students are resistant. All community members need to feel comfortable, but comfort is only possible with a deep and authentic understanding of who we are as First Nations principals and from whence we come—our own histories. Leaders, including teachers who come with no understanding of these relationships, experience culture shock. They may yet gain the ability to build solid relationships; however, they are unable to foster relationships when they are still adjusting to the community and battling their own biases. First Nations principals must be prepared to help their entire community build good relationships. Relationships are a First Nations focal point—relationships between administrators and teachers; between teachers and school staff; and between teachers, parents, and children.

Confidence is a gift First Nations leaders can foster in teachers. Confidence allows teachers to take risks, work hard to improve student learning, and generally act with greater enthusiasm. Confidence allows teachers to become more transparent, accountable, and honest in the work they are doing (or not doing). When First Nations principals become leaders who remove barriers, provide resources, and improve teachers' abilities to enhance student learning, they build teachers' confidence. When working in an environment where strong relational and administrative systems are in place, planning is sound, and procedures are consistent, teachers are less restricted by outside barriers. This element of teaching comes with experience, but also with support and direction from the leader. Many First Nations Schools face this struggle. They require procedures and a system that is thorough, detailed, and inclusive of everything from lunchtime routine to lesson plan expectations.

As noted earlier, understanding the community is critical for successful leadership. It cannot be underestimated how important it is to understand the community and people which the school serves. Such understanding is necessary to create and build the relationships pertinent to any successful school. Bridging connections between personal and professional life needs further exploration. A First Nations school, perhaps more than other schools, must bridge this element. The idea that the school community is a family is at the core of what First Nations schools stand for. At Ermineskin Elementary School, a teacher spoke at a staff meeting after she lost everything in a fire and said, "I know I lost my home, but I want to thank you all for being my family and truly this school is my home away from home, I love you all." Everyone felt exactly the same thing in that moment—connection.

First Nations schools must share a strong sense of connection by the heart; this should be the driving force of any First Nations school. The First Nations leader knows there must always be this balance between personal and professional life, and all aspects must be considered when faced with challenges and when decisions must be made. Many staff members are also community members and are dealing with crisis in their families (suicide, incarceration, poverty, and addictions). These staff members come to work with issues of trauma as well. For a school, principal leadership and collegiality all provide community staff members with support and guidance. School leaders are consistently counselling their staff. This expanded role allows leaders to build skills, understanding, and strength within people in the community. Thus, First Nations principals are leaders who empower the community as well as the school. The work is profound.

Further to family connection is the element of kinship. Many staff members are family to the children they work with, which can be confusing because of the different roles played. In Ermineskin Elementary School, some teachers are *Kohkom* (grandma) to their students, Auntie to others, and neighbours to a few more. They see how the children live, know their past, and understand their struggles and their day-to-day life. This knowledge creates a sense of family in the strongest way possible. When we refer to family, at Ermineskin Elementary School we mean family in every sense of the word.

Although student learning is the central purpose of any school, in First Nations schools success is celebrated in so many other ways. First Nations principals must recognize all elements that tie into school success. First Nations schools are unique in many ways, but strive to reach the same goals, set the same standards (Alberta Education's curriculum), and achieve the same successes. It is fair to acknowledge that all schools focus on student learning; however, First Nations schools must negotiate one step further. They must consider the culture, the language, and the community—all practices that support Indian Control for Indian Education in a way that emphasizes culture, language, and community control of education. A safe space must be created to build skills for the children and the community (including parents and staff members) so as to deal with the challenges brought to the community and to help provide a sense of hope. First Nations schools on reserves must incarnate HOPE. This hope gives children a desire to plan futures, look forward to, and aspire to be better than they are today. Hope sets First Nations schools apart from most schools. Effective First Nations principal leaders understand that hope is symbolic in everything they do. The promise of hope and future should never be dismissed or misused and should always be shared in the vision and direction taken as a principal. Hope is the driving force behind First Nations education.

The highly effective principals working in First Nations schools on reserves are leaders comfortable with change and they do not shy away from the backlash that may come as a result of the changes they enable. Effective First Nations principals push through the resistance with a calm confidence, to ensure that decisions made are based on what is best for the children. It was clear at Ermineskin Elementary School that all staff members, community members, and students knew that all decisions and actions were done with intentions of what was best for the children and their learning.

A key to highly effective First Nations principals was sharing of a vision that portrayed the "why and how" of change, the desired direction, and parameters of what needed to be done to determine whether the change was successful. These visions were far from being"touchy-feely" and contained goals with measurable objectives that defined the "what, how, who, when, and where" of the desired change. At Ermineskin Elementary School, this process was defined as action planning. It had a clear direction that was created by the staff and then placed into a manageable timeline. Visions were shaped into collaborative work with clearly defined tasks, benchmarks, and specific accomplishments to be completed by specific dates.

Communication in the highly-effective schools involved in the original case studies (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2011) was extremely important because it created a shared language and vision that the principal could communicate to stakeholders—including parents and students. Most importantly, these schools created and engaged in establishing what can best be called "conversational space" that allowed visions and plans to be articulated, reaffirmed, and revised as needed. These conversational spaces naturally included evaluation and revision because highly effective principals understood that even the best plans needed to be modified as they matured. These conversations were happening all the time: in the staff room, during teacher planning meetings, and in after-school meetings that were clearly directed to meeting actions set out by the plan.

Overcoming Change Implementation Pitfalls

Leaders working in a First Nations community must be diligent about ensuring their vision and plan for the school is communicated to all stakeholders. First Nations principals must not get swept away by programs or "quick fixes" and must understand that school improvement centres on the people. As noted earlier, principals working in a First Nations community must not alter their visions or plans for school improvement because of community pressures. Whether emanating from political leaders or parents, pressures can sometimes cause leaders to forego solidly built plans to appease others. This pitfall should be avoided by all leaders—especially First Nations school principals.

Our larger research (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2011) suggests that all principals must make their reasons and purposes clear. They should involve participants in planning, and base decisions on group needs and values. They should constantly communicate with teachers and work to relieve pressures or blocks that inhibited their teachers' abilities to teach. Principals should both respect and trust their teachers and show confidence in teachers' abilities to act professionally. As a result, in all the schools that we studied, there was little fear of failure present and teachers were ready and willing to act. Teachers clearly understood the goals and rewards for engaging in the hard work of educational change. These goals and rewards were wrapped into one key statement heard and, more importantly, practiced in each study school—"It's all about the kids." At Ermineskin Elementary School, it was clearly communicated that "the kids come first". It is the school's motto, in the school mission statement, and communicated with staff and parents consistently and frequently.

Difficulties and Successes for First Nations Principals

Many successes result from being a First Nations principal, but only if the First Nations principal understands his or her responsibilities do not deviate from what encompasses great leadership. First Nations principals will struggle like any other principal if they do not make vision a priority, foster instructional leadership, set high expectations for learning, build solid policy and procedural frameworks, and recognize how trust and positive relationships serve as the undercurrent to everything that happens in the school.

If characterized as a great principal, being First Nations is an additional benefit. First Nations principals may have an easier time building trust with families and the community. That said, First Nations principals may also have a harder time if people from the community choose to be harder on a First Nations person, especially if that person is from the community. First Nations principals confronting the barriers that many First Nations schools face, such as poverty, poor housing conditions, and other social issues such as addictions and domestic violence, will generally have less resistance. There is a sense of "connectedness" when working through these issues and parents do not feel judged. As a First Nations principal, Debbie, speaking from her perspective as school principal and one of the authors, can be honest and straightforward with parents and it is usually well received. At Ermineskin Elementary School, we made some of the most profound discoveries whereby parents are accepting responsibility and making changes in their lives. Meeting with parents can become mini-counselling sessions. Strengthening the child/parent relationship is instrumental in creating success in the school.

As a First Nations principal, Debbie can call upon her own experiences. She knows what "reserve life" is like, and can offer understanding and support that is genuine and heartfelt. Debbie is seldom shocked or overwhelmed by what she might see or hear, which allows her to immediately deal with

issues and not get wrapped up in the realities of what some of her school's families face. Her approach to dealing with difficult situations comes from a place of active listening and compassion. Debbie does this without getting emotionally tangled and provides children and parents a safe place to share, vent, and heal. This advantage, however, can also be a disadvantage.

The difficulties Debbie has faced as a First Nations principal have resulted, at times, in her feeling a sense of hopelessness and also, at times, feeling defeated. She sees the struggles her own family has faced and continues to face. She has met with families and parents and, although she tries to inspire hope, she does not always fully believe what she is saying. This sense of hopelessness can be detrimental to a conversation's outcome. When a Grade 6 student who sits in Debbie's office already has no hope for the future, doesn't think he will finish Grade 8, and can see himself in jail as a young adult, Debbie knows, how very difficult it is to overcome that feeling of hopelessness for this child. In truth, she knows this child has a hard life, is often merely surviving, and lives a life of detachment. It can become difficult to not get caught up in that reality and, instead, she must look forward and help this child to see hope and opportunity.

Such scenarios probably have the biggest impact on Debbie's ability to lead effectively. As stated before, a First Nations principal can be a great advantage, but it can also be a burden if the principal does not balance and separate bias and emotions when working with sensitive or crisis situations. Debbie has found it imperative to have regular times set aside to debrief and unwind with other administrators or colleagues to ensure these moments of vulnerability don't cloud the vision or purpose of the work of her school.

There is a careful balance in recognizing the realities First Nations children face. First Nations schools must remain connected to their families and children, but must also maintain a focus on what can be controlled. What can be controlled is children's educational experiences, what happens when they are in school, and how supports are provided. Debbie believes that if her school can manage these three areas, it can overcome many difficulties and serve to be an excellent role model to children. Debbie also believes that a First Nations principal must always remember that the goal is to lead the school with high expectations. It is necessary to set high expectations to ensure that learning is a priority, students' needs are met, and a school community is built on trust and positive relationships. First Nations principals must instill instructional leadership, clear vision, positive relationships, and decisions based upon what is best for students.

How Do We Know Ermineskin Elementary School is Effective?

We know Ermineskin Elementary School is effective because its programming needs have evolved. When Debbie first became the administrator 10 years ago, all of the classrooms were considered modified or adapted in

some capacity, either in language arts, in math, or in other subjects. Today, only 5 of 19 classrooms are considered modified and the numbers in these classrooms range from 14 to 18 students. Ermineskin Elementary School offers the entire provincial curriculum and does so with a strong element of Cree language and cultural experiences.

The following four changes have also occurred:

1. Enrollment rates have increased from 562 students in 2006 to 654 students in 2013.
2. Attendance in 2010 was 79 per cent; in 2012, it increased to 84 per cent; and in the current 2013 school year, the attendance is 88 per cent.
3. The Grade 3 language arts Provincial Achievement Test (PAT) results in 2004 were 19 per cent meeting acceptable levels and in 2013 they were 44 per cent.
4. An increasing trend in language arts achievement tests indicate an increase from 24 per cent of Grade 6 students meeting acceptable levels in 2007 as compared to 63 per cent in 2012.

How Does One Judge One's Own Effectiveness as a School Principal?

Debbie judges the effectiveness of her work by how her time is spent in school. She knows that she is effective when she works as an instructional leader, either spending time in classrooms or spending time learning with teachers, students, and other administrators. She knows Ermineskin Elementary School is effective when the focus remains on student learning and when conversations are centred on working to improve our school's instruction, daily routines, and the activities involved in running a great school. The more that Ermineskin Elementary School embraces the regular teaching and learning activities of any "other" school, the more effective it becomes and the more it helps children to learn.

In the early years of Debbie's administration assignment, her time was spent in her office resolving playground conflicts, dealing with angry parents, and counselling stressed teachers. Although these activities still occur, the focus differs. Students are now more respectful and able to take responsibility. Parents are more open and collaborative. Teachers are more willing to try new strategies and seek suggestions from their teams. These interactions focus on learning. Debbie spends more time celebrating school successes with students and teachers. Teachers share a great lesson that was taught, a child comes to read to her after reaching a literacy goal, or students come to her with ideas about how to improve the school. The focus has changed from reactive to proactive thinking, and the positive impact of this changed focus is evident in everything done in the school.

Debbie also judges her work by the success of Ermineskin Elementary School's students. When a child leaves her office feeling good, and goes back to class ready to work without creating problems, she feels her work is effective. Her goal as a principal is to get to the root of the problem and

resolve the issue with the student, not to punish the student. Solving problems instead of punishing usually takes longer, but it is necessary that children be given the opportunity to express themselves in a safe environment. When Debbie works with students in her office, instead of handing out "traditional" punishments and consequences, she feels she is providing them with skills and strategies that help them the next time they are in similar circumstances. Because she believes these actions have greater long-term benefits for everyone, she considers her role as being supportive, with opportunities to create challenges and pressures that turn school attitudes and behaviours around.

Debbie also knows she is effective because her teachers are not leaving. Ermineskin Elementary School retains teachers and there is little movement year to year. This past year, Ermineskin Elementary School had one teacher change but only because of a maternity leave. The school's stability is a strong indicator of teacher satisfaction, particularly because Ermineskin Elementary School teachers are not paid at par with local public school districts. The area of teacher compensation still must be rectified with Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC).

Finally, Debbie believes leadership is effective because of conversations that occur during meetings, Professional Learning Community time, in the staffroom, in the parking lot, and with children. Conversations have become more collaborative, professional, and more focused upon students' needs. Teachers are discussing their professional learning, student needs, instructional practices, and sharing data and outcomes with one another. They are more engaged and present with their students and each other. As an administrator, Debbie's focus is on learning. Ermineskin Elementary School is discussing programming, teacher effectiveness, and what teachers see in the classroom. Teachers provide support, which has made teachers' work more transparent, effective, and meaningful.

What Have We Learned that Can Transfer to Other First Nations Principals?

Two ideas underpin the success of a First Nations principal. The first is clearly articulating and leading a school with a vision founded on the cultural identity of the First Nations child. First Nations principals must understand it is more than just leading a school; it is leading a school with a strong focus on cultural identity and language. Strengthening the cultural roots and language of the community is a key to any First Nations principal's success. If the principal does not value cultural roots and language, schools will fail. The Elders and community members understand how important these roots are to their children; therefore, a First Nations principal must always ensure this priority. As Debbie says, "If we are a First Nations school, we must feel like one, look like one, and sound like one. We must see our children as First Nations children and with that we must infuse the language and culture into everything we do."

The second idea focuses primarily on strong leadership that prioritizes student learning. First Nations schools must provide opportunities to build leadership capacity, collaborate, and ensure everyone in the school understands that learning is the fuel and the fire for our children to become successful First Nations citizens. A First Nations principal must have a deep understanding of what effective leadership entails and how to create more school leaders. Leadership is essential to building a school community where learning is the priority and student needs are always at the forefront of any decision.

The Uniqueness of First Nations Contexts

In many ways, First Nations schools require a different kind of leadership. There are barriers or added burdens that other schools do not face. For example, there is a legacy of residential schools to overcome. First Nations schools must create an educational experience in which parents trust and believe. First Nations schools must ensure the community understands its purpose and goals, which are to provide a quality education without stripping the identity or, as infamously known, "kill the Indian in the child'. For this reason, it is critical that First Nations schools make culture and language a focus.

Considering the barriers First Nations principals face, there is a need to embark on a slightly different leadership journey. Flexibility and understanding of family dynamics is important. Parents and family structures, which are significant in raising children, are, in some cases, detached and broken. Relationships that foster family and school trust must be built. First Nations school leaders must actively listen more by validating thoughts, ideas, and feelings.

Finally, First Nations schools must provide supports to our families. When parents are helped to become more connected and engaged, children are helped. Such a process will take time, but it is evident that these changes make a difference. Recently, Ermineskin Elementary School started having parent workshops and healing circles. When these were first started three years ago, only a few parents attended. Recently, the school held a workshop on the topic of grief and 23 parents attended. The school's responsibility to help children also means helping parents. When students are struggling at home, the school meets with parents and walks them through what they are feeling. In these moments, parents begin the process of healing. The process allows the child and the parent to understand and forgive each other. It is extraordinary when parents and children can come together in a safe environment and both leave feeling validated and heard. Leadership on the reserve requires tremendous flexibility and understanding. However, if it is done with a delicate balance that ensures high standards and expectations are never compromised, the results are magical.

Conclusion: Recommendations for First Nations Principals

We have witnessed an evolution of change in First Nations education. Both the 1972 *Indian Control of Indian Education* (ICIE) (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972) and the revised 2010 *First Nations Control of First Nations Education* (Assembly of First Nations, 2010) policy statements supported a number of underlying principles, including that education is a tool that can help eradicate poverty of all types. Key elements of First Nations lifelong learning addressed in these statements and in our article include support for Indigenous languages; holistic and culturally relevant curricula; well-trained educators; focused leadership; parental involvement and accountability; and safe and healthy facilities founded on principles that respect First Nations jurisdiction over education.

We believe our work here explicitly links to the 2013 theme issue of "Indian Control of Indian Education—40 Years Later." Specifically, our findings link to a number of principles of the ICIE policy. For example, reserve schools that gained control of their education system have witnessed success in their First Nations communities. This success varies on the spectrum but, overall, many positive changes have been made. Much work remains to be done in terms of policy and procedural development; however, the underlying vision and purpose of this work is significant. What this means for most First Nations schools on reserves is the freedom to strengthen the culture and language and to create a school system in which identity, connectedness, and consistency is valued.

Strong evidence supports embracing the principle of *Indian Control of Indian Education* in all schools that serve First Nations children. There is no dispute that First Nations children have not fared well in comparison to non-First Nations children in terms of achievement results, high school completion rates, and post-secondary advancement. Therefore, we believe that the current education system does not fully support the history, culture, and language of First Nations children and simply does not work. Living on a reserve is significantly different than living in urban settings. There is often no access to public transportation, economic development is strained, social issues are heightened, and family support systems are necessary to be expanded to more than just the mother and father. Considering all these factors, it seems clear that our education system must support differences and build processes that fit the student population being served.

A few important elements seem essential to the success of First Nations education where local control has been honoured.

1. The vision of schooling must always begin with culture and language. This is the foundation for creating a First Nations school. Culture and language should never be undermined or considered "add-ons." They are embedded into everything that happens in the school and help to create schools where contextual differences are nurtured.

2. Emphasis must be made on creating policies and procedures within the school division. If solid policies are in place to support the work that happens in schools, it is less likely that good practices will be lost. Good policy and procedures also encourage consistent practices that support good decisions. It is important to understand that, for many reserve schools, local control is still in the infancy of education. There is still work to be done in this area.
3. The processes created must always honour traditional First Nations values. For example, using mainstream discipline strategies, such as suspensions and expulsions, should be altered to processes such as sharing circles and restorative justice practices. These processes allow for flexibility, accountability, and coming together so issues may be resolved.
4. Gaining local control does not mean lowering standards. Educating our children means honouring who they are as First Nations people and developing a system that balances this ideology with the setting of high expectations. Schools must do both.
5. Communication must be fluid, transparent, and open. Communication with parents, students, the community, and leaders must be centred on the vision, focus, and direction that the school is taking. Regular conversation and dialogue are necessary.
6. Cultural identify must be the school's focus. It can be easy to become distracted or feel defeated by community leadership, parents who challenge the school's vision, and the time needed for positive change to occur. However, celebrating both small and large cultural successes in the school can help.
7. Local control can be vulnerable to community pressure, nepotism, and decision making that does not match a school's vision. It is sometimes easier to cave into such practices, but strong policy development and vision helps schools to avoid issues that undermine local control. Keeping in mind that the purpose of our work is education in the broadest sense helps us to improve the educational experience for our First Nations children.

Local control of education for many First Nations schools has been a slow but steady process. It is improving and will continue to improve as more reserve schools remember their tremendous responsibility to create and develop policy, strengthen the importance of First Nations culture and language, and create atmospheres where connectedness and flexibility are fostered. The process has been long and hard for many, but the benefits will continue to flourish as long as policy and procedural framework is a continued focus. With a strong policy framework in place, making decisions and administering any school becomes easier. Some reserve schools have only had "local control" for 20 years or less in some cases. Education systems are still in their structural infancy. Therefore, celebrating the distance covered without losing sight of the goal is necessary.

In this final section, we attempt to summarize and reconcile the points we have made in this paper with our earlier research findings (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2011) to suggest recommendations for principals working in First Nations schools.

Recommendation One: Principals should work with both passion and a strong commitment to the school. They should believe their school is both about student learning and about hope and building a sense of "family" with all stakeholders.

Recommendation Two: First Nations schools must actively cherish culture and language. Culture and language set First Nations schools apart from others and include characteristics that foster identify and self-awareness in First Nations children. Culture and language should never be forgotten.

Recommendation Three: Highly effective First Nations principals should demonstrate and model successful leadership practices, both within the school and the community:

1. They should remove barriers from teachers with whom they work. They should work hard to ensure instruction and student learning is optimized and encouraged. First Nations principals should always ask the question, "How can I help you?" or "What can I do to make you a better teacher?" Highly effective First Nations principals give teachers freedom to risk, innovate, and try new things.
2. They should be strong leaders who do not hesitate to express expectations or set high goals. Our research uncovered leaders who first earned the trust and respect of teacher colleagues and then helped their colleagues to work efficaciously.
3. They should value people. Effective First Nations principals should establish a culture of belonging. The schools we studied named themselves families—close communities filled with joys and heartaches. The wall between personal and professional was permeable, and personal issues came to school daily. This is by far one of the most obvious characteristics principals could demonstrate in a First Nations school. Highly effective First Nations principals should create spaces where teachers can work together; support each other; and share stories, culture, and resources. These spaces are most evident in the staffroom, but are also observed during planning meetings, collaborative exercises, and informal teacher conversations.
4. They should build cultures of enthusiastic celebration of successes by focusing on the positive. They should build a common vision and goals, and share and live a mission statement. This mission statement should be shared throughout the school, the community, and with those at the political leadership level.

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