SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN THE CANADIAN NORTH:
A CASE STUDY OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN THE
SOUTH SLAVE DIVISIONAL EDUCATION COUNCIL

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ABSTRACT

Although decades of concerted efforts and related research are available to us, there remains little in the way of agreed upon definitive conclusions about how to improve schools anywhere, let alone schools as faraway and exceptional as those found in the South Slave region of the Northwest Territories (NWT) in northern Canada. The day to day emergencies and demands of the job of teaching children, coordinating programs, supervising staff and administering a school or region tend to consume us to the point that we overlook the factors and strategies that can approach and sustain excellence in our schools.

Advocating for a group of eight school principals and seven regional office administrators and program coordinators, this research endeavoured to determine what is really important to school improvement in small and diverse multi-cultural contexts. A participatory action research design and methodology was used to engage these participant practitioners together in the 'first person' (I and us) assessment and improvement of their own practices by reviewing and reflecting on school improvement efforts over the past several years.

Four key themes emerged from this research in response to the research question: Focus Is Needed, Relationships Matter, Context is Critical, and Servant Leadership Supersedes. As further validated by the participants, a graphic re-conceptualization of how to improve schools is provided. In short, the foundational components of context, relationships and focus underpin the other key strategic elements: servant leadership, multi-level alignment, professional learning communities and assessment.

Keywords: action research; educational change; educational leadership; northern education; school improvement
I dedicate this dissertation:

to my wife Michelle and children Michael and Amy,

and

to my first two teachers, Lynn and Donna Brown.

I am forever grateful for all their love, support and sacrifices.

This dissertation is also completed in fond memory of Mr. Lawrie Hobart,
a loyal and supportive colleague and friend.
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First, I am thankful to the doctoral program instructors and the amazing cohort of graduate students who made coming to campus intellectually stimulating and fun.

I am grateful to all the participants in this study. In spite of very busy schedules, they graciously agreed to participate and gave their precious time and thoughts to this research as it applied to our work together. I also thank the South Slave Divisional Education Council for seeing value and supporting this research.

Family members and friends, most of whom I neglected over the past several years, are appreciated for their understanding, support and concern for my welfare during this arduous adventure.

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Most of all, I am in deepest gratitude to my wife and greatest supporter Michelle Brown who has shared my trials and tribulations in the writing of this work. Above all others, I am grateful for her unflagging love, patience and belief in me. Words cannot express how much her appreciation and support has meant to me over the past several years, as my wife and as a respected colleague.

May we all continue to “live well with and for others”! (Ricoeur)
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<td>School Improvement</td>
<td>For the purposes of this research, school improvement is defined as the extent to which the school is improving at meeting the educational needs of the students and the aspirations of the community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community Education Planning (CEP)</td>
<td>The term is used in the Northwest Territories, instead of strategic planning or school improvement planning, to reinforce the importance of involving school partners such as students, parents, and community leaders in the development of a school, or schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Education Authority (DEA)</td>
<td>The community-based and locally elected or appointed education governing body. There is a DEA in each community of the Northwest Territories that also has a school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divisional Education Council (DEC)</td>
<td>A regional corporate body made up of one representative appointed by each community-based District Education Authority in the Northwest Territories. This is the governing body that employs a Superintendent. The South Slave Council is one of five regional DECs in the NWT.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Improvement / Educational Change Research</td>
<td>A body of research primarily qualitative in nature, that intends to answer the question, “How do we improve schools?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Leader</td>
<td>For the purpose of this study region and school administrators and coordinators are all considered educational leaders and may be referenced collectively and interchangeably, consistent with the conceptions of the ideal educational leader as a leader of leaders (Barth, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1994).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformational Leadership</td>
<td>Empowering approach that intends to build a shared vision, develop people and empower them to share in the leadership.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional Learning Community (PLC)</td>
<td>A Professional Learning Community (PLC) involves educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. (Dufour et al., 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Diversity means different races, different interest groups, different power bases and basically different lots in life. (Fullan, 1999, p. 2)</td>
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CHAPTER 1:  SETTING THE STAGE

INTRODUCTION

A small valley community was frequently inundated by flash floods from the mountain above. The inhabitants of this community stoically pulled their belongings from the raging waters time after time. One year a monk came to the community and soon earned the respect of the people because of his humility and wisdom. When the next flood rushed down out of the mountains, the people instinctively looked to him for assistance as they once again began pulling their possessions out of the raging waters. However, rather than assisting them in their tasks, he was busily engaged in throwing rocks and hauling timbers. When asked by the perplexed crowd of people why he was not helping, he replied, “I am. I’m working to build a dam to ensure this doesn’t happen again.” (Dogrib Divisional Board of Education, 1993)

Our work in school jurisdictions and in our schools is often similar to the work performed by the people in the community described above. The day to day emergencies and demands of the job of teaching children, supervising staff and administering a school or region tend to consume us to the point that we ignore the organizational building tasks that can improve and sustain our schools in times of rapid change. Like the monk, we must attend to constructing the foundations that enable our schools to have the continuity, direction and purpose to achieve excellence.

One of the ongoing issues steering leadership, governance and research in education is the question of how to support and sustain meaningful school change and improvement. Together, education policy makers and staff have the responsibility to improve their school organizations by collectively seeking to envision the possibilities for enhancing student learning. This would entail consultation with the wider community, taking action to overcome difficulties and moving schools in the direction of their vision. Facilitating school improvement to maximize student achievement may be our most important responsibility.

Recent efforts (since 2000) in the South Slave division of Canada’s Northwest Territories (NWT) have attempted to establish some of the foundations upon which school
improvement efforts might be more intentional and ongoing. However, concerns about competing priorities and staff overload have led to the need to re-examine these efforts to determine how leadership at the school and district/school board levels can be most effective in bringing about and sustaining changes that improve student learning.

This research involves a group of school principals and regional office administrators and program coordinators, who have been engaged in significant school improvement efforts since 2000, examining past and present initiatives and strategies to determine what is really important to school(s) improvement in small and diverse multi-cultural contexts. In doing so, the study identifies what leadership approaches at the district and school levels are perceived to ensure improvement that fosters greater student success.

THE PROBLEM

Although decades of concerted efforts and related research are available to us\(^1\), there remains little in the way of agreed upon definitive conclusions about how to improve schools (Bennis and Nanus, 1997; Fullan, 2004; Harris and Lambert, 2003; Reeves, 2009), and little has been done for schools as unique as those found in the South Slave region of the Northwest Territories (NWT) in northern Canada.

Both the NWT and its jurisdiction of the South Slave Divisional Education Council (SSDEC) are challenged in terms of a large geographical area, relative isolation, small population, limited resources and difficult social issues. These factors have combined to make a few of the South Slave communities amongst the most disadvantaged in the NWT and Canada. Factors such as high staff turnover, ongoing lack of community/parent support and involvement, and low student achievement seem to perpetuate the problem. In other South Slave schools, conventional methods are so entrenched it seems almost impossible to overcome resistance to change and innovation. These conditions result in sub-standard and sometimes dysfunctional schools and communities.

There is also scarce merging of education research with practice in more rural locations. Due to cost, distance and access issues, it is unlikely to see university personnel studying and working directly with northern districts and schools. Yet, there remains a need for such jurisdictions to understand better not only what is already working within the region, but also what’s working elsewhere so as to inform future efforts.

\(^1\) The \textit{curriculum reform movement} in the 1960s provided one example of educational reform that changed the way teachers taught math and science in many parts of North America. A second example of concerted efforts occurred in British Columbia and Washington State where the \textit{Young Writers Project} in the 1990s had considerable impact on teachers’ pedagogical practices.
Most school improvement research has been carried out in urban North American settings. The northern Canada setting is quite different socially, culturally, linguistically, and geographically. Because of high turnover of leaders and teachers, together with the immensely diverse student population, school improvement efforts tend to be hit and miss. Where improvement occurs, it is usually dependent on a few personalities, and the quality of such efforts typically rises and falls with the turnover of personnel. There is often very little continuity, leaving NWT schools in a constant rebuilding mode.

At the same time, a growing demand for accountability is leading to increasingly politically driven and educationally questionable strategies. Northern districts and schools are now required to test students annually using the grades three, six and nine Alberta Achievement Tests. While consistently below Canadian graduation rates and Alberta achievement standards, northern school districts are showing higher percentages of students meeting achievement standards, and the South Slave student achievement results continually better the NWT average. (Towards Excellence, 2005; SSDEC Systemic Assessment Report, 2007) It remains unclear, however, what the specific causes are for those improved results and how they might be further improved. Can the efforts and improvements made to date be sustained and further enhanced without causing burnout?

In 2006, South Slave regional and school leaders expressed increasing concerns about workload and related stresses. In an attempt to find out more about these conditions, and share coping strategies, responses were collected to the question: What kinds of time management strategies are you using to deal with the overwhelming workload? The responses indicated an eclectic variety of opinions and coping strategies, including working longer hours per day and on weekends. Three of the eight principals indicated they didn’t feel it was particularly problematic. The other five, however, did. Since that time, much has changed that is making the principals’ and program coordinators’ work even more complex.

Over the past few decades, a body of school effectiveness research (Reynolds, Creemers et al. 2002) has studied schools at a specific point in time and identified a number of significant factors that are present in effective versus ineffective schools. Although this body of knowledge helps us to answer the question of what is an effective school at a specific point in time and in particular contexts (structural constructs mostly). However, very little is yet known about how they become good schools over time (process and cultural implications), as is the intent of the body of school improvement research (Hargreaves, Lieberman et al. 1998; Harris 2000).

Both the effective schools and school improvement research paradigms reinforce the importance of effective educational leadership, particularly at the school level, but also extended throughout the system. A conference report (Creemers et al, 1998) on special
sessions at the *Tenth International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement* identified the need to focus more on district or local education authority (LEA) influences, as a way of understanding how different types of leadership at the school level can be fostered.

Moreover, consistent with the literature on educational change and effective schools (Fullan 1991; Hargreaves, Lieberman et al. 1998), improvement in schools requires broad based support. Consequently, district leaders and school principals need to develop the capacity to lead and facilitate by seeking input from others to help inform, initiate, and sustain school improvements. It has become increasingly clear that school leadership and school improvement processes need to be participatory and cyclical. That is, they must be consistent with the ‘string of changes in the workplace’ (Stanfield, 1997) that is often described as flattening the hierarchy or turning the pyramid model of the organization on its side or flipping it upside-down. Much has been written of the need for the principal to transform from being a supervisor and sole decision-maker to collaborator and facilitator. However, districts and schools may not believe they have sufficient leadership capacity to facilitate group decision-making processes and quality planning practices at the community/school levels.

More recently, school and district reform efforts have tended to look at school improvement from a more comprehensive and multilevel approach. Fullan (1994) suggests that neither top-down nor bottom-up strategies for educational reform work, but that a sophisticated blend of the two can be successful. Reform, however, is more “top-down”, leading Hopkins and Levin (2000) to identify a number of limitations of politically driven government programs of reform. For example, the pace of change at the local level is a product of local factors that are largely beyond the control of higher-level policy makers, and reform efforts have seldom paid sufficient attention to issues of implementation. They conclude, “Governments should insist that schools be thoughtful in their approach to change and improvement, but not necessarily require that everyone do the same thing in the same way at the same time” (p. 28).

Further, when knowledge about good practice continually comes from outside the school and district, there develops a dependency and an inability to construct a *community of learners and leaders* (Barth, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1994), a *learning organization* (Senge, 1990) or a *professional learning community* (Dufour et al., 2005) that has the capacity to produce its own knowledge, adapt to change, and create the future. This dilemma is particularly evident in communities and schools of the NWT where there has traditionally been little emphasis on, and sustenance of, school improvement.

Large-scale reform efforts and both the effective schools and school improvement research databases emphasize the importance of effective leadership and collaborative
efforts that garner broad base support for initiatives. But, while researchers are at pains to point out the importance of locality, school improvement is messy. There still remains:

- a scarce merging of research with practice, particularly in more rural locations;
- an insufficient number of studies about how to improve schools in diverse contexts;
- a lack of attention paid to issues of implementation; and,
- an insufficient understanding of leadership support strategies that maximize school improvement.

There is a need to clarify further what really matters and works best at improving diverse northern schools.

**Research Purpose**

The literature suggests that studies of how school improvement occurs in diverse communities typically involves addressing questions such as: What can policy makers, school boards, regional and school administrators and program coordinators do to energize school improvement efforts and maximize student achievement outcomes? Do we provide more pressure? Or more support? What kind and how much of each? How do we determine that school improvement has occurred? Is what we should do different for each situation? Are we already doing the best we can? How do we know?

The purpose of this study was to explore approaches that are most likely to empower and sustain effective school improvement from a school and district leadership perspective in diverse, northern communities. More specifically, this research endeavoured to determine the kinds of approaches in a participatory process that emerge as having impact on school improvement in the diverse, multi-cultural contexts of communities in the South Slave region of the Northwest Territories.

**Research Question**

While most school improvement research in the literature has been carried out in urban North American settings, this study was concerned with how school improvement can be effected in a school district in the NWT that is quite different socially, culturally, linguistically, and geographically.

The question this study pursued is simple but complex:
What kinds of approaches did South Slave Divisional Education Council leaders perceive as promoting and sustaining school improvement in the diverse multicultural context of the South Slave region in the NWT?

A participatory action research approach was used to get at the research question. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) posit, “Participatory action research is the preferred approach to social and educational research aimed at social and educational change” (p. 590). It is a research methodology that pursues action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time. The participatory approach taken in this study not only helped to crystallize results for contribution to the body of research, but it also had practical significance locally because it obtained knowledge that could be applied directly to the local situation.

Educational leaders seeking to improve the conditions that overwhelm school personnel need to examine something about the history of what has come before. The efforts of the past are seen as foundational and a resource for understanding the significance of a direct personal experience. Hence, the Northern context and the history of school governance in the NWT and the South Slave is described as background to having the participants actively identify the more recent school improvement efforts that have taken place since 2000.

**DELIMITATIONS**

This study was delimited to the collective beliefs and perceptions of 15 educational leaders, namely school and regional administrators and program coordinators from the South Slave educational division of the NWT. The findings were also delimited to the perspectives of the participants, in their settings and experiences, at a particular time, that is, during a six-month timeframe in 2007.

**ASSUMPTIONS**

There are several key assumptions implicit in this study. First, quality individuals and schools should continually strive to improve. Regardless of how good a school is it can become better. Continuous improvement is necessary just to keep up with the rapid rate of change in the world and even more so in the North.

Second, region and school administrators and coordinators are key agents for change in successful schools. School improvement is not likely to occur without the effective leadership of the school principal. The ability of the principal to effect change and
improvement is more likely with quality leadership and support from regional administrators and program coordinators.

Third, this research assumes that the participant regional and school administrators and coordinators in this study are also competent in their roles and knowledgeable of the context(s). Since they had been hired and retained by the locally elected school authorities, it was further assumed that these participants had the support of their communities.

In recognition of the significant focus on school improvement planning in the South Slave region since 2000 that had led to improvements in student achievement results, it is further assumed that these leaders are capable educators and leaders, whose knowledge had a role to play in obtaining the results that occurred.

A fifth assumption is made that when studying the quality of schools, educational change and school improvement are synonymous. The terms are used interchangeably throughout this dissertation because we engage in educational change in order to improve schools, and because educational change research is an offshoot of earlier school improvement research efforts. The term educational change also implies a view of improvement more widely than just in schools. For the purpose of this study, we are looking at educational change at the school and division levels that leads to school improvement and better results for students. More specifically, this research is about leadership of educational change for school improvement.

The challenge, for doctorate level research involving northern peoples, is to locate and employ research methodology that is culturally compatible with northern worldviews and traditions. The final assumption made here is that an action research study utilizing a more appreciative and collaborative inquiry is an appropriate design, which draws out a truer understanding of the participants’ personal knowledge and perspectives, and their multiple realities, and which are critical to the meaningfulness of this study. This design also intends to model these kinds of personal and organizational principles for how to work with and for people in a multi-cultural environment.

**LIMITATIONS**

An interpretive study using interviews has particular limitations in the NWT where distance and flight schedules are prohibitive to affordable travel. Focus group sessions and even telephone interviews are also very costly. Fortunately, it was possible to complete the majority of the interviews in person, or by telephone if preferred by the participant.
Time was also a factor. Due mostly to the time constraints of the participants, focus group sessions and interviews were limited to no more than two hours each. Several potential respondents mentioned a concern about the time they had available. Consequently, the verbal assurance of minimal additional work and the flexibility to opt out at any time was a selling point.

The language barrier may not have been visibly evident as all respondents were fluent in English, the language of the researcher and the interviews. A related limitation of the study was simply the quality of the insights of the participants pertaining to their level of knowledge of their contexts, the education system and the scope of their particular roles. Each participant had a variety of experiences and strengths. A few were also new to the NWT and the role of educational leader. Typical of any group, some were more or less perceptive and articulate than others.

Considerable effort was made to maintain confidentiality when describing the participants and presenting the data in this report. Although the provision of a more in-depth description of participants’ individual backgrounds and contexts might have added interest and clarity, this information was not reported here for privacy reasons.

It was recognized that these participants already had school or initiative goals and action plans in place that they were working on diligently, and that had been determined in consultation with stakeholders as per Council Policy AEA. (see Appendix A) Accordingly, participants may have been so invested in those local priorities that they might have been unable or unwilling to see and advocate for different approaches.

A further limitation to this study pertained to the dual role of the researcher-practitioner that includes supervisory responsibilities. This had both advantages and potential limitations in terms of access to, and accuracy of, data and interpretations. The role of the supervisor as researcher may have been a detriment to principals and regional coordinators, who may have felt compelled to give less than frank responses or who might otherwise have tempered their comments based on what they might have felt the researcher/supervisor was hoping to hear. To overcome these issues, the researcher needed to work consciously at the process of inquiry, with significant effort to set participants at ease, and by employing multiple strategies of validity to create participant and reader confidence in the accuracy of the findings. For example, the use of a confidential third party for collection and collation of feedback and a confidential peer review process helped to minimize this potential effect.

As Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) counter, however, epistemology, in terms of what participants think is accurate, relevant, appropriate and pertinent to their purposes is probably more important than methodology. Methodological rigor is more important in
second and third person research, where analysis generally occurs away from the setting and participants. Social transformation is also not just a technical matter. It is also political, cultural, social, and cognitive, so should be researched accordingly. In participatory action research, "participants live with the consequences of the transformations they make.... a very concrete 'reality-check' on the quality of their transformational work" (p. 592).

Lastly, the researcher's profile in the NWT, and his proclivities as a leader, could have contributed to the study’s limitations. That is, the researcher recognizes that his values and experiences have influenced his understanding and interpretations of the respondents’ perceptions. Moreover, he understands that he is predominately a synthesizer and reconciler. His role in cross-cultural leadership often requires a need to be a problem solver and to see things from others’ perspectives. This profile and these tendencies proved to be both an advantage and a disadvantage for this kind of social research.

An awareness of these limitations were kept in mind and minimized wherever possible, particularly during the data gathering and analysis stages. Again, this was accomplished in part through a more collaborative and participatory approach combined with the use of a confidential third party.

It should also be noted that given the variety of factors, flexibility and responsiveness inherent in the design of participatory action research (PAR), the results may have limited transferability beyond similar contexts.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

The significance of this research is found in the commonalities of approaches that are successful at improving schools and increasing student achievement in diverse, Northern communities. The kinds of research conclusions the researcher anticipates include:

- confirmation that school improvement efforts need to be intentional, comprehensive (multi-level & multi-lever), and ongoing;
- perspectives of key partners are valuable/critical to the identification of school improvement goals and approaches; and,
- educational leadership in the northern aboriginal context is more suitably collaborative and empowering than hierarchical and/or charismatic.

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2 The researcher is a former NWT school principal, co-author of *School Leadership in the NWT: A Profile for the 90’s* (1993), past developer and principal of the legislated *NWT Principal Certification Program*, and current superintendent with the *South Slave Divisional Education Council*. 
As a participative study, this inquiry should also act as a stimulus for transforming participants as well as the context, by enabling educational leaders to know how best to focus future energies and resources.

The results of this research will also be of significance to provincial/territorial and school board policy makers, and school and jurisdiction educational administrators such as deputy ministers, superintendents and school principals looking to understand how better to focus resources towards school improvement in diverse contexts.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

This first chapter has introduced the nature of the study, with a description of the problem followed by a clarification of the research question and its significance. A quick foreshadowing of the design and methodology is provided along with delimitations, limitations and assumptions.

The second chapter provides more detail as to the context of the Northwest Territories and the South Slave region in particular, followed by an overview of the history of educational governance in the NWT as a backdrop and framework for the history of school improvement efforts in the NWT and the South Slave region. The chapter ends with a frank but hopeful articulation of the challenges and successes to date in order to situate the research and discussions.

Chapter 3 provides a review of the literature related to school improvement, effective schools and educational leadership and provides an initial conceptual framework against which the analysis and findings will be interpreted.

The fourth chapter explores the conceptual underpinnings and provides a description of the participatory action research design and methodology and the reasons for its appropriateness for this study.

Chapter 5 flows from chapter four and describes the data collection, analysis and theory-building methods used. The key data collection events and group processes are described and the unique settings, actors, roles, responsibilities and ethical considerations are clarified.

Chapter 6 presents a descriptive analysis of the focus group data, written submissions, individual interviews and the confidential feedback from the participant school principals, regional administrators and program coordinators. The data is presented in categories of responses, and thematically inclusive of participant quotes.
Chapter 7 contains the major findings and interpretations of the study. It is here that the research questions are addressed specifically and the findings are compared to the initial conceptual framework.

Finally, Chapter 8 includes conclusions and personal reflections. Implications for further research and for policy and practice of the superintendent, school board, legislators and other educational leaders are also explored.

**CONCLUSION**

Strong and effective programs arise and derive strength from the school organization and community culture. Accordingly, this pragmatic and participatory action research study aspired to be non-intrusive and empowering for participants, inducing deeper critical reflection and change (personal growth and school improvement), grounded in a conceptualization of effective school improvement approaches for northern schools.

This chapter identified the problem from both a practical perspective as well as a research perspective. In short, northern educational leaders work hard and, against incredible odds, have achieved positive results. However, it seems unlikely that such a pace could be sustained without burnout. It does not appear possible for people to work harder. It could be argued that they need to work smarter. However, to do that they need to be involved in the identification of what has been most effective in the past. They also need to know which aspects of practice and research might further inform future school improvement efforts in northern contexts. Accordingly, this research honoured and involved the locally hired educational leaders, i.e., regional and school administrators, and coordinators.

Further and in summary, this chapter foreshadows later sections of this dissertation and begins to makes a case for the need for research that:

- was participatory;
- looked at what seemed to be working out there (literature review) and within the local context;
- was action oriented such that it not only added to the research knowledge base but also contributed to the local situation;
- was designed to be non-intrusive, liberating and empowering for participants; and,
- provided potential benefit to educational leaders and policy makers at various levels.

This research intended to mirror the wisdom of the monk in determining which elements of school improvement strategies are merely "pulling out belongings" and which are the foundations that can sustain school improvement efforts and outcomes in turbulent times.
CHAPTER 2:
THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

Since the purpose of this study was to look at the kinds of approaches that promote and sustain school improvement in the South Slave region in the NWT, it is therefore important to start with a description of this unique and storied setting. As educational leaders who seek to improve our overwhelmed schools, it is also important to examine something about the history of what has come before. The efforts of the past are foundational, and can be an invaluable resource in developing the future. Finally, this chapter is intended to provide the foundation and backdrop with which to better situate the reader within the unique and diverse context of this study of school improvement.

Accordingly, this chapter begins with a description of the setting of the NWT geographically and demographically. This is followed by an overview of the history of educational governance in the NWT as a backdrop for the chronological history of school improvement efforts in the NWT and more specifically the South Slave region. The chapter ends with a frank but hopeful articulation of the challenges and successes to date.

THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES (NWT)

The NWT is one of Canada's three northern territories and is spread over a huge geographic area of over 1.1 million square kilometres. The NWT has a population of over 42,500 people. Almost half of the population lives in Yellowknife, the capital, and another quarter live in the regional centres of Fort Smith, Hay River and Inuvik. The NWT has the second youngest population in Canada, behind Nunavut, with almost one in four people being under 15 years of age. About 50% of this population is of aboriginal descent. Of those reporting to be aboriginal, 57% are Dene, 21% Inuit and 19% Metis, in total representing 2% of the total aboriginal population in Canada. (Statistics Canada, 2006 Census)

There are over 9,300 students in 49 public schools across 34 NWT communities. The majority of these schools are situated in small, isolated communities, most of which have populations of less than 1,500 people. Almost half of these schools (23) deliver programs
right from kindergarten through grade 12. Eleven schools are very small, with fewer than 60 students enrolled. Just eight schools have enrolments of over 350 students and half of those are in Yellowknife. (Towards Excellence, 2005, p. 25)

**Figure 1: Map of the NWT**

While the NWT has 11 official languages—Chipewyan, Cree, English, French, Gwich’in, Inuinnaqtun, Inuktitut, Inuvialuktun, North Slavey, South Slavey and Tlicho (Dogrib)—English is the most common language spoken with 78% of the population reporting English as the first language (mother tongue).

Of the approximately 730 certified teachers in the NWT, 14% are aboriginal educators (mostly in the elementary grades). Even with significant efforts to train northerners, very few of the incumbent school principals are aboriginal, much of the school curriculum still comes from Alberta, and more than half of the teachers employed in the North still acquire their professional training in the south. (Towards Excellence, 2005, p. 28)
History of School Improvement Efforts

As the term *school improvement* might imply, educational change and school development is a complex and long-term endeavour that seemingly has no beginning or end. An overview of the history of educational governance in the NWT provides a backdrop for the history of school improvement efforts in the NWT and the South Slave region.

The NWT is big, but with a relatively small population, and with great distances between the multiple and diverse communities. Not surprisingly, most schools operate with a great deal of autonomy, thus exacerbating the variance in school improvement efforts.

*The evolution of education governance in the NWT*

This section provides a timeline of who was responsible for making decisions related to schools in the NWT since before the turn of the 19th century. The *NWT Education History Timeline* (2002), developed by the NWT Department of Education, Culture and Employment, provides a listing of some of the most significant events. This information has been correlated with the results of a series of facilitated *historical scan* sessions in various regions over the years. During each facilitated session, and regardless of the jurisdiction of NWT participants, the results have been similar. Described below are the major periods of educational governance and the expressed impacts of those periods on the peoples of the NWT.

Participants in these discussions have described the pre-1900s as a period of *traditional learning* or *learning from our ancestors*. Participants in these sessions have signified that in those days parents and the extended family, elders in the case of aboriginal families, in particular were the educators of the children.

In contrast, the early to mid-1900s has more frequently been referred to by participant groups as the *loss of control* or *educational chaos* years. This was the period when the education of northern children was subsumed by the Federal government, and then turned over to the churches. The signing of the first treaty (Treaty 8) by the Government of Canada and the Dene living in the southern district of the existing map of the NWT and the northern parts of Saskatchewan and Alberta marked the start of this devolution. The Dene groups came under the jurisdiction of the Indian Act and Indian education became a Federal responsibility. This was followed by the Government of Canada in 1908 declaring that the southern portion of the NWT was a “missionary field” and that the

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3 A *historical scan* is a variant of the focused conversation method that was developed by the *Institute of Cultural Affairs* based in Ontario. This approach facilitates a group's reviewing of its history of key events, issues and achievements that have influenced its development to date.
churches had responsibility and sovereignty for determining the goals of “Native Education”. (NWT History Timeline, 2002)

A public and then a Catholic school board were established in Yellowknife during this time span, but gradually the majority of the denominational schools in the rest of the NWT were replaced by Federal Day Schools and residential high schools in a few regional centres. Aboriginal languages were disallowed in schools during these years and the aboriginal communities began to suffer the loss of their first languages. This era also coincided with terrible disease and the Depression years, with further loss of large numbers of elders and their language, traditional stories, and inherited knowledge. Mineral production replaced that of the fur trade, leading to decades of southerners coming north until the demographics of the NWT shifted to where now the non-aboriginal population matches the aboriginal population in numbers.

May 1, 1967 marked the day Yellowknife was named the capital of the NWT. Administration was moved from Ottawa to Yellowknife, and thus began the gradual shift of authority from the Federal Government to the Territorial Council. On April 1, 1970, the Government of the Northwest Territories took over full responsibility for education in all of the NWT. It wasn’t until 1972 that the Department of Education published the Red Book (K-6), the first curriculum guide prepared in the NWT. Unlike Ministries of Education in the South, the Department of Education operated like one large school board for the entire NWT (including Nunavut at that time), with most decisions about schooling being made centrally.

The first fully elected Territorial Council took power in 1975. Consistent with the manner of Dene and Inuvialuit traditional consensus rule, the new government adopted, and continues to this day, a more consensus model of democracy than a majority rule or party model. There are no official party affiliations in the NWT. Once the Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA’s) are elected they meet and choose their Premier who then selects a Cabinet. This approach essentially leaves the remaining MLAs as the opposition.

In almost all the historical scan workshops over the years, participants referred to the more recent decades—since the 1980s and through the 1990s—as a rebirth or the beginning of a returning of control of education to parents and communities. The late 1970s saw the Legislative Assembly proclaim the 11 official languages of the NWT, and then introduced an affirmative action policy for hiring northerners into the public service. Concurrently, the first NWT Education Act, a northern teacher education program, and the first community-based Local Education Authorities were established. But it wasn’t until the report of the Special Committee on Education’s Learning: Tradition and Change (1982) was tabled in the Legislative Assembly that began the creation of regional
Divisional Boards of Education, Community Education Councils, and Arctic College several years later.

The territorial government’s priorities and directions typically change every four years coinciding with the election of the members of the Legislative Assembly; however, *Learning, Tradition and Change* (1982) was the first published plan for more significant and long term change in education in the NWT. It recommended the creation of regional school boards and community education councils made up of parents and other community members, who would collectively formulate district and school policy and make decisions that guide programming. This key document became the blueprint for more restructuring and decentralizing over the next 15 years.

**Figure 2: NWT School Divisions**

Thirty-three community-based District Education Authorities (DEAs), four Divisional Education Councils (DECs), a Community Services Board and a commission scolaire francophone currently govern public schools in the NWT. (see Figure 2) The last school
board incorporated, the South Slave Divisional Board of Education, was established in 1991 to administer the kindergarten to grade 12 education system for eight schools in five communities in the South Slave region—Fort Smith, Hay River, Hay River Reserve (now called K'atlodeeche First Nation Reserve), Fort Resolution, and Lutsel K'e—a region located in the south east corner of the NWT, bordering Alberta. The Council’s regional office is located in Fort Smith.

Divisional Education Councils such as the South Slave DEC are responsible for coordinating and supporting education programs and services on behalf of several community-based DEAs. Each regional DEC member is appointed by the respective DEA, and as a collective body, the DEC (ie. Council) elects a chairperson and vice-chairperson. It is the Council’s responsibility to set broad direction and policy for the kindergarten to grade 12 education system within the South Slave region. Their responsibilities range from establishing policies and developing local programs to preparing budgets and hiring teachers. The Council’s chief executive officer, the superintendent, is responsible for directing the implementation of Council policies by the regional office and schools.

The 1990s saw the official adoption of completely rewritten Education Act (1986) and the related community empowerment initiative intended to strengthen and build community capacity and control. Meanwhile the federal and territorial governments were also, and continue to be, entertaining land claims and self-government requests by NWT aboriginal groups. The division of the NWT and the creation of Nunavut in 1999 and comprehensive land claims agreements with the Inuvialuit (1984), Gwich’in (1990), Sahtu/Dene (1993), and Dogrib (2002) are further indicative of the transfer of the ability to govern to the first peoples of the NWT. The new roles of the various governments—federal, territorial, and aboriginal—are being further defined now and over the next few decades as self-government negotiations continue.

In summary, from the late 1800s until the present day, the history of the NWT has been one of reduction in size in order to create new or enlarged political jurisdictions. In the 1800s, the NWT covered most of Canada. Over the following hundred years Manitoba, Yukon, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Northern Ontario, Northern Quebec, Northern Manitoba and more recently Nunavut were created out of the Northwest Territories. In roughly that time period, the governance of education in the NWT has been one of abruptly taking away and then gradually returning some form of control to communities and parents through locally elected governing bodies.
School Reform Efforts in the NWT

As outlined above, prior to the 1970s educational change and school improvement efforts in the NWT were mostly in the form of large-scale ownership and systemic structure changes. There did not appear to be any other common NWT-wide approaches to school improvement in the NWT to that time. Nevertheless, during and after that time significant efforts did occur. Indeed, there were efforts territorially in individual schools, by very committed educators throughout the NWT, to create the most effective learning environment for students. Arguably, the federal government and churches of the early to mid-1900s became involved in northern education for noble causes. Although they did not refer to their initiatives as school improvements, they likely deemed them as important educational change.

As school boards gained strength, the territorial Department began moving away from the service delivery model and began focusing on prescribing policies, directives, curriculum and resources more consistent with the education Ministry model in Canadian provinces.

A significant development was that school boards now had the authority to determine language of instruction and the development and implementation of locally developed programs. Whole language was the thrust in the 1980s and several regional boards and schools picked up on the initiative.

In that same time-period, the NWT joined the curriculum reform movement. There was some urgency to create a specifically northern educational framework and set of curricula to replace the Alberta curricula and the Red Book (1972) that was the first school curriculum of the NWT. The Dene Kede (1993) and Inuuqatigiit (1996) curricula, in particular, reflect the worldviews of the Dene and Inuit. One-shot staff development events, usually of the train-the-trainer model, coincided with the implementation of the new curriculum, and still do today. This process was not yet complete when the NWT joined the Western consortium and pan-Canadian curriculum development and implementation initiatives.

A significant school improvement initiative of the territorial government in the late 1980’s was the partnership with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and the adoption of the Ontario principal certification program. Leithwood and Montgomery’s (1986) Principal Profile was the conceptual framework for the program, in recognition of research identifying the school principal as the critical agent for change in schools. Further rationale for this initiative was the significant distance and diversity between communities and schools and the inherent difficulties in establishing any kind of centralized and coherent school improvement strategy. Consistent with continued decentralization efforts, the top-down policy approach to school reform switched more to
a bottom-up approach. Site-based or school-based management, shared decision-making, and empowerment became popular concepts at this time.

The Department’s new 15-year strategic plan, *People: Our Focus for the Future – A Strategy to 2010* (1994) describes a vision of the Community Learning Network where partnerships are established within each NWT community in support of education. Most small communities began extending grades in the 1990s and are now offering full high school programs. One of the territorial government’s goals in the 1990s was to have a representative workforce, which would equate to roughly 50% of the teaching force being aboriginal. Similarly, the new *Education Act* (1996) came into effect and gave even greater powers to regional school boards (Divisional Education Councils-DECs) and community-based authorities (District Education Authorities-DEAs). This legislation also required that all school principals develop annual school plans in consultation with local stakeholders.

### Table 1: Role of NWT School Principals re: Community Education Planning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical</th>
<th>Ideal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>establishes school goals and objectives on an annual basis</td>
<td>collaborates with representative school partners to develop a strategic plan which reflects the community’s vision of education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>works with in-school personnel to develop school plans</td>
<td>involves selected school partners in the establishment of a community education plan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coinciding with the development of the new *Strategy to 2010*, a group of academics and northern practitioners collected for a weekend and drafted a more northern profile of the ideal school principal in the NWT. *School Leadership In the Northwest Territories: A Profile for the 90’s* (1993) continues as the conceptual framework for the now legislated NWT Principal Certification Program (also known as the *NWT Educational Leadership Program*). The term *community education plan* (CEP) was coined, drawing on the concept of the more common *strategic plan* or *school improvement plan* but titled to emphasize the importance of involving the local parents and community in the process. One sub-dimension of NWT principal practice deemed to be of critical importance was advocating for the community through the process of community education planning. Table 1 shows an extraction of the CEP rubric from the Profile. This provides an image of a school principal in developmental stages of growth from *typical* practice in the left-most box to *ideal* principal practice in the right-most box.

The adoption of the Education Act in 1996, and the related move to greater local control/community empowerment and decentralizing in the mid 1990s, has been followed
more recently by a move to greater accountability and related recentralization of boards and administration (technology, human resources and finance functions in particular).

The pressure for accountability is resulting in the creation of more departmental policies such as the Inclusive Schooling and the Aboriginal Languages and Culture Based Education Directives. The requirement for all NWT school boards to implement and report on Functional Grade Levels one to nine and the Alberta Assessment Tests at grades three, six and nine are also examples of the public and political desires for greater accountability.

Current Influences

Education in the NWT is continuing to face a rapid rate and increasing scope of change, influenced in large part by:

- aboriginal self-determination, self-government negotiations and related land claims;
- pressure for public accountability and efforts to recentralize;
- new economic activity mostly in mining, oil and gas, offset by inflation and related government fiscal restraint;
- declining birthrate, school enrolment and related school resources;
- rapid decline in aboriginal first and second language speakers;
- increasing numbers of students identified with special needs requiring interventions and specialist services;
- pockets of public anxiety and interest in safe communities (countering a prevailing culture of truancy, bullying, drugs and alcohol use, and crime);
- increasing awareness that a child’s readiness and success at school will be determined by their early childhood development in their first five years; and,
- the recent publication of the Department’s new strategic plan, Building on Our Success: Strategic Plan 2005-2015 (2005).

The combination of many of these factors has already had a significant impact on the contexts, the changing role of the educational leaders, and the quality of schools. As land claims are settled and self-government agreements are reached, and as demands for results and accountability continue to refocus in an era of financial uncertainty, the rapid pace of change is likely to continue. How the NWT education system will evolve remains uncertain.

As one reviews the history of education in the NWT, it is clear that there has been some coordination of school improvement efforts. However, these efforts have been
inconsistent. For example, while there are written government guidelines in place that require employees to be evaluated annually, this is not typically monitored or enforced. Similarly, the Education Act now legislates school plan development but it is left to school boards to choose whether or not to enforce the requirement, and it is largely left to school boards and schools as to whether or not they engage in improvement initiatives.

**THE SOUTH SLAVE DIVISIONAL EDUCATION COUNCIL (SSDEC)**

The South Slave Divisional Education Council (SSDEC) serves the educational needs of approximately 1,700 kindergarten to grade 12 students in eight schools geographically located in five communities—Fort Smith, Hay River, Fort Resolution, Lutsel K’e and K’atlodeeche—in the southeast portion of Canada’s Northwest Territories.

**Figure 3: Map of the South Slave Region and Schools**

As outlined in Figure 4, the Education Act and Regulations requires that the SSDEC is made up of representatives of the five community-based and locally-elected DEAs that serve the educational needs of kindergarten to grade 12 students in the eight schools located in those communities. With an operating budget of greater than $20 million, over 100 teachers and 60 paraprofessionals, secretarial staff and custodians are employed in South Slave schools.
Perhaps most striking about this unique northern school division is its diversity within. Two communities, Hay River and Fort Smith are considered regional centres and compete to be the regional service provider for government programs. Government department jurisdictions vary in their boundaries in this jurisdiction with three different Health Boards, five MLAs (Hay River = 2, Fort Smith = 1, Fort Resolution and Lutsel K’e = 1, Katlodeeche = 1), and two regions and regional presidents of the Northwest Territories Teachers’ Association (NWTTA).

The South Slave is also unique in that it has five official languages; South Slavey, Cree, Chipewyan, French and English. Approximately 70% of the student enrolment are of aboriginal descent—broken down further in the last column of Table 2. By comparison, the NWT population is 64% aboriginal with the vast majority of non-aboriginal people living in Yellowknife.
### Table 2: South Slave Communities and School Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community (population)</th>
<th>School (Grades Served)</th>
<th>Languages Taught</th>
<th>Aboriginal Descent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fort Resolution (pop. 484)</td>
<td>• Deninu School (K-12)</td>
<td>- Chipewyan, English</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Fort Smith (pop. 2364) | • Joseph Burr Tyrrell Elementary School (K-6)  
                             • Paul William Kaeser High School (7-12) | - Chipewyan, Cree  
                             English, French | 79% |
| Hay River (pop. 3648) | • Harry Camsell School (K-3)  
                             • Princess Alexandra School (4-7)  
                             • Diamond Jenness Secondary School (8-12) | - South Slavey, English, French | 64% |
| K'atlodeeche (pop. 309) | • Chief Sunrise Education Centre (K-12) | - South Slavey, English | 94% |
| Lutsel K’e (pop. 318) | • Lutsel K’e Dene School (K-10) | - Chipewyan, English | 99% |

Notes: populations retrieved from 2006 Census. Lutsel K’e is only accessible by air or by boat in the summer, while the other communities are also accessible by road year round.

Two South Slave communities are predominately Chipewyan. Another is a First Nations Reserve of South Slavey people, the only Reserve in the NWT. The community of Hay River also houses a French school that competes with Hay River schools for students and related government funding. Cree, South Slavey, Chipewyan and French second language programs are offered in the various schools.

Lutsel K’e Dene School is a kindergarten to grade 10 school located in a small fly-in community. Lutsel K’e is one of just a few NWT communities yet to add grade extensions through grade 12. Home boarding programs in the regional centre, Fort Smith, serve the educational needs of those who attain senior high levels.

A relatively large percentage of South Slave students are transient, with Fort Smith and Hay River serving as magnet communities for those being temporarily served by Aurora College and several secure facilities. In the smaller communities, the retention of quality teachers is a particular challenge and can provide inconsistency in program offerings.

The kindergarten to grade 12 education program is inclusive of NWT curriculum where available, Alberta curriculum at the high school level in particular, and Western consortium and pan Canadian curriculum where available. There are also a few other locally developed courses approved for delivery and high school credit in South Slave schools.
Foundational Policies

The SSDEC has three foundational policies (see Appendix A) that underpin and guide decision-making and action. These are summarized here as they provide further background as to the Council’s vision and expected culture of the region and schools:

1. Vision, Mission and Journey - Policy AD – indicates that the Council is committed to a philosophy of education which is built upon a foundation of enabling communities, DEAs, schools, staff members, and parents to assist students to reach their potential. Student achievement is expected to be at the heart of everyone’s work at the SSDEC and the common thread connecting the Council’s vision, mission, beliefs and values. The Council’s Key Intended Outcomes lay the groundwork for the determination of priorities and related scope of activities of the Council and its staff;

2. Principles for Working and Learning Together - Policy ADA – describes the preferred culture of the organization and is referenced in the policy as ‘the way we do things around here.’ The SSDEC and its DEAs and staff are expected to be committed to modelling five underlying principles or values for effectively working and learning together: Respect, Integrity, Loyalty, Commitment to Growth, and Advocacy. These values are said to transcend religious and cultural differences and serve as key leverage points for achieving the mission and working effectively to provide quality educational services to students, while maintaining and strengthening the support of communities; and,

3. Community School Education Plans (CEP) - Policy AEA – indicates, “The key to an effective school is an ongoing school improvement process which the school principal coordinates with the DEA, the school staff and students, and other school partners.” A well facilitated process is described as one that results in the following benefits: provides focus, builds relationships, achieves consensus, gives opportunity for community ownership, holds everyone accountable, provides a basis for staff growth and evaluation, provides continuity in school programs, and assists the Council to develop priorities and an agenda that builds on and supports the priorities of its DEAs and schools.

School Improvement in the South Slave

The researcher arrived as the new superintendent to the South Slave region in November of 1999. He quickly learned that the schools in the larger communities were well managed, and a higher percentage of students were graduating from these schools than most other schools in the NWT. Turnover in the South Slave was not as great as elsewhere in the NWT, particularly in these larger centres, but it was still as high as 20% in some years. The larger communities benefit from a number of long term and experienced school staff and principals, several of whom came to stay and retire in the South Slave. Some of the issues in these larger schools were not dissimilar to those elsewhere. They were typically using some of the same old hierarchical management and
direct teaching practices and were less likely to consider and adopt change. Indicative of this resistance to change, the South Slave was the last region in the NWT to incorporate local area computer networks (LANs) in their schools (late 1990s), and principals were not accustomed to the expectation that they had to develop annual school goals and complete teacher performance evaluations. Similarly, the employees' unions were and still are known to be stronger and more active than elsewhere in the NWT.

Ironically perhaps, Fort Smith and Hay River were considered among a few locations in the NWT where teachers migrate and stay until they complete their teaching career, and often beyond. All but one of the communities in the South Slave was connected by the road system to Edmonton in Alberta. These communities enjoy a shorter winter than more northerly communities. Hay River and Fort Smith are regional centres with most of the amenities of small southern communities. Hay River was considered the hub of the NWT as almost all modes of transportation (road, air, water) north or south go through it.

In the smaller more outlying communities, turnover was rampant. School administrators and teachers rarely stayed more than a few years. These schools were typically in survival mode from year to year, attempting to educate and entertain the children in order to promote attendance and maintain control. There was little to no long-term emphasis on school improvement.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the active pursuit of Departmental initiatives and expectations were varied in this region, as they were in other regions in the NWT. Board policies and employee job descriptions were either non-existent or out-dated. Compounding the issue, the superintendent position had turned over the most, with not one superintendent staying longer than two-and-a-half years since the inception of the South Slave DEC (the Council) in 1991.

Unfortunately, the diverse make-up of the South Slave region had been characterized by some as, “a marriage made in hell” (Hay River HUB news article heading, late 1990s). The diversity of community sizes, demographics and aspirations was and continues to be the most extreme of any region in the NWT. In-fighting amongst community representatives on the Council for the ‘largest pieces of the pie’ were, until very recently, reported extensively by the media perpetuating public perception in at least one community that the Council was dysfunctional. For a number of years in the late 1990s and early 2000s, “us and them” infighting resulted in little to no agreement on regional priorities of a substantive nature. Over the years the increased isolation of schools contributed even further to the dysfunctional crisis after crisis in some schools and entrenchment of existing school practices and resistance to change in others.
The manner in which school improvement efforts were undertaken in the South Slave prior to 2000 was through a cycle of school reviews, with one of the eight schools being reviewed each year. These school reviews were usually in the form of an internal review team putting together a profile of the school, and an outside contractor or team coming in and interviewing a representative sample of stakeholders and making an external report on the extent to which the internal team's report was accurate. Recommendations from the process resulted in the development of a school growth plan that was to be implemented until the next school review was scheduled several years later.

**Community Education Planning**

The SSDEC established policy and officially began its Community Education Planning initiative in the 2000-2001 school year. The introduction to structured, collaborative planning in the South Slave started in 1999 when the superintendent facilitated and modelled focused conversation and workshop methods for and with principals and regional coordinators. These facilitated activities were used to brainstorm and choose three regional priorities for focus over the course of the next several years in all South Slave schools: Literacy, Career Development, and Homework and Study Skills.

In 2001, the school board passed third and final reading of the Community Education Planning (CEP) Policy (see Appendix A) providing two non-instructional days per year for planning purposes and requiring that each school and DEA work together and with representative partners in education to develop and submit a CEP (school improvement plan). The plan was to be updated annually in a standard format that identifies two to four goals, a set of specific action items, responsibilities, timelines, costs, and expected outcomes. Coinciding with the implementation of this policy, several facilitation training and planning workshops were provided to school principals and regional coordinators, introducing them to group processing and collaborative planning methods.

At the time of this study, schools and the regional committees of the South Slave were using a wide variety of methods to set school goals, develop work plans, and then implement, review and update their plans annually. For some, it was seen as a time-consuming and stressful add-on to an already overwhelmed agenda for schools. For most, it was understood as necessary to focusing staffs and partners on the big picture while still maintaining the day-to-day operations of the school.

It was during this last period of community education (school improvement) planning and implementation (since 2000) that this study examined in further detail to determine most effective approaches for future direction.
ONGOING CHALLENGES

NWT schools, including those in the South Slave, have consistently experienced significant challenges and difficulties. Large portions of the students are academically below grade level and many present severe behavioural issues. The communities themselves have many social issues that manifest in the school in a variety of ways. Drug and alcohol addiction are pervasive among adults and youth. Consequently the school deals with issues that accompany this type of dysfunctional behaviour.

Students have a diverse set of needs, resulting in at least half of NWT students not making it to high school graduation. For the first time, in 2006, 50% of 18-year-olds graduated from high school in the NWT. About 20% are accumulating high school credits and another 30% are too low functioning to access high school credits. In the South Slave in particular, approximately 22% of students were on Individualized Education Plans (IEP) or Modified/Student Support Plans (SSP).

Further, the personal concerns students bring to the classroom have a profound influence on their school performance. In 2000, an NWT-wide Student Support Needs Assessment (referenced in Towards Excellence, 2005) was conducted in which all NWT teachers were interviewed. Teachers reported:

- “Approximately one third (over 1,100) of the students in need of additional supports are not getting them. If they were to receive the supports needed, the proportion of the NWT student enrolment receiving some level of support would be at 73%.” (p. 82) While these are territorial results, South Slave teachers made up about one-sixth of all the teachers interviewed. The South Slave specific results are likely consistent with the territorial results;

- In response to the question: “What are some of the issues that your students come to class with?” teachers most frequently cited family stressors (54% of NWT classrooms) as affecting the classroom. Among concerns identified in this category were family breakdown, illness and death. Following closely behind in overall frequency of response (47%) was substance abuse in the family, home and community. Substance abuse by students themselves was much less frequently cited. Concerns classified as parenting encompass such perceived family issues as expectations, structure, controls and support in the family. These concerns, as well as hunger, lack of sleep and abuse were presented by about 30% of teachers.” (p. 78);

- About 22% of NWT students require counselling and behaviour intervention but only 9% currently receive it. For many of these students, lack of access to specialized staff and facilities is the barrier. Even less specialized services are
difficult to find. For example, 34% of students require tutorial and/or homework support, yet only 12% of students receive it. (p. 84);

- Significant proportion of time, energy and resources is being devoted to students with behavioural issues (30% of total NWT student population). For many of these students, the learning problems they experience are a reflection of their readiness to learn. The problems are frequently associated with disruptive behaviour that also interfered with the learning of others. (p. 86); and,

- While there is a strong case made for strong community involvement, as legislated through locally elected education authorities, teachers report that parents are under-involved or inappropriately involved for more than 25% of NWT students. This is a concern, as a community-based approach to education is essential to student success and building healthy communities. Families play an important role in supporting learning, and children need to see their parents and school personnel working together in support of learning. (p. 80).

Many students and their parents see schooling as irrelevant and, for the most part, meaningless to their lives. They may have developed learning problems and are frequently passive, easily bored, and often disruptive. These youth are caught in a vicious cycle of behaviours and circumstances that consistently work against their own and others’ efforts to break out of patterns of self-destruction, which usually leads to truancy and dropping out of school.

While the majority of communities in the NWT offer aboriginal language programs, the languages are being lost. Only 45% of kindergarten to grade nine students were enrolled in aboriginal second language programs in 2004/2005. (Towards Excellence, 2005, p. 44) The recruitment and retention of staff plays a critical role in the delivery of aboriginal language and culture programs. Unfortunately, the lack of interested and fluent aboriginal language instructors, particularly in the regional centres, is making it increasingly difficult for communities and schools to preserve the aboriginal languages.

Multi-graded classrooms are prevalent with as many as three grades being served in some classrooms. The Inclusive Schooling Directive of the NWT requires that the majority of students are moved along with their age-appropriate peers regardless of their academic level, resulting in all South Slave classrooms serving an even wider spread of student ability levels.

These conditions are not typically appealing to most educators, which makes teacher recruitment and retention difficult. Other factors affecting teacher recruitment and retention include inadequate, over-priced, and even unavailable housing for staff. The pressures of living in an isolated community are also demanding. Some have referred to it
as working in a "glass fishbowl", where tightly interwoven communication lines (accurate and otherwise) make anonymity and privacy virtually impossible. The expectation of teachers, often fresh out of university and in a multi-cultural environment, to teach three grade level classrooms is not unusual. This all adds to the problem of providing quality staff in northern communities. They are dealing with critical issues every day, including truancy, unruly behaviour, drug and alcohol use, and dysfunctional families. Not surprisingly, the proportion of NWT teachers with less than five years experience is 63%. (Towards Excellence, 2005, p. 24)

Student attendance may be the greatest predictor of student achievement. Absenteeism is likely one of the causes of low academic achievement and consequently low aspirations and self-esteem. The overall SSDEC student attendance rate for the 2005-06 school year was 84%, while just 53% of students had 90% attendance or better. To put that in perspective, students who average an absentee rate of just 10% each year (90% attendance) have missed the equivalent of an entire year of school by the time they reach grade 10. “Students who have poor attendance or who frequently arrive late, miss important instructional time and their learning becomes increasingly more fragmented. Good attendance is essential to success in school.” (Towards Excellence, 2005, p. 52)

Students who attend classes regularly have a greater chance of achieving success in school and in later life. Perhaps not surprisingly, as Table 3 shows, results on standardized tests such as Alberta Achievement Tests (AATs) show acceptable standard for between roughly 45-65% of South Slave students. Therefore, approximately 35-55%, up to half of the students, are achieving below standard academic results.

Table 3: Alberta Achievement Test Results – SSDEC Historical Average to 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Language Arts</th>
<th>Math</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gr 3</td>
<td>64.2%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gr 6</td>
<td>54.2%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gr 9</td>
<td>61.4%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarly, South Slave student results on the nationally normed Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE) test shows that 65% of South Slave students are reading at or above the Canadian average for their age group. This means that 35% of our students struggle with reading and are below the national average within their peer group.
There is an accumulation of students at the grade 10 level, due in part to the social promotion policy which maintains students with their peers regardless of achievement through grade 9. Students cannot move beyond grade 10 until they earn the credits. Students must then complete an Alberta grade 12 exam in English 30-1 or 30-2 to qualify for a Secondary School Diploma, and all diploma exams are worth 50% of the final course mark. Approximately 52% of the senior secondary students in the NWT in 2004/05 were enrolled in grade 10 as compared to 27% in grade 11 and 20% in grade 12. (Towards Excellence, 2005, p. 22)

Many students take longer than three years to complete grades 10 through 12. Unfortunately, many others choose not to continue to grade 12 at all. They are typically left with few literacy skills and are disinterested or unable to compete with others for the few labour jobs in the community. They remain in their community, usually living at home with parents or relatives. Crippled by their perceived failures, they are unable to fit into any existing educational programs and unable to find any sustained employment. They frequently lapse into periods of despairing, self-destructive behaviour, marred by the ups and downs of alcohol and drug abuse, often resulting in legal problems for the boys and pregnancy for the girls. This tears apart the fabric of their lives and that of their family and friends. Too many of these students’ lives have been shaped by poverty, unemployment and failure.

Smaller outlying community schools also have fewer course options and smaller staff complements. While the availability of on-line courses has expanded the range of academic options available to high school students in remote communities, some of these communities continue to experience unstable connections to the Internet, resulting in many students being forced to withdraw from on-line courses. Since 2000, more than half the number of enrolled students did not successfully complete their on-line course.

In the meantime, there are three levels of conflicting governance that affect schools for better or worse. Schools compete with local versus regional versus territorial governing bodies in the determination of priorities and decision-making. The South Slave schools have also been directly affected by locus of control tensions associated with the authority of the local school Authority versus the regional school Council.

Some of the public perceive that their community schools are substandard, which leads staff to assume a reactive posture, continually responding to issues in order to just survive and finish the year. This leads to poor morale, inaccurate or non-existent reporting of student achievement to parents and the public, and significant turnover (further perpetuating the problem). Many of those who can afford it choose to move or send their children to the regional centres or even southern schools. The perception amongst some people is that there is little school and system accountability, little recognition of, or
interest in, community and school needs at the territorial and regional levels, all of which further perpetuates the “cycle of helplessness”. (Zoe, 1993)

The list of challenges continues and repeats. Relative isolation, small size, limited resources, and social problems have combined to make some of the South Slave communities amongst the most seriously disadvantaged. That and historically negligible support for the school and its staff by community members has led to ongoing high staff turnover and very little growth of educational expectations, structure and positive initiatives in some of these communities. Communities and cultures continue to conflict. Distances and related communication difficulties perpetuate. Coordination of territorial, regional and school-based efforts still lacks coherence. As staff turnover is still rampant in the smaller outlying communities, initiatives are not always sustained. Fiscal restraint remains the constant and time is limited. Data collection and measures of success are lacking, as is buy-in outside of schools. A significant proportion of students are not performing at grade level in these smaller outlying communities, where teacher turnover is high, the availability of staff housing is limited and community support for education is low. Although the South Slave has possibly the highest graduation rate in the NWT, both the NWT and SSDEC graduation rate is still lower than any other province or territory in Canada except for Nunavut.

Not surprisingly, the purpose and the quality of education in isolated northern communities has often been the subject of discussion for representatives at local, regional and territorial meetings.

**SUCCESSES TO DATE**

It is understood that the challenges and the profile presented so far paints an excessively bleak future for the young people and communities of the North. It is often overwhelming and demoralizing for staff, who in turn can become cynical and distant. However, it is apparent that schools have been seeking to provide a higher quality education for students. They are constantly designing and redesigning programs that will accommodate their diverse needs of the students within the limited resources available.

One initiative that seems to be making a difference for staff recruitment and retention in the outlying communities is the *NWT Teacher Education Program* (TEP) that has recently been upgraded from a 3-year diploma program into a *University of Saskatchewan* affiliated 4-year degree program. The main campus of *Aurora College* is based in Fort Smith. It is hoped that more northerners who already understand the culture and contexts will enter the education profession and stay in the northern education system longer. Other dedicated and experienced northern teachers are also staying in the system
longer, shifting the proportions of teachers with 10 or more years of experience up from 24% in 1997 to 46% in 2005. In the 2004/2005 school year, just 10% of NWT teachers had less than two years experience.” (Towards Excellence, 2005, p. 24)

In 2003, the NWT ranked second nationally in terms of student access to computers, with 3.5 students per computer. The NWT also ranked second in the ratio of students to computers connected to the Internet; however as mentioned earlier, some of the schools in the NWT suffer from poor or unreliable satellite connections. (Towards Excellence, 2005, p. 88)

In the South Slave, over the past several years, efforts to strengthen local education authorities and implement community education planning have arguably been a catalyst in bringing about improvements to the education available to students. Indicative of the interest in further promoting shared responsibility for educational improvements are the more recent implementation of staff, student and parent satisfaction surveys and engaging high school students and their parents in developing career and program plans that includes identifying strengths, interests and goals for their futures.

Table 4: Alberta Achievement Test Results – Percent Achieved Alberta Standard

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Language Arts</th>
<th></th>
<th>Math</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SSDEC</td>
<td>NWT</td>
<td>SSDEC</td>
<td>NWT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gr. 3</td>
<td>72.9%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>68.9%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gr. 6</td>
<td>61.8%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>58.5%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gr. 9</td>
<td>46.6%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: NWT data from Towards Excellence (2005, p. 58). SSDEC data are multi-year averages.

The SSDEC has shown improved results in grades 1 to 3 functional grade levels (FGL) and on grades 3, 6, and 9 Alberta Achievement Tests (AATs) (the average was below 50% prior to 2001), while grade 12 students continue to do well on Alberta diploma exams. Both the FGL and AAT results continue to better the NWT average, particularly at the earlier grades where the SSDEC’s literacy initiative has been in place for several years. (see Table 4) The AATs were mandated by the Minister in 2005 but had been in use in the South Slave since the late 1990’s. The tests are based on the Alberta curriculum, much of which is prescribed by the Minister in the NWT.

The nationally normed GRADE assessment results can also be used as a yardstick for measuring and comparing reading progress throughout the school years. The shaded section in Figure 5 is the Canadian norm and might be considered the normal growth curve. The darker bullets are the SSDEC results in comparison to the national norm for
grades one to 12. These 2008 GRADE results are an improvement over the prior year results. Further, 17% of South Slave students are reading above average or superior in comparison to national norms.

**Figure 5: SSDEC GRADE Reading Assessment Results 2008**

As can be seen, the grade one students are the only grade not within one standard deviation of the Canadian average, suggesting that a significant portion of South Slave children are entering the school system with lower awareness of print than the national norm. For many of these students, the learning problems they experience are a reflection of their prior knowledge and their readiness to learn. Research has identified prior knowledge as a significant predictor of new learning (Lezotte, 2000). Yet, teachers are faced year after year with students who lack the prerequisite learning for the standards they are expected to teach. However, the steeper than normal SSDEC growth curve further suggests that South Slave schools are working effectively to ensure more students attain the Canadian average as they move through the grades.

With access to senior secondary grades in their home communities, more students are staying in or returning to school. More NWT students (92%) have access to grade 10 in
their home community compared to a decade ago when this was at only 73%. The NWT graduation rate (in comparison to the number of 18 year olds in the population) has risen from 42% in 1999 to 45% in 2003 and 52% in 2005 (over 50% for the first time). There is still a long way to go to meet the national average of 78% (2001). (Towards Excellence, 2005, pp. 66-68)

There are many other systemic elements of the northern school system that appear to be making a difference. Maintaining the school principals in the NWT Teachers Association promotes collegial administration and staff relations. School facilities are adequate, and the funded pupil to teacher ratio is 15:1; however, this ratio includes school administrators and specialists so actual class sizes are much higher. Ample professional development opportunities are provided for staff both through the collective agreement and by the SSDEC.

Dedicated educators are putting in many hours of extracurricular activities with students in order to build relations and help to keep them in school. As the school-based management and locally controlled school authorities grow stronger, expectations are raised, success builds, and a sense of community and belonging strengthens. Both staff and students are staying engaged longer with South Slave education.

As one of the South Slave school principals stated, the South Slave has probably advanced its yardsticks more than any other NWT board over the past several years. It is a relatively small jurisdiction making good progress. People are not pointing fingers, blaming each other, and getting in each other's way like they were previously. People are working more collaboratively and cooperatively. Small steps and gifts such as these have resulted in a more team-like approach and greater achievement gains.

Not surprisingly, South Slave schools, programs and staff have received territorial recognition, including the Literacy Project (Ministerial Literacy Award 2003), the Career Development initiative (presenters at territorial and Alberta conferences), the Trades Awareness Program (Premier's Award of Excellence 2006), Student Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting (a letter from Assistant Deputy Minister indicating the South Slave has led the way), and Denini School in Fort Resolution (with media reporting of improved student achievement results).

Fortunately, many see just how far the South Slave and the NWT have come, in a very short time, building capacity and making improvements such that an increasing number of northern students are successfully completing their high school studies, going into post-secondary education, and becoming healthy and productive members of northern society.
The key question remains: What can territorial policy makers, school boards, superintendents, and school principals do to energize school improvement efforts and further maximize student success?

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter was intended to provide the foundation and backdrop with which to situate the reader within the unique and diverse context of this school improvement study. It began with a description of the setting of the NWT and the South Slave region geographically and demographically. In brief, the NWT is unique in terms of culture, language and geography. Further, the South Slave is arguably the most diverse region in the NWT. The NWT and the South Slave are also challenged in terms of small population, a large geographical area, limited resources and difficult social issues.

An overview of educational governance changes and school improvement efforts in the NWT was provided, including information about the concerted focus on school improvement in the South Slave region since 2000. While many challenges remain, there have been many successes. For one, student achievement appears to have improved in the South Slave over the past several years. However, it remains unclear which leadership and school improvement approaches have been most effective at bringing about this change.

The research literature provides some insight into the question of what are the best strategies for improving schools. The next chapter explores the literature about leadership of educational change / school improvement and provides a preliminary leadership for school improvement conceptual framework.
CHAPTER 3:
LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of educational leadership as it applies to educational change and school improvement. The educational change/school improvement research database is explored, followed by the identification of the key features of contemporary large-scale school improvement initiatives.

A conceptual framework is proposed that builds on the research literature, theory and practices summarized in this chapter. This preliminary model is important for analysis, critique and re-conceptualisation later in the dissertation, based on the data collection and analysis. The latter part of this chapter focuses on how these elements of the preliminary model might be honoured and constituted to uncover features of practice that lead to school improvement and enhanced student learning.

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

One can’t engage in a participatory school improvement action research study involving school principals and regional office administrators and program coordinators without considering educational leadership. Since the majority of the participants in the study were school principals, this review focuses on the role of the principal primarily, however, as Fullan (1999) contends, “While the focus is on ‘school’ leadership, much of the analysis applies to ‘system’ leadership involving superintendents and other central office staff” (p. 701). This section unpacks the concept and the different types of leadership in school improvement.

Notwithstanding the several decades of funding by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which created four programs in North America to prepare educational administrators and produced volumes of research, Bennis and Nanus (1997) claim in their book, Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge that there is a lack of a clear understanding of leadership. They recognize that decades of investigations and analysis of leaders has given us no clear and unequivocal understanding as to what distinguishes effective leaders from ineffective leaders. “Never have so many labored so long to say so little” (p.
4). It comes as no surprise then that there is a continuing lack of consensus among academics and practitioners alike about what constitutes ideal educational leadership and how it should be defined. More confusing still is the concept of effective school leadership in a diverse, multi-cultural environment such as the Northwest Territories.

According to Klenke (1996), “Many of the existing leadership theories are built on two-dimensional models” (p. 56). Transformational-versus-transactional leadership (Burns, 1978), task-versus-relationship orientations (Hersey & Blanchard, 1993), leadership-versus-management (Bennis & Nanus, 1997), structural-versus-functional theories, and content-versus-process approaches are examples of these varying dichotomies of the wonder of leadership. Klenke also identifies a popular way of grouping leadership theories according to whether they focus on traits (most popular in the 1930s and 1940s), behaviours (the prevailing view of the 1950s), the situation (predominant in the 1970s), and transformation (during the past 20 years) (p. 57).

**School Leadership Metaphors**

There has been an increased use of metaphors in the study of organizations and more specifically school administration over the past few decades (Bredeson, 1985; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1986; Renihan & Renihan, 1992; Dana & Pitts, 1993; Beck & Murphy, 1993; Sergiovanni, 1994; Fennell, 1996; Klenke, 1996; McGee, 1997). “Metaphors are useful linguistic structures that have helped theorists and practitioners generate ideas, concepts, models, and theories for describing, examining, and understanding phenomena in education.” (Bredeson, 1985, p. 29) It is commonly understood that a picture is worth a thousand words. It might be argued that a metaphor, since it paints an image in the mind, is also worth at least that many words in interpretation and understanding.

**Table 5: Comparison of Levels and Historical Metaphors of the Principalship**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Profile (Leithwood &amp; Montgomery, 1986)</th>
<th>NWT Principal Profile (Begley &amp; Murray, 1993)</th>
<th>Historical Metaphors of the Principalship (Beck &amp; Murphy, 1993)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 Administrator</td>
<td>Level 1 Manager</td>
<td>1960s Bureaucratic Administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2 Humanitarian</td>
<td>Level 2 Human Relations</td>
<td>1970s Humanistic Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3 Program Manager</td>
<td>Level 3 Program Manager</td>
<td>1980s Instructional Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4 Problem Solver</td>
<td>Level 4 Collaborative Leader</td>
<td>1990s ?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Beck and Murphy (1992, August, 1993), in particular, researched the language used in school leadership literature from the 1920s through the 1980s to identify metaphorical themes of the conception of the role in each decade. Somewhat fascinating however, is the apparent historical connection of these historical metaphors to the developmental stages of growth of the NWT Principal Profile (1993). It would appear that the ideal school leaders of past decades are now the lowest level, marginally effective administrators of the more recent decades. As can be seen in Table 5, a comparison of Beck and Murphy’s 1960s, 1970s and 1980s historical metaphors shows similar descriptions to the levels of effectiveness in the original principal profile (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1986), and the developmental stages of principal effectiveness from typical to ideal contained in the NWT profile. A marginally effective or lower Level 1 principal on the profiles is described as a manager or an administrator, which was what an ideal principal was considered to be in the 1960s. The 1970s brought the emergence of the more humanistic principal as the improved image of the role, which equates to the modestly effective or Level 2 principal on the two principal profiles. Similarly, the program manager or instructional leader came into fashion in the 1980s. Beck and Murphy (1992, August, 1993) stop short of identifying metaphorical themes of the 1990s and beyond. However, if the pattern continues, one might surmise that it would be the collaborative or transformational leader that was the prevailing image of the principals’ role in the 1990s, and beyond.

How is it that completely different methods, representing different cultures, and spanning completely different time periods—1980s for the principal profile, 1990s for the NWT principal profile, 1960s through 1990s for the historical metaphorical themes—can result in such overlap?

Beck and Murphy (1993) provide clues: “New images seem to emerge, in part, as synthesis resulting from tension between earlier conceptions of leadership” (p. 202). Dana and Pitts (1993) suggest further “a prerequisite for educational change may be the examination of existing undesirable educational metaphors and the exploration of more desirable metaphors to take their place” (p. 325). The ideal principal practice described in the profiles of the 1980s (Leithwood & Montgomery) and 1990s (Begley & Murray) are based on research involving language used by researchers and practitioners in each of those decades. It could be expected that their interpretations of effective leadership would be most clearly described using word pictures or metaphors that contrast their new interpretations such as empowerment and collaboration with the older images of the bureaucrat, manager, and program or instructional leader. Similarly, it is not unusual to see or hear researchers and practitioners referring to moral leadership (Sergiovanni, 1992), renaissance leadership (Renihan and Renihan, 1992), and principle-centred leadership (Covey, 1992) in contrast to earlier interpretations. As a result, those former
ideal interpretations would naturally register as the lower, still competent, but no longer ideal levels of the profiles.

A related explanation for the considerable overlap of the historical perspective with the current levels of principal effectiveness is that each decade's ideal conception of the role of the principal is built on and includes previous interpretations of the role. Beck and Murphy (1993) extend that thinking: "The dialectic pattern of development wherein concepts seem to reflect a synthesis and extension of images of preceding eras suggests that the principalship is a role influenced by its own history" (p. 205). Beck & Murphy (1992) also go as far as to propose that principals of schools in the 21st century "need to embrace a range of metaphors that reflect the true nature of educational leadership in a complex world" (p. 394). Conceivably, the range of metaphors they are referring to includes those that came before. Accordingly, one could further surmise that the earlier conceptions of the role are also subsumed into, and still required components of, the more recent conceptions.

**Situational Leadership**

While Beck and Murphy (1993) identify humanistic facilitator as the ideal image of the role of a school principal in the 1970s, Klenke (1996) seems to suggest it was that of the situational leader. It is not surprising that either one of these terms might be used. The humanistic facilitator was more attuned to relationships and the uniqueness of the situation, in contrast to the earlier bureaucratic administrator who was less concerned with these factors.

Hersey and Blanchard (1993) are probably best known for the development of the situational leadership model. Advocates of this model suggest that the best type of leadership to use at any given time depends on factors such as the complexity of the task and the readiness level of the followers. Hersey and Blanchard developed a four-quadrant model utilizing both task and relationship axes to determine if a more telling, participating, selling or delegating style is required in any given situation. The model advocates a more direct telling style of leadership, for example, when the task is important or complicated and the concern for relationships is low. When followers are unable but willing, a high task and high relationship participating style is used. If followers are capable but unwilling, a selling approach is used, and if capable and willing, a delegating style is used. So for example, a more capable employee should be empowered to contribute to leadership, while a new employee fresh out of college might need more direction.

There are a number of other situational complexities, be they historical, social, political, economical and cultural factors that influence the approach a leader could take. As
Marzano et al. summarize (2005, p. 18), "The effective leader realizes that no one leadership style is appropriate for all followers and all situations and accurately discerns which styles are appropriate for which followers in which situations." Although not popular in today's organizational climate, there are times when even the most empowering of leaders must be directive in order to serve the followers properly. Even the least directive administrators in a school system are expected to evaluate and correct an employee, and may even need to terminate someone's position of employment. There are other times in history, in times of crisis for example, when followers are looking for a brave leader to guide them safely through a calamity. During these times of crisis a more charismatic, if not autocratic leader might be preferred. And there are contexts such as in France where the general public continues to value leaders who are strong and more or less autocratic (I. Denizot, personal communication, July 23, 2002). So situational leadership accounts for the numerous other variables, and the continued necessity of the earlier metaphors, thereby ensuring that effective leadership will never be as simple as might be explained by a functionalist view of leadership on a two-dimensional continuum.

From an organizational and school improvement perspective, few would disagree that school administrators need to find contextually specific strategies and tailor the nature of leadership and improvement efforts to the current cultures and contexts of individual communities and schools. For a very small and predominately aboriginal kindergarten to grade 10 school in an isolated (fly in only) community, the strategies would be different from a regional centre, medium sized grades 8-12 school. For a school that might be considered ineffective or just starting the process of staffing and development, the strategies for school improvement will be different from a school with very little staff turnover or that has been developing for some time. The former in the two comparative examples above may need more direction or desire more external support. The latter might benefit from and desire greater autonomy if they have the capacity to access research knowledge and generate/critique their own practice and development.

Instructional Leadership

The ideal principal of the 1980s was that of the instructional leader, and for many it has remained the ideal image to date. Indeed, of the three models of leadership described here, instructional leadership is a decidedly educational leadership model. Transformational and situational leadership also apply to other fields of leadership. While the prominence of this style of leadership is evident, there is no clear definition of instructional leadership. The NWT principal profile (1993) indicates, "The principal initiates and directs a growth-oriented process to maximize learning outcomes for staff, students and community", and that this is accomplished through the sub-dimensions of planning, development and implementation, and evaluation. (see Table 6)
**Table 6: The Instructional Leadership Dimension of the NWT Principal Profile**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP</th>
<th>The principal initiates and directs a growth-oriented process to maximize learning outcomes for staff, students and community.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Planning                | • synthesizes the goals and priorities set by the Department, Board, and other school partners to establish instructional priorities and appropriate indicators of student success  
                          | • develops, as required, procedures to modify programs in order to ensure the attainment of desired student outcomes  |
| Development & Implementation | • involves teachers in a team process of curriculum review, development and implementation  
                              | • works collaboratively with school partners to ensure the integration of community resources within the curriculum  
                              | • systematically identifies multiple factors and matches them to appropriate strategies to bring about the implementation of change  |
| Evaluation               | • uses a variety of collaborative professional development practices (i.e. mentoring, modeling, clinical supervision) to develop staff to their full potential  
                          | • conducts cyclical reviews of particular program areas in collaboration with teachers  
                          | • facilitates professional development and promotes opportunities which support individual, school, and community goals |

The following excerpt, referencing the instructional leader, is extracted from the course outline for the NWT Educational Leadership Program:

"As the instructional leader of the school, the principal has a responsibility to:
1. articulate beliefs about effective learning in the context of the NWT,  
2. ensure that instructional practices used are in keeping with beliefs about effective learning,  
3. ensure school organization supports instructional practices,  
4. identify staff needs and create systems to address those needs, and  
5. support staff growth through modelling, guided practice, coaching and feedback related to those practices."

More specifically, sections 69(2) and (3) of the NWT Education Act (1996) requires, in part:

2. In addition to the duties of a teacher, a principal and an acting principal shall  
   (d) ensure, to the best of his or her ability, that the education program is delivered in accordance with the curriculum;  
   (e) perform the prescribed duties relating to the monitoring of and provision of support to home schooling programs;  
   (f) provide support services to a student in accordance with the direction of an education body;  
   (j) develop a positive learning environment;  
   (l) ensure, to the best of his or her ability, that all standards for the education program established by the Minister are met;"
(m) ensure, to the best of his or her ability, consistency and fairness in the assessment of students’ progress;
(n) encourage a standard of teaching consistent with the goals of education as expressed by this Act.

1. In addition to the duties of a teacher and the duties set out in subsection (2), a principal and an acting principal shall
   (g) incorporate into the school program the practices, procedures and subject matter suggested by the District Education Authority and the Divisional Education Council.

Each of the above NWT specific references to the role of the school principal provides some clarity as to what it means to be an instructional leader. As the title would suggest, the emphasis is on leader efforts that focus primarily on the quality of classroom instruction.

**Transformational Leadership**

Consistent with the concept of the newer metaphorical themes that are built on those that came before, according to Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach (1999), transformational leadership is an expansion of instructional leadership because it “aspires, more generally, to increase members’ efforts on behalf of the organization, as well as develop more skilled practice” (p. 20) (as referenced in Marzano, Waters, et al., 2005, p. 19).

Although first coined in 1978, Burns’ identification and description of the transformative leader seemed to take hold in the 1990s. Burns describes the transforming leader as one who “looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower” (p. 4). In this way, the followers are motivated to achieve “the wants and the needs, aspirations and expectations—of both leaders and followers” (p. 19). According to Burns, transformational leaders form “a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents” (p. 4).

The concept of the transformational leader as the ‘leader of leaders’ has proliferated. A popular conception of the role of the educational leader is that of the coordinator of the learning organization (Senge, 1990) or the facilitator of a community of learners and a community of leaders (Barth, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1994). More recently, the notion of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2005) suggests that at times leaders become followers and followers become leaders. Principals are typically responsible for achieving a wide range of complex outcomes in their schools. This responsibility must be shared. Deeper, or second order changes are not possible without collaborative efforts. Leadership
behaviour required for school improvement may not be possible for a single administrator, but it might be possible if focused on by many educational partners within and outside of the school. As Barth posits, “I would readily work in a school that could be described as a community of leaders, where students, teachers, parents, and administrators share the opportunities and responsibilities for making decisions that affect all the occupants of the schoolhouse” (1990, p. 9). Similarly, in Sergiovanni’s (1994, May) comparison of schools as organizations versus communities, he notes:

In organizations, relationships are constructed for us by others and become codified into a system of hierarchies, roles and role expectations. But instead of relying on external control, communities rely more on norms, purpose, values, professional socialization, collegiality, and natural interdependence. Once established, the ties of community become substitutes for formal systems of supervision, evaluation and staff development; for management and organizational schemes that seek to coordinate what teachers do and how they work together; and indeed for leadership itself. (p. 217)

The one word most often used in conjunction with the popular leader of leaders description of effective transformational leadership practice is empowerment.

Empowerment describes the act of the leader giving power to followers instead of holding power over them. Collaboration is another popular and related word in educational leadership because it describes how followers might be engaged and empowered to take part in leadership decision-making. Essentially, the transformational leader seeks to build a shared vision, develop others, and empower them to lead.

Although Burns’ interpretation of the transformative leader was not so simplified (the ethical/moral component is often overlooked), the collaborative leader, the empowering leader, and the transformative leader appear to be synonymous in the popular descriptions of the desired educational leader in the 1990s and beyond. Perhaps Fullan (1996) sums it up best when he indicates, “We have gone through the phases of the principal ‘as administrator’ and the principal ‘as instructional leader’ to a broader and more fundamental notion of the principal as change agent” (p. 701).

**Beyond Transformational Leadership**

If the transformational or empowering leader is the preferred metaphor of the 1990s, what is the metaphorical theme of the principalship in the first decade of the 21st century? Renihan and Renihan (1992) put forth the notion of the “renaissance metaphor” for educational leadership. They define it as “enlightened leadership, which has as its major characteristics, inspiration, renewal, knowledge, excellence, commitment, and sheer hard work, and which flourishes under conditions of uncertainty” (p. 10). They identify five
characteristics that distinguish the renaissance leader from the pedantic manager.

Renaissance leaders:

1. Accept, and are willing to confront, the challenge of complexity;
2. Are willing to stop, refocus and, if necessary, tear down and begin again;
3. Are committed to and have the persistence necessary for the long haul;
4. Know that change and reform emanates, not from policy or new structures, but from the hearts and minds of people; and,
5. Communicate a passion for their enterprise.

In their description of renaissance leaders as the resources, the instructional leaders, and the facilitators coordinating the activities of an educational team in its pursuit of excellence in meeting the needs of students, Renihan and Renihan too seem to conglomerate earlier metaphorical themes of the administrator, instructional leader and empowering or transformational leader.

This research endeavours to identify further the ideal leadership approach or metaphor for school improvement in the diverse contexts of the NWT.

**Educational Change / School Improvement**

A study of how best to lead the improvement of northern schools needs to consider the research base related to the quality of schools and, in particular, what the literature suggests for how to improve them. School improvement researchers such as Miles (1998), Fullan (1996, 1998, 1999, 2000) and Hargreaves (1998, 2001) have focused their studies on the processes that schools go through to become more successful and sustain improvement.

The term *educational change* and *school improvement* are used interchangeably in this chapter and throughout this dissertation because schools engage in educational change in order to improve, and because educational change research is an offshoot of earlier school improvement research efforts. The phrase *educational change* also implies a view of improvement more widely than just in schools. This study examines educational change at the school and division levels that leads to school improvement and better results for students. More specifically, this research is about *leadership of educational change for school improvement*.

Educational change and school improvement dates back to the mid-1980s as a field of study (Fullan, 1991; Reynolds, 1996) but the prevalence of strategies for educational change in schools has been around for about 50 years with much trial and error (Hopkins and Lagerweij, 1996, p. 59). Miles (1998) is one of the pioneer researchers on change in
schools and is also credited for having developed the first history of school change efforts starting from the 1950s through the 1990s. (p. 40)

Major school improvement efforts can also be categorized by decade (Fullan, 1991, 1998; Hargreaves et al., 1998; Hopkins & Lagerweij, 1996; Lieberman, 1998). The focus in the 1960s was on curriculum reform. The launch of Sputnik and post-war egalitarian ideals led to the push for schools to serve all students and to be the centres for the advancement of math and science. Different programs of study and innovations swept through in waves in the 1960s and 1970s.

The apparent implementation problems and the limited effect of these curricular reforms and multiple innovations on student outcomes led to the era of documenting failure in the 1970s. Lieberman (1998) indicates:

Researchers argued about ‘fidelity to an innovation’: teachers were often blamed for changing innovative ideas to suit their classroom context, and schools promising big innovations produced small changes. (p. 17)

The overriding message was that a family’s economic background was more important to student success and schools had little impact.

This was followed by a short period of success with decentralized efforts in the 1980s. The school was seen more as the locus for improvement, instead of the externally created curriculum and innovations that were not implemented effectively. School-based management and related professional development initiatives proliferated. Research on what made schools effective or ineffective and resulting lists of effective schools characteristics were articulated (see Lezotte, 1991, 2000; Reynolds et al., 2002). These became the basis for policy and effective schools projects as a way to improve schools.

This period of success was short lived, however, as it became apparent that effective schools could not be created by a school improvement team and a step-by-step process that was mandated by the jurisdiction. When these efforts did not bring significant and sustained success, efforts turned to managing change in the 1990s. The knowledge base on educational change research grew extensively in this time frame, and focused on determining the stages of change, implementation complexities, and generalizable rules for effectively managing and leading change.

In *The New Meaning of Education Change*, Fullan (1999) identifies the plethora of difficult predispositions and conditions of educational change including overload, fragmentation, and incoherence to name a few, that explains why most educational change efforts fail. It is because they did not have impact on the culture of the school and the profession of teaching. In other words, leaders did not take into account the reactions
of the various actors and, therefore, had not included effective strategies for implementation.

Accordingly, the school improvement literature tends to reflect Schein’s (1992) statement, “One could argue that the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture” (p. 5). Bennett and Harris (1999) suggest:

The types of school cultures most supportive of successful school improvement efforts appear to be those that are collaborative, have high expectations for both students and staff, exhibit consensus on values, support an orderly and secure environment, and encourage teachers to assume a variety of leadership roles. (p. 536)

They see school development planning, collaborative and systematic priority setting, action plan implementation, and evaluation, as crucial to creating a culturally coherent response to change, which in tum increases the school’s capacity for further change. Similarly, Hopkins and Lagerweij (1996) identify four factors that determine the change capacities of a school:

1. Capacities of the school leaders,
2. Communication and decision-making,
3. Process planning and evaluation, and
4. Coordination in the school organization.

Creemers, Reynolds et al. (1998) conclude, “Progress has been made in analyzing macro level policy techniques and strategies for change like teacher empowerment, teacher professionalism, school-based management and decentralization as techniques for school improvement.” (p. 129) They further argue that the ‘ownership’ paradigm, the material on school culture and the more recent change literature has been practically useful.

However, popular school improvement concepts such as vision, strategic planning, site-based management, strong leadership, collegiality and consensus, accountability and assessment, while important, have since been called into question because they are said to have contributed to superficial thinking (Fullan, 1999, p. ix). In an effort to counter this concern, Fullan went deeper and determined eight lessons for leading change:

1. You can’t mandate what matters (the more complex the change the less you can force it);
2. Change is a journey, not a blueprint (change is non-linear, loaded with uncertainty and excitement);
3. Problems are our friends (problems are inevitable and you can’t live without them);
4. Vision and strategic planning come together (premature visions and planning blind);
5. Individualism and collectivism must have equal power (there are no one-sided solutions to isolation and groupthink);
6. Neither centralization nor decentralization works (both top-down and bottom-up strategies are necessary);
7. Connection with the wider environment is critical for success (the best organizations learn externally as well as internally); and,
8. Every person is a change agent (change is too important to leave to the experts, personal mind set and mastery is the ultimate protection). (1999, p. 18, Summary of 1993)

Fullan (1999) further argued that new developments in educational change research had created even deeper and more coherent understandings. His more complex change lessons now included:

1. Moral purpose is complex and problematic (be inspired by moral purpose, but not naive about it: This one must be assisted by the other seven lessons below);
2. Theories of change and theories of education need each other (strategies strong on both sets of theories are more likely to experience success);
3. Conflict and diversity are our friends (conflict, if respected, is positively associated with creative breakthroughs);
4. Understand the meaning of operating on the edge of chaos (get used to uncertainty, and trust the learning process);
5. Emotional intelligence is anxiety provoking and anxiety containing (complexity and change creates anxiety: develop a strong ego structure to contain it within creative bounds);
6. Collaborative cultures are anxiety provoking and anxiety containing (develop and support people’s capacity for tackling an ongoing stream of hard problems);
7. Attack incoherence: Connectedness and knowledge creation are critical (make connections, synthesize, create mechanisms of integration, and focus on continuity); and,
8. There is no single solution: Craft your own theories and actions by being a critical consumer (learn how to apply research and published advice to your particular situation). (pp. 18-30)

Fullan’s advice is to engage collectively with partners within and outside the school and system, and follow these lessons collectively as a guide in the face of inherent complexity and chaos, so as to maximize school and system improvement.

Reynolds and Stoll (1996) also recognize, “School improvement efforts need to be informed by knowledge as to what conditions outside the level of the school are necessary to generate process and outcome improvement” (p. 103). School improvement
researchers agree. There is no one right way for all schools to develop, just as there is no one image of effective school leadership in all situations. “We know that you can be very successful in one situation, but a dismal failure in another.” (Fullan, 1998, p. 227) As each community, political, social and organizational structure is unique, different schools will probably need different leadership and school improvement approaches. The appropriateness of any one way or image is dependent on a number of factors including the particular context of a school community, the needs and preferences of students and school personnel and the political and social context within which they operate. Theories of educational change and school improvement are sensitive to these contextual differences.

LARGE SCALE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES

In an effort to address the lack of progress and varied pressures, recent school improvement efforts include large-scale regional or provincial initiatives focused on practical strategies for empowering school staffs and their partners in education towards enhanced achievement results.

Hopkins and Lagerweij identify the change in focus, “There is indeed now a move away from studying change as a phenomenon to actually participating in school development, and the best of the current work on educational change is coming from people who are actually studying change as they are engaged in bringing it about.” (1996, p. 61) Fullan (1999) echoes the sentiment, “Understanding change is just as much a matter of ‘doing’ reform as it is studying it” (p. x).

Many of these large-scale school improvement initiatives are being developed and implemented by jurisdictions in partnership with university researchers. Some of these projects are also supported and funded by supplemental government allocations, or research and charitable foundations:

The education system cannot go it alone, but must connect much more closely with other potential partners, even though they must work through the difficulties of establishing new alliances with groups with which they have not had strong relationships in the past (like parents/community, business, policymakers, universities, and so forth.) (Fullan, 1998, p. 227)

In Canada, the Manitoba School Improvement Project (MSIP) was initiated in the early 1990s, in partnership with Michael Fullan. The MSIP earned international acclaim and became the impetus and model for similar projects in other jurisdictions. Fullan is now working with the Ontario government on a comprehensive and long term school reform initiative focused on literacy. The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) entered its second three-year cycle beginning in the 2003-2004 school year. The
Northwest Territories Student Success Initiative (NWT SSI), modelled after Alberta’s AISI, also began in the 2002-2003 school year and continues today. In British Columbia, School Planning Councils were mandated a few years ago as a way of ensuring stakeholder involvement in this performance-based school improvement approach.

Perhaps the most significant new development in this school improvement movement is the focus on research, and the use of assessment data as a basis for inquiry and determination of results. Large-scale provincial assessments are also becoming the vehicle of choice for accountability and comparison of schools in Canadian provinces and territories (at the grades 3, 6, 9, and 12 or 4, 7, 10, and 12 levels).

The review of recent large-scale school improvement programmes such as MSIP, AISI, and the British Columbia School Planning Councils initiative has identified a greater emphasis on the use of existing research knowledge and the collection of assessment data on student outcomes as a basis for inquiry and determination of results (Brown, 2003). This current accountability and school improvement movement appears to be reinforced by three emergent ideologies:

1. **Multi-level Approach** – a top-down and bottom up approach balancing upper level pressure and support (external pressure for accountability; provision of support and incentives) and local empowerment and responsibility (local and differentiated approaches to priority setting, action planning, implementation, and assessment); *what* comes down and *how* comes up; building district and school leadership and change capacities;

2. **Assessment of Measurable Achievement Outcomes** – the use of multi-forms of data as a basis for inquiry, seeking qualitative and quantitative evidence of improved practice linked to student learning outcomes; and,

3. **Research and Professional Growth** – building learning communities with a focus on research and literature on improvement, university partners, a climate of experimentation, the promotion of professional discourse, and personal and professional growth. (Brown, 2003)

According to Hargreaves and Fink (1998), those are just a handful of the large scale school improvement initiatives that have attempted to “combine the ‘what’ of change, school effectiveness, with the how of change, school improvement, to focus on the ‘why’ of change, improved learning for all students.” (p. 42)

Since it is generally being shown that these efforts are resulting in the development of learning communities, professional discourse about student outcomes, and changes in practice resulting in demonstrable improved student learning and performance outcomes (Fullan, 1998; Hargreaves & Fink, 1998; Harris, 2000; Harris & Young, 1999; Townsend
& Adams, 2003; Zimmerman & Lee, 1999), it makes sense to consider these elements in the future direction of school improvement and research efforts in the South Slave.

**TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Important research work still needs to be done in determining the kinds of territorial, divisional, and school policy and leadership structures and processes that are most conducive to school improvement. This involves:

1. unpacking and understanding the different kinds of leadership in school improvement (e.g. situational, instructional, transformational, distributive…);
2. pulling all relevant levers at all relevant levels (classroom, school, community, region, territory);
3. engaging communities of leaders and learners in context specific school improvement; and,
4. improving assessment and data-based decision-making.

Figure 6: Leadership for Improving Schools
- Preliminary Conceptual Framework

The preliminary conceptual framework for this research study builds on the research literature, theory and practices summarized herein. This study begins with the proposition
that four key components, as shown interlinked in Figure 6, are required to promote and sustain school improvement.

**Transformational Leadership**

Since effective leadership is consistently identified in the educational change literature, and if transformational (empowering) leadership (1990s & beyond) has transcended bureaucratic management (1960s), human relations management (1970s), and instructional leadership (1980s), then it is critical that transformational leadership be a key component of a conceptual framework for improving schools.

Since the late 1980s, and in recognition of the importance of the school principals’ role in managing change and improvements, related empowerment efforts leading to a decentralizing of authority and a greater application of site or school-based management policies and practices have been initiated. The school improvement oriented concepts of shared leadership, building leadership capacity, and creating a learning organization are also emphasized, thus calling for the services of transformational leaders who collectively strive to build a shared vision, develop people, and empower them to lead.

Division and school administrators and program coordinators in the NWT are hired by selection committees made up of locally elected community members. They have the mandate to work with the assistance of numerous other partners in education, to make the schools the best they can be. This school improvement study both honours and investigates their roles and the kind of leadership they employ to garner commitment to the common cause of school improvement. Consistent with the transformational leadership metaphor, their leadership is expected to be collaborative and facilitative, involving stakeholders in decision-making to build a shared understanding of priorities and actions for the best possible future. In multi-cultural environments, it is critical to the building of positive and productive relationships. To this end, school leaders (and researcher/practitioners) are “askers of questions”, emphasizing listening, suspending judgment, and seeking common understanding. A no-fault and strengths-based inquiry approach to school improvement (Fitzgerald, Murrell et al., 2002) and to the research might best minimize stresses related to hierarchical relationships, culture and language differences between stakeholders, and any inherent gap between researcher and practitioners.

**Multi-level Alignment**

A school is not an isolated unit of change but a centre of change connected to a wider system. Creemers and Reezigt (1997) suggest that factors at different levels of education (departmental, divisional, community, school, grade level, classroom, student, parent, and...
others) have often been confounded. Efforts should be made to determine the combination of factors, and the levels they are representing, that have a major impact on effectiveness. Approaches are more effective if they are based on a shared vision and common goals, with flexibility to allow for strengthening parent involvement and partnerships with community agencies, and developing coherence between territorial, regional and school-based initiatives and work plans.

It has been the viewpoint of this researcher that central office needs to be proactive with a balance of expectation and support, capable of providing effective inservice for new mandates coming from above, and responsive to local school, community and collectively identified needs. Successful school improvement also involves the school adapting external change and expectations for internal purposes.

Particular attention should be paid to the coherence of education governing authority (DEC and DEAs) and central office influences. An important component of a school improvement research project could be the role of the school division/district in the process, and developing the internal capacity of divisional office and schools to manage change and evaluate its impact at the school, classroom and student levels.

Approaches should also be created that promote examination of the school improvement/educational change knowledge base at both the division and school levels. The various theories and models can be helpful in examining the way the levels are interacting, which factors are important at which level, and which persons should be involved at each level.

**Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)**

Dufour et al. (2005) define PLCs as "educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve." (p. 217) Where in traditional schools teachers and staff usually work in isolation, teams are a fundamental building block of a PLC school. These collaborative teams have a commitment to continuous improvement and they work interdependently with a focus on ensuring high levels of student learning. Through collective inquiry and action, PLCs are relentlessly focused on measuring and achieving tangible results.

In reference to the proliferation of PLCs, Fullan (2006) posits:

> Professional learning communities are in fact about establishing lasting new collaborative cultures. Collaborative cultures are ones that focus on building the capacity for continuous improvement and are intended to be a
new way of working and learning. They are meant to be enduring capacities, not just another program innovation. (p. 10)

The link between school improvement and the culture of the school is of particular importance. Conceivably, the region and schools’ capacity for change will be enhanced through these collaborative research efforts, and the groundwork will be established for proactive and virtuous ongoing change. Advocates suggest that PLCs have the capability to improve teaching and learning in their schools, despite very real external issues and obstacles that impact schools. Schools that have developed this culture and transformational change capacity should experience less anxiety and be able to cope with and adapt to greater levels of turbulence.

This model of empowering those within to be the solution to student achievement problems has implications for the role of educational leaders. They need to employ a collaborative and facilitative style in order to nurture a culture that is conducive to teacher learning. Educational leaders also need to ensure that the structure of the school provides teams with the time and the support needed for adult learning. In action, PLC leadership encourages teachers and provides time and structure to share promising practices, access related research, collect and monitor classroom-based assessment data, set short-term instructional goals, co-plan, co-teach, and build further leadership capacity to improve teaching and learning.

Taking into consideration the need for multi-level alignment, the notion of PLCs can be extended to teams of school representatives and other potential partners in education who are brought together on occasion to identify, develop, and/or plan implementation of territorial or regional programs and strategies that, if focused on over a period of time, are most likely to support teachers and facilitate student success. Finally, diligent effort must be made to create a strong leadership team that is comfortable asking the tough questions and committed to making the decisions and carrying them out for improved results. When performance data is collected, reviewed and related instructional goals set, the resulting action research is the best possible professional development.

Assessment

Assessment informs instruction and provides accountability. It is critical that all the partners in education receive regular updates of student strengths and weaknesses in relation to curricular outcomes, so that all efforts can be made to assist the students to maximize achievement.

Summative assessment (OF learning) for outcomes is necessary as baseline and for comparative reasons to see if an initiative or intervention is making a difference over
time. However, this kind of assessment data is limited in that it refers typically to standardized tests that are applied as a snapshot-in-time, often annually or every three years, in just a few subject areas, and on a particular day. Educators often take issue with the standardized tests in that they are not culturally relevant, are not aligned with the required curriculum, and are therefore also of limited value to classroom practice. While these assessments are often not perceived as valid and reliable tests of curricular knowledge, parents and politicians typically want to see these or some form of objective data to know how their children and schools compare.

Formative assessment (FOR and AS learning), on the other hand, is distinguished from assessment OF learning as a more valuable kind of assessment, one that takes place in the classroom on a period-by-period and daily basis. Classroom-based assessment FOR learning includes frequent monitoring of results and collection of student performance data against short-term instructional goals. It is assessment that promotes data-based decision-making that informs practice. Assessment FOR learning also applies here to the collection of student performance data for student and parent learning as well. Sometimes this is referred to as assessment AS learning.

In recognition that not all that can be measured is important and not all that is important can be measured, authentic and frequent assessments that involve staff, students and parents in analyzing data and setting short term targets is more likely to maximize achievement results.

**CONCLUSION**

Hargreaves et al. (1998), sum up the successes and also the continued limitations in what was known about how to improve school districts and schools at the turn of the 21st century:

> While we have learned a lot about how to improve individual schools or small clusters of schools with additional resources, exceptional leaders, the ability to attract or shed particular kinds of staff members, and discretion to break the rules; we are only just beginning to understand the challenges of scaling reform up from small samples of schools, to entire school systems. The existing knowledge base has shown us how to produce islands of improvement, but has been less helpful in assisting people to make archipelagos from islands, and still less in showing them how to build entire continents of change. (pp. 5-6)

In an attempt to build a foundation for further exploration of educational change and school improvement in a diverse northern context, this chapter began with an introduction to the educational leadership and school improvement research databases,
followed by an overview of the large-scale school improvement approaches that were being initiated elsewhere to address the demands for accountability and improvement.

This front-end literature review informed an initial conceptual framework for northern region and schools improvement grounded in the theory and practices summarized in this chapter, and in consideration of the contexts of the diverse multi-cultural communities in the South Slave region of the NWT. This research began with the proposition that four key components promote and sustain school improvement: transformational leadership, multi-level alignment, professional learning communities, and assessment.

This framework was reconsidered and critiqued during and at the end of this school improvement study. It was expected that the research would confirm, build on, or otherwise alter the conceptual framework presented here. It did. (see Chapter 7)

The next chapter describes what might be the most viable research design for a study that would provide important insight into the questions of what works in leadership for school improvement in these and similar contexts. Consistent with a key ingredient of transformational leadership, multi-level alignment and PLCs, collaborative participation was a fundamental premise underlying the manner in which this study would be organized. The chosen research design would allow for the examination, empowerment and building of further leadership and change capacity in the region and schools, in consideration of past efforts and the school improvement research knowledge base available.
CHAPTER 4:

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

RESEARCH DESIGN

Bennis and Nanus (1997) suggest that change can happen when one transcends the focus on just *doing things right* (typical manager) to a more transformational focus on *doing the right things* (effective leader). Doing the right thing with this research would be that which not only contributes to a body of research but that also has practical significance locally: obtains knowledge that can be applied directly to the local situation, improves self and other participants’ practice, and encourages others to use research to improve their own practice.

In reflection on the purpose, context and literature review discussed in the first three chapters, the research approach used in this study was intended to honour the contextual diversity of the South Slave region and contribute to the identification and celebration of the hard work and successes of the participants to date. Extrapolating key concepts from the earlier discussion provided some guidance for determining a viable research design for this study. A quality South Slave school improvement study should:

- Recognize large distances, related communication difficulties, and a variety of unique multi-cultural contexts,
- Recognize that unique local aspirations may or may not include or be focused on academic student achievement,
- Honour the concept of the future connected to the past,
- Maximize opportunity for collaborative decision-making, and
- Build leadership and change capacity.

The proposed research design consists of a *participatory action research* (PAR) study of school improvement efforts of educational leaders, namely school principals, regional administrators and program coordinators in the South Slave region of the NWT. PAR promotes social change by engaging the researcher working with participants in collectively examining and reflecting critically on their own and their partners’ (staff, students, parents, community leaders, local business, and so forth.) knowledge, skills and
values, as well as that theorized or established elsewhere, and responding in cycles of cooperative action for the common good.

The collaborative nature of the PAR design advocates a shared ownership of real-world social problems, the solutions and related actions, and even the research process and results. It is done on the self as well as with others. As Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) point out, most of the conventional methods of research only consider subjects as “second person” (you) and “third persons” (them) from the standpoint of the researcher. A defining component of participatory action research is that steps of the research process are also undertaken collaboratively with participants in the “first person” (I and us). This approach intends to extend the activities and outcomes of the research beyond just the researcher, in this case involving participant school principals, regional office administration and program coordinators. Research could also include other partners in education including teachers, students, parents, community leaders, and so forth, as occurs otherwise in the North through stakeholder surveys and collaborative improvement planning and implementation efforts.

Participatory action research is recursive, helping people to investigate reality in order to change or improve it. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) suggest that changes will not occur unless participants change themselves, their understandings, their practices, or their constitution of the setting. This implies the need for a consciousness-raising, among participants, toward theoretical resources, group processes, and other such discourses that are often limited to universities and researchers. In this way they build their learning and leading capacity. As key agents for change and improvement, school principals, regional administrators and program coordinators have a substantive role to play in developing and empowering others, not just staff and students, but also parents and local community leaders. It is conceivable that effective educational leaders, utilizing participatory action research and group process facilitation methods, can accomplish what Burns (1978) conceived as satisfying higher needs and engaging the full person of participants to higher levels of moral purpose in their work and social lives (transformational leadership).

This approach is consistent with current thinking in northern educational leadership and school improvement efforts that is also designed to identify and develop practical strategies for empowerment in our real world schools. According to Kemmis and McTaggart, “Participatory action research is the preferred approach to social and educational research aimed at social and educational change” (2000, p. 590). It is a research methodology that pursues action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time. It has the potential to create a centripetal force pulling together self and others toward a common cause, the results of which can cause a centrifugal force, transforming people and spreading the benefits beyond the local situation.
A PAR research design for a school improvement study in this context enables a focus on everyday practices, taps into collegial networks, potentially reduces isolation among participants, and contains deep and valid information about student learning. This design would thus appear consistent with the leadership framework described in Chapter 3 that emphasizes transformation leadership, multi-level alignment and professional learning communities.

From a region and school improvement perspective, this PAR research is more specifically valuable because it:

- provides a description of trends, attitudes or opinions of key local education leaders, which should garner valuable data given that school improvement will not occur without effective leadership (confirmed by both effective schools and school improvement knowledge bases);
- raises further awareness amongst the school principals and coordinators of the weight the superintendent gives to their perspectives and their leadership of school improvement;
- encourages open and honest participation and opinions, while ensuring anonymity of participant responses; and,
- includes an economy of design that respects staff workload pressures, requires no travel time and minimal administrative costs, while still taking into account the significant and unique diversity within the region.

In summary, a school(s) improvement PAR research study of this kind and in the South Slave can promote social change by engaging the researcher-practitioner, working with local participant educational leaders, in collectively examining and reflecting critically on their own and their partners’ knowledge, skills and values, as well as that theorized or established elsewhere, and responding in cycles of cooperative action for the common good. PAR is a participative, empowering, and powerful design for influencing ongoing individual, school and extended system improvements.

**Knowledge Claims**

Huberman (1999) refers to research “sustained interactivity” as a series of sustained interactions between researcher and practitioners, with a reframing of the goal of research from one of primarily informing the practitioner to one of jointly constructing knowledge through shared activity. It is clear that knowledge is socially constructed through interactions with others, but this stance does not go far enough in advocating for an action agenda for specific contexts, as do advocacy/participatory and pragmatic knowledge claims (Creswell, 2003). PAR does address these knowledge claims. PAR can be a
particularly powerful tool to model for multicultural education where the majority of the population may still feel marginalized by the southern values and structures imposed on them over the past century.

The issue of educational change is best dealt with using advocacy/participatory assumptions and strategies. Stanfield (1997) may have said it best, “More and more, people appear to have forgotten the value of wisdom gained by ordinary conversations” (back cover), and:

If ten people are conversing round a table, the truth lies not with any one of them, but in the centre of the table, between and among the perspectives of all ten. These ten people are co-creating what is true (or real) in their situations. (p. 10)

Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) concur:

Truth is always and only provisional, shaped by particular views and material-social-historical circumstances, and ... can be approached only intersubjectively—through exploration of the extent to which it seems accurate, mutually right and appropriate, and authentic in the light of our lived experiences. (p. 580)

Stanfield (1997) adds:

Traditional aboriginal teachings seem to suggest that people will always have different perceptions of what has taken place between them. The issue, then, is not so much the search for ‘truth’ but the search for—and the honouring of—the different perspectives we all maintain. Truth, within this understanding, has to do with the truth about each person’s reaction to and sense of involvement with the events in question, for that is what is truly real to them. (p. 10)

The advocacy/participatory knowledge claim described by Creswell (2003) coincides well with the researcher’s aspiration of becoming a transformational leader. It is also in-line with the knowledge claim of the aboriginal worldview prevalent in the multi-cultural environment in which northern educators live and work. This research might raise awareness and transform participants in communities with marginalized people, to facilitate community ownership of school improvement efforts in a more meaningful way.

It would be fitting that a research model that promises to be practical would fit within the pragmatic knowledge claim. Pragmatic knowledge claims are concerned with applications and solutions that work in the real world, as is the intent of this study. De Bono (1994) discourages knowledge claims that replace truth with false clarity because it “overrides the reality of complex system interactions, favours analysis rather than design,
leads to smugness, complacency and arrogance, [and] preserves paradigms instead of changing them” (p. 66).

**METHODODOLOGY**

Drawing on educational leadership and school improvement research, the perspectives and practices of participants held considerable value to the research. Accordingly, the researcher used qualitative methods (focus groups and interviews) with participant school principals, regional administrators and program coordinators. The research was somewhat open ended, involving collaborative processes intended to induce aspects to emerge during the study. The data collection process was open to change also as data gathering ensued and as the relationships developed. The thinking process was iterative, cycling back and forth from data collection and analysis to problem reformulation and back, all the while collecting, analyzing data for themes, drawing conclusions about its meaning personally and theoretically, stating the lessons learned, offering further questions to be asked, and writing up interpretations. It was expected that a general pattern of understanding would emerge and coalesce into broad interpretations that reinforce, build on or otherwise change the preliminary conceptual framework presented in Chapter 3.

**Setting and Actors**

As described in detail in Chapter 2, the site of this study is the small multi-cultural school division in the Northwest Territories in northern Canada called the South Slave Divisional Education Council (SSDEC). The region is made up of eight schools in five diverse multi-cultural communities with an enrolment of approximately 1,700 kindergarten to grade 12 students and a total staff compliment of approximately 180 employees. Each of the five communities have education governing bodies called District Education Authorities (DEAs), each made up of five to nine locally elected or appointed trustees. These DEAs each choose one representative to sit on the regional South Slave Divisional Education Council (SSDEC).

Each of the eight school principals and the regional office administrators (one) and program coordinators (five) within the SSDEC had opportunity to participate in the study. They, and the superintendent-researcher, were the participant actors. Each participant had a variety of experiences and qualifications. Most had years of experience, but a few were also new to the role and to the NWT.

Secondary participants may have influenced the perspectives of the researcher and participants, but were not directly involved in this research, including the teachers in the
schools and other partners in education (students, parents, DEA members, partner agencies) who were previously surveyed to determine satisfaction levels, and who were otherwise involved in the ongoing community and school-based improvement processes. Depending on the extent to which the locally elected DEAs were complying with the Council’s Policy AEA – Community School Education Plan (see Appendix A), each site (school or regional project/committee) already had an improvement team involved, by extension, with the participants and the researcher (the first person ‘us’) in ongoing region and school improvement efforts.

**Role and Responsibilities**

For comparative purposes, Table 7 contrasts the roles and responsibilities of the researcher and participants in the overlapping participatory action research and school and program improvement approaches.

**Table 7: School Improvement and Participatory Action Research Roles and Responsibilities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Improvement</th>
<th>Participatory Action Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School principal or coordinator leads in collaboration with variety of partners</td>
<td>Researcher leads in collaboration with participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher functions in this role as the <em>critical friend</em> behind the scenes (observer) unless practitioner chooses to involve the researcher/practitioner as participant or co-facilitator</td>
<td>Participant principals and regional administration and program staff involved in the research design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asks <em>how</em> questions for practical action</td>
<td>Also asks <em>why</em> questions to develop understanding (what worked and why?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocating for students, staff and school improvement</td>
<td>Advocating for students, staff, schools, and regional improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of theory, based on deep knowledge of local reality, to guide change</td>
<td>Develop and share understanding generated based on conclusions derived from multiple cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reaching out</strong> – beyond the local knowledge to explore the different perspectives and theories that might help to illuminate and develop critical insights and ideas about how things might be transformed (Kemmis &amp; McTaggart, 2000, p. 598)</td>
<td><strong>Reaching out</strong> but also <strong>reaching in</strong> – from the standpoints provided by differing perspectives, theories and discourses (Kemmis &amp; McTaggart, 2000, p. 598)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused on –</td>
<td>Focused on –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• collecting and combining internal and external information, visioning, identifying obstacles and strategies to overcome them</td>
<td>• refining research design to better fit the situation as contexts are clarified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ensuring the least disruptive approach to intervention (do not unnecessarily...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• involving key stakeholders in making sense of the issue, in collecting and interpreting data, and in trying out and adjusting solutions

• making school(s) improvement processes more intentional and meaningful

Note that the researcher in this PAR study of principals and other participants is essentially a researcher/facilitator of other researcher/facilitators. The PAR researcher served as both “researcher and facilitator of co-researching” (Wadsworth, 2001), encouraging participation, prompting dialogue, building relationships, collecting data, and so forth in a study of how participants informed improvement initiatives and achieve desired results. The researcher and the participants combined internal information about the region and schools and the learning environment with external information in the form or programs, research and theories to discuss and analyze. While the researcher’s focus was primarily on the research data and analysis, the participants’ focus remained on the regional initiatives and the improvement of their schools. The researcher acted as a participant or observer only and not as a leader with regard to the specific school improvement projects. During school planning days, for example, the aim of the observing researcher was not to interfere or undermine the authority of the principal and the DEA.

A first glance at the lists in Table 7 might suggest a simple delineation of responsibilities. Of course, it was not that simple. The intent of the researcher’s role was on collaboration rather than on determining strategies and responsibilities. The description of roles hereafter further explains the specific roles of the researcher and the participants in this study.

**Role of the Researcher**

The researcher in this study was an insider and an outsider, alternating between these two perspectives. Only the insider had access to inside knowledge, and could counter-pose insider knowledge with the external view. He was not only another actor in the social situation but also a human agent who, with others, must act in any particular moment in a situation that was already formed. As Palumbo (1987) recognized in reference to policy analysts, the researcher in this study was the “eye” that observes and the “I” that was involved; the same goes for the participant principals and regional administration and program coordinators.

The researcher already knew a significant level of detail about the study’s multiple sites and personalities due to his employment as superintendent of the region for the previous seven years. The role of superintendent was primarily to provide leadership services and coordination to the South Slave communities in the education of its children, with a focus
on building a shared vision, and developing and empowering others to lead so that all schools improve. In this way, the role of superintendent was consistent with the role of the researcher in this study.

In this study, the researcher intended to continue his efforts and strive to model a transformational leadership approach by making transparent the levels of hierarchy, encouraging the dealing with conflicts constructively, and encouraging risk-taking. The professional ethics and substantive responsibilities of the school principals and regional coordinators took centre stage. The researcher was advocating for these participant educational leaders primarily, but also by extension, other partners in education.

**Ethical Considerations**

Being involved in a sustained and more intensive experience with these participants introduced a range of strategic, ethical, and personal issues into the research process. The researcher had to respect the data as a guide to action before, during and after the study was completed. Recognizing that all research is value laden, he also strove to be introspective, challenging his own and other’s belief systems. The researcher intended to be candid about his biases, values, personal interests, and motives, and how that may have shaped the study. Researcher and participant bias might have, for example, resulted in the acceptance or rejection of particular alternatives before analyzing them. Part of the researcher’s role then was to help reframe alternatives.

As advocate for the students, families, communities and staff, the researcher felt obligated to respect the rights, needs, values and interests of both the primary participants and any secondary participants and stakeholders in school improvement planning efforts. Participants were assured that every precaution would be taken to ensure the research and the final publication was not threatening to them or any other parties:

1. The interviews were designed to be non-threatening and conversational (in memory of Socrates who was forced to drink poison because he asked too many subversive questions). Interview questions were sent to participants prior;
2. The research was conducted so as not to be disruptive to the schools. Effort was made not to add additional responsibilities on the participants beyond what might already be expected of them as educational leaders;
3. Participant principals and regional staff had the right to opt out of the study at any time. Participants could change their position on this option at any time up until the final writing of the research paper;
4. All participants were further guaranteed anonymity and their responses were treated with confidentiality if they so chose. Participants’ names were not to be revealed along with their particular responses;
5. Draft versions of the research paper were sent to participants for critique prior to submission to the university and the Aurora Research Institute of Aurora College.
6. In the event that there were questions, concerns or discomfort, participants were asked to bring this to the researcher’s attention as soon as they arose and every step would be taken to alleviate those concerns throughout; and,

7. Specific steps were taken to secure permission to engage in the research. Ethics application and approval was required from both the university as well as the Aurora Research Institute. The Deputy Minister of Education in the NWT was also informed of the research and provided his expression of support. Further, the researcher’s employer gave approval and support for his participation in the doctoral program. The Council indicated support for the research plan and expressed interest in the potential benefits for the schools, namely, more effective school improvement efforts targeted to the educational needs of the students and aspirations of the communities. The Council Executive was further briefed throughout the research.

Processes

Several have proposed processes (sequences of steps) for conducting participatory action research. (Gall, Gall et al. 1999; Kemmis and McTaggart 2000; Reason and Bradbury 2001; Altrichter, Kemmis et al. 2002) For example, Sagor’s collaborative process (1992) involves five steps:

1. a group of practitioners define a problem of concern to them,
2. they collect data about the problem,
3. they analyze the data for themes and patterns,
4. they report the results of their data analysis to significant stakeholders, and
5. they prepare and implement a plan for action.

Figure 7 shows how the action research and improvement planning cycles are similar. In their simplest forms, the improvement planning and action research cycles are complementary and are overlaid or nested. Both processes are viewed as spiralling in nature, such that improvement and action research efforts continue over time (reflecting and evaluating identifies new beginnings, and so on).

In both cycles the planning stage needs to be further fleshed out. The specific processes used would be different depending on the contexts and the specific improvement planning model(s) chosen.
This research used a variation of Sagor's PAR process described above, in the process merging into and out of the improvement planning cycles in the region and each school. The problem of sustaining school improvement efforts had emerged partly in consultation with these participants over the few years preceding this study (step 1). This study collected data in collaboration with the participants about the problem in consideration of the primary role of schools to improve student learning (step 2). The participants were involved in sorting naming, and then analyzing the data more deeply (step 3). The researcher further analyzed the participant responses to the initial data, in relation to the preliminary conceptual framework and provided drafts of the collated data, analysis and conclusions back to the participants for their critique (step 4). Finally, the results of the research contributed considerably to the resulting direction of the region in terms of continuing school improvement efforts (step 5).

Events

The main research related data collection events are listed in Table 8 in order of occurrence. Given the collaborative nature of this PAR design, the method in which the particular data collection activities were planned did change somewhat as the study proceeded and participants agreed on alternate methods. Specific questions asked at subsequent events remained focused on the research purpose but were
also more specifically determined based on the data collected and feedback provided by participants at the prior events.

Table 8: Data Collection Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forum</th>
<th>Data Collection Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus Group of participant principals and regional staff</strong></td>
<td>- Facilitated brainstorm of the regional and school specific improvement initiatives and strategies undertaken since 2000, and group analysis in terms of their impact on school improvement with questions such as: What is your gut reaction? What does this mean to us? Where might we go from here with this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual participant review and ratings</strong></td>
<td>- Collected participant critique of the headings, and collected preliminary ratings of the importance of brainstormed categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual participant meetings</strong></td>
<td>- More in-depth and context specific review and discussion of the results of this research in light of participant contexts using similar questions to those in the focus group session: What is your gut reaction? What does this mean to you/us? Where might we go from here with this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participant Critique and Peer Review</strong></td>
<td>- Data analysis, interpretation and conclusion sections of dissertation shared with participants for confidential critique and feedback to a respected third party - Resulting changes to chapters vetted by one of the participants, who agreed to run it through with others, to ensure the collective feedback had been captured adequately and nothing had been misrepresented</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Facilitation and Group Processing**

The researcher benefitted from knowing questioning techniques and facilitation strategies to engage in problem solving and decision-making. These were valuable skills for the research process as well as the process of facilitating improvement efforts. Some of these methods were adapted for use in the data collection and analysis stages of the research.

Among of many methods for enabling better group conversations, planning and decision-making processes are the approaches developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) as part of its Technology of Participation (ToPTM) approach. The ICA facilitation methods were relied on heavily in framing the focus questions and the processes. (see Spencer, 1989; Stanfield, 1997, 2002)

The ICA’s facilitation methods can help people reflect together on any subject. Their conversation and consensus workshop methods are led by a leader/facilitator who asks a series of questions (from objective, to reflective, interpretive, then decisional) to elicit
responses that take a group from the surface of a topic to in-depth implications for their life and work.

The ICA's ToP™ Consensus Workshop Method also helps bring individual ideas on a topic into group consensus and can be used for group problem solving and planning. The major steps in the workshop method include Setting the Context, Brainstorming Ideas, Grouping the Ideas, Naming the Clusters, and Reflecting on the Session.

A typical strategic planning process used in the South Slave in the past, also developed by ICA, includes the following sequence of steps in an ongoing cycle: historical scanning, identifying the current situation, establishing a vision for the best possible future, clarifying obstacles in the way of that vision, determining strategies that might overcome the obstacles and move the organization in the direction of the vision, followed by action planning, implementing, then reviewing, and so on in spiralling cycles.

Most of the regional program staff and principals, as key change agents, had been trained in these facilitation methods. They were expected by Council policy to transcend the internal focus of the day-to-day activities of running the school and focus their and their education partners' energies on more long term school improvement planning and initiatives.

Validity Procedures

Triangulation (or crystallization) of data and findings was accomplished in part by collecting multiple sources of data from participants from all eight schools and the regional office. This started with the facilitation of focus group sessions which were an opportunity to elicit and reach consensus on categories of approaches used in these diverse settings since 2000. The follow up individual interviews, with each of the participants, identified not only potential patterns amongst the various diverse settings, but also both validations and challenges to the initial brainstorm, which are presented in Chapter 6. Since the researcher also inherently brought bias to the process, member checking with the participants was used to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings and descriptions. Further efforts were made to determine whether the interpretations and conclusions were accurate from the standpoint of the participants, including confidential participant reviews of draft chapters of the dissertation. A peer debriefing process was also used for the purpose of further critiquing the findings and conclusions.

Dymond’s (2001) four key elements of a PAR process provided a checklist for the validity of procedures and outcomes of this study:
• **Involves key stakeholders** – school principals were the key agents and centre for change in schools and regional administration and program coordinators had a global view of the schools in the region;

• **Includes perceptions of a broader range of stakeholders** – the data collection and analysis involved the perceptions of the participant principals and regional staff, not just that of the researcher;

• **Analyzes both processes and outcomes** – the presentation of the data included participant critique of not only the process of the research but also the outcomes. The analysis was also reflective of the processes and outcomes at two levels, those of the researcher/participant (division/school leadership), and those of the regional and school-based improvement initiatives;

• **Uses multiple methods and measures** – the study used literature review, focus groups and interviews as well as participant critique methods, with analysis and interpretations of past and present school improvement approaches determined in consultation with participants.

### CONCLUSION

This chapter explored the conceptual underpinnings of the participatory action research (PAR) design and compared those to the preliminary conceptual framework for school improvement presented at the end of Chapter 3. PAR was identified as a suitable research design for a school improvement study in this location because it intended to be collaborative, practical, and transformational.

A case was made for a participatory and pragmatic action research study to identify what approaches emerged as having greatest impact on school(s) improvement in the diverse multi-cultural settings of schools in the South Slave. It aspired to be non-intrusive and empowering for participants, inducing deep reflection and change resulting in a potential conceptualization of effective school improvement processes for northern schools.

In brief, PAR is enquiry with people rather than research on people. It is a research method designed to engage educational researchers and practitioners together in the assessment and improvement of their own practice. The goal is to stimulate improvement as much as it is to generate knowledge. It allows action (change, improvement) and research (understanding, knowledge) to be achieved at the same time. The knowledge gained in the process allows for more informed change and at the same time is informed by that change. Since the people affected by the change are involved in the research, the knowledge will be more widely shared, thus enhancing further commitment. As Carasco, Clair and Kanyike (2001) further suggest, with practice this kind of research can become a regular aspect of continuing staff development and mobilization.
Collecting data, analyzing and interpreting results using the PAR design can be transformational for the researcher, participants and their schools if the methodology motivates further action, induces deeper reflection, and helps to build further leadership capacity to improve schools. PAR has the potential to show researcher and administrators how to break out of the rut of institutionalized, unexamined routines, and to develop hope that strengths can be expanded and seemingly obstinate problems can be solved. It is conceivable that research participants, utilizing PAR and group facilitation methods, could accomplish what Burns (1978) envisaged as satisfying higher needs and engaging the full person of participants to higher levels of moral purpose in their work and lives.

It was hoped that PAR research would result in a building upon or re-conceptualizing of the preliminary conceptual framework for the study. Conceivably, the research and results of this study would result in a call for further action, empowering the researcher and participants and other northern policy makers to explore changes in support of ongoing school improvement.

A model was also presented showing how school improvement planning and this PAR research coincide, overlaying cycles and responsibilities. In the same way that planning and implementation processes are cyclical, this study was just part of one or a few cycles within the ongoing process of region and school improvement.

Finally, a methodology was identified based on the unique settings and actors, with roles and responsibilities and ethical considerations addressed. The key data collection events and group processes were also described as a precursor to the more detailed description of the methods of data collection and analysis described in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 5:
DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

The methods for data collection and analysis flowed from the participatory action research (PAR) design and was guided by the problem statement with an emphasis on what is really important to school improvement in the South Slave region of the NWT.

The study incorporated a series of predetermined and emergent steps of collecting data with participant school principals, regional administrators and program coordinators. The process was further open ended by involving collaborative processes with the understanding that insights might unfold and emerge during the study. The thinking process was iterative, cycling back and forth from data collection to analysis and back, and drawing conclusions about it’s meaning personally, professionally and theoretically.

An overview of the activities related to this research included:

- completed literature review of recent large scale reform initiatives and effective schools, school improvement and educational leadership research databases (this provided the preliminary conceptual framework);
- obtained ethical clearance from the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics. Further, 2007 Scientific Research License No. 14176 was granted from the Aurora Research Institute as required by the Northwest Territories Scientists Act Approval to carry out the study was also sought and granted by the Deputy Minister of the Government of the NWT, Department of Education, Culture and Employment;
- identified, fully informed, and obtained consent from 14 participant school and regional administrators and program coordinators;
- held individual and focus group participant meetings:
  - brainstormed and reviewed the impact of various regional and school-based school improvement strategies and initiatives to date (since 2000) in the NWT and South Slave (What was done? What was effective? Why?)
  - discussed how improvement efforts might be better focused in future years as a result;
categorized and analyzed qualitative data generated from the participant discussions and responses to their past and present strategies and initiatives, and contrasted those themes to the preliminary conceptual framework; and,

- wrote and reported results in the form of a dissertation.

The more specific methods used to achieve the above are presented below in three parts: participant information, pilot study, and data collection and analysis.

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION**

Each and every one of the South Slave school principals (8) and regional office educational administration and program staff (6) were informed in-person of the research and their option for participation. Although school(s) improvement was within their role descriptions and collective mandate, they were informed that their input would only be included in the final results and report should they so choose. Potential participants were provided a summary overview of the research proposal (Appendix B) and invited to participate. Those who chose to participate submitted a signed participant informed consent form (Appendix B) to the researcher within a few days thereafter. All eight school administrators and six regional educational administration and program staff signed and submitted their consent forms; however, one participant chose to opt out of one of the data collection and analysis activities due to workload concerns at the time.

Consideration was given to the direct involvement of our other partners in education in this research, given the expectation and practice of involving them in the school improvement planning and implementation processes already in place (see SSDEC Policies AD and AEA in Appendix A). It was recognized however that our key partners in education—our teachers, students, parents, social envelop agencies and community leaders—were already engaged at the local level in education governing bodies (DEAs), parents advisory committees (PACs), school improvement planning days, satisfaction surveys, and so on.

The choice was made instead to limit involvement in this research to those who were hired by the elected education authorities into the key educational leadership roles in the region and schools. These educational leaders generally had a big picture perspective and critical understanding of the past and present region and school-specific improvement efforts, and through the research confirmed that they had valuable insights into the current and emerging factors that have impacted upon these efforts.

Of the eight school principals, four had at least four years of experience as the principals in their current schools. Two more had two to four years of experience, and two were
within their first year and a half as principal. Four of the eight principals also had prior experience as principals in schools elsewhere. One of the principals resigned mid-study and was replaced by one of the regional coordinators who was successful in the resulting principal staffing competition.

Of the regional office administrators and program coordinators, three of them had three or more years experience in their roles. Two were relatively new and were within their first year and a half. Four of the six had prior experience as program coordinators/consultants prior to coming to the South Slave, and three had prior school principal experience, all within the region. With the turnover of the one principal and the move of one of the program coordinators back to that principalship, a new coordinator was hired from within and participated in the final few activities of the research.

In all, nine of the participant educational leaders in this study were male, and six were female. One was aboriginal and two were classified as indigenous, having been born and raised in the NWT. All these participants had been hired for their positions through competitions that would have included at least one and usually two locally elected education authority members on the respective selection committees.

**Pilot Study**

The first focus group session and the independent interviews with the first participants were treated as a pilot study undertaken to anticipate possible problems with the research design and, in particular, the potential need for refinement of the interview process and questions. This pilot was also an opportunity to gain confidence with interviewing while using the recording technology, in-person for a few interviews, and over the telephone lines for one. Each of these participants was asked if s/he felt comfortable being recorded before doing so. They were pre-informed that they were the researcher’s first interviews and that they would be asked for feedback regarding the interview process and questions after the interview. The data collected from the interviews were included in the analysis given their importance to the study. Some minor changes were made to the interview format and questions resulting from the initial analysis of the pilot study feedback.
DATA COLLECTION

The remainder of the data collection and analysis events occurred as follows:

**Focus Group – School Improvement Strategies, Initiatives and Approaches**

All 14 of the original participants participated in a strength-focused, capacity-building style of inquiry used to facilitate the brainstorm and naming of categories of school improvement initiatives and strategies undertaken since 2000 in the South Slave region and schools. A short discussion occurred immediately after as to the perceived success of such categories of strategies, with notification that follow-up individual meetings would be utilized to garner more detailed feedback from each participant.

The brainstorm activity was in the form of a historical scan of school improvement efforts in the South Slave. The facilitation strategy used for this activity was the *Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) TOPTM consensus workshop method* (Stanfield, 2002) that helps bring individual ideas on a topic into group consensus. The brainstorm took the form of card storming that starts with each participant on their own or in pairs thinking about and recording their thoughts in relation to the focus question. They then wrote these ideas in big block letters on cards, posted them on the wall, and collaboratively grouped and sorted them.

The brainstorming activity was stimulated by a focus question, *What past (since 2000) and present NWT, South Slave and school specific strategies, initiatives and approaches have been in place to motivate, promote and sustain school(s) improvement efforts and outcomes?* Participants were asked to think both holistically and specifically in terms of what had been and what was being done at the territorial, regional and school levels. They were informed that this stage of the process was not a consensus building activity, but rather, all strategies, initiatives and approaches since 2000 were wanted on the wall. Participants were given 30 minutes to do their own personal brainstorming onto cards and they were further asked not to limit themselves to just those strategies they thought were effective. There was to be no judgement as to the value of any of the approaches at that time.

The second stage of the historical scan involved a collective interpretation of the value of the various categories of efforts identified. A consensus process was used to determine how cards would be grouped as they went up on the wall. If anyone objected to a card going in a particular grouping, discussion was extended. Strategies were then used such
as drawing out the meaning of the card by the author before it was posted in a grouping that everyone could accept. If and when there was no agreement, a new category was started. At the end of the activity, categories with just a few cards were considered for merger with other categories. The group posting and categorizing took approximately one hour to complete.

The manner in which the school improvement brainstorm was facilitated provided for a portion of the analysis of the data to occur during the process. The categorization of cards as they were placed on the wall provided for a collaborative themetization of the data.

Next, the various groupings of cards were named. The cards within a grouping were read out loud. Participants were asked to identify key words and phrases. They were then asked to venture a guess at a title or name that captured the essence of the brainstormed cards within the grouping, and that met with the agreement of the others. Time constraints resulted in the inability to complete the naming of all 17 of the groupings before the end of the focus group session. The researcher asked for one or more volunteers to take on the task of working on and suggesting names for the remaining few groupings. In response, the researcher was requested to consider and suggest names for those remaining groupings. The researcher agreed to type up the results, to draft names for the remaining groupings and to send the results out to participants for their critique. In addition, the researcher indicated that he would be asking participants to rate the categories and he would also be discussing those with participants during subsequent individual meetings.

Before the end of the focus group, the researcher also facilitated a short total group focused discussion. The following questions were asked:

- What surprises you? Intrigues you? Concerns you?
  - These questions were reflective in nature and intended to solicit personal reactions, internal responses, and associations with the data that was presented;

- How valid is the data for your setting? How important are the various pieces of data?
  - These were interpretive questions that dredge deeper and draw out meaning, values, learning, and significance;

- What is this telling you/us? What needs to be addressed? What are possible best strategies or approaches? Next steps?
  - The last questions were decisional questions intended to draw out implications, decisions and potential next steps.
After the group conversation, the researcher informed the participants that the questions used were thought starters and would be the same ones asked in the subsequent individual meetings.

**Email/Fax Poll – School Improvement Strategies, Initiatives and Approaches**

In light of the lack of focus group time to name all 17 of the groupings of responses collaboratively, participants needed to be given the opportunity to review and critique the initial naming of those remaining categories. All the categories of participant responses were typed by the researcher into charts and provided to participants by email and fax. Participants were asked to critique the category names, particularly those that had not achieved participant agreement during the focus group, and to validate or suggest alternatives. A few of the category names were adjusted accordingly.

Each participant was also asked to individually rate each category used in the South Slave since 2000 as either: 1 = *very effective*, 2 = *somewhat effective*, or 3 = *not very effective* in terms of motivating, promoting and sustaining school improvement efforts and outcomes. The frequencies were then tallied; three points for each *very effective* rating, two for every *somewhat effective* rating and one for every *not very effective* rating to give composite scores. The categories with higher scores were the top rated groupings of strategies, initiatives and approaches identified collectively by the participants.

The resultant chart and ratings were not intended to be definitive. Rather, they were meant to provide a snapshot of school improvement efforts past and present that could then be further critiqued from personal and contextual participant perspectives during the individual interviews.

**Individual Participant Meetings**

Individual participant meetings were used to facilitate more in-depth discussions. These discussions garnered context specific participant perceptions of the impact various school-based and regional school improvement approaches that had or had not been effective in improving their particular school/region, and why.

Several weeks prior to the individual meetings, participants were asked to be prepared to speak to their school’s strengths, weaknesses and current improvement strategies as they relate to their most recent school-specific staff, student and parent stakeholder satisfaction surveys and student achievement results. The interview format and a series of interview questions were also emailed to the participants several weeks ahead of time. At this time, the participants also received another copy of the chart of brainstormed school
improvement categories, in order of deemed effectiveness, with their ratings shown at the bottom of each column. (see Chapter 6: Table 9, p. 84)

Participants were contacted individually to set mutually convenient times for the individual meetings. The researcher took the lead from each participant as to whether or not the meeting took place, and if so, when and where. One participant chose not to proceed with the interview with indication that workload requirements were significant at that time. Most preferred their own place of work; however, a few chose the regional office and one chose a telephone interview for the interview. The researcher subsequently met in person or by telephone at the agreed upon time.

At the start of the interview, the interviewer once again provided a brief overview. Participants were reminded that they could retract anything they said, choose not to answer any question, and even withdraw from the interview at any time if they began to feel uncomfortable. Participants were also asked if they had any questions or concerns before starting the interview.

The participant was then asked to speak briefly to their achievement data and to the improvement strategies currently in place in their contexts. This was done in part to help put the participants at ease, as results had been improving in all South Slave schools. These kinds of celebratory and further planning discussions had been part of prior individual meetings of the superintendent and participants in the past, usually two times per year. A quick discussion of the achievement and satisfaction data was also meant to help reinforce the particular context within which each school/participant resided, as foundational to their individual critique of the school improvement categories and further discussions. Both qualitative and quantitative data are typically referenced in these individual meetings, including public, staff and student stakeholder satisfaction surveys, student attendance and behaviour tracking, classroom-based assessments (grade 1-9 functional grade level data), as well as standardized test results (grades 1-12 Group Reading Achievement and Diagnostic Evaluation [GRADE] assessment; and grades 3, 6, and 9 Alberta Achievement Test and grade 12 Alberta Diploma Exams).

The participants were again asked if they minded the remainder of the interview being recorded. It was explained that the recording was simply so that the comments could be transcribed and grouped into themes with similar comments made by others. They were reminded that their confidentiality would be protected, and that they could opt out at any time.

The researcher used similar questions to those used in the focus group discussions with the intent of getting initial reactions to the charts data, and then interpretations of what this meant, and where efforts should be focused from there. The following questions
served more as discussion starter questions, in reference to the school improvement categories:

- What might you change (re-order, delete, add)?
- Which might you rate the highest? or might you think should be addressed first?
- What might this be telling you about where you might better focus your efforts?
- What might this be telling us (regional office) as to where we might better focus our efforts?

The flexible format provided a more specific review and discussion of the categories in light of their particular contexts. The order of questioning, following a brief overview of the context specific achievement data, led well to individual review and analysis of how the improvement process, participants, plans, and expected outcomes had been influenced and might be different in subsequent years.

As each interview proceeded, the interview checklist was kept on hand by the interviewer (see Appendix C). The checklist served as a guidepost for potential follow-up questions. For example: if a participant had identified the importance of one or more of the brainstormed categories, follow-up questions would seek rationale and might ask for clarification of importance in comparison to other categories. The researcher and participants made reference to the progression of achievement results in their region or school since 2000.

The researcher conducted all of the interviews. Most of the interviews were recorded and later transcribed by the researcher or a clerk. The identities of the participants were kept anonymous with regard to their connection to any particular comment or quote. All but two participants also came to the individual meetings with hard copy of their responses to the discussion starter questions. When requested, each of those participants agreed to email their typed notes to the researcher as another piece of data to utilize in the analysis.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

The researcher used a qualitative approach to process the data from the interviews so that it could be further analyzed in light of the preliminary conceptual framework presented in Chapter 3. The transcribed participant comments, and any electronic and hard copy responses provided, were copied or printed. For the electronic data, line breaks were inserted where comments made by the participant were differentiated. Each major point or argument in the responses became at least one paragraph. The printed or copied documents were then all cut into strips at these breaks.
These resulting strips were then grouped as they were posted on chart paper. When a new strip was about to be posted, it was compared to the comments already posted. If the un-posted comment was closely related to a previously posted comment, the new strip was posted underneath the related one. If it was a new idea, it became the first strip in a new column.

Once all the comments were placed on chart paper, it became possible to identify themes. Where clusters had only one or two comments, these were merged with another column to give another angle or sub-dimension of that theme. The themes were then named and ordered in a manner that captured the essence of the ideas for presentation in Chapter 6.

The researcher then compared the resulting descriptive themes to the initial conceptual framework for school improvement to determine the extent to which the findings in these contexts confirmed or diverged from the theories and the literature. This interpretation and integration of the data helped to answer the question: What were the lessons learned?

**PARTICIPANT CRITIQUE**

After the individual meetings were transcribed and comments categorized, the researcher drafted Chapters 6, 7 and 8 of this dissertation inclusive of the collated data, analysis and conclusions. For the purpose of crystallization of results and in keeping with the design and philosophy of participatory action research, drafts of these chapters were shared with all the participants for their confidential critique and feedback.

It should be noted that this first draft of Chapter 6 in particular included virtually every quote from every one of the participants, presented in themes. This was much more than what would be included in the final report. It was important that the participants saw their own detailed comments, just as they had been seen in total by the researcher, when they were provided the opportunity to critique the draft findings and conclusions presented.

Instructions and thought starter questions were sent to participants (see Appendix C) to facilitate their critique of the drafts of Chapters 6 through 8. Participants were given one month and encouraged to read the draft chapters and respond confidentially to a third party, a retired supervisor of schools. The third party was known for his high morals and ethical behaviour. Most of the participants in the study knew him well and had worked with him previously. The third party collector of these confidential responses indicated that he received nine written responses, which he collated into one document and emailed it otherwise unedited to the researcher.
Finally, once a draft of the entire dissertation was completed, a peer review process was used, whereby one of the participants was identified and agreed to meet alone or with others, without the researcher in attendance. This participant’s role was to meet with one or more of the other participants to once again critique the draft dissertation, or portions thereof, and validate or otherwise provide candid comments for possible changes to the report.

It should be noted, given the collaborative nature of this participatory action research design, the originally planned data collection activities did change as the study proceeded and participants guided discussions. Specific questions asked at subsequent events remained focused on the research purpose, but were also more specifically determined based on the data collected and feedback given by participants at the prior events. For example, while regional student achievement results had improved considerably over the past several years, there appeared to be less focus by most participants on student achievement and satisfaction survey results (quantitative) and more so on the nature of the contexts and the quality of relationships (qualitative) as the study progressed. The data collection and analysis also became more focused on these factors also.

CONCLUSION

This process-focused and participatory action planning and research was school improvement orientated at each of the phases of the research. Participant school and regional administrators and program coordinators were involved in a focus group session, to identify collectively, categorize and initially assess school improvement initiatives, strategies and approaches employed to date in the South Slave region and schools. After they responded collectively, they were then interviewed individually to determine potential personal and contextual similarities and variation of perceptions. Relatively unstructured and open-ended, the focus group interactions and subsequent interviews allowed the researcher to delve more deeply into the thought frames of the participants and their perceptions related to school improvement.

Many steps in the process were collaborative in that they included the participants not only in the data collection but also in beginning stages of the analysis, and ultimately in the critique of the findings and conclusions. Participants were also involved in a confidential review and critique of the drafts of Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

Accordingly, the process of the research was evolving in that meaning was derived from the emergent areas of concern through the process. For example, a comparison of the research findings with the initial conceptual framework prompted further review of the literature. Efforts were also made to develop a more complete and accurate visual model
of the resulting conceptual framework (Chapter 7) to aid in establishing this picture and generating conclusions about what policy makers and jurisdictions might do to maximize and sustain school improvement efforts (Chapter 8).

The next chapter (Chapter 6) provides the results of the focus group brainstorm of past and present school improvement initiatives, strategies, and approaches (from 2000-2007). More importantly, the categorized participant reflections collected during the subsequent interviews are named to capture the essence of the key ideas. These resulting descriptive themes are accompanied by a sampling of the rich participant quotes that were gathered during this data gathering and analysis process.
CHAPTER 6:
PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a descriptive analysis of the focus group data, written submissions, and individual interview responses gathered from the participant school principals, and regional administrators and coordinators. The focus group brainstorm and ratings of past and present school improvement efforts in the South Slave is presented first (SSDEC Schools Improvement Efforts section), followed by a categorization of participant reactions (Reactions and Reflections section), and then an analysis of the participant responses to the more important question of what this was telling them/us. A number of key themes emerged from the individual participant meetings and written responses, and these are presented next in the section titled, What Is This Telling Us? Finally, the confidential feedback from participants to the first draft of this paper is also presented.

It should be noted again here that every opinion made by the participants was included in the original categorization and interpretation of the data, after which participants then provided confidential feedback. Once the themes and interpretations were validated, participant quotes were then selected for this chapter that best represented the core and breadth of the meaning of each theme.

SOUTH SLAVE SCHOOL(S) IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

Participants brainstormed ideas and categorized themes together in the focus group and then individually rated the effectiveness of approaches or categories of strategies used in the South Slave since 2000 on a three-point scale: 1 = very effective, 2 = somewhat effective, or 3 = not very effective in terms of improving South Slave schools. The frequencies are shown below each category in Tables 9-12. Scores were then tallied, three points for each very effective rating, two for every somewhat effective rating and one for every not very effective rating to give the composite scores (shown in bold and colour at the bottom of each column). The columns were then sorted from left to right with the top rated approach on Table 9 and the lowest rated on the last Table 12.
Brainstorm and Ratings

South Slave administrators and regional coordinators brainstormed and rated the following five past and present approaches as the most effective at motivating, promoting and sustaining school improvement efforts and outcomes:

1. Enriching Programs and Teaching Strategies;
2. Optimizing Professional Development;
3. Building a Culture of Improvement;
4. Networking and Building Partnerships; and,
5. Maximizing Resources for Teachers.

At least nine of the 14 participants rated each of the above themes as very effective. None of the participants rated any of these as not very effective. Further, all of the participants rated the following two approaches as either very or somewhat effective also. None of the participants rated these as not very effective:

6. Using Collaborative Planning Processes; and

Of those approaches rated lowest, they were still considered effective by the majority. For example, even though Integrating Technology Effectively was rated lowest of the 17 categories brainstormed, 11 of 14 participants still rated it as somewhat or very effective.

The tables of results (see Tables 9-12) were visible on the wall of the meeting room during the focus group session and then presented in chart form to the participants shortly thereafter for individual reaction.

This participatory and strengths-focussed approach to the study provided each participant the opportunity to identify what efforts they had been part of, by requirement or by choice, regardless of origin and quality. As both the researcher and participants further reminded in the later discussions, the brainstormed categories contained every submission made by every participant. There was no distinction made during the brainstorm as to the quality of the particular strategies, initiatives and approaches identified and then posted. There was also no effort to reach agreement or to decrease or refine the number of postings and categories. That would have required the culling of some participants’ responses. It was deemed important not to be judgemental as to which or whose responses were best during the focus group forum. Rather, the activity simply gathered and sorted what this collection of participants understood were the past and present school improvement efforts in which they had been involved, into an order that could then be further analyzed.
The sorting and the naming of categories gave participants the opportunity to celebrate and commiserate collectively about all they had done and accomplished. Later, they were to think more deeply about the categories in light of their unique contexts and perspectives. It was those later activities in which the participants responded to the collation of what they and others had been doing that the more critical data emerged for analysis and conclusions related to the research question: What school improvement approaches work best here?

Since every idea from every participant was taken into account during this first activity, the list of categories was not intended to equate to the priorities of the Council over that time period. Some of the approaches identified were regional initiatives, but some were also territorial initiatives and new directives, and many more were community specific. Not all schools and principals were doing all the things identified in the brainstormed categories. Rather, Tables 9-12 are a collection of all school improvement approaches identified by 14 participant leaders, representing a region of eight unique schools, over a period of about seven years.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enriching Programs and Teaching Strategies</th>
<th>Optimizing Professional Development</th>
<th>Building a Culture of Improvement</th>
<th>Networking and Building Partnerships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• learning strategies</td>
<td>• Staff participation</td>
<td>• Trust with open communication</td>
<td>• T.A.P.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• More quality literature</td>
<td>• Teacher mentorship x2</td>
<td>• Collaboration and empowerment</td>
<td>• Elders in School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increase time for ELA and math</td>
<td>• Numeracy job embedded PD</td>
<td>• Balance of top down and bottom up</td>
<td>• Partnership with RWED, WBNP etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reading in the content areas</td>
<td>• CWT x3</td>
<td>• Individual principal mtgs</td>
<td>• Elders in the classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Grade 9 ALT program</td>
<td>• Balanced literacy</td>
<td>• Consolidation of school and community goals</td>
<td>• Traditional skills in the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hands on focus</td>
<td>• ALCIP</td>
<td>• Staff collaboration</td>
<td>• Interagency collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increasing breadth of program</td>
<td>• ELP x2</td>
<td>• Celebrating success</td>
<td>• Snack program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bush program</td>
<td>• SSDEC in-service x6</td>
<td>whenever possible</td>
<td>• Trades in the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Exploratory activities</td>
<td>• PD opportunities</td>
<td>• Culture of improvement</td>
<td>• Breakfast for brains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reading at home focus</td>
<td>• Staff facilitation and workshops</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Coordinator fund raising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• SSI Writers workshop</td>
<td>• Curriculum in-service workshops</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Policy governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Balanced literacy (X3)</td>
<td>• Individual growth plans x3</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Regional Initiatives – school reps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• SSI extended literacy</td>
<td>• Increased PD x5</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Principal’s forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Emotional intelligence</td>
<td>• TEP</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Joint PST/Principal mtgs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Career education</td>
<td>• Classroom Based Assessment x3</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Butt out campaign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Program diversity</td>
<td>• Facilitation training x3</td>
<td></td>
<td>• SSDEC links with DCI etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Transition classes</td>
<td>• DEA training x3</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Partnership with ECE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Community hunts</td>
<td>• NWT Principals Conference</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Partnerships with Aurora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Assistive technology</td>
<td>• Job-embedded PD</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Community resource people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ab. Culture in school</td>
<td>• Facilitators course</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Ed psych consults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Promoted 3-way conferencing with book fair certificates</td>
<td>• New principal orientation</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Interagency meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers use of rubrics through school writes and AAT3</td>
<td>• Wkshops/in-services offered by coordinators and school staff</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Community partners with RCMP, H&amp;SS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher’s use of Lang. Arts portfolios</td>
<td>• Principal PD</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Partnerships with A/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Revised Kindergarten program to increase academic content</td>
<td>• Regional Committees – teacher involvement</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Partnership with SNAP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Implemented new science curriculum</td>
<td>• Supporting PI that is in line with school and regional goals</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Partnership with housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Providing time for collaboration (school level)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Partnership with WALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E.D./Team meetings</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Partnership with FEDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Task meetings (subs)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Skills Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• 3’rd party funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Parent contact initiative!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1=very effective, 2= somewhat effective, 3=not very effective (i.e., 13 participants rated the first column very effective)
Table 10: Participant Brainstorm and Ratings of Approaches That Have Motivated and Sustained School Improvement Efforts and Outcomes in South Slave Schools Since 2000 – In Order of Perceived Effectiveness from 5-8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maximizing Resources for Teachers</th>
<th>Using Collaborative Planning Processes</th>
<th>Boosting Student Support Planning</th>
<th>Advancing Effective Behavioural Supports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal Lang books and resources</td>
<td>CEP days</td>
<td>Release time for teachers to collaborate on SSPs/IEP</td>
<td>EBS (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balanced literacy</td>
<td>Dept head mtgs.</td>
<td></td>
<td>EBS training &amp; implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing aboriginal products</td>
<td>CEP stakeholder Surveys x2</td>
<td>Student Support Plans</td>
<td>EBS with Monday morning goal setting assemblies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building up aboriginal language resources</td>
<td>Vision development</td>
<td>Budget flexibility in program support</td>
<td>EBS training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource coordination</td>
<td>Community education plans</td>
<td>PST funding</td>
<td>EBS and spin off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal reading books</td>
<td>Data collection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher made resources</td>
<td>CEP format</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent HSS handbook</td>
<td>CEP policy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promising practices</td>
<td>Regional collaboration and sharing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numeracy initiative</td>
<td>CEP x4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td>SSDEC visioning activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HW&amp;SS</td>
<td>Use of regional forms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action Research grants</td>
<td>Develop of vision statement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AATs</td>
<td>Creation of council vision and mission</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic Resource Centre</td>
<td>Commitment to community involvement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Information systems: AAT/FGL ESIS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collection of school accountability data</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Council policies review</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hay River community partnerships with community taking lead to move programs forward</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 1 – 9 | 37 | 1 – 7 | 35 | 1 – 7 | 35 | 1 – 8 | 35 |
| 2 – 5 | 2 – 7 | 2 – 7 | 2 – 4 | |
| 3 – 0 | 3 – 0 | 3 – 0 | 3 – 2 | |

Note: 1=very effective, 2= somewhat effective, 3=not very effective
Table 11: Participant Brainstorm and Ratings of Approaches That Have Motivated and Sustained School Improvement Efforts and Outcomes in South Slave Schools Since 2000 – In Order of Perceived Effectiveness from 9-12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focusing on Improved Results</th>
<th>Supporting Student Leadership</th>
<th>Integrating Career Development</th>
<th>Promoting Ownership and Success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Whole school write</td>
<td>• Promoting student leadership</td>
<td>• CPP and career exemplar confirmation visits</td>
<td>• School posters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Develop Nov/March Benchmarks</td>
<td>• Mac youth conference</td>
<td>• Career portfolios in CALM</td>
<td>• Policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Benchmark documents for FGL</td>
<td>• Sport events and student travel</td>
<td>• Focus on trades</td>
<td>• SSDEC vision and mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reporting WGL/FGL</td>
<td>• School wide recognition of students</td>
<td>• CPP focus</td>
<td>• HS Help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Report card criteria</td>
<td>• House league system</td>
<td>• Career development</td>
<td>• HS Homework time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 3 way conferencing x2</td>
<td>• Student awards and recognition</td>
<td>• CD committee</td>
<td>• HIP Tips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Portfolios x2</td>
<td>• 3 way conferencing</td>
<td>• CPP</td>
<td>• Publicity and promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• SAER guidelines</td>
<td>• Dreamcatcher Conference</td>
<td>• CPP and trades awareness</td>
<td>• Electronic message board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• SAER committee</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Ownership of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Whole school writes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Workshop and support list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Focus on improving academic results</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• FGL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Analyzing AAT/Diploma results</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Regional initiatives: HW&amp;SS, Is, Lit, Num, CD, DI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• DI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Whole school wide write</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Unhooking curriculum and behaviour in evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 – 6 33</td>
<td>1 – 6 32</td>
<td>1 – 6 31</td>
<td>1 – 5 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 – 7</td>
<td>2 – 6</td>
<td>2 – 5</td>
<td>2 – 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 – 1</td>
<td>3 – 2</td>
<td>3 – 3</td>
<td>3 – 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1 = very effective, 2 = somewhat effective, 3 = not very effective
Table 12: Participant Brainstorm and Ratings of Approaches That Have Motivated and Sustained School Improvement Efforts and Outcomes in South Slave Schools Since 2000 – In Order of Perceived Effectiveness from 13-17

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enhancing Student Support</th>
<th>Managing Resources and Accountability</th>
<th>Coordinated and Multi-level Planning</th>
<th>Promoting Research Based Initiatives</th>
<th>Integrating Technology Effectively</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School community counsellor</td>
<td>Aboriginal language directive x2</td>
<td>Coordinator committee work plans</td>
<td>SSI/AR numeracy</td>
<td>Wireless school LAN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PST role more instructive and leadership oriented</td>
<td>Increase in IS base funding</td>
<td>School based committees</td>
<td>SSI/AR PST assessment</td>
<td>Technology reps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultant support with feedback, resources, training</td>
<td>Inclusive schooling directive</td>
<td>Use of consistent planning</td>
<td>SSI/AR school projects</td>
<td>SSI Success maker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring a Speech and Lang. Pathologist</td>
<td>More $ for IS</td>
<td>Homework and study skills</td>
<td>Research based initiative in BLSSI / DI</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SAER focus on assessment</td>
<td>Literacy initiative</td>
<td>SSI projects ELA groups</td>
<td>Technology initiative regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SAER clear strategies</td>
<td>Balanced Literacy Initiative</td>
<td>SSI and action research</td>
<td>School based technology planning x2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AAT</td>
<td>Committee work plans</td>
<td>balanced literacy</td>
<td>Computerized report cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increase to IS funding</td>
<td></td>
<td>Assessment and portfolios focus</td>
<td>Use of school web pages to share information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SAER directive</td>
<td></td>
<td>SAER committee</td>
<td>Computer consultants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentorship Program</td>
<td></td>
<td>School is cool incentive program</td>
<td>Enhanced use of technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Guided reading</td>
<td>Technology grants x2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SSI read to write</td>
<td>School based technology initiatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>DI – SSI x2</td>
<td>Itech meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>PST – SSI grants to improve assessments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SSI – portfolios</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>DI specific to gr. 5&amp;6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>AR/SSI projects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| | | | | |
| 1 – 4 | 1 – 4 | 30 | 1 – 3 | 30 | 1 – 3 | 26 | 1 – 1 | 26 |
| 2 – 9 | 2 – 8 | 2 – 10 | 2 – 7 | | 2 – 10 | |
| 3 – 1 | 3 – 2 | 3 – 1 | 3 – 3 | | 3 – 3 | |

Note: 1=very effective, 2= somewhat effective, 3=not very effective
The follow-up group conversation, individual written submissions, individual meetings with the participants, and the subsequent confidential feedback to the draft combined to provide the most valuable contributions to the research. The categorized reflections below were in response to basic discussion starter questions:

- What might you change (re-order, delete, add)?
- What might this be telling you about where you might better focus your efforts?
- What might this be telling us as to where we might better focus our regional efforts?

This first major section below, Reactions and Reflections, provides the researcher’s analysis of the participant responses, primarily related to the first two questions above. This is an analysis of the participant’s initial reactions and interpretations. The major section thereafter: What Is This Telling Us? provides the researcher’s collation and analysis of participant responses to the next two, more decisional questions.

**REACTIONS AND REFLECTIONS**

**Impressive but Overwhelming**

While other participant comments confirmed that there was a clear understanding that the categories brainstormed were all inclusive of everyone’s efforts in several schools over many years, there were numerous comments about the expansiveness of the categories and lists of activities underneath each. Every participant commented that they were both impressed and overwhelmed with all that was occurring in the schools and region to improve schools:

Holy cow, we are doing so much!! I guess, not only do we have, I don’t know, what do we have across here, two, four, six, eight, say about 16 different things but when you look down, I look and I see all the stuff that is going on here. Well, first of all, I’m not going to add a damn thing. I think there is too much here to begin with. Honestly, I don’t know I would delete anything either.

The comments directly above and below epitomize the expressed feelings of almost all participants who recognized they were going full out, to the point of angst about the possibility of more. At the same time, people were invested in what they were doing and unwilling to let anything go, either. The latter sentiment, unwilling to drop anything, is further reinforced by comments in a later section.
We are stretched – way out there! This is a great place to work in terms of support. Never left on that proverbial limb. However – the amount of work we all do is mind-boggling.

[The school improvement brainstorm] is all consuming and, when spelled out as it is, seems daunting and overwhelming even though, in many ways, schools are practicing and embracing through their efforts, much of them.

The comments directly above and below also provide a glimpse of the kind of pride participants had in what they were doing, the support they were getting, the professional growth they were achieving, and the results they felt they were getting. Note the lingering desire to hang on to everything in the quote below.

If I look across and so for example, promoting research initiatives, which is ranking lower than building a culture of improvement—does it mean for you to focus on that lower one? I think we need to continue to focus our efforts on everything we do, so we get the best bang for our buck. The more we continue to do these, we are going to build. I mean look at our networking, look at our partnerships and our successes there. So I don’t think there is better or worse. They are all important. It’s just that some rank lower. I don’t think you can drop it.

Some participants spoke more specifically to the related difficulty in managing so many competing priorities; not only in those areas articulated in the brainstormed lists, but also those that were not included such as running an assembly, and dealing with an upset parent. The following comments exemplified some of this sentiment.

When you take a look at some things being done, it’s quite an intimidating looking list. The problem I think with the vast number of initiatives is management, and it becomes a real management issue when you’ve got so many things happening. And I would say that had been my experience in respect of my own organizational ability. I find that there’s a point at which I start becoming less effective; when there’s so too many things happening; when I can’t figure out a way to restate something clearly to say this is our vision, this is what we’re doing, this is why we are doing it things. I tend to scatter a bit, and I think school improvement became a little bit scattered.

The quote above indicates that the participant is feeling less effective because of their inability to manage multiple and competing priorities. When school and district leaders do not know what efforts are most important and most effective, the lack of such clarity results in everyone trying to do everything, only to find that some of the more important things might fall through the cracks (resulting in mediocrity at best).

We are sure doing a lot in the SSDEC. Too many items for me to focus on any 2-3 areas; looks like a shotgun pattern. Would there be a way to
conceptualize it to chunk it in a different kind of way so that it would make more sense?

The comment above suggests disorganization and a lack of clarity. Leaving participants with a long list of all that has or is being done is not helpful in terms of moving forward most effectively. In fact, it would probably be counterproductive. The above and many other comments suggest making meaning collectively and then following up with clarity and cohesivenes as to priority and focus.

We’re our own worst enemies. I think that’s the problem with positive people. If you get people together that are dreamers and they’re positive and they dream together and they get the excitement of dreaming together, all things become possible and you make commitments. And you come back and it’s, Oh my God! I’m only one guy and honest to God, sometimes it feels like you’re a one-armed paperhanger trying to make everything work. You only have such small times where you’re spent in reflection—the rest of the year is spent doing. You go from doing A to B to C to D to E to F to G in a day. Is the sound system working? So ‘n’ so’s out of town; Nobody’s going to pick this up! Do we have batteries for the microphone? How are we going to do this or that? Report cards are coming up. I got a new PST; I haven’t really talked to her about three-way conferencing. How are we to get three way conferencing going? We got our awards assembly. Do we have everything here that [staff name] said she was going to do? But she’s been a bit remiss lately, what am I going to do about that? It’s like the whole day is about creating structure from chaos. You’re doing that all day long, all day long, all day long!

The quote above is included in its entirety because it reminds us that what is contained in the brainstormed categories does not include the day-to-day work and emergencies that can be all consuming in a principal’s life at the school.

“We are our own worst enemies.” That statement speaks to that desire again for participants to want to do everything, and do it well. This participant and others also remember that they were the group regional and school leaders who in 2000 brainstormed the three priorities that were the focus of the Council’s efforts over the next seven years: Literacy, Career Development, and Homework and Study Skills. It was also these school principals who annually choose whether to attend the regional committee meetings associated with developing and implementing these initiatives, or whether they would send someone else from staff instead. They even had the option of opting out of sending anyone or opting out of the initiative completely, if they felt it was not consistent with their particular school’s needs.

These comments also acknowledge that, by nature, people who end up in district and school leadership positions are typically positive, driven and productive. They have been
successful at working things out and completing daunting tasks. They are not used to saying: “I don’t know how.” or “I can’t.” They come to the occasional regional meetings that distance and cost permits each year to share strategies and brainstorm solutions to common issues. They may be initially motivated and inspired, only to find it difficult or impossible to implement initiatives when they return to the all-consuming day-to-day work with teachers and dealing with the serious effects of the difficulties of the local context.

We do spend times meeting and thinking about the big picture in school but it is often in the context of solving serious day to day, week to week and month to month problems. I will say with confidence that all of our communities have serious problems. Drugs, absentee parents, kids with little or no adult supervision, predatory sub cultures and so forth. These come into the school.

The comments above also remind us of discussions with regional office staff who sometimes lament that important information shared at regional meetings appear not to be reaching teachers. A most memorable example came to light during the research when a school administrator, who had been hired from within, shared that he and his staff were completely unaware of a Department Directive that had come out several years prior, and yet the former principal was a member of the regional committee that had met several times to develop the regional framework and help ensure that the initiative was implemented effectively in the schools.

The quote below may provide further insight into why this may happen. School principals are having difficulty reconciling school/community, region and territorial priorities. When pressured, they may simply feel forced to pick and choose based on an arbitrary set of criteria that might be as rudimentary as: What can I drop the ball on that won’t be noticed?

I think it’s certainly a little bit schizophrenic that there were some things that were initiatives from the Board office and from the committees and those things were important, and there were things coming down the pipe from the GNWT that is important, and you have to be very careful of management of those things. And what would happen is that teachers became disillusioned when I would bring things up. It was almost the straw on the camel. In itself it wasn’t that big of a deal, like doing the SAER Review [territorial student assessment review] and then doing the big review for the department on special needs students, where there were so many things that were being given that were similar that it started to negatively affect staff and myself. It just felt like we were going in too big a circle and part of it comes from the complexity and number of things and my ability to stick them in a category that people could get into.
All of these quotes, and similar comments made during and prior to the study continue to raise flags about the potential for burnout and the inability to sustain improvements accordingly—further exemplifying the need for this research.

On the other hand, several participants also put the seemingly competing priorities within the brainstormed categories into perspective, noting that not all schools were doing all these things, and that there was duplication and overlap in the resulting categories:

I think somebody in their response [in the focus group discussion] said, yeah it’s intimidating; yeah we’re doing too much but I think somebody made the point that we’re not really doing all these things. I mean some schools are doing some of these individual things.

There are some of them I see as overlap. You can’t separate them. And you can’t do without them. Using collaborative planning and building a culture of improvement are very similar, and how do you get improvement if you’re not doing it with other people? Physically, it is not someone alone doing it.

While in no way to downplay some of the feelings of overwhelm, the comments directly above refer again to the resistance of committed professionals to drop anything. These and other comments also provide further insight:

The charts are a compilation of what many schools have been doing over many years, not indicative of what each school was doing alone;

There are duplications in the contents, naming and meaning of many of these categorized areas; and,

The category names are more motherhood and apple pie and, as a result, many are seen as describing things that are already in place or philosophical approaches as opposed to particular initiatives.

The above notwithstanding, the region and its schools appear to be improving according to the student achievement results and leader perceptions.

**Teacher/School Level Items Rated Highest**

While all the categories brainstormed were rated as effective, the categories that at least three quarters of the participants rated highest tended to be those that focussed on the “front line”. Priorities that were deemed most effective seemed to be those that most likely had a direct impact on school staff practice and on students:

I, overall in a “big picture” sort of way, would agree with the rankings and was not at the least bit surprised to see the grass root items rate the highest: *Enriching programs and teaching strategies; Culture of*
Improvement; Professional Development; Resources; EBS; Collaborative Planning; and Student Support all rated very high as broad categories. These are all things that impact daily on student lives and achievement. This was no surprise that these school level, teacher level [categories] are what would be the most important in the lives of school communities.

Regardless of the scoring system used to rank the categories (total tallies, most 3s, most 3s and 2s, least 1s), the top rated six or seven categories remained the same.

I agree that *enriching programs and teaching strategies* are the most effective ways to promote school improvement because they are closer to day-to-day activities of students.

Several made reference to the categories at the other lower rated end as simply “not in the faces” of the leaders as much. These are categories that are still important but might not have rated as high because they are already in place and taken for granted, or because teachers and students aren’t expecting or asking for them on a daily basis.

I wasn’t surprised about the first part and I’m not surprised about the middle part. It seems like the further we move to the right in the listing of them, we get into things that are perhaps driven by forces outside of school. But *managing resources*, *enhancing student support*, *promoting ownership*, these tend to be things that have drivers that are not necessarily in the principal’s faces all the time, the same with the *promoting research based initiatives* [and] the *integrating technology*. There will be some principals who will latch onto it because it’s a personal preference, but you know what, if its not in your face and doesn’t really get in everyday classrooms [and] activities, the clientele who were asked to respond aren’t going to put that up as a very high priority in the schools.

The question of how perspective influences one’s conception of effectiveness could also be coming into play here. From the standpoint of education leaders and staff, this brainstorm and rating suggests that enriching programs and teaching, and optimizing professional development are most effective. However, from the perspective of other stakeholder groups such as parents, boards, business, government or higher education, it is conceivable that the lower rated categories such as promoting research and integrating technology are deemed more effective approaches. This leads us to the related issues of context and perspectives, both of which are further identified as critical considerations in the next sub-section.

**Context Makes a Difference**

When participants were asked if they agreed with the order of the categories, most said they were. Differences in opinion were based mostly on the particular context in which each participant lived and worked. Many of the participants commented that the context
made a big difference in terms of the importance of the various categories, and in the impact of context on accountability.

**Context Influencing the Perception of School Improvement**

Context influences what might be a school priority and in what order categories of school improvement efforts were rated. For example, the percentage of aboriginal families, the frequency of staff turnover, or the number of at-risk students influenced participants (in that particular context) to argue one category as more important than another:

You’ve got to work with the crew you have and make the best of it, and when you are looking at 20% turnover, or 60%, or whatever else, it’s a constant challenge. So yes, you go and do professional development with the staff, and three of them move on, you’re starting over, so it’s continual. It will be nice to move beyond the basics sometimes. How do you do that? Some of the staff are ready to move on to the next level, others are at the beginning level, how do you balance that one? And that’s the same question at the regional level too, some schools are ready for this and some aren’t.

As indicated in Chapter 2, a few of the communities in the South Slave are more isolated and challenging than others. Teacher turnover tends to be more rapid in those schools. The above example epitomizes the unique challenge of school improvement efforts in one of those schools as compared to a school in a community where there is less turnover. For these school and regional administrators, *optimizing professional development* may be deemed absolutely critical for this reason, or it could also be considered a waste of time; why provide in-service to teachers who won’t be here next year?

The quote below also points to the understanding that the current school system, which still follows an agrarian school calendar, is largely a southern construct transplanted into the northern aboriginal context. It is only recently, since the 1980s, that significant efforts have been made to return control of education to the parents and communities. In communities such as Hay River where the majority are not aboriginal, they are probably satisfied with the current model. However, in communities such as Lutsel K’ee that is over 95% Dene, school improvement priorities and preferred approaches can be quite different.

The comment below also touches on the importance of *building relationships* as foundational to success with school improvement efforts in cross cultural settings. This will be discussed further in upcoming sections.
I would emphasize *promoting ownership and success* and *enhancing student support* as key components of a successful school and more integral to the success of aboriginal/northern schools than is indicated in their placing. Rationale: the northern school system promotes an artificial environment far removed from the traditional cultures of the students and families we serve. To truly develop the relationships we need to succeed, we need to have the students/families embrace the system and this comes through meeting needs, celebrating success and facilitating a sense of ownership within the community.

Some participants reminded the researcher also that where a school was undertaking a particular initiative, school culture also had a bearing on how they rated particular school improvement approaches:

> At times, depending on where schools are in terms of the improvement process, improved results may mean different things and might vary among communities and different principals.

The quote below is in recognition that one of the best ways to improve schools in northern contexts is to identify priorities and action plans in collaboration with the local partners in education such as staff, students, parents, community leaders and local business (see Appendix A – Policy AEA – Community School Education Plans). The argument made by this participant is that collaborative planning might not have rated higher either because it was already in place, or because it is less important in some contexts than others.

> When you talk about using a *collaborate planning* process, even though it is still ranked in the mid range of all the columns, you are looking at something that is either already being done, and it is strongly entrenched in practice and therefore forgotten in the terms of importance, or you are looking at something that people don’t do because they don’t have multi-grades in the school, and they aren’t doing that kind of teaming in the school.

Similarly, the argument made by this participant is that parent involvement might not have shown up as a separate category but it is largely in place and infused in many of the region and school initiatives already.

> The parents aren’t evident in this brainstorming, except for one comment. To be fair, if you actually said let’s have an initiative called *parent involvement*, you could probably extract from all of our other initiatives a whole plan. We just haven’t categorized it that way right now. But literacy has a whole section on family literacy and baby bags. The homework initiative is very heavy with parent involvement initiatives. And inclusive schooling plans, I mean the parents are huge stakeholders of the planning
process; the parent satisfaction surveys; career development has parent signed CPPs; the CEP process its supposed to happen.

Several felt that the school or regional context suggested that something was missing from the list. Two categories in particular that were mentioned more than once, and emphatically by a few, were Building Relationships and Cultural Awareness/Relevance. The fact that both of these potential categories were named as notably missing by a few participants during a focussed discussion at the end of the focus group session [with general agreement from others] may have prompted further comments from more participants in the following individual meetings. Relationship building in particular, and the necessary related sense of trust, were seen as foundational to the other categories and needed to be emphasized.

One of the things I would’ve added, because of this specific thing in my school community... things that basically address building relationships.

The quotes directly above and below were indicative of the many comments made in support of the importance of relationship building. The quote below speaks more specifically to the importance of quality relationships between staff and community members. It is possible that this has been emphasized in part because of the emphasis it has received of late in the form of the Council’s three foundational policies—including Principles For Working and Learning Together and Community School Education Plans) that were all just established in consultation since 2000 as well. (see Appendix A) More likely though, this emphasis on relationship building is simply irrefutable and foundational to improving schools in diverse, cross-cultural contexts.

Relationships – relationships – relationships. Schools in minority (traditional school) situations need to emphasize the quality of relationships between teacher-student and teacher-parent/community.

The emphasis the participants put on relationship building after the focus group and during the individual meetings, prompted the follow up question as to why relationship building had not been identified as a category during the earlier brainstorm. Participants commented that relationship building was foundational and taken for granted as opposed to a unique initiative or strategy. For some, relationship building was implicit in many of the categories.

If I were looking at labelling things or organizing things in terms of the brainstorm, I would sort of be putting in a column for relationship building. Or, I don’t know if that would be the correct label or not, but something that indicates that there is a concerted effort to build relationships within the school, and extending out in the community as well. Yeah, maybe it’s implied and included in networking and building partnerships, or building a culture of improvement, or collaborative
Some participants ventured further to articulate why relationship building was so key to school improvement in northern, multi-cultural contexts. Trusting relations are not something that is simply in place when one arrives, but something that has to be developed. If relations are limited or strained, the team is smaller and less productive in its efforts to improve schools. However, when there are strong relations and trust amongst most local partners in education, ‘great things can happen’ as indicated in this quote.

The whole idea of relationship building is not really sort of part of that in terms of how anything is labelled. So although some of the tasks are sort of related to relationship building activities, there is nothing there that talks about the quality of the relationships that are built between the school and the community, between the teacher and the students, between the principals and the teachers, and the principals and the students, etcetera. To me, in aboriginal education, that’s probably the key, and without that kind of relationship, and without considerable effort to build that relationship, a lot of the other good things you want to do, can’t or won’t take place until those relationships are built. There is a sense of trust that I’ve always felt is really strong in aboriginal communities and aboriginal schools. Great things can happen when that sense of trust exists, and terrible things will always occur when that sense of trust is not there. So no matter how much you want to do other things, until you have that relationship you’re not going anywhere. When you have that trust, the community is there to support the school, and good or bad, they’ll be there to sort of support things. And when you don’t have it, it makes it that much tougher.

The quote above digs a little deeper into the kind of understanding and sensitivity that educational leaders need in order to be able to develop the kinds of trusting relationships required to collaborate effectively and really improve schools.

Aboriginal schools research indicates that a child’s success in school is significantly influenced by having teachers who understand different cultures and backgrounds, recognize student differences and provide a sense of inclusion for all (based on learning and culture).

It was somewhat surprising that there was not more commentary on the importance of cultural sensitivity. Again, this might have been implied for most. Several of the participants were born and raised in the North; many more had been working in the North for more than 15 or 20 years. They were part of the culture. Unlike in southern
jurisdictions where many aboriginal and some non-aboriginal living arrangements tend to be more heterogeneous, northern communities typically integrate aboriginal and non-aboriginal living arrangements. Perhaps it is not unusual for those who are immersed in a culture not to talk about it as if they were somehow removed from it. That said, over 50% of the student population in the region is of aboriginal descent. The history of aboriginal education in the NWT has significant implications, as identified in Chapter 2, in terms of the perceptions of education by the parents and grandparents of students currently in the school system. Forced residential schooling and the loss of traditional culture and languages created a legacy of despair and helplessness. Many new educators coming north simply don’t last long if they have an expectation of an education system and parenting practices that are more similar to their own.

Relevance of learning and identification with aboriginal languages and tradition helps develop student esteem and cultural identity in ways that promote academic success.

Perhaps there were not more comments about the importance of aboriginal culture and language because it is already a foundational approach, or perhaps because it is not equated with improved student achievement. Perhaps participants are equating student achievement with only those achievements that are measured by the existing standardized tests? It could be also that there has already been a significant focus on this area on many levels and with many territorial initiatives, that it does not stand out as something that needs further focus? (Dene Kede Curriculum, Aboriginal Language Directive [and categorical funding], Aboriginal Achievement Initiative, Affirmative Action Policy, and so forth.)

**Context Influencing Accountability**

Some participants feared that the results of the brainstorm and ratings would influence regional priorities such that those of value to them might no longer be available, or that too strong a focus on measurable results might damage relationships and other important factors that may be more difficult to assess:

We also focus on *improved results* because that is what we are here for, however we look at results maybe on a wider scale and not just academically but in the terms of social and emotional intelligence and those kind of things. We need to think in terms of what is measurable and what is not measurable, and still insuring that some of those processes and some of those things that may be difficult to measure we still keep in mind. We need to create benchmarks. We need to make certain that we have SMART targets, but we can’t do that at the exclusion of maybe some of the other things that might be harder to measure.
The above quote is perhaps a caution that by focussing better in future, there may be a tendency to rely too much on instrumental assessment of a limited scope of student accomplishments, and ignore some of the other critical factors.

Captures most of my initial feelings, however I have not been here through all of the initiative implementation therefore, I feel I am playing catch-up at times. When others want to throw in the towel on things, I often see them as new and exciting. Unfortunately, it looks like there is a push to do away with some of the regional initiatives and possibly provide more support for the top rated areas.

The above comment recognizes again that staff turnover can have an impact on the perception of what is valuable, and in this case, a reluctance to let go of existing regional initiatives for fear of losing the external supports that come with them.

A few spoke of the value of existing regional initiatives and the downsides as well. The quote below speaks to the constant challenge school boards and administrators face in deciding how to obtain the best value with limited resources. Do we lower pupil-to-teacher ratios or fund our priorities first? Do we centralize or decentralize control?

The initiatives have been valuable as a means to focus efforts and resources, but have cost a lot of money for travel and face-to-face conversations that might have meant another teacher in the classroom.

The difference in context and perspectives at various levels of the system also created perceptions of difference in opinions and potential for conflict. The following comments speak to the importance of multi-level alignment of efforts and the relationships and trust required to be effective.

A principals’ meeting happens. We meet, we discuss, we reflect, we start a process of making decisions which we never finish because we don’t have time. We leave and in our absence those threads are picked up and woven together by board office staff because otherwise they would just be threads that lay there all year. Sometimes those threads are woven together in a way that wasn’t initially anticipated perhaps and we come back there’s been progress and principals haven’t necessarily been part of that progress. And we can hardly even remember what we talked about at the last meeting so you go over the agenda items or the minutes and you think, “Oh [expletive], I was supposed to do this, that or the other thing.” We get lost, these things become islands that are lost in the sea of doing. That creates a difficulty of momentum because I know that principals are part of a decision-making team and yet we don’t quite make fully-fledged decisions; and if you are relying on us to do so, we wouldn’t have progressed very far as a board.
The comment above is interesting for two reasons. The participant recognizes that when there is not follow up at the next level on decisions that they were a part in forming, implementation falters or fails. When this happens, the initiative essentially and inevitably appears to become top down from the perspective of the school staff and perhaps even the participants of the original discussions and agreements. Yet, it was the intentional involvement of the various levels of educational leaders that was utilized from the beginning as a method not only to determine the best approach but also to secure buy-in. The problem is one of initiative development and implementation in a multi-layer organization. Multi-level alignment and engagement is extremely difficult in school systems, particularly because the development and implementation of new initiatives seems to occur on top of, and removed from, the daily work of participants. Yet, those educational leaders who have managed to reconcile territorial, regional and community/school level priorities and initiatives, and do so in collaboration with local partners in education, have accomplished tremendous school improvements. One of the related questions is: How do leaders best support other leaders in other levels of the system with the daunting responsibility of reconciling competing priorities and facilitating further engagement in what is deemed critically important for school improvement and student achievement?

It goes back to relationships as one of the things that’s an important implication. I think that relationship is the thing that saves those kinds of problems because I need to have relationship of trust with you and teachers need to have a relationship of trust with their principal so they can tell you their concerns—these are the issues. So you’ve got a feedback device that you’re getting information at least how these things are impacting and whether you need to fine tune what you’re doing and that’s only going to happen with solid relationships. I’ve seen it here as a principal. If I’ve got a teacher who doesn’t believe that I’m really supporting them, thinks I’ve given up on them, they’re going to retreat, they’re going to have trust issues, they’re not going to tell me what I need to know, and they’re going to be less effective and in the end it’s going to be a destructive kind of situation. So a relationship is a real key to give you that feedback to self correct the system when it starts going off. It’s going to go in different directions and sometimes it’s going to go in a direction that’s not healthy and the only way to solve that is to have the communication which means there needs to be trust relationships in the system.

This comment is similar to the one prior in which the participant is speaking about the critical importance of strong and trusting relationships with supervisors and subordinates. The ability to be honest with each other, without fear of retribution or disdain, suggests that the effective leaders needs to build a relationships such that they are in many ways servant to the follower.
Perspective Makes a Difference

Even if the context is the same, people still had different perspectives. In response to the question regarding what might be re-ordered, responses varied.

While there were mostly opinions of support for the order of effectiveness of the categories of strategies, three of the participants interviewed indicated they would move *Boosting Student Support Planning* up higher in the order of effectiveness in improving schools primarily because it is the students who are the ultimate clients. The educational needs of the students come first. Comments in this regard also connected to the importance of *relationship building*, as was mentioned earlier:

I am looking at *enhancing student support* and that seems awfully low to me, you know and *boosting student support planning*. If those two were combined together, 'cause I think that’s in the area that the schools are starting with, the clients that we have.

The next two comments below also speak to individual perceptions about the importance of building relationships. The following participant comment suggested that the categories that were really about relationship building should be deemed more effective approaches for improving schools.

I would reorder things. First of all, I think that the two areas that really talk about *relationship building* are the *promoting ownership* and *enhancing student support*. I would see those as a higher priority if I were running a school and trying to make an impact on a school, and that may be the case with some people sort of regarding it as very important.

One participant clearly articulated that it was more important than even the highest rated brainstormed category.

Yeah, I would talk about *relationships* as important, even more important than *enriching programs and teaching strategies*, because once you’ve got the relationships, then you can have effective learning taking place, until you have that, then it’s a struggle for some kids, not all but for some.

Three participants also thought *Promoting Research-Based Practices* might be misunderstood by participants or otherwise should be higher. The Student Success Initiative (SSI) referenced below is a northern variation of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) that provides funding for approved action research projects in schools. The comment below again references the likelihood that workload issues get in the way of more effective collaborative planning efforts that include data collection and analysis at the school and classroom levels (even when additional funds are available for this).
Promoting research based initiatives, that’s the one that is still on the docket, we can take advantage of this. We’re not using it in our schools. That it is in the list is good but that it is second last, is it telling us people aren’t taking advantage of it because its is another paper trail, or workload.

Part of the issue with the apparent lower rating of promoting research based initiatives might also be a result of the fact that the NWT and its schools are relatively new to collecting and using data to inform decision-making. This is not an area that has received pressure in the North as it has in other jurisdictions, so the fact that it arose as a priority may be a sign of the need to consider such an approach.

That’s very interesting, I think that the research based initiative and the SSI [student success initiative] are down there because, I’m really not sure people know really what research-based initiatives are. I don’t think people understood that as opposed to other things. I think a lot of schools aren’t tapping into the SSI, the action research projects for example, probably because of the extra workload with the data collection and stuff, and so if they aren’t dabbling in it then it’s obviously lower on their priorities list.

There were several comments about technology being last in the list. Comments mostly referred to recognition that it was important otherwise it wouldn’t have been mentioned and identified as its own category. There was also an understanding that it was not as important as other categories for achieving school improvements and, in fact, there might still be some very good schools that do not have computers. Technology offers some rather sophisticated tools for enhancing learning and work but, in and of itself, it is probably not a key approach for school improvement.

Other items mentioned by individual participants, as being more valuable than the results of the ratings portrayed, include: Using Coordinated and Multi-Level Planning, Focusing on Improved Results, Optimizing Professional Development, Integrating Technology Effectively, Integrating Career Development, Promoting Ownership and Success, and Supporting Student Leadership.

One participant commented that s/he was surprised that Advancing Effective Behavioural Supports was not rated higher:

I thought that advancing effective behavioral supports might’ve been higher, from what everyone was talking about you know. You’ve got to get your basic needs dealt with first in terms of discipline and management before you can move on to other areas. Seeing it kind of in the middle of the pack surprised me a little bit. I thought that one would have come a little bit higher.
Feedback on the Activity/Process

The actual activity of brainstorming and rating approaches and then critiquing the outcome produced a number of comments, some positive and others less so:

**Positives**

During the discussions, and as referenced earlier, several participants commented on the wide range of initiatives and approaches undertaken, and the satisfaction felt when brainstorming and then seeing the final 17 categories with the plethora of examples under each. A few of the observations in this regard were included earlier in this chapter. This was seen as a sort of celebration for some.

I think that identification of the changes over the past six years was a useful exercise and having the participants rate them was also useful.

For those who had not been around the entire time since 2000, the activity and historical information were appreciated as reflected by the comment below.

Some of the points and initiatives I was very much aware of and others I had little or limited understanding of what was regionally or locally involved in the initiatives or approaches.

For others, their comments indicated they enjoyed the sharing and they managed to learn and borrow ideas from each other in the process. Some participants commented on how schools might use the charted product of the brainstorm for continued planning and priority setting.

By brainstorming and labeling them, setting these up in columns, schools can sort of pick and choose where they want to focus their efforts, depending on where they are in terms of their evolution as a school within a community.

Some participants took to heart where categories were rated or where initiatives they were passionate about were not rated as highly as others. They saw the results of this activity as a learning opportunity and an eye opener into what still needed to be addressed:

Big hit – right between the eyes! [Need] more dialogue about the research based component of Balanced Literacy and discussion about the value of Guided Reading beyond grade 3. [Need to share] the research and the anecdotal remarks from our teachers on the value of that.

Below is an example of a comment from a participant who is feeling the need to refocus a school more on the approach that was rated the highest after the brainstorm. This
participant intended to itemize and reconsider things happening in the school that were not focused on this high priority.

I am going at it, looking at it and saying, okay, *enriching programs and teaching strategies* is something that we ranked as number one. What are we doing in the school that is or isn’t related? I think that it’s going to make me focus a little more. We are making it a high priority at our school.

The observation below is indicative of others who had been advocating for some time to improve student behaviour before significant improvements could be made in academic achievement.

The fact that two indicated that current practice or in the past EBS [Effective Behavioral Supports] is not effective in motivating or promoting school improvement. I think this is something I really need to try and spend more time on.

Still others sought out areas of responsibility or passion and came to conclusions as to what they might need to do next to change other people’s opinions.

Interesting to see that student portfolio’s rated in a column that was lower on the charts; might need to continue to do some education as to why this is seen as a valid assessment practice for student achievement.

As evidenced by the above quotes, most participants appreciated the activity and found it and the resulting document helpful for their own learning and in the determination of priorities and next steps in their unique roles and contexts.

**Concerns**

Some participants raised concerns with the quality and location of the items under each category and the naming of the categories that might have influenced the ratings:

When I looked to the titles, the order seemed relatively on par with what I was thinking. When I looked at some of the activities underneath the titles, I wasn’t quite always sure if the titles captured everything there, so that definitely jumped out at me.

In the activity of brainstorming of past and present approaches to school improvement in the South Slave, everything was posted regardless of the quality of the approach, the breadth of implementation, and agreement of others. All of every participant’s responses were honoured and collected. This resulted in some very long lists as the consensus activities of sorting and naming the resulting categories occurred. The result, however, was that similar points were made in different ways and showed up in multiple
categories. The naming of the categories became problematic, as it was difficult to sum up the meaning of so many ideas into one short phrase that described a school improvement approach.

Some participants deemed some ideas effective; others saw them as counter-productive. The example below exemplifies the ongoing conflict about how best to meet the needs of students with special needs. Does one pull them out into special programs or include them in the regular programming and provide additional supports in the classroom? While this issue is prevalent (it has inevitably led to much discussion and debate over the years), the important purpose in naming the categories was in part to avoid becoming distracted by such conflicts and to reach agreement on the larger meaning of the category.

An area of concern: was underneath each main title I felt some of the bullets were again much more effective in promoting school change than others. For example, I would say under enriching programs that things like learning strategies, hands on focus, exploratory activities might be more relevant in promoting school improvement than a statement like Bush programs or transition rooms. I think that these two words on their own do not promote school improvement. Bias can also come into play here when we know that some aspects of some of these programs are effective and others are perhaps less likely to lead to improvement. Some can make people's lives easier, but I would argue not always lead to the best interest of a student for long-term programming and development.

The comment below suggests, similar to the discussion about the importance of context and relationships, that some categories might be more foundational to the others and therefore not on the same level. The desire for clarity and to focus came through strongly in the discussions and is further explored in the next major section.

I don’t know if focus on improved results should be a separate column. I mean that is the big goal, would it not then be achieved through some of these other columns, you know what I mean. Is that the overall thing and everything else supports that, or is that just its own separate column?

Comments were made that there was too much in each category and that there were probably subcategories within each that might have been titled and rated. Still others felt there were already too many categories and too much overlap. A few suggested that it might have been an idea to spend more time in focus group discussing the categories and maybe re-grouping some of them before finalizing and rating them.

I understand it's important to honor what the group came up with, however, the multitude of factors (72 in all) blurs. Maybe if we did that activity where we combine the strategies and worded them more clearly, and maybe it would have [been] more like the Effective Schools list, where it is narrowed down to seven.
One suggested that *Networking and Building Partnerships* could have been merged with *Using Collaborative Planning Processes*, and that *Boosting Student Support Planning* could be merged with *Enhancing Student Support* for example. Another said s/he would have combined *Using Collaborative Planning Processes* with *Coordinated and Multi-Level Planning*.

There were so many categories and there was some overlapping, which brought me some confusion, and I wondered if we could’ve made this a bit more succinct, somehow maybe combined some categories which would have taken more time to do.

The quotes above and the one below pinpoint the problem of dealing with abstract categories rather than specific actions, and further reinforces the need for greater focus and clarity for leaders and staff within the division.

I think we talked yesterday about one of the guys that I really like is Harry Wong and he said if you want people to remember something you put it in chunks of three to five and that’s how people remember things. That’s how we have phone numbers 874-6534 – chunk of three, chunk of four and I think when you have such extensive lists there’s an immediate reaction to shut down a bit because it’s a bit overwhelming. I think the fact that because these were in headings of 17, that impacts the ability to wrap your mind around it.

One noted that the order of ratings would have been different if they were ordered based on which category had the most *not very effective* votes.

It might be interesting to see that [chart] organized in terms of the highest to the lowest, and then looking at the number threes. That would be interesting to look at them because people felt strong enough to give it just a three, it would be interesting to see. You know we’ve got this organized in terms of *most effective*, which is number one, but if you organized in terms as least effective, according to three, *career development* would be toward the end. There were two 3s under *EBS*. That would shift the ordering of it in that sense.

As we looked at this together, we noted that the top categories would still have been in the same order, however as we went down the list of 17 some of the categories would have changed places. *Coordinated and Multi-level Planning* for example rated 14th or 15th in the list now could have rated as high as eighth if ordered based on the number of *not*
very effective ratings. Integrated Career Development on the other hand would have gone from its current spot at 11 to 15th. 4

What Is This Telling Us?

This section provides the researcher's collation and analysis of participant responses to the more decisional questions of what this was all telling the participants in terms of what their brainstorming and reactions were saying about where and how the division and schools might better focus future efforts. A number of themes emerged from the data collection and analysis.

Consolidate and Focus Efforts

Almost all participants referenced the need to narrow the focus on a few carefully selected priorities that could be communicated with clarity. All other efforts would or could be sustained only if they aligned with the few key priorities. Recognition would still be required for the need to differentiate for the various school contexts.

Participants repeated statements such as this over and over.

I think that we need to sharpen the pencils to a narrower focus. When I look at what we've got here, we have a ton of stuff.

These comments were not new to this researcher. There had been considerable talk about reducing the existing four regional initiatives to two or three a few years prior, but agreement amongst the principals to eliminate any of them could not be reached. Each one was deemed absolutely critical for at least two of the eight schools. Those principals argued that if we dropped their favorite, their schools would not be benefiting from a regional initiative to the same extent as other schools. Some of the statements now were more directed, as the one below shows.

Stop talking about reducing initiatives and decide which to focus on, and which would increase the commitment of principals and teachers.

4 In hindsight, I would have had participants rate the categories in order from one to 17 in terms of their importance and then score the categories out of 17 accordingly. This would have garnered a greater spread in scores that might have been more helpful with the analysis of what these participants perceived as most effective. Even with the existing manner in which the categories were rated on a scale of three, if doing it again I would have scored the categories 0=not very effective, 1=somewhat effective, and 2=very effective. I applied this conversion after and found that the order of the categories would have remained the same except for one. Advancing Effective Behavioral Supports would have dropped two spots, meaning Using Collaborative Planning Processes and Boosting Student Support Planning would have slid up one spot each. I have retained the 3, 2, 1 ratings in order to maintain the integrity of the process and the order the participants reacted to in the study.
Still, even with the desire to focus, there remained that concern that all schools would be required to adopt a new priority that might not be of their preference.

When you look at all the things we’re doing in the different areas, we need to think in terms how we bring this all together, in what makes it more manageable keeping in mind one size fits doesn’t all, one strategy doesn’t fit all.

Some were now questioning what the research was saying in terms of whether or not the region and schools would actually benefit more from a narrower and deeper focus than the existing one that tried to do everything well.

Would we be better to take a narrower focus and shine in those areas before going beyond? What does the literature tell us about where to start, how to prioritize?

Some spoke to what was occurring in schools and how focus could be better achieved with respect to the existing community-based school improvement planning (CEPs) process and priorities.

With a narrow focus I believe that we can be more successful. With the information gathered, we can re-adjust our CEP and work towards a more successful educational experience for our students.

Nevertheless, some distinguished between developing a narrow focus at the district level and establishing priorities at each school.

But you have to prioritize, and that’s a tough one, and if you have to prioritize, teachers don’t like to. They want to do everything and anything they can do to try to get a result. Sometimes things grow beyond where you can do adjusting it, and you spread too thin. I noticed when I looked at our CEP [community education plan] from the previous year, we talked a lot, we had five items under success, and now we’ve got three, and are more focused and more concentrated. We used to have five under traditional language, now we’ve got two. You know, some people are saying okay, its not necessarily that we are doing less but we have more of a chance of getting done what we can if we tackled two or three things as opposed to tackling six things, but it would be interesting to see if this revamps the other way too. Am I lowering expectations?

Others suggested a clearer mandate from the top. The bottom up approach of developing improvement plans at the community level and then engaging school principals in identifying regional initiatives using a collaborative approach was deemed problematic. Fullan’s (1999) notion that educational change has to be both top-down and bottom-up to be most effective resonates with the quote below.
I think we’ve got to have a vision that could create enthusiasm whereas before it was too fractured. Because the CEP was based on the community in a way, but then it came back and was filtered a little bit by the board initiatives: then it came back and it had this ying yang between what’s driving what. There should be no doubt about what’s driving what. I think there’s a much clearer mandate that we need coming from the SSDEC members themselves saying what they want. That is a real vision, an umbrella that all schools can go under. In some way you had a lot of conversations about top down, bottom up. I think sometimes their needs to be some top down. If you’re going to really have one kind of common idea, it’s got to start from the top and trickle from the bottom as well.

It is also possible this perspective was prompted by the inability of the leadership team to reach agreement on a priority to drop in the previous two years. That said, every school was given the opportunity to opt out of any of the regional priorities and none did, probably because those initiatives also provided further resources and supports.

Others spoke more specifically about how current staff responsibilities and processes could change or be re-focused specifically with regard to the role of regional coordinators. Namely, coordinators should, if they weren’t already, be focused to a larger extent on teacher support more so than the leading of regional committees made up of representatives from schools.

Our main attention, as coordinators, should be focused on classroom instruction (first choice) and assisting in areas that enrich classroom programs and teaching performance.

I think one thing we need to do as coordinators and as a region is focus really on what the principals and teachers view as most important, and that’s enriching programs and teaching strategies. A lot of our efforts I think should be directed towards helping schools meet those goals, to identifying areas where we as coordinators can help and direct our efforts there. I think [name of a program coordinator] does a great job in doing that sort of thing, because she’s there in the classroom. It’s a new initiative, and again the labeling works to its disadvantage, but she is basically there to support literacy and support teaching in those schools and in those classrooms. I think more of our time should be towards that approach.

The last part of the quote above speaks to a relatively new initiative that had the coordinator providing mini-in-services in each school, demonstrating the best practice in the actual classrooms in the schools, and then going back and observing the teacher practicing the strategy and providing feedback. Similarly, the observation below speaks to the need for a more focussed and differentiated approach to regional in-services based on school specific needs.
I think that perhaps the issue of developing context specific in-service, recognizing that each school can improve their delivery of programs, that each school is unique and in a stage along the way, so that custom designing any kind of in-service, what is going to work in the school. What is needed in Fort Res. is not going to be what’s needed in Fort Smith.

Others spoke more specifically about revamping the role of existing regional initiatives and program committees, made up of representatives from the schools, to be more focused on school specific supports as identified by the individual schools:

I don’t think it’s too much to ask a committee to take a look at itself and say okay, these are the priorities and this is the goal that Council has accepted as its priority. So how do you tie into that in terms of what we do as a committee? I think it is easy to do, even if you picked student achievement, or even literacy, or numeracy as the goal. I don’t think it’s hard for any of the committees to say we are doing this and this and this, and these are the links and this is how it ties in. I think that’s easily done.

This view suggests that committees, should they remain in place when the new priorities are determined, should be re-focussed on what they can do to support the key priorities. This is a way of consolidating efforts.

I think a portion of their time and energy has been spent on what the committees have done in the past, coming up with regional initiatives that are going to be the same throughout. But I think maybe, the resources of the committee and the resources of the coordinator, with the committee, needs to be freed up for a portion of the time to work with identified individual school goals within those same sort of areas. I see that in terms of, hey, you know, I want help on this, can you come in here and help me with this. I request this, my staff have requested this, the board coordinator comes in does a workshop, does this, does that, whatever we want help with in these areas, and we move on. As opposed to the board coordinator saying, this is what the committee says, this is what you have to do as a school to meet with the committee work plan. It’s a different kind of approach, so I think their timelines and their assignments need to have some sort of flexibility built in them so that they can support local schools on these initiatives within the big category of the existing initiatives.

The comments directly above and below suggest that while the committees’ membership had been hand picked by the principals, and that those representatives were to be bringing the views of the principal and schools to the meetings when strategies were to be determined, the impression had emerged that those coordinators and school staff members were making decisions without the support and sometimes without reporting back to the principals. The request is that the committees refocus more toward a role of delving into, targeting and differentiating support for each school. In this way, what were
being seen as regional initiatives could shift to a focus on the unique supports that each school needs.

There is a perception by some that the schools are working for the regional program committees; the committees aren’t working for the schools. I guess in some ways we need to have some of these initiatives working in the background more, instead of being viewed as an initiative. It’s just something we do. As long as we view it as an initiative then you’re sort of separating it from other things, so we need to integrate. These things are just there to support teachers and support schools.

Others referred more strongly to their fear of losing the current regional priorities and committee structures partly because they felt that is what had built leadership capacity and resulted in major successes to date (see also Context Influencing Accountability section earlier in this chapter):

I think a lot of positives come out of what we are doing at your regional committee meetings. For example with homework and study skills, [name of school representative] came back to the school the last time, had a different vision, and was very good at explaining to people assessment, about homework, and study skills, and about how we mark homework. It was very positive. She came back out with a better understanding and was very good at articulating it to others on staff.

You’ve told us before and it is important to remember that these regional initiatives came out a brainstorming activity of school principals. And if it wasn’t for the regional committees, we would not have achieved all that we have since 2000, the improved results, the awards, the recognition.

The reference above shows an understanding of where and how the committees were formed, but other comments suggested that the focus of the committees became somewhat removed from having a real impact on school improvement. The next quote below, on the other hand, acknowledges that deciding and forcing a new program on schools without school input might be more difficult.

Could you imagine the backlash that would have occurred had an attempt been made to implement the Balanced Literacy program in classrooms if it hadn’t been researched and chosen by a committee of representatives from our schools?

**Prioritize Approaches that Impact the Classroom**

The earlier reference to the role of the coordinators and the regional committees, being more focussed on strategies that directly impact teachers and students in the classroom, was further extrapolated and articulated by participants. Many references were made to satisfaction with two relatively new SSDEC initiatives that were using a continuous and
ongoing classroom embedded teach-model-practice approach to professional development. In this approach, teachers receive frequent mini-in-services (teach) and demonstrations of effective strategies in their classroom (model), and then they practice those strategies themselves and demonstrate it back to the coordinator/trainer for further feedback. This approach increases the chances of effective implementation, over the one-off in-services:

I believe that the model that is being used for the delivery of the Numeracy initiative is better suited to our needs. With the Numeracy initiative, we are involving all teaching staff in the process and are requiring them to reflect and improve upon their teaching practice, consult with Math leaders from the South, and to work together collaboratively as a grade level. I believe that this model has the potential to link the aspects that the brainstorming exercise showed, in my opinion, to be fragmented.

It is always refreshing to hear educational leaders speaking knowledgeably about the kinds of practices that are desirable in the classroom. The quote below references the need to ensure that teachers are supported in the delivery of instruction that is effectively differentiated for the wide range of ability levels and challenges in the classroom.

We need to strengthen classroom strategies and support learners in the learning continuing from dependence on teachers, to independence. There is a strong link to DI [differentiated instruction], but this is not explicitly linked for teachers across the content areas. There needs to be an increased understanding that student support is a classroom-based strategy, not outside-in and on the bottom. We need to change teacher practice, move away from worksheets, incorporate that often called DI strategy, use the teach, model and guided practice strategy.

The quote below recognizes the kind of push back that can happen when a particular and relatively scripted program is being promoted and implemented. Many have suggested that the teaching of the philosophy and the research-based structures are critical, but that the strict adherence to the daily schedule and order of activities may be counterproductive.

We need to get that literacy support model for learners: teachers and students. Don’t call it balanced literacy, [call it] using research proven practices in the classrooms.

This comment suggests the need for high expectations and support not only for English but aboriginal language instruction as well. Unfortunately, the aboriginal language programs are the most under-resourced in terms of aboriginal language teachers, curriculum and instructional resources.
[We need to] have high expectations of success in terms of the aboriginal language teachers. The job embedded PD approach was maybe the best way to do this, like that used in the literacy and numeracy initiatives.

I don’t think we’re where we need to be with buy in at the teacher level. It is often more ritualistic than authentic. We need authentic engagement to soar in this area. So how do we get it? This may require an increase in commitment by principals and teachers to those initial things that are deemed most important.

The quotes directly above and below recognize the virtually impossible responsibilities hoisted on principals in northern schools. They are CEOs for the local education authority, staff supervisors, facility managers, and expected to be instructional leaders as well. Some, in the smaller schools, are also full time teachers. With those kinds of forces on the school and principal, it is very realistic to think in terms of what approaches could be taken to provide better support for principals in the important work of *enriching programs and teaching strategies*.

Principals are so overwhelmed with everything else. I wonder, what can we as regional coordinators, and the regional office do to get into the schools and be more instructional leader coordinators on the side; to be more providing that instructional leadership maybe that the principals can’t get to.

We need continuing contact for teachers. That’s collaboration and multi-level planning. We need to also put checks and balances in place to ensure the best practices continue in classrooms after job-embedded training is over and after regional initiatives have jump started and come to completion. The checks and balances are critical as an orientation for new teachers too.

The quote above is in recognition of earlier comments about the effect of staff turnover of school improvement initiatives. It also speaks to the issue of sustainability of promising practices if and when there is not ongoing support and monitoring. People tend to return to the old way because it is usually easier, but typically also less effective. The paragraph below references a training program that school administrators went through a few years ago called SmartWalks or Classroom Walkthroughs. These are intended to be short five-minute visits to the classrooms each day, followed by an affirmation and reflective question for the teacher to stimulate further growth. The process is focussed on higher order thinking skills, but can be adapted for the purpose of providing affirmation and reflective questions regarding any particular instructional practice being sought or observed. The understandable fear of this participant is that push back will occur on the announcement of such a process, even though it is meant to be a positive and non-evaluative.
I think we have to be more focussed on implementing classroom walk throughs. I think it’s powerful. So how do I introduce this to my staff? How do I bring this to their attention in such a way it doesn’t generate a backlash? We need to have staff understand that it is a learning process for the principal too.

The observation below is a good summary of the dilemmas principals and coordinators face in trying to facilitate change in practice in the classroom. It also reinforces why the leaders in this study are advocating for the ongoing and job-embedded professional development model for enhanced staff development and student achievement.

I think some of the processes here of helping staff with ongoing PD are answers to that too. There’s a glimmer of an answer there if you can free up people to do job embedded professional development. I think that’s a huge selling point of what were doing because the other stuff doesn’t work. The in-service doesn’t work for a long term—you could spend $10,000,000 and get the best speaker there for one day a year and I think the research says you’re not going to get any change with people. You need to support people, you need to show them that something works, you need to hold their hand, you need to put a bit of pressure on them that they need to perform, but you’ve got to give them all the support in the world to get there if you want transformational practices. Otherwise people will fall back to what makes them feel safe and what makes them feel safe often doesn’t work. I’ve seen teachers here that have failed and I tried to give them some assistance and it hasn’t been effective assistance. You sometimes get frustrated because why are they continuing to do this when it doesn’t work? Because they don’t know how to do anything else and they fall back in the thing that sort of works but not really.

The added complication is that the coordinators have no authority for supervision and are bound by the teachers’ union code and should not be speaking negatively about teacher performance with anyone other than that teacher. This provides the teacher the opportunity to opt out of engagement. On the other hand, the principal does have supervisory authority but little opportunity, it appears, to apply his or her knowledge and support in the classroom. Yet, according to Territorial legislation, the principal as supervisor is required to address any deficiencies in instructional performance.

**Enhance Community-based Improvement Planning**

“One size does not fit all” was one phrase used to support the need for continued flexibility at the community/school level afforded by the Council’s Community Schools Education Plans (CEP) policy and approach (see SSDEC Policy AEA in Appendix A). Note the different levels of authority or delegation, either stated or assumed, in the
various responses below, from the more directive (top down) to the more facilitative, and more hands off but still responsive to schools (bottom up) approach:

This understanding would lead to the need to create a plan for each school that would identify its specific needs (i.e. set within its context) and then respond to these needs by developing a specific plan of action for that school. There must be links among this concept of profile, context and Community Education Plans.

The quote below references the need for a multi-level approach, with the regional level perhaps more directly involved in the setting of school specific profile, goals and plans. The particular context and needs are paramount to the determination of priorities for support.

How you bring about improvement within a system, taking into account the needs of the different schools and where they are in process of change, certainly at the regional level, what might work for us might not be okay for another school because they are not there yet. By looking at each school and its needs, then you can focus on what the students and what the teachers need becomes possible. Again it’s that process of becoming, and then taking that understanding and making it lead into a plan in the schools to address those schools specific needs, so that you are really developing a support plan for each school. It’s a program support plan and a school support plan, but I think that is just a part of it. If it isn’t there already, there needs to be a really clear connection between what the school needs are and the context in which they are set.

There is more than one school in the communities of Hay River and Fort Smith. The question below asks why all the schools in one given community are not working more closely together and creating synergy in the determination of a community education plan.

When I think of community education planning, my first question was, why aren’t all three schools here working together on a community education plan. Because if its one community, the three schools are three actualizations of it, so why isn’t there more coordination and collaboration among the schools here if we are all serving the same community and all have the same mandate. It made me think as well, in one of the pieces we read last time—the WOW book, they talked about having people who don’t usually meet together, to meet together and you get a lot of creative energy coming out of that—and wondering whether or not having the cross school kinds of meeting for the communication might get some new energy into looking at a community education plan.

I think a lot of it is dependent on the schools themselves. It’s a matter for principals, and the teaching staff, and the communities eventually to sort of look at that and say, you know where can we really have some impact
in some of these areas, and then communicating that through the superintendent to the consultants. Saying we need some help in this area or that area, is there somebody that might be of support to us in this pathway that we’re taking? I see that as sort of basically taking our direction from the schools, and then assisting them or helping them in achieving whatever goals and targets that they sort of identify.

Both the quote above and the one directly below speak to the role of the coordinators in taking direction from the school and regional administrators in terms of supporting the implementation of each school’s community education plan (CEP).

The one area where I thought that a consultant can take a more active role in offering our services would be through CEP planning. Not too much involved in the planning itself, but by taking a look at what the CEP goals are for each school and trying to decide as consultants, what can we offer this school that’s established this as a goal within their CEP. When you sent out the CEP goals from all the schools at the beginning of the year, I thought that was a very good exercise. We sat down and looked at that in just a cursory here they are, this number is dealing with achievement, this number dealing with discipline, this number dealing with aboriginal culture and that sort of thing. But I think a good exercise would be for us as a board to sort of sit down, look at those CEP goals, and then saying, and who might be able to offer support in these areas, and what would that support look like, and how do we communicate that to the principal. So that might be one exercise that might push us towards being more helpful, and in the hopes that our help would be welcomed.

It should be noted that in many schools the CEP is developed largely by the principal and staff, with little if any involvement of other stakeholders including governing body members, parents, students and neighbor schools. Although community involvement is a clear expectation spelled out in Council policy, in many cases, regular invitations have been given, input has been asked for and parents have been surveyed but with limited success. In a few other communities, the intent of the Council’s policy appears to be recognized, and authentic community and DEA involvement appears to be occurring.

**Strengthen Research-based and Data-based Planning and Programming**

Participants spoke to the need to articulate better the research base for some of the classroom-embedded programs that were being received and implemented effectively by some but still not being engaged by others. They also expressed optimism about the use of research, data and results to motivate improvement and professional development.

The comment directly below was indicative of other comments about the need to enact the collection and use data for improvement purposes.
I think one of our weak areas of our school is data driven decision-making. We’ve had some experience in the past in terms of analyzing the AATs [Alberta Achievement Tests] and diploma exam results, but are we there yet, no, I don’t think so, especially if we looked in terms of behavior and EBS. Our data collection in terms of that sucked big time, so that is definitely an area that we need to work on.

Teachers have difficulty in complying with a relatively new Departmental Directive from the Territorial government that requires them to identify and report the grade level each student has been working on in math and language arts for the majority of the school year. This quote suggests that teachers are looking for assessment data that would help them be more definitive in determining the level of achievement of their students, so that they can be more accurate in their reporting and better able to target instruction.

Teachers want to have data. That’s one of the real difficulties with SAER [student assessment, evaluation and reporting directive] is trying to have teachers guess at kids’ grade levels. That’s difficult.

Participants spoke to the importance of setting SMART targets that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, and have assigned Responsibility and Timeline, and then measuring progress and learning in the process. They also advocated for the measurement of results to inform future efforts and as a form of teacher professional development.

We’re not good at setting targets, measuring our progress against them, and learning from them. First of all, it’s like a difference between a dull pencil and a fine tipped pencil in the expected outcomes column of the workplan. Put a SMART target in a work plan and it makes a world of difference.

Participants also wondered what the literature says about where to start and how to prioritize in terms of time line for improvements. The quote below suggests that one participant might feel a 5% improvement in the number of students achieving a target might be suitable. It will be interesting to see what targets are set and achieved in the first few years of a new initiative.

I think that anytime you know what you are targeting, you have a better chance of hitting it. I get that both of us, working as program coordinators and teachers in schools, have to be realistic when we set those SMART targets. We have to be clear about when and how we show improvement. I think sometimes we think we’ve got to get a high number up there, 80% are going to be successful. But if only 65% are successful now, then maybe next year we’ll go to 70% percent, and understand it’s a gradual progress improvement that takes time.

We don’t often look at what is working elsewhere and what the research is telling us. Research and related PD can give us a framework to build on or
against. That maximizes our learning and our potential impact on our
schools and children.

Participants also recognized that the research base for quality instruction was becoming
much clearer and that programs and models that had stood the test of scrutiny elsewhere,
in practice and in research, might be considered for adaptation in South Slave community
schools. Both the quotes directly above and below speak to this optimism.

I’m really enthusiastic about educational research. I think this is an
exciting change. When you’ve been at it for as long as I have, I remember
my behaviour class at university, and we all learned that if you were
rewarded rats, Skinner said this would happen. Then we went into
classrooms and we decided we’re going to reward these kids; if they do
well we’re going to do this for them. There was no discussion about group
process. There was no discussion about how kids reward one another for
bad behaviour and how you can often be out-bid when a kid is getting
such great positive feedback for being a complete tool in front of his peers.
We didn’t learn how to run a class in education school. The research that
is being done now is becoming more credible. You read Marzano’s
synthesis of research: it’s a very good time to be an educator right now
cause we’re actually starting to learn what we’re supposed to do. Now we
just have to do it. Most teachers want to be better. They want to do a good
job. They want to have tools that work. The difficulty is you’ve got
unlearning to do because you’ve got bad habits with some of the staff,
including myself, that have been doing things for so long.

Focus on the Positive

There were many references by participants about the high quality of the South Slave
schools and teachers and the need to recognize periodically that northern schools were
being effective against incredible odds. Several commented on the need for a strengths
based or an appreciative inquiry approach to developing students, staff and schools. This
is reinforced by the comments below:

Students:

The quote below speaks to the recognition that large portions of northern students are
currently not graduating from grade 12. It further recognizes that graduation is not the
only measure of student and school success. While it is important to keep expectations
high and continue to improve the graduation rate, it is also important for schools to strive
to provide educational services for those who are also not on track to graduate. Those
students need educational options for becoming something other than perceived failures
and resulting drain on society.
I would say for too long, we’ve sort of viewed the pathway towards graduation to university as the model for success. But we’ve got about 2/3 dropout rate. Only 1/3 of the students ever get grade 12 and beyond and go that sort of pathway. So what happens to the other 2/3? I think we have to sort of look at our definition of what success is and what success means. For some students, that might mean getting into that grade 10, struggling through that, and writing the trades entrance exam, and going into that program at Aurora College which you can do with a grade 10. That’s success for them - Rather than being deemed a dropout. For a community, school and student to say, I’ve done what I could academically and I want to do this for a career in my community, and there is a community there to support him or her in doing that. That’s success as well. There is a relationship aspect to success, and there is a value aspect to success which we have to sort of accept as part of that. So I think we do have high expectations for success but we’re very limited in what we sort of define success as. Again, to me we need to broaden that definition and be more inclusive of different opinions of what success is.

A positive approach to school improvement for the large number of these kinds of students is one where they continue to be welcomed and supported back into school, that sincere and diligent efforts are made to determine interests, strengths and stretches, and then program and interventions are put in place to help these students. The end result is a person who achieves more education, a positive lifestyle, makes a contribution to society, and who wants to work closer with the school when they have and raise their own children. This and similar participant quotes speak to the long term impact of building positive relationships with students and parents not only for the good of the education of this generation, but the next one as well.

**Staff:**

These comments speak to the importance of building positive and supportive relations with staff if school improvement efforts are going to be maximized. In a context where challenges and stressors are high, it is important first to recognize staff successes, before and at the same time as potentially hitting them with the need to change and improve.

I think I need to focus my efforts on trying to find more successes in classrooms and in teachers. I can tend to focus on a few things I am looking for in a room or with a teacher and it can cloud all the great that is before me. Teachers, like students, need to know what is expected of them and have opportunities to experience success. Teachers also need to be treated as instructional leaders and their ideas and opinions valued. We need to allow staff time and resources to frequently and freely monitor their own learning and to provide ample opportunities for them to learn in non-threatening and non-evaluative settings. This is something I want to strive to continue to work on.
Educational change is difficult. Leaders are encouraged in the following quote to recognize that, and be understanding but persistent with improvement efforts. Those that are originally resistant may just need more time and support.

A comment was made by Terry Small [2007 brain-research staff in-service presenter] about how the human mind automatically reacts to change with resistance. It’s so true and I see it in the staff when I float an idea sometimes. If it’s a good idea the initial response to some of the best ideas I’ve had are… it’s fear. But nobody ever says “I’m scared.” They say, “It doesn’t work because of xyz” and they rationalize reasons why it’s not going to work. The interesting thing is I’ve been doing this long enough in this school now that some of those ideas that I used to pose that had a lot of resistance they’re now saying “Yeah, we’ll do this.” Sometimes it just takes time. And a steady drive, and a little bit of realization that it’s human nature, some people are going to be scared, some people are going to resist, some people are going to find reasons why not, why not, why not.

The next quote exemplifies a leader’s ability to be self-critical and to admit mistakes. This can be an important part of building strong relations with staff, particularly when stressors are strong and many, and such that the focus can then return to what is in the best interests of the school and students.

I had an interesting conflict with [staff member] on Friday. We were both talking from fear. I was talking from fear because she was coming at me saying “you need to change this, this and this.” And I put up a spirited resistance and I think she reacted from fear because she thought she was losing the argument, the initiative, and also that I had been a supporter of her and now I’m not. So, I wish I could go back in time and fix that communication we had because it was terrible and it all comes from fear. You need to be really a grown-up in this business and really reflect on yourself and know yourself well and be strong enough to say “this is where I have weaknesses and this is where I need to do better”, and a lot of people aren’t there, so then what do you do? You’ve got to try to help them.

The quote above also references the difficulty when staff are not self-critical themselves and aren’t receptive to constructive criticism. They are more likely to change in a positive environment.

We’re in an era now where good teachers are harder to get so we’ve got to work with the people we’ve got and have them truly supported enough to change and to try things in support of our research and what’s going to make the system better. In the meantime we’ve got to survive.

In an area of Canada where attracting good teachers can be difficult, it is absolutely critical that staff can feel a part of a team that is doing something meaningful and well.
They need to be in a supportive environment where they can grow and learn. Otherwise, staff are more likely to exercise their right to look for work somewhere they are more appreciated and where there are more amenities.

**Schools:**

The importance of being positive also applies to the way schools should be referenced, even when they struggle and have dips in performance. It does little to lament a school or community and hope at the same time that people who are invested in those are going to be inspired to work with the leader to bring improvements. The participant quote below suggests that regardless of the challenges, each school has strengths that need to be celebrated in order to provide a foundation for success to grow further. The challenges are not ignored, but neither are the successes.

Considering context as a factor in each ideal allows the development of a unique profile for each school that would include assets and detractions. Then the strengths of each school become sources of pride and each school’s process of improvement is nestled within its own context. At any point in time, their positioning on the continua ebbs and flows. Benchmarks or targets can be placed along the continuum. The definition of them could be extremely challenging in terms of critical characteristics. By profiling each school and its needs, then a focus upon what the students need and what the teachers need becomes possible. No school is ever deemed ineffective but on a process to be the most effective they can be.

In sum, it appears that an approach that garners cooperative efforts is ultimately more effective than aggressively imposing something on schools. The former could result in what is popularly termed a win-win situation; the latter makes people want to win at others’ expense (i.e., a win-lose situation). Leaders too need to use an appreciative approach, a facilitative approach, and a servant approach if they wish to maximize responsiveness and buy in for educational change.

**Validation and Cautions**

Feedback from the participants collected in anonymous responses to a third party helped to both critique and crystallize the results of this research. Participants overwhelmingly indicated that the analysis in the draft of Chapters 6 and 7, and conclusions in chapter 8 were consistent with the perceptions of the participants and the data collected.

The research in Chapter 6 is a reaffirmation of discussions. I agree with the conclusions and summaries of chapters 7 and 8.
The chapter pretty well covers our discussion. I can't think of anything of importance to add.

I think that he captured the essence of the discussions we had. The conclusions and themes identified were certainly extracted from the feedback given.

As evidenced by the comments below, the results had already had an impact on the direction of the Division.

Over time I feel we have made a difference and I like the present direction of the Board and agree with [the researcher’s] findings in Chapter 8. I think [the researcher] has tried to work the relationships and encourage honesty and this has had a positive effect.

The importance of context and relationships were again reinforced in the comments of the participants to the confidential third party.

Yes, context and relationships are foundations. To think that an imposed system of accountability can achieve real educational change in these communities without taking this necessary community development into account is naïve. This does not mean that the school cannot have a real positive impact on the nature of relationships in families and communities by modelling and showing healthy relationships; it can. If we did not believe this there would be little spirit for our work in many of these small communities.

I am glad that [the researcher] picked up on the importance of relationships as a foundational component to effective multi-cultural schools. I believe that relationships are the key component. With good and effective relations with students, teachers, parents and the community administrators can begin to assert programs and policies that focus on a school’s safe environment, expectations for success, time on task, mission etcetera. Failure at this level, however, means that an administrator will always be “fighting against the current” and trying to create programs and policies that have only limited support and little chance for sustained success.

The following thoughtful comment makes the connection of the importance of relationships in school improvement efforts to the importance of relationships in traditional aboriginal cultures of the North. It is likely that building strong relationships is of great importance to northern school improvement given the uniqueness of its contexts.

The importance of relations cannot be underestimated in traditional communities. In a society and culture that believes so strongly in the interdependence of all living and non-living things, it’s not hard to imagine its central importance. In societies that sought to gain a superior
balance and harmony with their environment and interdependency within the family and tribal unit, the need to keep and maintain harmonious relations was key. Traditions and cultural activities, from the drum dance and prayer song to the hunting tradition of giving away the meat from a kill are all ripe examples of actions designed to maintain the principles of harmony, equality and respect within the relationship.

Comments provided to the confidential third party also reaffirmed the finding that a focus on just a few key priorities that impact the classroom, with a commitment to results, is what the participants stated collectively.

The Focus issue... spot on. Literacy, numeracy and results, this has been a big improvement over past years and is something staff can get their heads around. Focusing on classroom strategies... this is where the real work goes on... fantastic.

There was an expressed sense that the outcomes of this research, although no less challenging, were much more specific, reasonable in number and digestible.

The major findings [consolidate and focus efforts, prioritize strategies that impact the classroom, enhance community-based improvement planning, strengthen research-based and data-based planning and programming, focus on the positive] are something that can rally the troops.

A few references were made to the conception of the educational leader as servant was well received by the participants also.

The focus on relationships and servant leadership should have a powerful effect.

The thesis makes the case for a servant leadership model of school administration as an effective model leading to school improvement particularly in small multi-cultural schools. Given a conducive environment, I agree with the conclusion that this form of leadership holds the most potential in helping a small multi-cultural school achieve the goals and aspirations placed upon it by a community – particularly when those aspirations may not fall within the domain of traditional “school” expectations (ie: need for good grades, regular attendance, nightly homework, high graduation rates and so forth.)

One noted with interest that the key themes, coming out of participant reactions to the past and present school improvement practices, were not ones that showed as categories of the initial brainstorming and sorting session. As others had indicated earlier though, this may have been a function of simply how things were sorted or that there were simply too many submissions to sort effectively. It may also be that these are things that are
more abstract and foundational than the kinds of strategies and initiatives that were mostly brainstormed.

I think that the four additional themes that are suggested as coming from the brainstorming sessions are indeed key and interestingly enough were not part of the original list.

The comment below acknowledges that focus needs to be communicated effectively at all levels of the Division for improvement efforts to be successful. The reduced number of priorities should make it easier for these leaders to identify and refine their key messages for staff and others, and not otherwise feel guilty for not having better informed and involved them.

The idea of focusing our efforts. I think it’s so important to go back to the key message. You talk about key messages. We talk about key messages when we are talking to the press when there’s a difficult situation happening so that you’re focusing your message. I think we have to do the same thing with staff and I haven’t always done that and sometimes staff meetings need to be more focused. I think I need to have the same sort of strategy that I’m focusing my message. I want a message out there and I don’t want this message out there… When an issue arises with a staff member, I’m thinking, crap, we went over that, but we didn’t—I did, I went over it but they didn’t hear it. The issue is to focus that message, know your audience and try to leave people with some key understandings.

The comment below speaks to the past difficulties in reconciling numerous territorial, regional and community priorities and implementation plans in the past. It also speaks to the fact that many of those initiatives were less likely to impact directly on teaching and learning in the classroom. They may have come about through political pressure and the need to be seen to be responsive. Or, they have focussed on the creation of resources that may or may not have made their way to the classroom. The focus on results now also maximizes the chances that efforts will be more focussed on the classroom.

I think before, a lot of things we were doing were more public relations, more just a hodge podge of we’re going to do this because we had a meeting and a group of teachers thought that this was a good idea to do. Xyz and zyh are regional initiatives and these others things are from the department and it became a hodge podge with no strong moral backing and how can you argue? We want to use results, we want to use evidence, we want to improve teaching; we want to improve kids results. How can you argue with that? You can’t argue with that. That’s what we should all want. We’re doing it now.

Still, there were a few fears or cautions as to how and where the new focus may play out. The first concern was in relation to the speed of change and the fear that in the zeal to
achieve, the superintendent may not look around to ensure that staff are truly engaged and up to speed. If implementation issues arise, the superintendent needs to ensure he has established and maintained the kinds of relationships such that other leadership team members are appropriately bought in and feel comfortable sharing when they are not.

I fear that the issue of regional committees, in this case the literacy coaches driving the entire process, circumventing principals may happen. It is a problem of speed. [The superintendent] wants things to happen but sometimes the bus leaves the station and we are running after the bus on the return of our committee members hoping the direction is sound. The caution... sometimes we are still in too much of a hurry. It's great to lead from the front but turn around once in a while and make sure the troops are in a coherent line behind you. The test of leadership is when we run into difficulties. Do we hang together or hang (with a more sinister context) separately. I have experienced both and the former is a lot more fun!

The next caution is somewhat related to the first. There is a legitimate fear that a trumped up focus on student achievement data could distract regional and school personnel from a focus on the whole child. It is clear that formative data needs to be collected frequently by teams of teachers primarily to inform short-term goal setting and instructional decision-making. The collection of systemic outcomes based data is also needed, but less frequently, for measuring progress, reporting to Council and resetting targets. If dips in achievement data occur, they are to be analyzed for improvement planning. Putting too much high stakes pressure on schools and teachers in these contexts not only leads to less than productive efforts to obtain positive results, but it also runs counter to the importance of building relationships and retaining good teachers who are so critical to school improvement in these contexts.

Studying data makes our staff more informed and helps to look at and pinpoint dips and shortfalls, but we must not lose sight of that which is right in front of us – little Johnny Smith must never become #346382740!

While pleased with the overwhelming support for the interpretations and conclusions in the draft of this report, it was surprising to the researcher that more cautions or concerns were not raised. This may be a function in part of the incredible stresses and workload of these leaders and their available time for thoughtful analysis. It could also be that this group of leaders already manifests what they are telling us is critical to success in the northern school system, a positive approach.

Again, the majority of the comments above were shared in confidence through a third party. The exception was a case where one of the participants missed the deadline for submission to the third party and asked if it was acceptable that he just provided his comments to the researcher directly.
The purpose of this study was to explore approaches that are most likely to empower and sustain effective school improvement planning and outcomes from a school and district leadership perspective. Accordingly, the participants provided numerous comments about the kinds of approaches that emerge as having an impact on school improvement, starting with their initial responses to the focus group question, “What past (since 2000) and present South Slave leadership and planning approaches have promoted and sustained school improvement efforts and outcomes?”

The school improvement brainstorm and categorization generated 17 different themes or categories of efforts over the past seven years in the South Slave. The follow categories were rated most effective at improving schools: Enriching Programs and Teaching Strategies, Optimizing Professional Development, Building a Culture of Improvement, Networking and Building Partnerships, and Maximizing Resources for Teachers, in that order.

Next, a consolidation of the reactions of the participants during individual meetings and written responses to the initial brainstorm and ratings identified that: both the efforts to date and the list were impressive but overwhelming; teacher/school level items are rated the highest; context makes a difference in both the importance of the categories and accountability; and, personal perspectives also make a difference in both the importance of the categories and how things were categorized.

In response to the more forward thinking question: What is this telling us in terms of how we improve our schools? Five key themes emerged:

1. Consolidate and focus efforts;
2. Prioritize strategies that impact the classroom;
3. Enhance community-based improvement planning;
4. Strengthen research-based and data-based planning and programming; and,
5. Focus on the positive.

The theme appearing to have the highest level of agreement was the one having the greatest number of similar comments, that being the consolidate and focus efforts theme. Participants spoke to the need to narrow the focus and concentrate more intently on just a few carefully selected goals or targets for improvement. Closely rated and related to this, participants were consistent in their message for the need to prioritize strategies that impact directly on the classroom for maximum results.
There were three areas of discussion that pervaded the participant discussions and stood out in the analysis of the participant responses to their brainstorm about past and present school improvement efforts. First, and as indicated, school and regional administrators and coordinators emphasized the need for a clearer and more coherent school improvement focus. Participants’ responses showed, however, that this focus still needed to allow for differentiation due to the diversity in contexts within the region. There were many comments about the importance of building and maintaining positive and productive relationships with stakeholders within those diverse contexts if school improvement efforts were going to be effective. The style of leadership discussed and implied by this approach to school improvement would seem to be more of a stewardship or servant leadership approach. These initial findings will be further discussed in Chapter 7 in relation to the preliminary conceptual framework for school improvement presented in the literature review (Chapter 3).

In the final two chapters I will also use the first person (I and we) often as the findings and interpretations are predominately mine, based on my interpretations of the research literature combined with the participant submissions in this study. That said, as shown in this chapter, the researcher’s interpretations and conclusions were overwhelmingly validated by the participants.
CHAPTER 7:
FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with a quick summary of the results of the data collection and preliminary analysis and then provides an interpretation of what it means in light of the primary research question, namely: What kinds of approaches did South Slave Divisional Education Council leaders perceive as promoting and sustaining school improvement in the diverse multi-cultural context of the South Slave region in the NWT?

I start by addressing the research question and presenting the key findings of this study. I would be remiss, however, if I did not also address the issue of overwhelm and work overload as identified so strongly by the participants in this study. This is followed by a more detailed examination of the key findings and an interpretation of how these results have influenced the preliminary conceptual framework that was presented in Chapter 3. Finally, a revisiting of the literature in light of the outcomes of this study provides some implications for action as well as some cautions.

KEY FINDINGS

In addition to the specific findings related to the school improvement brainstorming activity and the critique of the results, I have surmised that there were three strong themes that pervade the participant discussions and further inform our interpretations and the implications. I argue that there is a fourth interpretation that should be drawn from the data:

1. Focus Is Needed – While participants felt that the scope and number of school improvement categories were impressive, the sheer amount of work that has occurred and continues to occur is overwhelming and needs to be better focused in future (work smarter, not harder) as a means to improve schools. In line with this prevailing feeling, there was preference for improvement efforts that most directly impact teachers and the classroom (such as the current classroom-embedded Balanced Literacy and Numeracy initiatives).

2. Relationships Matter – Possessing cultural awareness and sensitivity and building trusting relationships with students, staff and parents are seen as keys
to success and bringing about school improvements, particularly in multi-cultural contexts such that occurs when working in aboriginal communities and schools.

3. Context is Critical — There are significant and compelling contextual reasons (turnover, cultural differences, grade distributions, differing perspectives, and so forth.) for which there needs to be continued flexibility in the identification of priorities and in the manner in which initiatives are implemented.

4. Servant Leadership Supersedes Transformational Leadership — Greenleaf’s (1977, 1996) conception of servant leadership builds on and incorporates transformational leadership as the ideal educational leadership metaphor in multi-cultural contexts in the 21st century. In the same manner in which transformational leadership is seen to be an extension and improvement on earlier leadership metaphors (situational and instructional), servant leadership also draws on and works up the less than ideal transformational leadership model for these contexts.

I talk more about these and other findings in the next sections as they apply to the research question, the conceptual framework as well as recent activities within the South Slave.

ADDRESSING OVERLOAD

My analysis found there are two kinds of overload referenced by participants in this research, the first being workload, and the second referencing difficulties with the research process.

The Workload Issue

While the South Slave and school achievements to date are impressive (increased student achievement results, award winning staff and initiatives), the workload has been daunting, and it seems to be getting worse.

I share first some territorial impacts that have contributed to the problem. Public demands for accountability are resulting in the Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) tightening up on expectations and reporting requirements. In the past three years alone, the following new initiatives have been implemented:

• new Aboriginal Language and Culture Based Education (ALCBE) Directive including restrictions on spending of existing dollars allocated for aboriginal language instruction, and threat of clawback of funding if not spent accordingly. As articulated by one of the participants:

  The biggest bee in my bonnet is the rigid interpretation of staffing dollars towards aboriginal dollars [which] has completely negated
improvements to formula. This has led to serious understaffing in key areas in my school that I end up owning, with an increased need to put out fires and fix problems caused by pressure on teachers. Ironically, the main problem is faced by our students below grade level who need smaller class sizes. Many of these students are aboriginal. I am so frustrated with recent curriculum decisions regarding science and math that run counter to Alberta and solve nothing of substance.

- new Inclusive Schooling Directive including restrictions on spending of dollars allocated for students with special needs;
- new requirement that teachers monitor and submit annually to the Department the functional grade level (FGL), both math and language arts (grades 1-9), that each student has been working on over the course of the year;
- new requirement that Alberta Achievement Tests be implemented annually at the grades 3, 6 and 9 level;
- NWT Student Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting (SAER) review (included review of policies, student records, number of teacher evaluations completed, report cards, and representative parent interviews);
- Special Needs review required teachers to be freed up for portion of a day to complete a survey on each student they teach;
- new centralized (web-based) student information system (eSIS) implemented; and,
- tightening up on requirements for annual reports, emergency response plans, first aid and allergies policies, trades programs, health and physical fitness programs, and so forth.

This does not include all of the new curriculum that has come, or is in the process of coming, that school boards are expected to in-service teachers on and implement.

There are also a few unique features of our jurisdiction that were referenced in Chapter 2, but should be raised here again in light of this discussion. That is, it is likely that the decentralized nature of our South Slave schools, the dual level governance model and the flexibility permitted at the local level is causing some of the principals’ feelings of being overwhelmed. School-based management, decentralized budgeting, and reporting to local education authorities in addition to the superintendent can have its benefits; but it is also extremely time consuming for principals who are trying also to be instructional leaders for their staff. In addition, the infrequency of in-person visits given the distance and costs of travel provides both autonomy and opportunity for decision-making at the local level,
while also creating more work and strain on principals and potential for conflict between local, regional and territorial priorities.

Further, professionals typically appreciate autonomy and collaborative efforts that give opportunity for input into decisions that affect them and others. The downside of these decentralized and empowering approaches is often fragmentation and duplication of efforts leading, at times, to inefficiencies and gaps in service. Collaboration amongst principals and schools also takes more time if implemented effectively. The comment of a respected and now retired teacher resonated a few years ago when she said, “Just tell me what you want. I don’t have time for all this collaboration. Isn’t it your job or that of the school board to decide what our priorities are?”

In our jurisdiction, our school principals develop their own staffing plans, administer most of their own staffing competitions (no small task in a community of high turnover), and report directly to a local education authority approximately once per month. This is in addition to the regular duties that we understand principals have in other jurisdictions, such as supervising staff and developing and implementing school improvement plans to name a few of the more daunting core responsibilities. This is a paradox. The empowerment and flexibility is desired, and apparently necessary given the results of this study confirming great diversity in contexts. Yet, the result is contributing to the feeling of being overburdened, and understandably so. Just keeping the ship sailing can become the pre-occupation, never mind focusing on improvements.

As a few participants indicated, we are our own worst enemies. When we add initiatives, we are reluctant to give up on others. We keep adding on. This was never so evident than two years ago, when we undertook a review of our regional initiatives in an attempt to restructure and downsize the number and size of committees. Principals could not agree to drop any of the existing committees, nor did any of them choose not to continue sending members to the committee meetings.

Something has got to give, but what? Clearly, the message from participants in this study is that focus and coherence is required. However, other changes also need to be considered. I will speak later to some of the plans that are now being put in place in the South Slave, in part, to address these concerns. I will suggest some other possible solutions and implications for policy, practice and further research.

The Research Process

After the 17 categories resulting from the school improvement brainstorming activity had been named, I immediately had a sense that the reflections might be of greater value had we taken the activity to the next step; that is, we could have attempted to consolidate and
refine the categories into a more manageable number. However, distance and time prevented that step from being taken collectively, and I felt obliged to honour the results of the shared activity. I did this by including the scope of the principals’ brainstorm in the reflection stage of the research rather than make a unilateral interpretation of how the group might agree to consolidate and refine the categories. Nevertheless, the approach taken that resulted in 17 categories of strategies, contributed to the plethora of comments about feeling impressed but overwhelmed with the scope of the data. It also contributed to the related difficulty of making quick meaning from these data in preparation for the individual interviews. This is in no way to downplay the fact that educators are also feeling overworked.

What would I do next time with regard to the school improvement brainstorm activity? I would have attempted to engage the participants in a further activity where the categories were combined or otherwise refined for further clarity, and hopefully for consensus. Depending on the interest level of the participants, we may still do this in follow-up and then comparison to the outcomes of this study.

Recognizing, in hindsight, the sheer enormity of the different strategies, initiatives and approaches these education leaders were using to improve schools, I might instead have started with focusing participants on individually listing and then categorizing the school improvement approaches they were and had been using. The next step might have been for participants to work in pairs until reaching consensus on the categories of approaches they jointly believed had a positive impact. Participant pairs could then be instructed to write on cards only those categories of approaches on which they agree. A reduced number of cards would then be presented to the larger group during the sorting and naming process, potentially making the process more manageable and the meaning clearer. It is conceivable, with opportunity for more time and thought during the focus group, that participants may have generated the other approaches, such as building relationships and having a clear focus, that came out so strongly in the individual follow-up meetings.

Although comparing somewhat different elements of the quality of schools, it might be of interest to examine how a refined list of school improvement approaches that educational leaders say makes a difference in the North, might compare to the correlates of effective schools (Lezotte, 1991, 2000; Reynolds et al., 2002) identified in the research database.

Perhaps the more concerning of the expression of issues with the process was identified when participants were asked if they felt anything was missing from the brainstormed list of categories. More than one commented that the process of identifying tangible approaches and strategies made it easy to forget categories such as Relationship Building and Cultural Awareness/Inclusion. Although the region and schools are doing much to
strengthen internal and external relations, as was implied and incorporated into many of the cards, the brainstorm did not result in this or these categories emerging from that data. Ironically perhaps, a similar criticism of the Effective Schools Research shows up here. The manner in which we pulled together school improvement efforts in the South Slave over a specific timeframe, garnered a list of characteristics or approaches, not unlike that available to us through the effective schools research, albeit more uniquely specific to these contexts. Should I be concerned that cultural awareness, relationships and trust did not specifically arise during the school improvement activity, when it was raised so strongly as missing thereafter? Could I have changed the manner in which I framed and asked the focus question? Is the context and these kinds of variables simply the kinds of things that underpin all the other strategies brainstormed and that I would have needed another question to obtain these? What question might that be? Had we taken the next step and consolidated and refined categories and titles collectively, would that step have potentially rectified the omission?

**TO WHAT EXTENT DO CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IMPACT ON SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANNING EFFORTS AND OUTCOMES?**

At times, depending on where schools are in terms of the improvement process, improved results may mean different things and might vary among communities and different principals. (research participant)

As the quote above exemplifies, this study highlights the fact that there are numerous contextual factors that can have a critical impact on school improvement efforts. The responses to the school improvement brainstorming categories highlighted contextual factors as key underpinnings to the effectiveness of school improvement efforts in multicultural contexts. Not only are there differences between the South Slave region and say southern Canada that impact on the approaches taken to improve schools, but significant differences between communities, schools and even perspectives and personalities of key educational partners come into play at all levels of these small jurisdictions. These kinds of contextual factors have considerable impact on the approaches that can be considered and deemed most effective.

Context is not only a macro issue that affects us, but also a micro issue, within which we work together and interact with each other and with students. To attempt to change the wider context within which the school operates would be a daunting task and arguably ill advised. Educational administrators, however, do influence and structure the culture and context within which educators work in the region and schools.

Indicative of the need for flexible approaches, a wide range of individual perspectives were articulated in response to the focus question, even between persons from the same
community contexts. If we are advocates of the transformational leadership model that “looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower” (Burns, 1978, p. 4), then we must also recognize that the means to do so includes engaging with our partners in collectively identifying the image of the best possible future and determining potentially unique strategies to implement in each particular context.

It has always been my philosophy that we are best to err on the side of decentralization and empowerment, particularly in aboriginal communities, where history is riddled with examples of the dominant culture telling the disenfranchised how they should think and act. This can sometimes result in disastrous albeit unintended outcomes (residential schools, loss of language and culture, disempowered communities reliant on government, and so forth.) The results of this research suggest that the decentralized approach continues to be a preference, but with implications related to fragmentation and workload.

**WHAT KIND OF LEADERSHIP APPROACH IS MOST CONDUCIVE TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS?**

I see that as basically taking our direction from the schools, and then assisting them or helping them in achieving whatever goals and targets that they identify. (research participant)

I need to have a relationship of trust with you and teachers need to have a relationship of trust with their principal so they can tell you their concerns—these are the issues. (research participant)

Situational leadership? Instructional leadership? Transformational leadership? Which of these leadership models, or others, are most likely to promote and sustain school improvement efforts in the multi-cultural communities of the South Slave?

Given our discussion about the diversity of contexts shaping school improvement efforts, and that every situation presents a new context, it would seem impossible to discount the value of the *situational leadership* model. There simply has to be leadership flexibility to permit consideration of contextual factors when determining the best approach to take to improve schools. Hersey and Blanchard’s (1993) three-dimensional situational leadership model with *relationships* and *task* as the axes aligns with those first two key findings in this study. Note that their relationships and task axes align with the results of this research that confirms that *relationships matter* and *focus is needed*. However, the situational leadership model does not go far enough to capture the style of leadership that is required.
Clearly, the image of the instructional leader continues to be prevalent in schools everywhere, including schools in the NWT. Accountability pressures, to prove quality and improvement, have resulted in the desire of politicians, school boards and the public to have definitive student achievement results available to them. Efforts of regional administrators, program coordinators and school principals are becoming more intensely focused on student achievement results in language arts and math in particular. Instructional leaders are expected to focus on programming and learning in schools.

Burn’s (1978) notion of the transformational leader suggests that the efforts of the leader are in part to meet the needs and aspirations of the followers in order to obtain a deeper level of commitment. I have often referred to the image of the transformational leader as one who builds a shared vision of the best possible future, seeks to develop others, and empowers others to assume leadership responsibilities for the betterment of the school, the children, and the community. If we agree that this form of leadership incorporates the earlier ideals of situational and instructional leadership, then we might have captured the image of the role well, in response to this research.

Transformational leadership, described this way, takes account of the context by building a shared vision as opposed to imposing a vision. It implies the need for positive working relations, and permits focus and coherence. Exemplifying this, although the diversity of the South Slave make the contexts of each of the schools unique, the focus group sessions in this study were most helpful and empowering as a means of sharing school improvement strategies, drawing out people and building consensus.

However, while we might endorse all of these leadership models in the unique multi-cultural contexts of the South Slave region, I no longer believe that transformational leadership is the ideal, even though it builds on the earlier leadership metaphors. What the situational, instructional and transformational styles of leadership fail to speak adequately to is the importance of cultural sensitivity, trust and relationships with those that are being served (at least in multi-cultural contexts), not just the staff (followers), but the wider community of students, parents and community members with and for whom we work. The cultural context in small northern communities is very complex and requires very delicate negotiating to build a shared vision of the best possible future. The historical baggage for many of these communities is still a significant interference factor in terms of healthy, productive relationships amongst community members, families and the school. Having authentic parental and community involvement in the school and in the education of the children requires years of work and is primarily a ‘community development’ focus. The results of this study suggest that the metaphor of the servant leader more fully extends this element of engagement beyond just the followers.
I am drawn to Greenleaf’s (1977, 1996) conceptualization of servant leadership, and I now argue that for these small, northern, multi-cultural contexts, servant leadership implies a greater level of advocacy for the students, parents and community (partners) than does transformational leadership that more often refers only to followers as having potential for shared leadership. Servant leadership is the contemporary metaphorical model in the first decade of the 21st century because it best encapsulates ideal educational leadership in diverse, multi-cultural contexts.

According to Spears and Lawrence (2002), “The term servant leadership was first coined in a 1970 essay entitled The Servant as Leader, by Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990)” (p. 3). Similar to Burns’ definition of transformational leadership, servant leadership involves putting people and ethical considerations intentionally ahead of short-term organizational or personal self-interest. The current decade seems to have grasped Burns’ utilitarian approach to ethics as a key component of effective leadership and further added a more deontological and altruist approach reflected more completely in the conception of servant leadership. One might argue that the only acceptable motive in seeking school leadership is a moral commitment to the lives of the children in those schools. According to Shugart (1997), in the 1960s Greenleaf posited that:

Institutions were both the glory and bane of modern society because they extended essential human services beyond the wealthy few, but also often behaved in unresponsive, bureaucratic, and destructive ways. The servant leader's central mission is to call institutions back to their fundamental mission of service, raising the institution's capacity to serve and to perform as a servant. (abstract)

Sergiovanni (1992) also postulates:

Command and instructional leadership, “leader of leaders” leadership, and servant leadership can be viewed developmentally, as if each were built on the others. As the emphasis shifts from one level to the next, leadership increasingly becomes a form of virtue, and each of the preceding levels becomes less important to the operation of a successful school. For example, teachers become less dependent on administrators, are better able to manage themselves, and share the burdens of leadership more fully. Initially (and because of circumstances faced) the command and instructional features of the leadership pattern may be more prominent. In time, however (and with deliberate effort), they yield more and more to the “leader of leaders” style and to servant leadership. (p. 127)

More recently Blanchard has also argued, “I knew situational leadership was a servant-leadership model, but the concepts I had learned from Greenleaf did not return to centre stage in my work until the mid-1990’s, when I began studying Jesus of Nazareth as a clear example of enlightened leadership.” (cited in Spears & Lawrence, 2002, p. x)
How do the results of this research and, in particular, the collective responses of the participants reinforce, extend or counter the conceptual framework presented as part of the literature review in Chapter 3? I found that the results of this research do indeed extend and better lay the foundation for the preliminary conceptual framework presented earlier.

Figure 8: Leadership for Improving Northern Schools
- A Conceptual Framework
Based on the results of this research, Figure 8 portrays a revised conception of how to improve schools in the diverse context of the communities of the South Slave. I have added context (unbounded-constantly changing), relationships and focus under and around the other four circles to signify the critical importance of those underpinning the others. Note that the number of times the word context, relationships and focus is printed in the figure is roughly equivalent to the comparative frequency of these points being made by the participants in this research. I will speak to each of these components of the model starting with the context that underlies the rest of the model, followed by relationships which is the next layer up, and so on.

Context

You’ve got to work with the crew you have and make the best of it, and when you are looking at 20% turnover, or 60%, or whatever else, it’s a constant challenge. So yes, you go and do professional development with the staff, and three of them move on, you’re starting over, so it’s continual. It will be nice to move beyond the basics sometimes. How do you do that? Some of the staff are ready to move on to the next level, others are at the beginning level. How do you balance that one? And that’s the same question at the regional level too, some schools are ready for this and some aren’t. (research participant)

In multiple multi-cultural sites, context is critical to the determination, development and implementation of school improvement efforts. In this study and for the purposes of our conceptual framework, I am referring to context as the situation or circumstances that forms the environment, within which kindergarten to grade 12 schooling takes place.

To a large extent, the context is a given and is largely outside the control of educators (e.g., size of community, location of school, distance from regional centre, choice of community leaders, relations to other communities in region, family disputes within community, community support for education, and so forth.). The context changes continually. From an educational leadership perspective, this can be evidenced by a simple occurrence of a school no longer having running water. It is generally accepted that for health reasons, the school should be closed and students sent home, if the school is going to be without running water for more than a few hours. Factors such as the size of the school, the number of staff and students present, the time of day, the likelihood of rectification or repair in a timely manner, anticipated public perception, and so forth, will all impact on the decision of the principal (whether or not to close) and the resulting education of the children. The weather is another contextual factor that influences the extent to which children are at school and learning. The Hay River schools, for example, were shut down for a few days in 2007-08 due to blizzard conditions and blowing snow making the roads impassable.
Equally important are contextual factors, which would show up higher on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, such as the viewpoints and emotions of people who are both charged with educating children (staff, trustees) and those who are partners in the process (parents, community leaders, children themselves). The perspectives show up in the language and cultures of the people and in "the way things are done around here". For example, it would be virtually impossible for a school principal to effectively implement a new initiative in a school that does not have the support of either the local governing body and/or the staff. Indeed, the manner in which any initiative is implemented needs to take into account these multiple perspectives. On a small staff, even the turnover of one or two staff can change the dynamics of the school considerably, and the approach to school improvement must adjust accordingly.

Clearly, the predominately aboriginal cultures of the South Slave provide a rich array of contextual factors including diverse world views, values, rituals, symbols, and assumptions that impact on school improvement efforts (Schein, 1992). Many of the participants of this study spoke to the importance of understanding, being sensitive to, and incorporating the local culture(s) of the community into the school to ensure that it was more relevant to the students and their families.

It should be noted also the emotions and perspectives of people, in turn, can influence that context, also. For better or for worse, the continued presence of the churches in many small, northern, and aboriginal communities is evidence that the perspectives of a few can change a culture immeasurably. Similarly, governments and educators have similar opportunities to have an impact on the culture of schools and communities, either intentionally or unintentionally. Thus, in this northern school improvement framework, the local and extended context underpins and is foundational to other factors and strategies for supporting and sustaining school improvement efforts.

**Relationships**

Relationships – relationships – relationships. Schools in minority (traditional school) situations need to emphasize the quality of relationships between teacher-student and teacher-parent/community.

(Research participant)

Closely related to the contextual factors, and further buttressing school improvement efforts, is the importance of positive relationships. The participants in this study referenced the importance of building relationships throughout the school, community and region frequently. This theme is also implied through several of the categories of the initial brainstorming activity of the participants: *networking and building partnerships, building a culture of improvement, using collaborative planning processes*, and *promoting ownership and success*.
So much about teaching and leadership is relationships. Indira Ghandi is reported to have said, "I suppose that leadership at one time meant muscle; but today it means getting along with people." (unknown) Relations are at the heart of what it means to teach and to lead in northern multi-cultural environments. Accordingly, participants in this study spoke to the importance of trust and in having positive relationships as foundational to the success of any efforts to improve schools. If the relationships are there, it is more likely educators will understand needs and aspirations and be able to influence decisions of local governing bodies, parents and children.

I’ve noted that when school principals, administrators and regional coordinators are not successful in their jobs, the reason is not usually because of deficient technical skills. They often left their jobs because of issues with relationships. A principal or superintendent can have all the technical skills but if they do not have cultural sensitivity and cannot get along with people of different viewpoints, success is unlikely. The results of this study suggest that this factor may be even more critical in small, isolated and multi-cultural communities where anonymity is impossible. To be successful, educators and partners must be able to interact, socialize, be friendly, respect differences, empathize, and espouse universal values such as respect, integrity, loyalty, commitment to growth and advocacy to be successful personally and professionally, and to be able to sustain school improvement efforts.

Some researchers argue similarly that quality leaders acknowledge workplace emotions in a manner that enables them to transcend any negativity. Hargreaves (2001) (referenced in Grimmett et al, 2008) states, “It is exceptionally important to acknowledge and honour the emotions of teaching and leadership, and to cultivate their active development as an essential aspect of developing higher quality education” (p. 104). Similarly, Grimmett comments on the value of local relationships in potentially countering other feelings of despair:

“In a context of increased policy changes, fragmentation, difficult conditions and the disruption of professional identities, it may be that the discourse of satisfaction serves as a counter-text to the discourse of despair. By idealizing the local workplace, they are discursively positioning themselves and their work in a more positive light. This discursive practice might even serve to manage negative trends and reconcile them to their situation . . . for the core of their work centers around curriculum, learning and relationships and it is meaningful and rewarding for a number of reasons. The frame of reference for this discourse of satisfaction is more local as it focuses on actions and relationships at the level of the school.” (p. 117)

With so many contextual factors outside the school’s control, the quality of human interactions can begin to overcome and influence those factors in ways that can improve
student achievement. Being open and responsive to the local cultures, the local governing body, the staff, parents and students is what builds and maintains positive relationships. It is about creating an environment that promotes cooperation and interaction among all school partners. One participant in the research even suggested that perhaps the Council needed a relationship goal to reinforce the importance of this cooperative venture.

That said, this research also identified a few contradictory responses that raise further questions as to the best approach to building community relations as a means to improving schools. One has arisen out of our discussions and has identified at least two distinct approaches related to community-school relations. At least one community in the region is taking the more culturally sensitive approach by maximizing efforts on empowering the local governing body, developing a shared vision of what the community wants from its school, and achieving improved student achievement results and positive feedback in the process. In another case of a similar context—considerable dysfunction, including drug and alcohol issues, crime, violence in the community—the school is successfully working more directly with the students and motivating them, building their skills and self-esteem. In turn, the rising student achievement results and graduate numbers is being recognized within the community and in the territorial media, and appears to have helped to create a great deal of pride in a community not previously known for its successes. The sense of pride appears to be perpetuating a more positive attitude within both the school and the community.

The most common viewpoint has been that of home-school relations being critical and foundational to culturally sensitive school improvement efforts. However, both approaches are resulting in improving student achievement results. Both approaches are creating a positive image for the school in the community and strengthening school-community relations.

This raises questions as to the conception of community and culturally sensitivity: What is the definition of community? In the first example above, the focus appears to be on the wider community? In the second example, the primary focus was on the community of staff and students within the school? Is one approach better than the other? To what extent can the second approach be considered culturally sensitive given the results? Whose decision is it which approach to take? Do we re-conceptualize what a community is and what cultural sensitivity is in multi-cultural communities? These questions lead us into the discussion in the next two elements of our model, namely focus and servant leadership.
Focus

We need to narrow our focus – perhaps we might do better concentrating on a few selected items. We need to work SMARTER not harder. (research participant)

Stop talking about reducing initiatives and decide which to focus on. (research participant)

This is the area of the model that has provided the greatest level of discussion in various forms over the past few years in the South Slave. As indicated earlier, while we all want focus and certainty, we also still want flexibility and autonomy. We are decidedly reluctant to give up any of the regional initiatives we’ve started, particularly since those initiatives are garnering positive results and are building leadership capacity in schools. However, participant school principals and regional office staff alike are over-extended and finding it difficult to keep up the pace with these initiatives and the proliferating accountability requirements. We are so overwhelmed that we are exacerbated when an emergent issue arises in which we have no choice but to respond. This feeling of overwhelm is being broadcast by those within the education system at all levels, from schools to regional to Department staffs. And yet, we do not seem to have the heart to tell our very engaged and motivated advocates, that current initiatives must be downsized or ended in order to allow other priorities to strengthen. We also seem reluctant to revisit our priorities now because the process of starting from scratch again is further overwhelming and time-consuming.

When participants talked about feeling overwhelmed with the data and their workload, they are in part responding to what Ball (2003, p. 221) refers to as a kind of “values schizophrenia” that is experienced by teachers—this applies also to school principals, regional administrators and program coordinators—where commitment and judgment are sacrificed for performance on those activities that are of lesser importance, but that may give some sense of certainty and impress others (day plans and annual reports for example). Ball references Lyotard’s (1984) law of contradiction between first order activities of critical importance (direct engagement with students, research, curriculum development) and the time and energy costs in terms of second order activities that is the work of performance monitoring and management (p. 221). The second order activities of school leaders and program coordinators consume so much time that it reduces energy available for first order activities, those that impact directly on classrooms and students. Increasing demands for accountability typically results in an increase in second order reporting requirements, such as those listed earlier in this chapter that have been coming down from the Department, as well as those additional ones that might be required by the Council and superintendent. Efforts, therefore, must be taken to minimize the focus on these requirements and to re-focus staffs on maximizing student success.
It is evident from this research that a clearer and more targeted focus is needed. Efforts are required to offset the fragmentation, and in some cases the duplication, of having multiple priorities at all three levels (Department, region, school). These priorities are sometimes aligned but are also at times competing with each other, often perceived as only relevant to some schools and not others.

Coinciding with the results of this research, a quick revisit of the literature identifies Reynolds and Stoll (1996) concluding:

> School effectiveness research, whether of North American, British, or Dutch origin, tends towards the generation of lists of organizational factors within schools that are associated with pupil outcomes, yet, of course, what school improvement needs is not the knowledge of which ten, twenty or thirty factors may be useful enhancers of outcomes if changed, but which one or two key factors should be changed first. (p. 103)

**Servant Leadership**

I agree with the conclusion that this form of leadership [servant leadership] holds the most potential in helping a small multi-cultural school achieve the goals and aspirations placed upon it by a community – particularly when those aspirations may not fall within the domain of traditional “school” expectations (ie: need for good grades, regular attendance, nightly homework, high graduation rates and so forth.)

(research participant)

Earlier in this chapter I addressed the question: What kind of leadership approach is most conducive to school improvement planning efforts? Servant leadership was the style or model presented as the ideal in these multicultural contexts. Servant leadership, as described, builds on and incorporates the earlier ideals of transformational, instructional and situational leadership. In essence, a leader who models the pursuit of excellence in the form of service to others, works towards consensus, and fosters the creation of a community of leaders, is promoting the kinds of values that most likely bring about cohesiveness and school(s) improvement.

The results of the research indicate that context, cultural awareness, relationships and trust are critical factors underpinning all the instructional and infrastructural foci that we undertake to improve schools. The contextual questions of: Who determines what the needs of the children are? What are the aspirations of the community? Who is the community? and the focus question: What is the best approach to take? are probably best answered by superintendent and principals in consultation with the duly elected members of the communities. The key is to build the relationships with these organizations in part through asking the right questions, and as Chambers (1983) suggests, just sitting and
listening. If the regional Council or community Authority indicates they want to see improved literacy results, for example, then that is what determines the focus. If a region or community says they want all students off the streets and in school regularly, then that becomes the focus.

A servant leader would assist a community in identifying its unique priorities and work to incorporate those into regular school programs. This approach would work to strengthen both the school and the community. Indeed, this is the challenge faced by principals of small, multi-cultural schools and particularly where cultural flux is a determining factor. The administrators who tend to do well, feel most satisfied and achieve the most success are those who can marry the expectations of the school with those of the community in a strategic manner. These schools attain the best of both worlds or in the words of Chief Jimmy Bruneau, become strong like two people (1990). These schools develop community support and can become the models of effective aboriginal education.

In the examples presented earlier, of the two approaches taken that have each resulted in improved student achievement and increased community support, the local governing bodies were supportive of the approach taken. In essence, the local authorities had defined who the community was and what the focus was in consultation and probably in line with the options and advice provided by their school principals, whom they also hired. In both cases, the principals’ approaches were well aligned with the readiness of the community and, in particular, the perspectives of the local governing body.

Servant leadership then, is now the principal metaphor of choice for small, multi-cultural contexts in this the first decade of the 21st century. Servant leadership aspires to advocate for the children, parents and community (their needs and aspirations), and the staff (their collective wisdom and related efforts to get there), within the mandate of the various levels of government and their shared desire for quality kindergarten to grade 12 education.

**Multi-level Alignment**

A principals’ meeting happens. We meet, we discuss, we reflect, we start a process of making decisions which we never finish because we don’t have time. We leave and in our absence those threads are picked up and woven together by board office staff because otherwise they would just be threads that lay there all year. (research participant)

I think one thing we need to do as coordinators and as a region is focus really on what the principals and teachers view as most important. (research participant)
Participants identified *coordinated and multi-level planning* as an important approach for school improvement in their initial brainstorming activity. This theme is also implied in the *networking and building partnerships, using collaborative planning processes*, and *promoting research-based initiatives* categories.

Initiatives and budgets need to be aligned up, down and throughout the system in order to maximize improvements. School-wide initiatives are less likely to be supported and achieved unless governing bodies and staffs understand, buy in and contribute. Even the best programs cannot be successful without proper implementation. School improvement efforts are also less likely to be supported and successful if they run counter to the efforts and expectations of the superintendent, the elected boards or the Department.

Fullan (2006) suggests that the work of transforming schools has to apply to all or most schools, and this means it is a system change:

> For system change to occur on a larger scale, we need schools learning from each other and districts learning from each other. We call this “lateral capacity building” and see it as absolutely crucial for system reform.... The basic purpose, in my view, is to change the culture of school systems, not to produce a series of atomistic schools, however collaborative they might be internally. (pp. 10-11)

Fullan (1994) also speaks to the need for a balance of both bottom-up and top-down strategies for educational change within the organization. Neither is sufficient on its own. Similarly, Schmoker (1999) argues that at its best, leadership is “both top-down and bottom-up”. Effective leadership is “shared” (Lambert, 1998), and it is “distributive” (Spillane, 2005). Even so, “major change almost never wells up from the bottom. It begins near the top” (Schmoker, p. 244). “If we’re serious about better schools, we must be “as bottom-up as possible; as top-down as necessary” (p. 245). Similarly, Reynolds and Stoll (1996) conclude, “Governments should insist that schools be thoughtful in their approach to change and improvement, but not necessarily require that everyone do the same thing in the same way at the same time” (p. 28).

With the help of the principals and program coordinators at both the region and school level, we need to develop a clear framework, expectations and supports for initiatives, mostly in the form of expected outcomes or *ends*, and expect and allow the more local levels to determine the *means* to those ends, within whatever parameters might be deemed necessary. And then adjustments occur from there, depending on satisfaction levels and results. The multi-level alignment of leadership for this initiative might look like this:

- **Council** - set priority/goal, align budget, expect results;
• **Superintendent** - develop framework for results including expectations regarding outcomes and research-proven strategies in consultation with principals, coordinators and others who are having success elsewhere;

• **Principals** - flesh out school plan in consideration of Council/superintendent direction, local context and striving to implement/adapt research-proven strategies;

• **Coordinators** - provide results-oriented training and support for principals and literacy coaches, and coordinate assessment;

• **Literacy Coaches/Program Support Teachers** (school-based) - provide results-oriented classroom-embedded teacher training and support; and,

• **Teachers** – implement effectively based on individual student assessment data and research-proven practices.

As Ball (2003) indicates, “The new hero of educational reform, involves instilling the attitude and culture within which workers feel themselves accountable and at the same time committed or personally invested in the organization.” (p. 219) Ball and others (Grimmett, 2008) caution, however, that we need to be careful that as “technicians of transformation” we do not “produce bodies that are docile and capable” (Foucault, 1979a: 294, as referenced in Ball, 2003, p. 219). To be a servant leader suggests that the professionalism of teachers remains foremost and intact. Just as the needs of students and the aspirations of communities are important to the direction of school improvement efforts, so is the professionalism of teachers important in determining how best to achieve these goals.

If we are to build alignment and capacity, within the system at multiple levels in the school, region and system, we also need to look at where there are avenues within the schools and within the system for collaboration, conversations and network building with other partners in education: the professional learning communities.

**Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)**

We’re in an era now where good teachers are harder to get so we’ve got to work with the people we’ve got and have them truly supported enough to change and to try things in support of our research and what’s going to make the system better. (research participant)

I think some of the processes here of helping staff with ongoing PD are answers to that too. There’s a glimmer of an answer there if you can free up people to do job embedded professional development. (research participant)
"It's the quality and collective purpose of collaborative relationships that can transform a group of people learning together into a true learning community." (forward in NAESP's Leading Learning Communities, 2008, p. 12) Carefully coordinated and continuous teacher collaboration in the form of PLCs provides a tremendous opportunity to improve the quality of teaching and obtain quick dividends in professional morale and student learning. Fullan (2006) concurs and extends the need for multi-level alignment to the work of PLCs and the relationship between the schools and the division, thus building leadership and improvement capacity throughout the system. He says PLCs are critical for encouraging two-way interaction and mutual influence across the two levels, and that "an even bigger change is at stake when school and district leaders see themselves as engaged in changing the bigger context or system." (p. 14)

At the school level too, the implementation in 2000 of the Community Education Planning (CEP) policy provided two days per year for school staffs and partners in education to meet to identify their priorities and develop and implement plans. Related CEP sub-committees have been formed in virtually every school in the region since then, in order to carry out the school plans.

As I indicated earlier, there was no consensus amongst school principals to drop any of the regional initiatives when reviewed in 2004, even though there was an expressed need to do so at that time. Principals were offered and even encouraged to remove representatives from these committees, but none did. Follow-up with principals indicated that they felt the initiatives were of value. They produced excitement and involvement of teachers who then did not want to step down. It should be noted that with the initiatives went funding also. The committee had virtually full authority to determine how best to spend that money and their time for the benefit of other teachers and their students across the region. Two of the eight principals expressed disappointment when the superintendent finally made the decision to bring the career development priority and regional committee to an end after the 2006-07 school year.

While these regional and school-based committees have accomplished a great deal, it is apparent that the dual level approach, and perhaps also the autonomy of the various schools and regional committees to set their own goals and strategies, may have produced a level of fragmentation of efforts that has also not contributed as strongly in teachers’ classrooms as hoped. For example, schools could and did opt out of the earlier Balanced Literacy initiative. Yet, some members of the Council have since articulated that they feel those schools made a mistake.

It is further recognized that the principal may not have the time to be the instructional leader, who can provide the kind of school-level in-servicing and job-embedded coaching that teachers will need and hopefully also want. This research highlights the importance
of developing PLCs within the school and transcending boundaries such that PLCs might include those outside of the school including parents, community leaders, partner boards and agencies, and university/college education programs and researchers. Efforts are needed for refinement of the CEP process at the school level, so that collaborative efforts are ongoing and more focused on student achievement results and related teacher development. With a focus on a collaborative culture and improved results, there is greater potential for continual energy and sustained change.

Grimmett (2008), in reference to his examination of teacher research, suggests that:

Instructional improvement needs to be transformed into an experience that sustains a rich conversation about pedagogical possibilities, working alongside teachers to help diverse learners in a rapidly changing social context by collaboratively addressing the vexing questions and perplexing dilemmas inherent in daily practice. (p. 103)

Accordingly, as the participant principals and regional office staff in this research indicated in their ratings, enriching programs and teaching strategies, and optimizing professional development were deemed the top two approaches for improving schools. This PLC component of the conceptual framework was also implied in a good number of the other initially brainstormed categories: building a culture of improvement, networking and building partnerships, maximizing resources for teachers, using collaborative planning processes, boosting student support planning, focussing on improved results, promoting ownership and success, coordinated and multi-level planning, and promoting research-based initiatives.

Assessment

I don’t know if focus on improved results should be a separate column. I mean that is the big goal. Would it not then be achieved through some of these other columns, you know what I mean? Is that the overall thing and everything else supports that, or is that just its own separate column? (research participant)

I think one of our weak areas of our school is data driven decision-making. We’ve had some experience in the past in terms of analyzing the AATs [Alberta Achievement Tests] and diploma exam results, but are we there yet, no? I don’t think so. (research participant)

Consistent with the greater focus elsewhere, student assessment has been perhaps the area of greatest focus of NWT education in the last decade. The numerous references by participants to AATs (Alberta Achievement Tests) and SAER (Student Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting) in the initial brainstorm and the follow up individual meetings has been influenced in large part by the territorial Department’s release of the SAER
Directive in 2001 and the more recent mandating of the grade three, six and nine AA Ts annually. Although not received with much fanfare, there has been considerable recognition that this Directive has changed practice and has schools and teachers engaged in more discourse about student learning. Accordingly, these acronyms showed up several times in both the focusing on improved results and managing resources and accountability categories from the participants’ initial brainstorm of school improvement approaches that have made a difference. Further, statements such as the one above recognize that this is an area of importance that the region and schools need to develop in order to maximize school and student improvement.

Determining where our students are in their achievement levels, what they need to learn next, and ensuring sustainability of change are all made possible by committing to both short term and long term goals and measuring results. Without assessment of students, there is no way to know their strengths and stretches. It is otherwise impossible to differentiate instruction in such a way that builds on the strengths and targets the weaknesses so that greater achievement gains can be made. Without assessment data it is difficult to know whether the schools and division are making progress, and where best to focus future resources and energies.

Accordingly, over the past few years, we have geared portions of our regional in-services to become more assessment literate. We have been learning about effective classroom-based assessments FOR and AS teacher and student learning respectively, in addition to the assessment OF learning for accountability and reporting. The formative assessments that occur in classrooms every day are arguably more valuable. They inform the student how they are doing and what they need to do to improve (AS learning), and they inform the teacher more frequently so that instruction can be adjusted accordingly on-the-fly, from lesson-to-lesson and from unit-to-unit (FOR learning). In response to related concerns about the limitations of standardized tests, the Department requested that each student’s functional grade level (FGL) be collected annually in addition to the Alberta exam results that provide only assessment OF learning, which is of interest to the superintendent and politicians and perhaps parents but of lesser value to teachers to inform their teaching. There are common requirements for reporting and report cards in the region, and each school is now also using three-way conferencing (student-parent-teacher) at report card times as a method of involving the student in reporting progress to parents—to name a few of the more visible changes that have occurred as a result of this initiative.

Coinciding with the development of this assessment initiative within the region, and in an effort to support the school CEP sub-committees, a regional action research fund was set up several years ago, and schools, committees or individual teachers were encouraged to apply for funding accordingly. Shortly thereafter, the Department adapted the Alberta
Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) and offered regions and schools the opportunity to apply for Student Success Initiative (SSI) funding for special projects (action research) intended to improve schools. The SSI and action research initiatives were then merged. A key feature of the initiatives was the expectation that the researcher (implementers) would be collecting baseline and then comparative student achievement data to determine if the projects were making a difference.

The intent here, and in large-scale reform initiatives elsewhere, is that PLCs engaged in action research would look more diligently at assessment data before and after, and then document the results so that new learnings are maximized for their own classrooms and the entire region. The reason I share this is because, in hindsight, I wonder if these action research opportunities, although of value, have resulted in a further fragmenting of initiatives and duplication of efforts. As it turned out, each school was left to decide the value of the extra action research funding opportunities in light of the extra workload. While schools were given opportunity to apply for the moneys, some applied as mentioned, but other schools didn’t, even with the promise of success, due to the additional workload and reporting requirements. That said, these projects prompted the further exploration and collection of alternate forms of assessment data and targets.

THE EFFECT OF OVERLOAD ON SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Why are South Slave educational leaders overloaded and overwhelmed? Fullan (1996) provides some reasons that are not unique to the South Slave. He confirms that overload and fragmentation plague educational change “because post modern societies are non-linear, chaotic, and dynamically complex” (p. 719). Educational change may be even more difficult in cross-cultural environments. One of the problems is, “There are great tendencies to keep people who are different than ourselves at a distance” (1999, p. 2). Fullan reminds us that it is no easy task to develop mutual empathy and relationships across diverse groups so that one can make a positive difference in the lives of all citizens. Naturally, this problem is likely more pronounced in cross-cultural environments in which many northern educational leaders reside and work.

Fullan (1999) also looks at chaos or complexity theory to explain why school improvement efforts often fail. Organizations are paradoxes pulled by centralizing and decentralizing tendencies. Centralizing tendencies are those looking at bringing stability, security and certainty while, on the other hand, decentralizing tendencies include are human desires for excitement and isolation. Neither decentralization nor centralization works. Stacey (1996, as cited in Fullan, 1999) suggests, “Success lies in sustaining an organization in the borders between stability and instability. This is a state of chaos, a
difficult to maintain dissipative structure” (p. 4). It is these kinds of issues that led to the identification of Fullan’s complex collaborative change lessons identified in Chapter 3.

The above helps to explain why educational leaders in most jurisdictions, and at various levels of the education system, are expressing feelings of overload. However, it is important to unpack further what might be compounding the feelings of overwhelm and overload by regional and school administrators and coordinators in the South Slave. The following section summarizes the Current Influences and Ongoing Challenges, identified in Chapter 2, that are contributing to the feelings of overwhelm:

- Large portions of the students are academically below grade level and many present severe behavioural issues; at least half of NWT students are not making it to high school graduation—30% are too low functioning to access high school credits;
- “Approximately one third of the students in need of additional supports are not getting them. If they were to receive the supports needed, the proportion of the NWT student enrolment receiving some level of support would be at 73%” (Towards Excellence, 2005, p. 82); increasing numbers of students are being identified with special needs require interventions and specialist services;
- Most communities have many social issues and this manifests in the school; drug and alcohol addiction are pervasive among adults and youth; parents are under-involved or inappropriately involved for more than 25% of NWT students (Towards Excellence, 2005); truancy and drop-out rates are high; just 53% of students had 90% attendance or better; many students and their parents see schooling as irrelevant and meaningless to their lives;
- An increasing awareness that a child’s readiness and success at school will be determined by their development in their first five years, is countered by the realization that the NWT lags behind the rest of Canada in terms of children entering into grade school with adequate prior knowledge; multi-graded classrooms are prevalent with as many as three grades being served in some classrooms. The Inclusive Schooling Directive of the NWT requires that the majority of students are moved along with their age-appropriate peers, regardless of their academic level, which results in all South Slave classrooms serving an even wider spread of student ability levels;
- Data collection and measures of success are lacking; communities and cultures continue to conflict; distances and related communication difficulties perpetuate; coordination of territorial, regional and school-based efforts lack coherence; initiatives are not sustained;
- Some of the public perceive that their community schools are substandard, which leads staff to assume a reactive posture, continually responding to issues in order
to cope; poor staff morale; inaccurate or non-existent reporting of student achievement to parents; very little establishment of educational expectations, structure and positive initiatives in many communities; inadequate, over-priced, and even unavailable housing for staff, with a shrinking pay and benefits gap over southern counterparts; the pressures of living in an isolated community, teaching three grade level classrooms in a multi-cultural environment is particularly demanding; the proportion of NWT teachers with less than five years experience is 53\% (Towards Excellence, 2005, p. 24);

- Education in the NWT is continuing to face a rapid rate and increasing scope of change, influenced in large part by: aboriginal self-determination, self-government negotiations and related land claims; pressure for public accountability and efforts to recentralize; new economic activity mostly in mining, oil and gas, requiring the need for more trades programming, offset by inflation and related government fiscal restraint; a declining birth rate, and resulting decline in school enrolment and related school resources; rapid decline in aboriginal first and second language speakers and lack of interested and fluent aboriginal language instructors; pockets of public anxiety and interest in safe communities (countering a prevailing culture of truancy, bullying, drugs, alcohol, and crime);
- And so forth.

These factors continue to perpetuate the "cycle of helplessness" (Zoe, 1993).

There are a few other role specific factors that affect principals' feelings of overload in particular. Unlike in most southern jurisdictions, each community in the NWT has a locally elected education authority (DEA). This effectively results in the school principal acting as the CEO of the local board, on top of an already overwhelming workload. In smaller schools, the principal is also a full time teacher. By necessity, administrivia, planning, reporting, parent and DEA meetings all occur outside of the regular school day.

Further, the principal can be caught in authority conflicts between the DEA and the regional DEC or the superintendent, making it difficult to know which authority to try to keep most satisfied. The Education Act does not help with this issue, as the DEAs and DECs are described with almost the same powers in the legislation. In school boards that have addressed this tension through decentralization such as the South Slave, it is the school principal who develops the staffing plan for DEA and superintendent approval, and who then facilitates the selection committee for hiring staff. The principal also evaluates staff while being in the same union as the teachers and the coordinators; this brings additional inherent complexities.
The combination of these factors has already had a considerable impact on the contexts, the changing role of the educational leaders, and the quality of schools. As land claims are settled and self-government agreements are reached, as contracts are re-negotiated and board reform is explored territorially, and as demands for results and accountability refocus us in an era of financial uncertainty, the rapid pace of change is likely to continue. While it is yet uncertain how these educational and non-educational factors will continue to change and impact on school improvement efforts, overload and feelings of overwhelm seems a certainty.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION**

In light of the research presented in the literature review and the results of this study, future school improvement initiatives in the South Slave region should include consideration of the *Leadership for Improving Northern Schools* conceptual framework presented herein, as well as the Fullan’s (1999) complex change lessons presented in Chapter 3. Accordingly, this section describes some of the changes the SSDEC has undertaken coinciding with the outcomes of the data collection and primary analysis in this study that occurred in 2007.

The SSDEC chose to change and reduce its focus. The outcomes of this research, combined with the advice the superintendent and Council received in a recent board development session, helped to inform the Council’s new goals and priorities. The new *Leadership for Literacy* initiative (initiated in August 2007) intends to subsume all other initiatives and start a new chapter in the history of the South Slave region with a more coherent, “focus on just a few key priorities with carefully chosen strategies and a commitment to results” (Sloan, personal communication, 2006).

The regional Council has essentially flexed its corporate muscle related to student achievement outcomes, and has chosen *reading* as their key priority with *numeracy* and *social responsibility* as secondary priorities. The key priority chosen, *reading*, was due to historical student achievement data that showed weaker reading and math results, as opposed to writing. The initial response of both the superintendent, as well as the regional office staff and school principals, was positive. The narrower *focus* and the promise of related supports seem to have been welcomed and appreciated.

In order to be successful in this new *Leadership for Literacy* initiative, we have taken a long term and *multi-level* approach, involving *PLCs* at both the school and regional levels, and reviewing student performance (*assessment*) data frequently as and for learning and outcomes.
At the same time, and in recognition of Fullan’s (1999) lesson that *neither centralization nor decentralization works* (p. 18), we are differentiating our efforts to allow for local refinement of the initiative, and the inclusion of any locally identified priorities as well. The question remains: What decisions are made at what level? Utilizing a servant leadership approach and the premise, “as bottom up as possible, as top down as necessary” (Schmoker, 1999), we started by articulating to staffs that this was going to be a long-term initiative as opposed to a passing fad. Although Council had only committed supplemental start-up funding to schools in the first two years of implementation, it was anticipated that this initiative would continue for five years or more. Reading achievement could arguably always be a priority, unless we have 100% of our students reading at grade level.

Using a servant leadership approach, and given the example of this research honoring that principals and regional program coordinators are crucial to school-wide improvement as well as for system improvement, efforts were made to engage them and their staffs in building the new *Leadership for Literacy* initiative collectively and deeply through the system (*change is a journey, not a blueprint*, Fullan, 1999, p. 18). Together we need to explore and establish the new organizational systems/structures required for further and ongoing collaboration and region-wide reading improvement (*there is no single solution*). Note that in this section I refer back to Fullan’s (1999) change lessons (see Chapter 3, pp. 59-60) and indicate the respective lesson in brackets after each step in the process:

- Met with principals and regional coordinators to develop a framework within which all South Slave schools will operate (*connection with the wider environment is critical; problems are our friends; attack incoherence*);
- Realigned resources with funding for a literacy coach in each school and leveled resources (books) for classroom libraries;
- Principals identified literacy coaches from within and held competitions for the others (*individualism and collectivism must have equal power*);
- Accessed professional development moneys for regional administrators, coordinators, principals, and literacy coaches already identified, to attend a major International Reading Association conference in order to learn about best practices and to meet as a group and further flesh out the *Leadership for Literacy* Framework (*connection with the wider environment*);
- Began work on individual school based models/programs and work plans (*neither centralization nor decentralization works; there is no single solution*);
- Developed and implemented an intensive literacy coaches training program (*every person is a change agent*);
• Identified reading assessment tools, measures and targets that could be utilized to
diagnose reading proficiency and guide classroom instruction, for motivational
purposes, and for monitoring outcomes over time (assessment); and,
• Explained the new initiative to the media/public, staff and students in order to
raise expectations and garner support and buy-in (connection with the wider
environment).

The primary strategy being employed in this initiative is the establishment of in-school
literacy coaches who train and support teachers with effective instruction in the
classroom, and facilitating school-based PLCs. (individualism and collectivism must have
equal power). In recognition that parent involvement is critical to improved results, in
consultation with school staffs, this has been made a cross-goal strategy for 2009 as well
(connection with the wider environment).

The research in this study leading up to this initiative has also developed into the form of
a regional leadership team PLC (multi-level) that is becoming stronger in its research and
dialogue in relation to our new prime objective. Our blissful ignorance of what was
purported to be effective and working out there and even in here (the South Slave) is
diminishing (change is a journey, not a blueprint). We have more options and a deeper
understanding of what works. We also now have the suggestion of a revised approach
that includes a loosely coupled and multi-level matrix of interdependent teams focused on
learning—our own and our students (neither centralization nor decentralization works;
there is no single solution; individualism and collectivism must have equal power).

The new Leadership for Literacy initiative identified earlier, inclusive of regional
 coordinators, principals and literacy coaches engaging in joint professional development
and regional framework creation is an example of a multi-level PLC. But this model is
not entirely new to the South Slave. In fact, this approach has been in place since at least
2000 in a number of initiatives. The establishment and development of PLCs occurred at
both the regional and the school levels with positive results, as evidenced by awards,
surveys and improved student achievement results over the past several years. Three
regional PLCs, made up of representatives from each of the South Slave schools, have
been in place since the principals brainstormed these priorities in 2000, namely the award
winning Literacy Project committee (2003 Ministerial Literacy Award), the Career
Development Initiative (in 2006 received the territorial government’s highest award for
employees, the Premier’s Award of Excellence), and the equally effective Homework and
Study Skills committee. Since then, territorial directives resulted in the addition of two
more initiatives, the Student Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting and the Aboriginal
Language and Culture Based Education initiatives, which didn’t have their own distinct
committees but had consumed significant regional meeting time of the principals,
program support teachers and aboriginal language instructors over the past several years. The regional team of program support teachers (special needs) has always met several times each year. Additional ad hoc meetings of other teams of school representatives, such as the technology specialists and teams of teachers, have come together for new curriculum in-service and planning sessions.

We are evolving. As indicated in the responses, participants spoke highly of the need for more classroom-embedded Balanced Literacy and numeracy support (inclusive of classroom modeling and coaching) that was promoted and extended from the Literacy Project PLC a few years earlier. In this study, participants indicated that school improvement is maximized when teachers have intensive opportunities to learn in context of the job, with the help of a mentor or coach. In essence, while there was benefit to both models, it appears the pull out model of regional committees is not deemed as effective as the push in model of teach, model, and practice in the classroom. This is consistent with the current Inclusive Schooling philosophy for reading intervention that suggests the same—push in with resources into the classroom for students with reading problems, and pull out outside of language block if further intervention is needed.

The inception of the Leadership for Literacy initiative brought to a close several of these other initiatives that had been in place since the early part of this new century. A set of new multi-level and interlinked PLCs at the regional and school levels need to focus more specifically on teaming, reviewing assessment data and experimenting in the process. In recognition that every person is a change agent, all staff were informed about the new regional focus and all were asked for their help in achieving improved student reading. Staff members were encouraged to consider our collective moral purpose to do whatever we can to ensure student success: supervisory expectations were secondary. They were asked to climb in the front seat and help navigate and drive, rather than bouncing around in the back seat.

The new Leadership for Literacy initiative is addressing research participant expressed preferences by refocusing and re-aligning regional PLCs, and strengthening the literacy project PLC to be the overarching umbrella initiative and focusing it more directly on the classroom. Other initiatives have been downsized to cross-goal strategies (student assessment, evaluation and reporting; homework and study skills) as opposed to large initiatives. The literacy project committee was informed of the restructuring. The project is continuing but as a PLC of literacy coaches of which several of them assumed those new roles. The homework and study skills PLC was also informed and asked to downsize and either realign their initiative and plans with the Leadership for Literacy initiative or to bring their project to an end. They responded by converting their plan to a maintenance plan primarily and now meet in person just once each year.
There were expressions of concern and frustration as cherished projects were reconsidered and refocused or dropped. There was fear of “what this means to me” and excitement for some as well as we re-aligned and began to see if we might be capable of pulling off the improvements that Council was requesting (*emotional intelligence is anxiety provoking and anxiety containing*). In light of the earlier discussion about the importance of relationships and emotions in particular, it was critical to help people understand why the need for change, and to ask them to assist in “building the road by walking it together”; thus creating the change needed so that more South Slave students are reading at or above grade level (*moral purpose is complex and problematic*).

In terms of assessment OF learning for the *Leadership for Literacy* initiative, the Council’s three reading achievement targets were included in the superintendent’s performance evaluation. Since then, another target has been added:

1. An increase of 5% in the percentage of students reading at or above the average level relative to the *Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE)*,
2. 80% of those attending 90% or more of the time achieve an increase of one full year in reading achievement,
3. At least 15% of the students gain at least one stanine increase on the *GRADE* assessment (improve by more than a year), and
4. At least 80% of the students reading at or above the Canadian average by the end of the 2010/2011 school year.

Principals and staff were informed of these new targets at the regional staff in-service. Baseline data was collected in May of 2007 using a new reading achievement assessment and was again collected in 2008 and 2009 to determine the effectiveness of the *Leadership for Literacy* initiative. More importantly, this data was also collected to help inform region and schools of where changes may be needed for more successful implementation and sustainability throughout the region.

In order to offset implementation costs of the *Leadership for Literacy* initiative, Council had already requested that a proposal be sent to the Department for the entire amount of the 2007-08 and 2008-09 *Student Success Initiative (SSI)* funds available to the South Slave. Although at first contested by the Teachers’ Association (NWTTA), they reconsidered, perhaps in part given the level of support indicated from the membership for the job-embedded professional development approach for teachers, and perhaps due to the realization that this was in fact de-fragmenting and focusing efforts. Relations appeared to strengthen with the Association in the deliberations (*conflict and diversity are our friends*).

Another approach was undertaken in order to bring greater *focus* and *multi-level alignment* as it relates to assessment, and that was the setting of school goals. Unlike in the past where principals were required to develop and submit community education
plans (CEPs) annually, based solely on what they and their local partners determined were the priorities, with the new Council priority, principals were asked to include reading achievement as one of their school goals. Many of them still also have school-based goals that were again locally determined. In their draft CEP submissions, Lutsel K’e had a parent involvement goal, Fort Resolution had student attendance, and a school in Hay River also has numeracy and social responsibility goals. Aligned with their reading goal, schools are also asked to have at least one related reading assessment SMART targets. A SMART target is one that is specific, measurable, achievable, aligned, realistic, and with responsibilities and timeline.

In terms of assessment FOR learning, staffs were informed that the Leadership for Literacy initiative was the launching point for ensuring that we had a clear understanding of the reading level of each and every student within the region. The best way to be servant to our students was to be clear on what each student could do and what they were ready to do, so that the assessment could inform instruction. Unless we know what the independent and instructional reading levels of each student, how can we be sure we are assigning readings appropriately and moving them along in their reading development most efficiently?

Regional office staff, working with principals and literacy coaches, have selected suitable informal reading assessment tools and have been training all language arts teachers, through the literacy coaches, in the proper administration and interpretation of these assessments. Leveled guided reading books and guided reading records and graphs have been implemented to maintain an ongoing record of each student’s reading level month-to-month. It is important that not only the teachers know the student’s reading achievement level. The student and parent need to know as well so that they can be part of setting the next performance target and working to achieve it.

The literacy coach is pivotal to working with grade level or subject area teams (PLCs) through this process of helping to collect the initial and monthly data, determining instructional goals based on the data, and assisting with the determination and implementation of research based instructional practices in the classroom. The existing program support (special needs) teachers are part of the process of assessment and follow up implementation of reading intervention programs for those who are at-risk of not achieving the standard.

The results of this research have informed and explained why the parallel process of change occurring in the South Slave with the 2007 inception of the Leadership for Literacy initiative is being received positively by participants, at least initially:
• Narrowing the focus (literacy/numeracy and social responsibility) – the myriad of all other initiatives are cancelled or have taken a back seat;
• Multi-level and coherent alignment of key goals and targets (student achievement in reading) and related resources (budget), but with flexibility within to honour diverse contexts and strengthen both relationships and professionalism; and,
• Carefully chosen strategies with a commitment to results:
  o *Infrastructural* (systemic variables [levers] of particular concern to the trustees and leadership team) includes:
    • servant/instructional leadership/focus,
    • assessment OF learning for outcomes,
    • achievement goals/targets,
    • research base,
    • PLCs, research and professional development,
    • up to date resources (including levelled books), and
    • classroom-embedded professional development with literacy coaches.
  o *Instructional* (of primary concern to teachers) – includes:
    • classroom organization,
    • assessment FOR and AS learning,
    • research-based instructional practices,
    • matching students to text,
    • short term instructional goals, and
    • resources and supports from PLCs, literacy coaches, program support teachers and assistants.

In brief, we are attempting to build the capacity of South Slave schools to (a) collect and analyze achievement data, (b) establish clear measurable short-term goals, and (c) use meaningful, informed teamwork to obtain results, with the expectation that these efforts will result in the achievement of the targets the Council has set. Council is hoping for more results like those seen at one of our Balanced Literacy schools where this approach has already been tried and has attained dramatic achievement gains. When a school is able to celebrate student successes, the community starts to realize that there are good things happening. This can be seen as essentially strengthening the instructional leadership sub-dimension of our servant leadership model with an emphasis on better serving the educational needs of the students.
CAUTIONS

There are of course significant cautions that should be raised here. One is that we know our schools are already good, are already improving (62% Achieving the Alberta standard at end of 2006, up from about 50% three years earlier). Schools are achieving incredibly well against the odds already. The targets set by Council simply might not be achievable given the contexts and in such a short time period. We’re certainly going to give it our best shot and time will tell.

Another concern is that even with all the dialogue, efforts and resources, some staff simply might not see the sense of urgency that the Council and superintendent feel is needed to improve reading results that dramatically. If progress is being made quicker in some schools or classrooms than others, those strategies will need to be celebrated and shared. The situations where results are not improving would warrant profession dialogue and coaching and potentially tighter supervision. However, every effort should be made for the professionalism of staffs to remain paramount, if for no other reason than to empower and maintain authentic motivation for achieving the goals.

Not achieving the targets set, even with all the best efforts, might further demoralize already overburdened schools and staff. Strict adherence to a particular program might also de-professionalize and de-motivate staff. Flexibility continues to be required for local schools and teachers to choose their own annual reading targets, their short-term instructional goals and the best approaches to achieve those goals. This research is telling us to focus, but that flexibility is still important given contextual variables, in order to achieve success.

In the context of the uncertainty we are experiencing, or turbulence as described in the parable at the beginning of this dissertation, “people will cling to someone who gives them a promise of rigid certainty” (Grimmett, personal communication, 2009), which I submit is what the effective schools research database provides in place of the more fragmented school improvement research database, and which the standardized tests of student achievement results gives us in place of other valuable forms of student learning that are not so easily quantifiable. On both counts, we need to work for focus and certainty, however, we have to be careful not to let it take control of our lives and overlook important aspects of context, culture, and relationships.

Further, as was pointed out, the accountability requirements also mean much energy is redirected not only to improved instruction, but also to more secondary tasks like reporting reading level data, which is potentially a less valuable second order activity. In personal communication recently with Peter Grimmett (2009), he correctly reminded that
it is usually the ones further from the classroom that want to set the criteria because they do not have the same level of confidence that the ones closest to the action have that a good job is being done. "The more removed from practice a person is, the more they rely on proxy variables" such as standardized tests.

In a related concern, Ball (2003) posits that "somehow the more figures we use, the more the great truths seem to slip through our fingers" (p. 215). With pressures for accountability, the teacher, researcher and academic is more and more subject to a myriad of judgments, measures, comparisons and targets. And, yet, our accountability systems still permit us to skirt responsibility. For example, the requirement for teacher evaluations does not necessarily mean that the evaluator has ensured that the performance is suitable, or that the employee has improved in the process of the evaluation, or that the process was done well enough to withstand a grievance. All it may have ensured is that the evaluator has met the second order requirement of having completed the evaluation for placement in the personnel file. A participant gave another example of a student who attends school only sparingly, but improves considerably and comes out with more confidence and more of an ability to meet challenges. While the school may have succeeded as best it could, the student may still not pass the standardized test. A school may be adding great value in consideration of the context, but still the student cannot achieve the Alberta standard. Ball (2003) laments:

Increasingly, the day-to-day practice is flooded with a baffling array of figures, indicators, comparisons and forms of competition. Within all this, the contentments of stability are increasingly elusive, purposes are made contradictory, motivations become blurred and self-worth is uncertain. We are unsure what aspects of work are valued and how to prioritize efforts. We become uncertain about the reasons for actions. Are we doing this because it is important, because we believe in it, because it is worthwhile? Or is it being done ultimately because it will be measured or compared? It will make us look good! (p. 220)

Further, and as evidenced by this research, school improvement is a synergistic process being described in terms of its components. Many of the vital components, such as context and relationships, are not amenable to measurement or accountability. Yet we recognize that principals and teachers must find themselves putting a great deal of energy into these qualitative and foundational dimensions of our work, which are so vital for any real improvement to take place.

Ball goes on to say, "Constant doubts about which judgements may be in play at any point mean that any and all comparisons and requirements to perform have to be attended to. Selection and prioritization becomes impossible and work and its pressures intensify." (p. 220) This is a key point coinciding with the results of this research and that sparks the
need for clarity of focus. Ball’s earlier point—the current workload stressors and the likelihood of further second order accountability requirements distracting us from our first order activities—needs to be considered further in light of the results of this research and as we build this road. If nothing else, we want to be urgent with high expectations (in the best interests of the education of our students) but also patient with results. I am convinced, with a concerted effort of collaboration, communication, coherency and collective commitment, the results will come in time.

CONCLUSION

This chapter began with an overview of the key findings of this school improvement research, namely that focus is needed, relationships matter, context is critical, and servant leadership supersedes transformational leadership as the ideal metaphor in these small multi-cultural contexts. The research question was addressed, and then the initial conceptual framework was reformulated in light of the key findings. Each component of the conceptual framework: a) context, b) relationships and c) focus underpinning d) servant leadership, e) multi-level alignment, f) professional learning communities, and g) assessment approaches and strategies, is discussed in relation to the findings of the study. The effects of fragmentation and overload were addressed specifically. Finally, revised and planned future strategies of the SSDEC, resulting in part from the findings of this study, are shared along with some related cautions.

Context and relationships are additions to the preliminary conceptual framework resulting from this research. In other jurisdictions they may appear of lesser importance and virtually impossible to influence. However, in small northern and multi-cultural communities the context is foundational and needs to be understood and adapted for, and relationships also need to be taken into account in virtually all education decision-making. The interpersonal aspects of an educational leader’s role in this regard, and the leadership capacity necessary to build and sustain relations between governing bodies and schools, regional office and schools, principal and teacher, teacher and student, teacher and parent and among all members of the school community, cannot be overstated.

It is evident from this research that a clear and targeted focus is also required. Efforts are required to offset the fragmentation, and in some cases the duplication, which often occurs when juggling multiple priorities at three levels (Department, region, school). The priorities of these three levels are sometimes aligned, but often they are competing. A coherent focus on just a few key priorities with carefully chosen strategies and a commitment to results up, down and across the system is required.
The ideal approach to educational leadership and school improvement in small aboriginal and multi-cultural communities is a servant leadership approach which honours the importance of cultural sensitivity, trust and relationships with those who are being served, not just the staff (followers) per se, but the wider community of students, parents and community members with and for whom we work. The servant leadership approach endeavours to more fully extend this element of engagement beyond just the followers.

This study encourages all of us to respond to student needs and community aspirations by engendering professionalism and teamwork among school partners, and using public resources most effectively for the education of the students and the development of the community. This is the kind of educational leadership that contributes to the improvement of self, students, schools, staff, parents and community.

Significant effort and momentum has already occurred in the jurisdiction of the South Slave since the announcement of the Council’s new initiative and goals, both at the region and school leadership levels and the teacher and support staff levels. Relationships and a sense of common focus are expected to develop through carefully facilitated local and multi-level PLC sessions that draw out perspectives and ideas, achieve consensus on a vision of the best possible future, identify and address barriers, and carefully choose strategies with a commitment to results.

Efforts are still needed to reduce second order activities of little value and further empower and build leadership and change capacity amongst school staffs, families and communities to maximize learning outcomes.

The next chapter will provide a set of conclusions and implications for further practice, policy and research.
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section summarizes the study’s purpose, methodology, major findings, and implications for further research and for policy and practice. The second section contains conclusions and implications for leadership for school improvement in the South Slave region. It begins with my own personal reflections on the results of the research for my particular leadership as Superintendent and goes on to address implications for leadership at every level of governance in the Northern context under study.

SECTION ONE: SUMMARY

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore strategies that are most likely to empower and sustain effective school improvement planning and outcomes from a school and regional leadership perspective. More specifically, this research endeavoured to determine the kinds of approaches in a participatory process that emerge as having impact on school(s) improvement in the diverse multi-cultural contexts of communities in the South Slave region of the Northwest Territories in northern Canada. The study included a review of this particular northern context and its history. The current literature on school improvement was used to construct an initial conceptual framework for the study.

Methodology

A participatory action research methodology was used to engage participants in collaborative reflection on past and present school improvement efforts and related educational leadership strategies deemed most effective in the South Slave region. Eight school principals and seven regional office administrators and program coordinators were involved in the study during the 2006-07 school year and the following fall of 2007. The participatory action research coincided with ongoing school improvement efforts in the region and schools. Data collection activities included focus group brainstorming and reflection activities, and follow up semi-structured individual interviews that were audio-taped and then transcribed. The data collection process probed with a more internal focus,
what educational leaders (namely, school principals, regional administrators and program coordinators) in the South Slave region felt was most important and effective for improving their schools. Data analysis consisted of categorizing the data into themes for presentation and subsequent interpretation into findings.

This qualitative research provided a holistic and broad panoramic view, as distinct from a microanalysis, of how school improvement takes place in a diverse context in Northern Canada. Many steps in the process were collaborative and included the primary action research participants not only in the data collection but also in the beginning stages of the analysis, and then in the critique of the findings and implications. The data collection, analysis and interpretations were interactive and complex in order to determine to what extent findings in these contexts confirm or diverge from a literature commonly developed in Southern Canada and the USA. The meaning derived from the emergent areas of concern about the process, together with a comparison of the study’s findings with the initial conceptual framework, prompted a further review of the literature. This integration of the data helped to determine the section on the lessons learned and generated conclusions about what policy makers and jurisdictions can do to maximize and sustain school improvement efforts in the North. Efforts were made throughout to develop visual models to aid in establishing clear representations.

**Findings**

The participants’ brainstorming initially generated 17 different themes or categories of school improvement efforts. These were then rated most effective at improving schools in the following order: *Enriching Programs and Teaching Strategies, Optimizing Professional Development, Building a Culture of Improvement, Networking and Building Partnerships,* and *Maximizing Resources for Teachers.* Subsequent focus group sessions and individual interviews permitted five themes to emerge in addressing the question: “What is this telling us in terms of how we might further improve our schools?” They were:

1. Consolidate and focus efforts;
2. Prioritize strategies that impact the classroom;
3. Enhance community-based improvement planning;
4. Strengthen research-based and data-based planning and programming; and,
5. Focus on the positive.

This led to the further determination of three strong themes about leadership for school improvement in the South Slave region. My interpretation of these themes suggested that there is also a fourth possibility about leadership style. The following description of these themes summarizes the collective thoughts of the educational leaders in this study as they address the study’s specific research question:
1. **Focus** Is Needed – Whereas participants felt that the scope and number of school improvement efforts were impressive, the sheer amount of work that had occurred and continues to occur was deemed to be overwhelming. There was a strong call for a more focused approach. Work smarter, not harder, seemed to be the mantra for improving schools. In line with this prevailing view, there was preference for improvement efforts that most directly impacted teachers and the classroom (such as the current classroom-embedded Balanced Literacy and Numeracy initiatives).

2. **Relationships** Matter – Possessing cultural awareness and sensitivity and building trusting relationships with students, staff and parents were seen as keys to success in bringing about school improvements in multi-cultural contexts in northern and predominately aboriginal communities and schools.

3. **Context** is Critical – There were significant and compelling contextual reasons (community leadership, socio-economic factors, staff turnover, cultural differences, grade distributions, differing perspectives, and so forth) that required flexibility and differentiation in the identification of priorities and the way initiatives were implemented.

4. **Servant Leadership** Supersedes Transformational Leadership – My suggested additional theme revolved around Greenleaf’s (1977, 1996) conception of servant leadership. Just as transformational leadership was seen to be an extension and improvement of earlier leadership metaphors (situational and instructional), servant leadership builds on transformational leadership and these previous leadership ideas to speak more directly to the importance of **cultural sensitivity, trust and relationships** with those being served. Put differently, I argued that it represents an appropriate educational leadership metaphor at the beginning of the 21st century for small, multi-cultural contexts where leaders serve not just the staff but also the wider population of students, parents and community members. I have argued for the metaphor of the servant leader because it extends this element of partner engagement to include all members of the community.

Accordingly, the initial conceptual framework for school improvement was adapted in consideration of these key findings. This led to a participant-validated graphic representation of the Leadership for Improving Northern Schools. This revised conceptual framework portrays a re-conception of how to improve schools in the unique and diverse contexts of the communities of the South Slave region. In the graphic depiction, the more foundational **context, relationships and focus** elements are shown under and around the more strategic elements: servant leadership, multi-level alignment, professional learning communities, and assessment. Note that the number of times the words **context, relationships and focus** are printed in this graphic is roughly equivalent to the comparative strength and frequency of these points being made by the participants in the research.
The ideal approach to school improvement in small aboriginal and multi-cultural communities includes a servant leadership model with a clear focus and carefully chosen strategies for improvement, inclusive of the strengthening of multi-level professional learning communities, and data-based decision making with a commitment to results. The findings of this study exhort us to respond to student needs and community aspirations by developing and sustaining relationships and trust, engendering professionalism and teamwork among all school partners, and focusing efforts and public resources on the education of the students and the development of the community.

**Section Two: Conclusions and Implications**

This study provided a collective articulation of the participants’ viewpoints about viable approaches to school improvement in small, northern multi-cultural communities. The findings emphasized positive relationships, coherent focus and consideration of the unique and ever changing contexts. These findings have implications for the policy direction of the South Slave Divisional Education Council and other locally elected District Education Authorities (DEAs) and regional Divisional Education Councils (DECs), for regional administrators, principals and program coordinators, and for the Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment. They also hold implications for further research and for my practice as Superintendent. I begin with reflections about what the study’s findings mean for my practice as a leader.

**For my Leadership Practice as Superintendent (Personal Reflections)**

As Heifetz and Linsky put it, “leaders these days must be able to be on the dance floor and the balcony simultaneously” (referenced in Fullan, 2006, p. 14). As superintendent I am constantly working to improve schools. I also reflect continually on where I should be focusing my efforts. This study, in which I have fulfilled the roles of both participant and primary researcher, has been a difficult but eye-opening and rewarding experience.

Some key questions plagued my mind as I analyzed and interpreted the data:

**Something’s got to give!**

*How do I better serve the regional office staff and principals? How can I minimize or help them reduce, streamline, or otherwise efficiently complete their administrative work, so that their efforts can be more focused on the priority of educating children?*

Work overload—Although the majority of the participants do not report to me directly, namely the school principals and program coordinators, their collective concerns require that I take heed. It is not just the principals who are raising concerns with regard to workload; it is an issue throughout the organization, from teachers to Department staff.
New accountability requirements and increasing expectations require educational leaders to take on more and more responsibilities. I am continually reminded of the increasing complexities of the various educator roles and the virtually impossible expectations on the principal, and the superintendent as well. In particular, I have concern with the expectation that the principal act in the role of chief executive officer (CEO) for the local education governing body (DEA), and be a community developer, while still maintaining a focus on the effective supervision of staff and the quality of education for students. In several smaller communities, where the principal has additional teaching responsibilities, these expectations would appear to be unrealistically demanding. On top of all that is the plethora of new accountability requirements coming down the line, many of which require what Lyotard refers to as second order activities (e.g., writing reports, etc.) that take us away from the first order activities of educating children (cited in Ball, 2003).

It is more than a time management problem. It is also an issue of capacity, culture, change and commitment. The whole idea of school improvement can crumble because of its complicated intensity, and because people cannot simultaneously attend to a host of new initiatives, accountability expectations, and maintenance requirements without potentially losing focus. In such circumstances, practitioners focus their energy on survival and the articulated messages for this and that initiative get lost in a cacophony of demands. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to manage through all the interference. Just keeping the operation going can become an important preoccupation. However, those educational leaders who do manage in this way may be doing more superficially what fits instead of what works at improving schools and student achievement.

It is clear that we must continue to explore options for reducing the ambiguity and fragmentation created by multiple role expectations. Focus, focus, focus was the key message from the participants. Convergence of focus and continuity of objectives are required in both the short and long terms. A clear focus can partly address workload and the perception of being overwhelmed. The outcomes based focus that the Council has recently identified with the selection of one key priority, student achievement in reading and the clear expectation of results, has gone a long way both to address this issue and challenge administrators and regional coordinators in a more coherent way. The Council has chosen a priority that represents the area where our results are weakest and teachers see the struggles of their students on a daily basis. One or two priorities are easier to remember and engage, particularly if they capture the hearts and minds of teachers, administrators, students, and educational partners. When teachers understand that Council policy connects with their interest in doing what is best for students, they can engage and focus accordingly. All other initiatives are then scrutinized in terms of whether or not they are enhancing the Council’s key priority of literacy/reading achievement. With literacy as the main goal, the effective behavioural supports (EBS), career development,
and homework and study skills initiatives can align with the emphasis on literacy. Those activities that are most likely to improve reading results will receive attention.

While focus helps, it does not solve the problem. Further efforts are required. We have already had discussions over the past three years at the principals’ forum (where agendas are set and chaired by principals) that have resulted in the following adjustments:

- We created a single page evaluation template for support staff so it can be completed quickly and easily, thus meeting the government requirement that these staff be evaluated annually;
- We reduced principal reporting from 10 to 5 per year (although many still do 10 so that they have something to present to their local authorities when they meet); and,
- The administration of staffing competitions for support staff has fortuitously been removed from their jurisdiction. Government restructuring has resulted in a new Human Resource Department that now administers these competitions. However, adding another Department to the mix has in many ways increased paperwork and lengthened timelines for the competitions to be completed, which has not been appreciated by principals. Hence, this adjustment has produced mixed results.

Many of us admit that we are our own worst enemies, taking on more and more with our drive to succeed. On the other hand, we were mutually discombobulated about how to reduce workload, given the current governance structure and proliferating accountability requirements. In a previous attempt to find solutions in 2006, I collected and shared responses to the question: What kinds of time management strategies are you using to deal with the overwhelming workload? Many responses indicated a variety of opinions but few actual strategies. Two that did emerge were:

- be more pragmatic with staff evaluations – if they don’t get back to me with a time for me to visit their class for formal observation, I tell them when I’m coming. I don’t give second and third reminders anymore;
- consider extending principals’ meetings by a day and allow principals to bring work they need to get done but can’t do in the school due to constant interruptions.

Three of the eight principals indicated they did not feel the workload issue was particularly problematic. The other five did. But that was a while ago and much has changed since then that is increasing the complexity of the principals’ and program coordinators’ work. While the Leadership for Literacy initiative provides focus, it also expects them to act more as instructional leaders (first order activities), requiring them to find ways to reduce, streamline or otherwise complete second order activity requirements more efficiently.
What does this say about my leadership? To address the workload and overload issue, I have identified the following:

- I will attempt to show through actions and articulate clearly and frequently that we are putting greater emphasis on results (namely reading achievement results now), and less on process indicators. I will exhibit less concern, for example, for how the community education (school improvement) plans are formatted or worded, and more concern for the expectation that improvement is happening. I will endeavour to revamp the principal evaluation process and criteria in line with the new Leadership for Literacy initiative and results. I need to ensure that this initiative begins to take off at the classroom level so that we can achieve excellence for all children;

- I will put the workload issue on the agenda of upcoming principals’ and regional coordinators’ meetings, and facilitate an activity whereby we brainstorm the things we have to do, then mark them as either first order or second order. We can then take the second order activities and have educational leaders work in groups of two or three to code each of the items as either drop (not important), downsize (less important) or delegate (important but…) with explanations. For example, for teacher evaluations they might choose to delegate and hire a clerk or contract a retired principal to set up the evaluation template with all the required teacher information, interview the principal using the section headings as guides, tape the conversation and then type up the first draft of the evaluation for the principal to edit and finalize. Aside from the possibility of dropping or reducing second order activities, this principals’ meeting process might prompt outside-the-box thinking and identify promising practices for work completion.

- I will continue to praise the achievements of principals to Council so that Council members and their respective local governing bodies (DEAs) understand the nature of the principals’ role with its proclivity to become overwhelming. The purpose here is to engender support for them and to ensure that Council do not inadvertently add unnecessary second order requirements. I will also encourage DEA alignment of pressure and support for the Council’s key Leadership for Literacy priority;

- I will again address the issue of staff work overload as a topic of discussion at superintendents’ meetings with the Department so that we might influence the nature of any new requirements that affect workloads and resources/funding. I will again ask for more adequate funding for secretarial positions. I may even ask what the consequences might be if staff evaluations are not completed or if annual reports are not submitted. Alternatively, I might test the waters by simply permitting exceptions and seeing what the consequences are (e.g., allowing a principal the option of not doing evaluations on competent staff who are within five years of retirement?); and,
• I will request other suggestions from others for ways to address staff work overload issues

Since participatory action research has demonstrated its potential both to open up ways in which administrators can break out of the rut of institutionalized, taken for granted routines, and to develop a sense of hope that strengths can be expanded and seemingly obstinate problems can be unravelled, I intend to continue this approach in a more informal manner.

**Can I really be a servant leader?**

How do I practice servant leadership at the same time as we are restructuring and increasing expectations with the Council's new Leadership for Literacy initiative, the related student achievement targets, and the Department's increasing second-order requirements? Is it possible, and if so, how do I frame servant leadership in this new context of accountability?

I have struggled with this question considerably. I have always leaned on the side of empowering governing bodies and staff, focusing my efforts more behind the scenes to assist organizations and individuals to achieve. For example, our current decentralized budgeting model permits education authorities to receive their portion of funding allocations and for respective principals to re-allocate funds and develop their staffing plans, as per their own determination of student needs, as long as it is within budget. Before the Council's very recent announcement of the new *Leadership for Literacy* initiative (reading achievement focus), schools were provided the time and authority to set their own goals largely uninfluenced by regional office. Regional priorities were also identified in a facilitated session of principals and regional coordinators. The resultant regional initiatives were established by a facilitator and representatives from each of the South Slave schools, who in turn decided themselves what strategies they would undertake to bring about the greatest support to our schools, teachers and ultimately students. I have always taken the approach that I am setting the framework for professionalism and collaboration, while permitting the professionals to determine priorities based on their collective understandings of the contexts, albeit with veto power when deemed necessary.

The servant leadership model presupposes a high degree of flexibility and independence on the part of the school and regional administrators and program coordinators. They must have the ability to act upon community concerns, respond to a changing context, and modify curriculum and programs to meet objectives. They also require the time to build the relationships required for school initiatives to succeed.
I would argue, however, that in this era of increasing accountability (i.e., time-consuming assessment and reviews, burdensome paperwork, expanding ministerial expectations and inflexible regulations and timetables, etc.), the ability to administer as a servant leader is dramatically diminished. Notwithstanding my desire to develop servant leadership and the obvious effectiveness that such a model would bring to our schools, the burdensome day-to-day constraints on administrators and coordinators counter their creativity, independence and flexibility. Although lip service was paid over the past decade to the importance of independence, flexibility, creativity, community input, and empowerment, the reality is that the more recent requirements of the job do not support this belief.

The new *Leadership for Literacy* initiative also requires a more structured and focused approach, with stronger expectations on everyone. This requires that, as Superintendent, I become more visible, attempting to inspire and motivate, but also needing to pull and prod from time to time. I will need to portray strong leadership and frequently ask the tough questions that address the relationship between existing structures and potential new ones that are more focused on Council targets. We will have to tighten up the linkages. For some this may be seen as top down impositions that are constraining and not recognizing the diversity within the region. This may generate some resistance to change, undermining behaviour, passive compliance, or the perception that the new initiative has caused a decrease in staff morale and an increase in staff turnover. These are the very things that can proliferate and breed negativity.

In consideration of these concerns and in light of my preferred leadership approach, I have concluded that to be a servant leader I have first to be servant to the needs of the children and the aspirations of the communities. When in conflict, the preferences and comforts of staff simply have to come second. In this case, the representative Council has spoken, and we must be responsive. My role is that of servant to the Council and the children. My role continues to be servant to the staff also, but in a secondary way. I can serve best by clarifying expectations, working to clear the way and providing the structures and supports for educators to collaborate as professionals and to achieve as best they can for our children. The strategies for how I address the workload issue are examples of how I can continue to be a servant to staffs in the process of maintaining high but better focused expectations for student achievement.

Accordingly, Deal and Peterson (1994) provide a perspective of how to merge and harmonize the seemingly conflicting aspects of these roles. They suggest:

> There is, however, another option: to accept the seemingly contradictory approaches as a paradox to be embraced and creatively addressed, not to see them as either-or choice to be made . . . When school principals or leadership teams attend to both administrative imperatives and the desire
to shape a meaningful school culture, high performing organizations are the predictable result. (pp. 9-10)

One thing is clear, I have two ears and one mouth and will need to use those in proportion, listening more than telling, as I constantly strive positively to influence morale and efforts toward the best possible learning outcomes for children.

For the South Slave Divisional Education Council (School Boards)

Grimmett, et al. (2008) correctly point out that their “ongoing research in Canada indicates that whether its influence is direct, indirect, intended or unintended, policy does shape educators’ discourse about the conditions of their work” (p. 102) Accordingly, the implications for school boards and departments or ministries relate mostly to policy and expectations at those levels that might be adjusted to serve schools and communities more effectively.

The Council needs to be persistent and resilient. In order to reduce the stresses of significant change on principals and staff, and to maximize coherence and benefits for students, the reading achievement focus should be maintained and funded first, before all other Council expenditures, for at least five years. It is now almost commonly recognized by educational leaders that significant change does not occur until an initiative has been in place for at least five years. This long term commitment will make it more difficult for resisters to choose to wait it out, and further lessens the impact of the potential implementation dip (Fullan, 2001) in performance and confidence, which often occurs at the beginning of a change initiative as educators engage in the learning and implementation of new skills and new understandings.

That said, education authorities that hire, develop, and supervise educational leaders are encouraged to be critically aware of the complexities of the role, and to consider candidates who have the kinds of skills and dispositions that empower and improve learning. We need also to be careful not to set policy that de-professionalizes teachers such that they are “monopolized by targets, standards, benchmarks, performance management, development planning, and market choices.” (Grimmett, 2008) While goals and targets are required, school boards need to consider strongly if increasing other accountability requirements from board, territorial or provincial levels are necessary, and in the right form. For example, Council could continue to publish regional student achievement results but need also to qualify them, reminding the public that this is just a snapshot-in-time, in just two subjects and with a particular grade of students, and that not all that is good and important can be measured. For example, school boards can take positions on matters that show support for their educational leaders and that also cause
the upper echelons to think twice before imposing more requirements, particularly of the second order variety.

I think we are going to find it harder to hire and retain quality administrators and coordinators due to the workload and the draw of potentially more desirable leadership positions elsewhere, namely in communities with more amenities (including housing), temperate climates, and greater anonymity. Almost every leader continues to put in extremely long hours in an effort to support the initiatives and improve student achievement. Hence, school boards need to find ways to support and to recognize directly and publicly the efforts and successes of their educational leaders and staff. Not only have boards’ accountability related reporting requirements increased substantially, the expectations of the various forces on the schools are proliferating (student demands, parent demands, school board demands, union unrest, labour relations issues, and so forth). Too often, the communications between board members and administrators (and between levels of the hierarchy) is focused solely on confronting, monitoring and correcting, which then tends to stifle initiative and increase second order activities. Efforts to focus on the positive and building on strengths—a more appreciative approach—is more conducive to promoting and sustaining improvement efforts, particularly where turnover is already high. This is not to say that school boards should not question or correct. They must be involved in setting the direction and challenging inappropriate decisions, but the focus should be more on the appreciative—“Trust, but verify” (Leroy Sloan, personal communication, 2006).

As a system and as a profession, educators and school boards are typically ineffectual at promoting all the good that is happening in schools. In fact, the conflicts in and between education authorities not only distracts and results in a sense of fragmentation and chaos, but also plays out negatively in the media, further demoralizing staff and causing the public to perceive the local education system as dysfunctional. This one focus alone, on accentuating the positive and asking questions (directly and in private, rather than confronting through the media) can make an important difference in the current perception and future success of schools. If staff members feel appreciated and motivated and the community sees and gains a sense of confidence in the school system, then dissension is diminished, staff retention is promoted, and student attendance potentially increased.

Finally, school boards are encouraged to take a role in working with school administrators in the organization of community education (school improvement) planning (CEP). When community representatives are not involved in the process, it is left up to the administrators and staff to develop the key goals and targets. In the NWT, and in the South Slave in particular, DEAs should consider setting up a small planning committee made up of the principal, a local education authority member or two, and
maybe a teacher, student, community government representative, and/or regional office representatives to sit and plan out the next CEP day, and then implement it collaboratively. This will portray a strong message to participants that we are working together and that we have a common direction. The results of the day are more likely to be synergistic and powerful for future action.

For Legislators and the Department of Education (Education Ministries)

Current and future legislators need to examine and reconsider the role of the school principal in light of the recognized and increasing accountability requirements and their responsibilities. Is it reasonable to expect that a school principal can be a servant leader and an instructional leader, ensuring a quality education is offered in the school through staff supervision and development (a traditional internal focus), in addition to being the chief executive officer (CEO) of the locally elected DEA, and a key facilitator of community development (an external focus)? This would not appear fully possible in smaller schools where principals teach full-time as well. If these increasing responsibilities continue to fall within the expectations of the school principal, adequate resources must be provided to allow them to be free of classroom responsibilities and to delegate some responsibilities to others who are also free from some classroom responsibilities. A minimum of a full-time secretary for each school, regardless of size, could provide the support needed to ease the burden of the increasing second order activities.

The corporate body relationship of school boards should be reviewed and clarified. The Education Act currently provides the same powers for community based district education authorities (DEAs) as it does for regional divisional education councils (DECs). The structure causes relationship ambiguity. In some cases the power struggles and infighting has contributed to the confusion and feelings of being overwhelmed as expressed by some school principals who say they do not know clearly to whom they report or how to deal with differences of opinion. In cases of conflict, principals are placed in the uncomfortable position of not knowing whether they should hold their primary allegiance to the local DEA or to the regional Council and superintendent. The current arrangement also provides for the possibility of school administrators to play one off against the other, intentionally or otherwise. Greater clarity of differences in roles and responsibilities would enhance relationships and allow for an increased focus on improving student learning.

Given the increasing complexity of the role of a school principal, and given the principals’ role in also developing and empowering the local governing body, it is recommended that the Government of the NWT continue to legislate the Principal Certification requirement for all NWT school principals (a 240-hour leadership program).
Conclusions from this research also provide implications for the future design of the NWT Educational Leadership Program. One idea for improving the program, and keeping up with change, would be to survey current principals every five years to determine the long-term benefits of the program and to solicit recommendations for improvements. The document School Leadership in the NWT: A Profile for the 90's (1993) is over 15 years old and in need of an update. Since this document serves as the conceptual framework for the Certificate Program, the document should be reviewed in light of new legislation and accountability requirements, and in consideration of the five themes that emerged from the participants’ review of school improvement factors in this study.

An important concern coming out of this research was voiced by school principals who were frustrated about recent territorial decisions that further restrict schools from meeting the educational needs of students. One is the lack of a suitable program that could be of benefit to the roughly 30% or more teenagers who drop out, are labelled failures and become a burden on society. A second is the recent categorization of existing annual allocations (subject to claw-back) that further restrict local determination of priorities to address student needs. Many issues might be solved if there were two clear streams of approach to graduation in the NWT. Many of our students struggle with an academic curriculum that is not tailored for a trades or apprenticeship pathway. The implication directed to legislators is to fast-track the development or adoption of alternate pathways to student success, and give the school boards the autonomy they need to provide the basic programming so that more students become contributing members of society.

Perhaps most importantly, similar to the actions taken in other provincial jurisdictions in Canada and in the South Slave, the Minister and Department are encouraged to consolidate and focus efforts on one or two key kindergarten to grade 12 priorities, rather than the scattering of initiatives and accountability requirements currently in place. It is recommended that they choose a key leverage point or target that promises to have the greatest possible impact in several areas for the benefit of student success. A focus with clear expectations for improved student literacy achievement results at the territorial level, for example, would prioritize efforts on strategies that impact the classroom, and would give strength to regional initiatives of a similar nature. A review of the research would help to find out what is working (e.g., word study, guided reading, shared reading, professional coaching for example), and then in-servicing school boards and schools based on this research would more likely infuse the most promising instructional practices in the classroom. An adoption or adaptation of curricula already available, and a reduced focus on developing new curriculum, would provide time for existing Departmental staff to focus on this instead. The Department could engage in a related territorial wide public relations campaign on the chosen focus, so that everyone in the NWT would know what the expectation was and could be part of the solution. This
approach might leverage further resources from a number of organizations willing to be part of the solution (government, industry, non-government foundation, and university research partnerships). Most importantly, if children can read, attendance may improve and behaviour problems decrease, and a higher percentage of students would have the crucial skills needed for success in school and throughout life. Fewer students would fall through the cracks, feel demoralized, and drop out, and community and voter confidence in the government and school system would improve.

Consistent with the results of this research that suggest prioritizing relationships and focus, the various service Departments—Education, Culture and Employment, Health and Social Services, Housing, and Justice—need to work together and with communities to provide greater support to families. Such staff issues as housing, social problems, the lack of specialist services, and the inability to share student information between departments and boards, exacerbate the personal concerns that staff and students bring to the classroom and that have a profound influence on their school performance. Some of these issues must be addressed for the well being of the students.

For School Principals, Regional Administrators and Program Coordinators

The major themes that emerged from the research and that informed the school improvement re-conceptualization suggest that principals and regional staff first consider the context of a particular region, community, and school before taking action of a substantial nature. While this may appear overly cautious, it is this approach primarily that minimizes the chances that the educational leader will inadvertently do something that might be culturally inappropriate. Our energies should be focused on strengthening relations between all partners in education and building better schools on the cultural foundation and the related strengths that are already in place. In fact, this approach based on building capacity and relationships may be the primary way to improve schools in northern, multi-cultural environments.

The fact that the context influences educational decision-making, and that administrators and program staff substantially shape culture within the region and schools, means that we simply must attend to it. Fullan (2005) argues that we need to ensure that there is purposeful interaction between and among individuals within and across systems through the use of lateral and vertical strategies. We need to ensure that we are part of a community interagency tasked with dealing with fundamental issues in local settings.

As we carry out our responsibilities as collaborative members of the team, it is essential that we be guided by core values, principles or standards of conduct such as respect, integrity, loyalty, advocacy, and commitment to growth—our moral and purposeful compass—and that those values become second nature to us as we interact and learn
together. These kinds of values apply to the network of collaborative teams within the region such as governing bodies, school staffs and committees. They transcend religious and cultural differences and express our common humanity and purpose. These values also affirm our dignity, promote the development and welfare of individuals while also serving the common good. They form the basis of good character, create caring communities and serve as key leverage points as we seek to achieve our mission, and work effectively to provide quality educational services to our students, while maintaining and strengthening the support of our communities.

Like a well-functioning family, each member of the team—regional office staff, principals and school staff, partners—should strive to build the team and show kindness and compassion for others at all levels of the organization. We are more likely to achieve our mission, in part, through an inclusive and caring network of productive teams. It is important that care for others (board members, staff, students, parents) is demonstrated on a daily basis as we carry out our work, not because others deserve or merit it, but because it is our nature and our business to be concerned about the welfare of others. By modelling cooperation, care and concern for others throughout the organization, we speak volumes, not only to each other but also to the hundreds of students and families whom we serve.

A related and important quality of effective people is that they maintain a positive attitude. They are optimists as opposed to pessimists or negative talkers. I understand that emotional intelligence research has shown that inserting an optimist into a group changes the tone and productivity of the group for the better. Allowing negativity to be expressed about students, parents or community should not go unchecked. Neutrality is not good enough here. If we are negative or deceitful, we destroy our commitment to these values, our relationships, the perceptions others have of our organization and our likelihood of success in achieving our mandate. Negativity and deception should not be tolerated by anyone in the system, and action should be taken immediately by leaders to correct such behaviour.

Educational leaders tend to be people who are driven to succeed. It is a challenge to focus efforts on just a few key priorities when everything else seems just as important. The evidence of this research suggests that the scattered approach—an inch deep and a mile wide—is not effective at improving schools. School and regional leaders need to be diligent in collectively setting priorities and then holding everyone accountable for results in those areas. With carefully selected priorities and a long-term commitment to results (several years), improvements will be seen in those and related areas. Small wins will be visible, which in turn motivates partners—successes have many parents (failures are orphans)—and the related synergy brings about more widespread pride and improvements not only in the school but also within the community.
Once a primary focus has been chosen, such as literacy (reading and numeracy) and social responsibility as recently chosen in the South Slave, the school improvement model provides the infrastructural elements—multi-level alignment, professional learning communities, and assessment for, as and of learning—within which school improvement can develop most effectively.

Accordingly, education leader practitioners need to continue to recognize that many people in and outside the school can provide leadership. As Barth (1990) dreams, “I would readily work in a school that could be described as a community of leaders, where students, teachers, parents, and administrators share the opportunities and responsibilities for making decisions that affect all the occupants of the schoolhouse”. (p. 9) This is the essence of multi-level alignment and professional learning communities.

Region and school administrators are wise to continue to engage themselves and their staff on effective teams. Professional learning communities (PLCs) may be as simple as subject or grade level groupings of just two or three staff viewing themselves as participatory action-researchers, collecting and reviewing student assessment data, setting short term instructional goals or targets, selecting research-based strategies for implementation over a period of six weeks, re-assessing and celebrating small wins. This approach is more likely to work because it honours the professionalism of teachers, maximizes their learning, and garners improved student achievement results that, in turn, further motivate the team.

The way to be successful these days is through networking and partnerships for mutual benefit, with educational partners including students, parents, community leaders, businesses, industry, agencies, pre-school and post-secondary institutions, and so forth. Accordingly, whether facilitating a shared vision, chairing a meeting, or modelling or guiding a smaller PLC, educational leader practitioners in multi-cultural environments need to develop their facilitation skills if they are going to be successful in coordinating group processing and collective school improvement efforts. Without effective team facilitation, well-intended initiatives at all levels are more likely to spin wheels and frustrate participants.

In order to prioritize strategies that impact the classroom, PLCs at all levels of the organization might incorporate professional book studies. Leadership teams might begin a book study of this research dissertation, Greenleaf’s (1977, 1996) servant leadership model, or Fullan’s (1991, 2006) educational change literature. Barth (1990) and Sergiovanni (1994) both wrote about building communities of leaders in education, which has become the more specific and refined professional learning communities described by Dufour et al (2005).
Coinciding with our workload and Ball’s first and second order activities, Marzano, Waters et al (2005), in their meta-analysis, *School leadership that works: From research to results*, provide a similar distinction of leadership for first order change and for more substantive second order changes. They propose selecting the right work, identifying the order of magnitude implied by the selected work, and matching the right management style to the order of magnitude of the change initiative. That might be a good book for our principals and program coordinators to study.

It is also recommended that education leaders aspiring to be effective in the NWT, make an effort to read Chambers (1983), McKnight (1995), and Ross (1992) who all speak to the importance of valuing the contributions local people can make to the education system. McKnight in particular, advocates the utilization and development of community resources, and Ross speaks specifically to the ethics of aboriginal peoples and how outsiders usually misinterpret their actions. School staff might prioritize the study of Marzano, Pickering, et al.’s (2001) meta-analysis, *Classroom instruction that works: Research based strategies for increasing student achievement*. Given the regional focus on reading achievement, PLCs might consider Allington’s, *What really matters for struggling readers: Designing research-based programs* (2001) or a series of shorter articles in recognition of the work overload issue.

Finally, school principals and regional staff need to re-evaluate what is truly important to school improvement in light of the shared vision, and to communicate that effectively and repeatedly. Change is happening around us and the pace of the changes that we aim for can sometimes be negated by the vicissitudes of life that confront our work. Ideas for change and critical refinement are more likely to be forthcoming when partners know and are continually reminded and engaged in decision making about what they collectively want to accomplish. By seeing the bigger picture, partners are more inclined to take concrete steps rather than being content or concerned with less important matters. Educational leaders, who are able to focus on first order activities (Ball) that impact teaching and learning, are more likely to guide partners to focus on their first order activities as well, so that real change is more likely to be achieved.

**For Further Research**

While there are numerous options for further research related to the process and outcomes of this study, consideration of further research is limited herein to the following areas: extending this research; honouring the results in both choice of participants and methodology; checking for reliability with the results of this research or a similar conceptual framework in other communities and school contexts; and engaging in more specific school case studies and multi-case comparisons in order to validate the results of this study or to further re-conceptualize school improvement.
Extensions of This Study

It was during the data collection phase of this research that I first thought about further extending these complementary and iterative cycles of school improvement and action research to the next cycle. Since school improvement is a process, extension activities to this research might include engaging these same participants in further activity where the brainstormed school improvement categories are combined and refined for clarity. It would add to the analysis and the potential for improvement outcomes if there were further discussion and elaboration on how each of the most effective school improvement themes or categories identified are best implemented in northern, multi-cultural contexts.

Another option for extension of this research might be to look at each individual school’s improvement efforts separately. Having the principals (and staff and other partners) outline and assess all they have done or are doing in each of the identified school improvement categories might provide some clarity or refinement to the conceptual framework determined herein. This approach would also allow school-based participants to join in the celebration of accomplishments and direction to date, rather than to generate negative reactions to those and other changes. This school-specific and appreciative approach would also honour the outcomes of this research, suggesting that context makes a difference and staying positive is foundational to improving schools.

As a longitudinal extension of this research, further analysis might reflect on the extent to which the key multi-linked components of effective leadership and effective research were adopted and realized. For example, participant researchers might examine whether they were persuaded by this research to change their practices, and whether those changes appear to have had a beneficial effect on the practitioners themselves, their colleagues, or their students. Were the participants open to change and free to try out creative solutions, or were they constrained by organizational norms or reluctant colleagues and school boards?

Multi-case Comparisons

This research recognized the diverse contexts within which schools are situated. Each community and school is different from the next. For the research to be specific to a particular community or communities, further efforts could take the form of within-case and comparative multi-case approaches, allowing for the comparison of strategies and successes, or otherwise, between the various school improvement efforts. The researcher(s) could make note of differences in the multiple site determinations of means (planning) and ends (outcomes), and the various reasons for those differences. Additional detailing of one or more of the specific settings and various participants might provide for descriptive richness and deeper analysis of themes or issues. Research might be
forthcoming that is more focussed on finding possible differences in the effectiveness of school improvement efforts in different size communities or schools serving different demographic enrolments.

**Involving Other Partners**

This study was based on the assumption that school principals, regional administrators and program coordinators are key to school improvement. Given that this research highlighted the importance of understanding context, and building and sustaining relationships, future studies might focus on the involvement of other partners in education—different stakeholder groups in the community—such as teachers, students, parents, elders or education authority and community leaders who represent the views of the majority of the community members. Future studies might also focus on a single community and a cross section of that community’s stakeholders. The role of the school context and the relationships within and between levels, and between different stakeholder groups could provide insights into the factors that contribute to or hinder school improvement.

The research could be undertaken with participants in such a way that it engages relationship building with educational partners in the process. Participatory action research that uses facilitative processes is likely to stimulate authentic engagement and meaningful interpretations of the multitude of perceptions of the contexts and the way things are and could be.

The history of northern education is rife with examples of seemingly logical decisions that had a negative impact on children and their relationships with their families and their heritage (e.g., sending them off to residential schools, permitted to speak English only, corporal punishment, suspensions in response to truancy). Future research efforts might:

- identify school population characteristics and prevailing attitudes toward school improvement efforts,
- determine the extent to which students and their parents have been and are currently involved and committed to a school improvement process, and/or
- identify obstacles in the way of effective and ongoing school improvement, and strategies to overcome them in small, northern, multi-cultural communities.

**Cultural Sensitivity**

In consideration of the cultural heritage and communication styles of local people be they students, parents, elected officials, or elders, attempts need to be made to utilize research methodology that is culturally sensitive. If elders are to be involved, for example,
research methods that honour the traditional method of conversation and storytelling may be more appropriate and relationship building than impersonal questionnaires, surveys or structured question and answer interviews. Ethnographic research and interpretations of storytelling might be a suitable method of research about school improvement efforts with this group of stakeholders, since storytelling has been their preferred method of communications over the years. The results of this research suggest a more qualitative and participatory and/or servant approach to the research may be appropriate.

Testing the Conceptual Framework

The pace of change and the diversity of contexts suggest that knowledge obtained under one set of educational arrangements may be invalid under another. Both the effective schools and school improvement research databases agree that we need to find more contextually specific school strategies where we tailor the nature of the improvement efforts to the current cultures and contexts of individual schools. Ineffective schools, for example, are not opposites of effective schools but are distinct and require unique interventions for improvement.

Similarly, the results of this research—the re-conceptualization of leadership for improving Northern schools—needs to be tested to see if it can be effectively extrapolated to other community schools and jurisdictions. Further research could utilize this conceptual framework to assess the extent to which the model is being implemented and what impact it and related efforts may be having on school improvement efforts in this and in other contexts.

This study highlights concerns about workload, issues about social problems affecting schools, and the importance of context and relationships. Although the study concludes that servant leadership is the model in which to aspire for effective administration in multi-cultural jurisdictions and schools, there may be preconditions to allow this leadership style to be successful. Analyzing the leadership styles from the vantage point of these preconditions would be worthy of further examination. I recently came across a conceptual model for extending and deepening our understanding of school improvement or educational change as Fullan (1991, 1998, 2001) and Hargreaves (1998) designate. Hargreaves (1998) identifies four areas—similar to those identified in this research—where extending and deepening our understanding of educational change can strengthen how we think about change and deal with it in action:

- Chaos and complexity — educational change in a world of chaos and complexity, and as a process that is complex and chaotic itself;
- Context — the societal change forces which drive educational change, and the ways that educators understand and respond to them;
· **Politics** – the political factors that shape the purposes of educational change; and,

· **Emotions** – the emotional aspects of learning, teaching and leading and how these can guide or divert educational change agendas.

Hargreaves' model could be used as a preliminary framework for data collection, analysis and interpretation.

As observed in this study, participatory action research tends to result in a call for further action, empowering the researcher and the respective school leaders and policy makers to explore policy changes in support of ongoing and effective school improvement, and the continuation and expansion of participatory action research and data-based decision-making approaches to local issues of teaching and learning. Regardless of the research topic, I argue that participatory action research, implemented in a facilitative and empowering manner, would garner important benefits to collegial relationships and to jurisdictional and school improvements. School board administrators, school principals and researchers would benefit from asking parents, teachers, students and other stakeholders questions such as: What dreams do parents have for their children? What are the learning needs of students? What are the professional needs of teachers? What are the societal needs of the community? What are the values this organization should hold in the future? Or, What are the two or three most important things we should be trying to improve? Just asking these kinds of questions of stakeholders raises awareness, stimulates discussion, and further focuses and educates people. Finally, sharing the results stimulates more discussion and education, the valuable bi-product and synergy of community schools. For this reason, participatory action research should be encouraged in all schools and jurisdictions.

**CONCLUSION**

Advocating for a group of eight school principals and seven regional office administrators and program coordinators, this research endeavoured to determine what is central to school improvement in the diverse multi-cultural contexts of communities in the South Slave region of the Northwest Territories in northern Canada. The analysis and interpretation included an evaluative comparison of the jurisdictional approaches perceived to have had the greatest impact on school improvement, in a northern multi-cultural context. This collaborative and integrated interpretation of the data helped to crystallize the lessons learned.

Four key themes emerged from this research in response to the research question: **Focus** is needed, **Relationships** matter, **Context** is critical, and **Servant Leadership** supersedes transformational leadership. As further validated by the participants, a graphic re-
conceptualization of how to improve schools was provided. In short, the foundational components of context, relationships and focus underpin the other key strategic elements: servant leadership, multi-level alignment, professional learning communities and assessment.

The interpretations of data collected from participants in this participatory action research study, combined with the related literature review, indicate that the ideal approach to educational leadership and school improvement in small, multi-cultural settings includes a servant leadership approach inclusive of the strengthening of local and multi-level professional learning communities and data-based decision making. Participants advocate strongly for a clear focus and commitment to results, while prioritizing strategies that positively impact on the classroom. This study encourages us to respond to context specific student needs and community aspirations by developing and sustaining relationships and trust, focusing on the positive, and engendering professionalism and teamwork among all school partners. Directing efforts and public resources in this way provides for the best possible education of the students as well as the development of the community. This is the kind of educational leadership that contributes to the improvement of self, students, schools, staff, parents and community.

Implications for further research and for policy and practice of the superintendent, school board, department and other educational leaders are overlapping and can be summed up similarly. In an ideal northern, multi-cultural education system, educational leaders, at all levels of the education system (politicians, bureaucrats, teachers, parents, students) can energize school improvement efforts and maximize student achievement results by:

- viewing themselves as servant to all other partners (relationships, servant leadership);
- reinforcing, consistently, the principles for learning and working together (relationships) such as caring, respect, integrity, loyalty, advocacy, and commitment to growth (professional learning communities);
- utilizing a collaborative and appreciative model of inquiry to determine and extend what is working in here and out there (action research, assessment, professional learning communities, multi-level alignment);
- facilitating/contributing to a shared vision of the best possible future (context, servant leadership, focus, multi-level alignment); and,
- choosing a few key priorities (focus, multi-level alignment) collaboratively (professional learning communities), with carefully selected strategies (research-based) and a commitment to results (assessment, participatory action research).

As I come to a close in the writing of this dissertation I feel it should be repeated that the results of this study are not put forward as representation of the opinions of all school
principals, regional administrators and program coordinators, in all small, northern, multi-cultural communities. Stanfield (1997) best articulates what has happened in this kind of research:

While each piece of participant data can be assumed to be valid, no piece is the whole picture. Everyone has a piece of the puzzle, but the whole picture comes together through hearing and understanding all the perspectives. There are always conflicts, as people fail to understand each other's perspectives and experiences. This [study] is predicated on the possibility that any group can arrive at a common understanding. Whether that understanding is precisely true and complete is a matter of opinion. For that group, at that time the understanding they arrive at is appropriate wisdom. It is temporarily the truth for them. Truth is not set in concrete, forever immovable. It is a moving target, an evolving construct. (p. 36)

I believe there is hope for greater success in our schools as a result of the comprehensive and multi-level approaches of the current school improvement movement. I feel, and participants of this study agree, that using the re-conceptualized model for school improvement described herein, can help to overcome the history of perceived educational failure and despair and can result in a more accountable cycle of educational change and improvement in the diversity of northern schools and jurisdictions.

One way to judge the quality of research is to consider the question, "Did colleagues and clients derive a lasting benefit from the research project?" In the final analysis, this research and the resulting school improvement model helps to refocus efforts to parallel the wisdom of the monk in the parable articulated at the outset of this dissertation. We now know better which strategies are merely "pulling out belongings" and which are the foundations that can empower and sustain school improvement efforts and outcomes in turbulent times.
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
SSDEC Policy AD – Vision, Mission and Journey

The South Slave Divisional Education Council is committed to a philosophy of education which is built upon a foundation of enabling communities, District Education Authorities (DEAs), schools, staff members, and parents assist students to reach their potential. Student achievement is at the heart of everyone’s work at the South Slave Divisional Education Council and is the common thread connecting the Council’s vision, mission, beliefs and values.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VISION</th>
<th>The Vision statement describes our vision of education in a perfect world with no restrictions.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>All individuals reach their educational potential</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MISSION</td>
<td>The Mission is a broad statement describing the purpose of the Council.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The South Slave Divisional Education Council strives to prepare students to create their futures.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMMON ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDINGS</td>
<td>Common Essential Understandings are our fundamental educational beliefs and values that provide a foundation for the mission and intended outcomes, and through which educational decision-making is filtered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We believe:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Education must begin with the child and build upon the foundations of culture, heritage and language;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Parents are the child’s first teachers; The education of children is a shared responsibility of parents, teachers and the students themselves;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. All children can learn in a caring and nurturing environment;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Education must develop knowledge, skills and attitudes in the physical, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual growth of the student;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Education should be student-centered, balanced, integrated, process oriented, and interactive;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Education must be publicly accountable and should involve multiple partnerships within each community;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Quality education depends on effective board governance, fiscal responsibility, recruitment and retention of the best possible staff;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Effective decision-making requires cooperation, open communications, and respect for each other’s opinions;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Decision-making must be premised on what is in the best interest of the education of the children.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
KEY INTENDED OUTCOMES

1. Students have access to a continuum of programming appropriate to needs.
2. Recruit and retain dedicated and qualified staff.
3. Funding is maximized for staff development and program development and delivery.
4. Parents/guardians are welcome and active participants in their child’s education.
5. Enhance partnerships for the benefit of students.
6. Provide a safe and healthy educational environment.
7. Enhance internal and external communications.
8. Funding is commensurate with program needs.

Intended outcomes are derived from the mission statement and lay the groundwork for the determination of priorities and related scope of activities of the Council and its staff (journey).

In fulfilling its mandate for kindergarten through grade twelve education in the South Slave, the Council is guided by applicable legislation and its philosophy of education. Flowing from the Council’s mission, vision, common essential understandings, and key intended outcomes are the Council’s regional priorities and workplans, the DEAs/schools’ community education plans, and individual staffs’ growth plans.

- Regional Priorities and Workplans and Community (School) Education Plans are developed and updated by staff in consultation with our partners in education. They include goals, strategic objectives, and workplans defining who (responsibility), will do what (specific actions), by when (timeline), at what cost, and to what end (expected outcomes). As school and regional priority development and implementation are considerable undertakings, the Council recognizes that improvement efforts such as these must be committed to and sustained for at least 3 to 5 years to make significant change.

- Growth Plans are developed by each staff member annually, in consideration of identified areas needing improvement as well as the school and regional priorities, subject to the approval of their immediate supervisors.

Reference: Education Act s. 22, 25, 33, 45, 69, 117.

Education Act, South Slave Divisional Education Council Regulations s. 5

Date: June 2005
SSDEC Policy ADA – Principles for Working and Learning Together

The culture of an organization can be summed up as ‘the way we do things around here.’ An organization is functional and more effective when its relationships and ‘way of doing things’ are morally good and consistent with its official directions and stated purposes. The values of an educational organization and its leadership team are those that are lived out every day in interactions with each other, with students, with parents and with other partners in education. The South Slave Divisional Education Council (SSDEC) aspires to develop an ethical culture within our education system that seeks and develops principled leadership. Recognizing that all that we do ultimately affects the development, achievements and lives of our students, the SSDEC and its District Education Authorities (DEAs) and staff are committed to positively modelling five underlying and virtuous principles or values for effectively working and learning together:

**Respect**
Respect is a unifying and universal value often separated into respect for self, for others and for property or for the environment. With regard to working and learning together, respect is showing that we value others by treating them in a courteous and considerate way. We must be mindful of the dignity and rights of all persons, even those whose beliefs and behaviours differ from our own. Respect is an essential component of all relationships and also implies empathy (identifying with and feeling other people’s concerns), conscience (knowing the right and decent way to act) and self-control (regulating our thoughts and actions so that we act the way we know is right). Respect always points towards collaboration rather than confrontation, and it is shown through the patterns of communication and relationships developed between and among people. This value is the characteristic of choosing to be open-minded, acting in a just and fair way and appreciating and honouring diversity.

**Integrity**
Integrity is the quality of possessing and steadfastly adhering to high moral principles or professional standards. It is the characteristic of being fair, just, truthful and morally upright, accepting responsibility for personal decisions and actions and responding to challenges with courage (doing the right thing even if it’s not popular). It is an absence of falsehood. For example, when we make a mistake, we should be the first in line to discuss it—full disclosure is made even when it would cast oneself in a bad light or would bring some negative consequence to bear on oneself. It is essential that we have full disclosure within the chain of command so that our time is spent working together as a team to solve the problems that are identified. We all will fall short of the high expectations held of us at some time. It is not fatal to err, and it is tremendously important that we operate with honesty in our dealings with one another through the chain of command.
Loyalty -
Most codes of ethics refer to the common definition of loyalty that is, if you have a
conflict or disagreement with someone else in the organization, you go directly to that
individual or to the individual in the chain of command who can solve the problem rather
than gossiping or complaining to others.

The second aspect to loyalty is the concept of ambassadorship. It is essential that each
member of the team strive to be a positive ambassador for the schools, communities and
division. Allowing untruths to be expressed about the organization or people in it should
not go unchecked. Neutrality is also not good enough. This stance does not mean that we
ignore our shortcomings. It is extremely important that we address any negatives within
our organization and bring solutions so that we can improve. We cannot expect the
citizens to think well of our schools, have confidence in the services we are providing and
be willing to provide support, if we are permitting either untruths or shortcomings to
perpetuate. We depend increasingly on the positive support of local governing bodies,
volunteers, partnerships and our parent community. It is important that our optimism and
our successes are relayed to our community and that we clarify our shortcomings and let
our communities know we are prepared to do something about them. These actions show
loyalty to purpose.

Commitment to Growth -
Effective organizations have the responsibility and the capacity to learn and grow. They
are proactive, intentional and relentless in their pursuit of excellence. A great deal of
research, literature and practice has focused on the creation of research-driven and data­
based professional learning communities that are required in effective organizations not
only to keep pace with the speed of change, but to improve further. It is important that we
internalize the concept that 'we always want to improve,' and that we are constantly
seeking ways, collectively, to improve our schools and better meet the needs of our
students:

It's All about Learning
All Learning
Learning for All

This value and our motto Creating Futures both speak to an intent to improve not only
our schools and students, but to improve ourselves professionally and personally also.
Perhaps one of the most difficult things to change is ourselves; our personal habits, our
character or our attitudes. However, change must start within each of us, members of the
team each personally being prepared to make individual changes to make us more
effective and to ensure that we better serve our clients collectively. In its simplest form,
this value means we have the capacity to strive to improve, whether that improvement is
to say "I am sorry" or "I was wrong", to search to see the other person's point of view or
to accept personal responsibility for fixing the problem, not the blame.

Advocacy -
There is no organization that has affected us more than the one we first experienced, our
family. Like a well-functioning family, it is desired that each member of the team strive
to build the team and show kindness and caring for other team members. Our mission statement and motto, Creating Futures, suggest that we will achieve our mission, in part, through an inclusive and caring network of productive teams. It is important that care for others (board members, staff, students, parents) is demonstrated on a daily basis as we carry out our work, not because others deserve or merit it, but because it is our nature and our business to be concerned about the welfare of others. By modeling cooperation, care and concern for others up, down and across the organization, we speak volumes, not only to each other but to the hundreds of students and families whom we serve.

A related and important quality of effective people is that they maintain a positive attitude. They are optimists as opposed to pessimists or negative talkers. Emotional intelligence research has shown that inserting an optimist into a group changes the tone and productivity of the group for the better, while inserting a pessimist or a negative talker accomplishes the opposite. Allowing negativity to be expressed about students, parents or community should not go unchecked. Neutrality is not good enough here. If we are negative or deceitful, we destroy our commitment to these values, our relationships, the perceptions others have of our organization and our likelihood of success in achieving our mandate. Negativity and deception should not be tolerated by anyone in the system, and action should be taken immediately by any one of us to correct negative and deceptive behaviour.

As we carry out our responsibilities as collaborative members of the team, it is essential that we be guided by the above core values, principles or standards of conduct—our moral and purposeful compass—and that they become second nature to us as we interact and learn one with another. These basic values transcend religious and cultural differences and express our common humanity and purpose. These values also affirm our dignity, promote the development and welfare of individuals while also serving the common good, and they inform our rights and responsibilities. They form the basis of good character, create caring communities and serve as key leverage points as we seek to achieve our mission and work effectively to provide quality educational services to our students, while maintaining and strengthening the support of our communities.

- This set of overlapping values for working and learning together is not intended to be all-inclusive.
- The values espoused here apply to the network of collaborative teams within the region such as governing bodies, school staffs and committees.
The South Slave Divisional Education Council believes the key to an effective school is an ongoing school improvement process which the school principal coordinates with the DEA, the school staff and students, and other school partners. This process involves the identification of priorities based on agreed program and operational strengths and needs. Updated annually, a Community School Education Plan includes goals, action items, responsibilities, timeline and expected outcomes.

A Community School Education Planning process of setting priorities and building consensus toward a shared vision of the best possible future can be as much if not more valuable than the actual completed and implemented plan. A well facilitated process should result in the following benefits:

- provides focus – by identifying and anticipating needs, then monitoring plans... keeps people focused on what is really important—a move from a reactive posture (continually responding to issues) to a proactive posture (setting priorities, actively anticipating issues)
- builds relationships - brings community and the school closer together as staff, students, DEA members and other partners work cooperatively
- achieves consensus - keeps everyone in agreement in contrast to the polarizing effects of voting
- gives opportunity for community ownership - everyone is empowered by the same information... collaboration moves power out from the few in the know... every community is different... planning is likely to be more relevant and effective when done by people closest to the students and school (rather than by Divisional Councilor principals alone)...
- by publishing them, it tells everyone and holds everyone accountable, to what the priorities are and who is doing what to address them
- provides a basis for staff individual development plans and staff evaluation
- provides continuity in school programs even with staff changes
- assists the South Slave Divisional Education Council to develop a set of goals and an agenda that builds on and supports the priorities of its DEAs and schools.

REGULATIONS

The community school education planning process:

1. Should include a process of consultation and discussion with the DEA, the staff and students and other school partners. This process may include questionnaires, meetings, open houses, radio shows, written submissions, home visits, class teas, or any other strategies determined by the DEA and the school principal to encourage input and develop public support.
2. Should include a review of the aspects of the school operation and program which are working well, and identification of those areas which require improvement to ensure students are receiving the best possible education.

3. Should include a review of all relevant school and DEA documents such as previous school goals, minutes of DEA meetings, community concerns sent to the Council, and so forth.

4. Should reflect a commitment to finding creative solutions by forming working partnerships within the community, with businesses, and with various agencies, to achieve school goals.

5. Two days will be set aside each year in each community for the education planning process. These two days will be used for goal and action plan development and revision, and review of progress towards achieving goals and action plans. These two days may incorporate or may also serve as the Annual General Meeting of the District Education Authority. The two days will be built into the annual school calendar and will typically be scheduled in the winter and late spring so that the plan is in place for the coming school year—Time can be taken in a variety of ways, split—one in the winter, one in the spring, or 4 half days, and could also involve evening sessions.

6. Action plans will identify how the goals will be addressed over the school year, who will be responsible for carrying out various parts of the plan, a timeline for when those actions will be complete, identification of anticipated costs, if any, and expected outcomes.

7. Will result in a *Community School Education Plan* using the common SSDEC approved format.

8. Will include submission of the completed or updated plan to the SSDEC office by May 31st of each year to assist the Council in its work with principals, schools and DEAs, regardless of staff turnover, in the following school year, and to help guide planning at the Council level.

The process and level of consultation may not be as intense in every school and community each year. Subsequent years of a three year plan, for example, may simply require further efforts to review, update and carry on with implementation.

The Council will provide assistance to each DEA and principal, as possible given human and fiscal resources, to develop the Education Plan. This support will include facilitation training opportunities for school administrators and sharing of each community’s education plans with other communities.

Reference: Education Act 117 (1), (D), (O), (P), (Q), (S), (F), (G), 118 (f), (g)
Date: January 2001
APPENDIX B
Informed Consent Script

**Topic – School Leadership in the Canadian North: A Case Study of School Improvement in the South Slave Divisional Education Council**

As you are aware, as an educator in the NWT and a Doctoral student in the Educational Administration program at Simon Fraser University, I have undertaken to complete a research study here in the South Slave. I have spoken to most of you already about my Doctoral studies and consulted with several of you as to how and where I might go with my research.

The project I am considering is one that I hope will be of benefit to schools, divisions, the Department of Education, Culture & Employment, educational leaders and policy makers, and ultimately, the students, parents and communities served.

I am at the stage now of having drafted my proposal and research license and ethics approval applications. I am now looking to secure participants by informing you of the purpose and methodology, and hopefully obtaining your individual consent to participate in this research. Coming around is a description of the purpose and methodology of this study for your review.

Attached also is a Consent Form that I sincerely hope that you will consider signing as indication of your agreement to participate in this study. Please don't feel pressured to sign if you wish not to. There will be no repercussions or hard feelings. If you do choose to participate, please be assured that you have the ability to withdraw of the study at any time, and that every effort will be made to minimize additional workload and to protect your identity.

You can sign and submit your consent form and/or pull me aside anytime in the next few days to discuss any questions or concerns you might have.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.
Research Proposal Abstract

School Leadership in the Canadian North: A Case Study of School Improvement in the South Slave Divisional Education Council

The South Slave Divisional Education Council serves the educational needs of Kindergarten through grade 12 students in 5 very diverse communities of the Northwest Territories (NWT) in northern Canada. Although the regional office serves just 1800 students in 8 schools, the related limitation in personnel and resources, the significant distance between communities, the 5 official languages, and the 4 separate aboriginal self-government negotiations currently underway within or overlapping the region, make it a complex and often turbulent expanse.

Although decades of school improvement efforts and research are available to us, there remains little in the way of definitive research as to how to improve schools anywhere, let alone schools as faraway and exceptional as those found in the South Slave region of the NWT. Meanwhile, growing demand for accountability is resulting in increasingly wide spread, politically driven and educationally questionable strategies and measures.

The purpose of this study is to explore strategies that are most likely to empower and sustain effective school improvement planning efforts and outcomes. This research endeavors to determine what kinds of approaches in a participatory process emerge as having impact on school improvement in diverse multi-cultural contexts. More specifically, this study intends to identify and compare which ‘effective schools characteristics’, ‘school improvement approaches’, and ‘educational leadership strategies’ are perceived by school and regional education leaders (namely school principals and regional program staff) to be most effective at promoting school improvement and maximizing learning for all.

The proposed research design consists of a participatory action research (PAR) multi-case study of school improvement efforts in the South Slave region of the NWT. The methodology engages the researcher/practitioner working with participant school principals and regional program staff to collate, articulate and assess a synthesis of effective schools, school improvement and educational leadership research, in light of the unique contexts and a number of strategies used to date in the NWT and South Slave region and schools.

The potential outcome of this research includes a building on and re-conceptualization of school improvement theory in the unique multi-cultural contexts within which many schools are situated. In addition to generating knowledge, this study should also stimulate further leadership capacity and school improvement throughout the region. Being just one
part of an ongoing cycle of school improvement planning and implementation, the research and results of this study are expected to transform participants as well as the context, and further empower and guide educational leaders in terms of how best to focus future energies and resources.
Informed Consent Form

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

INFORMED CONSENT BY SUBJECTS TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT OR EXPERIMENT

The University and those conducting this project subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of subjects. This form and the information it contains are given to you for your own protection and full understanding of the procedures. Your signature on this form will signify that you have received a document that describes the procedures, possible risks, and benefits of this research project, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information in the document, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the project.

Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent permitted by law. Knowledge of your identity is not required. You will not be required to write your name or any other identifying information on the research materials. Materials will be held in a secure location and will be destroyed after the completion of the study. However, it is possible that, as a result of legal action, the researcher may be required to divulge information obtained in the course of this research to a court or other legal body.

Having been asked by Curtis Brown, a Doctoral student of the Faculty of Education, Graduate Programs of Simon Fraser University to participate in a research project experiment, I have read the procedures specified in the document.

I understand the procedures to be used in this experiment and the personal risks to me in taking part.

I understand that I may withdraw my participation in this experiment at any time without prejudice.

I also understand that I may register any complaint I might have about the experiment with the researcher named above or with the Dean of Graduate Programs, Faculty of Education Department of Simon Fraser University.

I may obtain copies of the results of this study, upon its completion, by contacting Curtis Brown, PO Box 958, Fort Smith, NT, X0E 0P0 (867) 872-2115

I have been informed that the research material will be held confidential by the Principal Investigator.

I agree to participate as a participant and subject of the 2007 research titled, School Leadership in the Canadian North: A Case Study of School Improvement in the South Slave Divisional Education Council as described in the attached proposal abstract.

NAME (please type or print legibly): ________________________________

ADDRESS: ______________________________________________________

SIGNATURE: __________________ WITNESS: _________________________

DATE: ________________ ONCE SIGNED, A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM AND A SUBJECT FEEDBACK FORM SHOULD BE PROVIDED.
Individual Interview Checklist

School Improvement Brainstorm & Rating

- What might you change (re-order, delete, add)?
- What might this be telling you about where you might better focus your efforts?
- What might this be telling us as to where we might better focus our regional efforts?
Confidential Feedback Request

School Leadership in the Canadian North:  
A Case Study of School Improvement in the South Slave Divisional Education Council

Good news, this is the last step for you in this school(s) improvement research study…

Attached is my draft of the collated data, analysis and conclusions of the research we undertook earlier this year. As this is a participatory action research study, it is important that I consider/include your thoughts in the analysis and conclusions (not just the data collection as in more traditional research studies). The attached draft is in the form:

- title page and table of contents  
  just to give you an idea of the contents and where these chapters fit in the dissertation. (If interested, I’d be happy to share the drafts of the other chapters as well for your comments. Regardless, I will make the entire final thesis available to you upon completion.)

- chapter 6 – Presentation of the Data  
  FYI, I have yet to interview a few of you. Virtually all comments have been included from the submissions/interviews to date. I’ve included everything because I think it important for you to see and be able to reflect on the more raw data. That said, in finalizing this chapter I am expected to include fewer quotes (the more informative/salient ones) and to provide more commentary between them.

- chapter 7 – Findings and Interpretations  
- chapter 8 – Conclusions and Implications  
  note that I left a few sections blank at this time as your comments would be of particular value in this regard (implications for principals and program coordinators, conclusions)

I have provided some thought starters below for your consideration:

Chpt 6  
  o What other commentary might you provide given what the data shows?

Chpt 7  
  o Have I captured what the data is saying? Suggestions?

Chpt 8  
  o What think of the implications section in particular (most of the rest is just summary of the earlier chapters),
  o Does this look like logical next steps for the superintendent? SSDEC? policy?
  o Any thoughts on what the implications are for principals and program coordinators?
  o Are there any questions that should be addressed that haven’t been?

Please don’t feel the need to address each and every one of the questions. Basically I’m asking how the 3 draft chapters communicate to you with regard to the data, findings, interpretations, conclusions and implications. There are no expectations in terms of what or how you respond. Feel free to even provide comments about content, layout and/or spelling/grammar if you choose. Your response can be as short or long as you prefer.

Thank you for your consideration of this personal/professional favor.

Please email your submission to Jim Crowell – jwcrow49@telus.net by Friday, Sept 28.

Jim is responsible for collating all responses, removing any reference to whom the comments were attributed, and forwarding the result to me for further analysis and consideration for updates/changes to the contents of these chapters. If you like I can send you an electronic copy and you can track changes/comments electronically (Jim will find a way to remove your name from the changes so that your comments are anonymous - I’ll forward the electronic file).

Feel free to call with any questions. If any questions of Jim in particular, you can call him at 780-490-4202 home or 780-982-4522 cell.

August 2007
REFERENCES


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Harris, A. (2000). "Successful school improvement in the United Kingdom and Canada." Canadian journal of educational administration(15).


