Instructional Leadership for Improved Aboriginal Student Achievement

Lindsey Burym

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine effective instructional leadership in relation to improved Aboriginal student achievement. In addition it explores the concept of relationships: principal/teacher, teacher/student, and school/community as they relate to the purpose of the study. The following research questions provided the direction for this study:

1. *What makes an effective instructional leader and how does this relate to improved Aboriginal student achievement?*

2. *How do relationships impact Aboriginal student achievement?*

3. *How do principal-teacher relationships impact the school community?*

4. *How do teacher-student relationships impact Aboriginal student achievement?*

5. *How do school-community relationships impact Aboriginal student achievement?*

A literature based research methodology is used to address the research questions in this study. The foundation of the research is framed around work conducted by Stockdale, Parsons and Beauchamp (2013) on effective First Nations principals. The examination of findings provides instructional leaders and researchers with a broader understanding of qualities necessary for individuals who work with Aboriginal students, whether on or off reserve, to be effective instructional leaders. Additionally it may begin to address the need for further research in the area of instructional leadership and Aboriginal student achievement.

The history of Aboriginal education continues to have a significant impact on the lives and culture of Aboriginal people today. While there have been many changes and improvements in the implementation of education for Aboriginal people, there continues to be a long road ahead (Alexander, Hewitt, & Narbonne, 2013). Aboriginal leaders do not deny the importance of education, but recognize the role that Aboriginal culture plays in the education of their future generations. As noted by the Assembly of First Nations (2010), "education is a long-term predictor of lifetime success, earning potential and the ability of First Nations people to be significant contributors to their families, communities and society as a whole" (p. 8). LaFrance (2000) expressed that while it is important to educate future Aboriginal leaders, providers and citizens their education must not displace the values and knowledge of Aboriginal people, but rather enhance contributions to the community. In addition LaFrance (2000) stated that Aboriginal "youth are no longer being educated to take their place in a non-Native society; they are being educated to take control of their future in a Native society" (p. 104).

Education is the key to success and continued development of a functioning and productive society. The Assembly of First Nations (2010) noted that, "by 2020 the number of seniors will double in mainstream Canadian society. In contrast for First Nations over 50% of the population will be less than 25 years old by the year 2020" (p. 11). With a young Aboriginal population on the rise, it is evident who the leaders of our future are going to be. This data provides evidence of the importance in the investment

in Aboriginal education. A significant component to this investment will undoubtedly involve leaders in the education sector, in particular instructional leaders who work with staff and students every day.

In any organization, effective leadership can be a key factor for success. When considering educational institutions, effective instructional leadership is essential not only to the success of the school as an institution, but to student learning and achievement (Fullan, 2002). Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2008) affirmed that "school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning" (p. 27). In relation to the success of First Nations students, effective instructional leadership can be integral. The 2012 Provincial Auditor Report (Provincial Auditor Saskatchewan, 2012) found that the graduation rate of Aboriginal students in Saskatchewan was 32.7% compared to 72% for Non-Aboriginal students. Two years later in 2014 the subsequent report found that there has been minimal improvement for Aboriginal students with graduation rates at 35.9% compared to 73.7% for Non-Aboriginal students (Provincial Auditor Saskatchewan, 2014). In order to initiate the improvement of Aboriginal student achievement it is crucial that instructional leaders take into account current data and use it to drive decision making. As Leithwood et al. (2008) suggested, basic leadership practices, "demonstrate responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the context in which they work" (p. 27).

The purpose of this study will be to examine effective instructional leadership in relation to improved Aboriginal student achievement. In addition it will explore the concept of relationships: principal/teacher, teacher/student, and school/community as they relate to the purpose of the study.

Research Questions

1. What makes an effective instructional leader?

2. How does effective instructional leadership relate to improved Aboriginal student achievement?

3. How do relationships impact Aboriginal student achievement?

4. How do principal-teacher relationships impact the school community?

5. How do teacher-student relationships impact Aboriginal student achievement?

6. How do school-community relationships impact Aboriginal student achievement?

Significance of the Study

As a researcher, educator and new vice-principal of a school with an approximately 95% Aboriginal student population this topic is of great interest to me. This research will be invaluable to my own professional development as an educator and instructional leader. As a new administrator I want to learn more about what I can do to improve Aboriginal student achievement in my school and professional community.

While there is a wealth of information about instructional leadership, positive relationships, and Aboriginal education I believe further research in these areas as they relate to each other is necessary. It is my hope that through my work I may begin to explore these areas in greater detail to provide information to other educators and leaders in education, so that work in the area of improving Aboriginal student achievement may continue. In addition with the growing population of Aboriginal students in our province and the progressive work being done around Truth and Reconciliation, this research will be a valuable resource for administrators and various leaders in the education sector.

Methodology, Method & Data Analysis

A literature based research methodology was used to address the research questions in this study. The method of research for this study included the collection and in depth review of existing research from reputable peer reviewed journals and books. The analysis of data involved the critical analysis of findings in existing research that took place throughout the research process, concluding with the combining and synthesizing of the data collected. Key terms used for the accumulation of research data included, but were not limited to: instructional leadership, instructional leadership and aboriginal education,

the importance of relationships to Aboriginal culture, positive principal teacher relationships, positive teacher student relationships, teacher and Aboriginal student relationships, school and community relationships, school and Aboriginal community relationships, and student engagement and achievement.

Following my introduction and the significance of this study, I begin by exploring the first two research questions that examine effective instructional leadership and its relationship to improved Aboriginal student achievement. Following this I will address the third research question, which explores how relationships impact Aboriginal student achievement. To further explore the impact of relationships, there are three sub sections. These sub sections include principal/teacher relationships, teacher/ student relationships and school/community relationships. Finally, I discuss whether my findings have addressed my research questions as well as possible implications for further research and practice.

Literature Review

Effective Instructional Leadership

Improving Aboriginal student achievement may be easier said than done. While using data to drive decision making and instruction will be a useful tool, there are several components that instructional leaders must take into consideration if they are to be effective. Stockdale et al. (2013) outlined nine attributes of a highly effective First Nations principal: (1) cultivate and nurture a sense of culture and traditions within the school community; (2) get to "know" the community; (3) understand the community in which they work; (4) listen, and be caring, and supportive of colleagues; (5) establish "family-based" working and learning environments; (6) be organized; (7) instill hope in the school; (8) demonstrate passion; and (9) use the "big picture" as their guide. Although their work specifically identified attributes of highly effective First Nations principals on a reserve, these attributes will be further examined to demonstrate how they apply to the effectiveness of any instructional leader who works with Aboriginal students whether on or off reserve.

Culture and traditions. The first attribute of a highly effective First Nations principal discussed by Stockdale et al. (2013) is that they foster and nurture a sense of culture and traditions. They noted that while all schools focus on student learning and achievement, First Nations schools must also consider culture and language. "First Nations principals must understand it is more than just leading a school; it is leading a school with a strong focus on cultural identity and language" (Stockdale et al., 2013, p. 107). With the increasing population of Aboriginal students in the public school system there is a need for all instructional leaders to acknowledge the importance of Aboriginal culture and traditions within the learning environment. Alexander et al. (2013) discussed the difficulties that Aboriginal students attending majority society schools face such as: mistrust of Non-Aboriginal people, bigotry, racism, and stereotyping. They noted that if Aboriginal students are to be successful they must be grounded in their own culture before they will be able to and feel comfortable to "walk in both worlds".

Creating a school environment that incorporates Aboriginal culture may seem like a daunting task to many, especially considering the growing cultural diversity of schools today. However, the Aboriginal Services Branch and Learning and Teaching Resources Branch of Alberta Education (2005) maintained that:

Effective education that includes Aboriginal worldviews does not exclude or discredit other cultures but ensures that non-Aboriginal students and Aboriginal students alike are given the opportunity to see Aboriginal perspectives, and the strengths and gifts of Aboriginal people reflected in the schools they attend. (p. 14)

Through her research, Kanu (2005) found that teachers recognized the importance of integrating Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives into curriculum. She identified several reasons as to why teachers felt the inclusion of this content into curriculum was crucial. The wealth of Aboriginal cultural knowledge, values and contributions that should be learned about and understood by others is the first reason. In addition, curriculum and learning should be relevant for all students and the integration of

Aboriginal perspectives could significantly impact Aboriginal students' self-perceptions. According to Kanu (2005) the inclusion of Aboriginal content may result in greater success and retention in school for Aboriginal students. She identified the fact that Canada is a multicultural nation with a high population of students, including Aboriginal students, who are inadequately educated about issues affecting Aboriginal people's lives. It is through education that students can be provided an opportunity for structured learning that more accurately represents Aboriginal peoples (Kanu, 2005). It is the responsibility of the instructional leader to ensure that the school environment is one that supports teachers as they work to integrate Aboriginal culture into their classrooms and the school community (Kanu, 2005).

Getting to know the community and community relations. The second attribute identified by Stockdale et al. (2013) suggested that highly effective First Nations principals are involved in the community and take the time to get to know and build trusting relationships with its' members. The third attribute discussed is that highly effective First Nations principals understand the communities in which they work. These attributes will be explored in greater detail later as they relate to research question three sub question three.

"Family-based" working and learning environments. The fourth attribute discussed by Stockdale et al. (2013) is that highly effective First Nations principals work to create family-based working and learning environments. In many First Nations schools, staff may have children or relatives that attend the school. These relationships also exist in non-First Nations schools, particularly in rural communities. Although family relations occur in many schools, the dynamics of this often look different in First Nations schools. Stockdale et al. (2013) noted that staff members in First Nations schools who are part of the community may often be dealing with issues similar to students such as, suicide, incarceration, poverty, and addictions. They identified the importance of the school principal as a leader and colleague who provides support and guidance.

While Stockdale et al.'s (2013) concept of family-based schools may differ from other schools, instructional leaders who work to develop a school community that is a safe place and feels like a second family can have a significant impact on student success. Aboriginal students whether on or off reserve may be more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than their non-First Nations counterparts. Lee and Smith (1997) acknowledged that positive school environments can have a significant impact on students from socioeconomically disadvantaged families. Belernardo (2001) identified six dimensions that create a sense of community within schools: shared values, commitment, a feeling of belonging, caring, interdependence, and regular contact. She noted that although each of these dimensions is comprised of independent components, the integration of all six is what truly creates a sense of community within a school.

Support for staff. The fifth attribute discussed by Stockdale et al. (2013) is that highly effective First Nations principals listen, care about and support staff in both professional and personal matters. This attribute will be discussed in greater detail later as it relates to research question three sub question one.

Organization and planning. The sixth attribute discussed by Stockdale et al. (2013) is that highly effective First Nations principals are organized, engaging in detailed planning and development of systematic and sustained procedures. This attribute is not an uncommon quality for any instructional leader. Mendels (2012) described one of the qualities of an effective principal as someone who knows how to manage people, data and process. Darling-Hammond (2007) stated that, "the number one reason for teachers' decisions about whether to stay in a school is the quality of administrative support – and it is the leader who must develop this organization" (p. 17).

While organization plays a significant role in the effectiveness of an instructional leader, especially given that the standards of education continue to evolve, being a school principal has become much more than simply managing the daily operations and functioning of a school. The role of principal as leader involves hard work, dedication and a love for students and learning. Mensik (2006) described an effective leader as "a strong educator anchoring his/her work on central issues of learning and teaching,

and school improvement" (p. 6). Effective leadership means taking on the role of a learning leader who inspires and uplifts the people with whom they work.

Instilling hope. The seventh attribute discussed by Stockdale et al. (2013) is that a highly effective First Nations principal fosters hope in their school and everyone involved in the school community. They asserted that, "[t]he promise of hope and future should never be dismissed or misused and should always be shared in the vision and direction taken as a principal" (p. 102). The promise of hope and future is important if not a central component for any instructional leader's development of a vision for their school. Furthermore they proposed that instilling hope creates a greater desire in students to look forward to and plan for the future and develop aspirations to be better. Mendels (2012) suggested that in addition to structuring schools to be safe and orderly effective instructional leaders also work to create a school climate in which students feel they are heard and supported. Klem and Connell (2004) stated that students "need to feel they can make important decision for themselves, and the work they are assigned has relevance to their present or future lives" (p. 262). The development of such a school climate can help to instill hope in students in that what they say and do matters.

Passion. The eighth attribute discussed by Stockdale et al. (2013) is that highly effective First Nations principals are passionate, maintaining their goals and vision for the school despite pressures from staff and community. This quality is an important attribute for any instructional leader. They must have a clear vision, specific goals, and be prepared to stand up for their beliefs. Mendels (2012) noted that it is the instructional leader's responsibility to develop, "a schoolwide vision of commitment to high standards and the success of all students" (p. 55). The instructional leader's vision must become a shared vision that all stakeholders find relevant. Metuq (2010) found that the effectiveness of schools with Aboriginal students was:

> linked to leaders, usually school principals, with strong vision and high standards who were not afraid to challenge the system. These leaders collaborated with staff members and communities to create a welcoming school climate grounded in Aboriginal culture, language and traditions. (p. 5-6)

It is the instructional leader's responsibility to create a climate in which the teachers want to follow the vision.

"The big picture" – more than just school: health and welfare, families, future. The ninth and final attribute discussed by Stockdale et al. (2013) is that highly effective First Nations principals use the big picture as their guide. They also noted that an effective First Nations principal ensures that decisions are made based on what is best for students. Instructional leaders in any school must consider what is best for students, and continually reflect on the big picture when making decisions. Nielsen (2013) affirmed that, "[e]ducation has long been recognized as important to individual well-being and the nation's economic growth" (p. 76). Education is more than just going to school and attending class. It involves the health and welfare of students and families and preparing students academically, physically, socially, and emotionally for the future.

Relationships

Building and maintaining positive relationships is an important part of life. Dolezsar-Glarvin (2010) described relationships as "necessary to be part of society; relationships require people to think, trust, and understand each other" (p. 6). In *Seeking Their Voices: Improving Indigenous Student Learning Outcomes*, Berryman et al. (2014) identified the concept of relationships as a reoccurring theme in their research. When considering the impact of positive relationships as they pertain to instructional leadership and Aboriginal student achievement, there are several areas to consider. For the purpose of this research study the following three relationship types will be examined: principal/teacher relationships, teacher/student relationships and school/community relationships.

Principal-teacher relationships.

Defining relationships. A relationship is defined by The Psychology Dictionary (2014) as a connection between two or more individuals with continuous interactions wherein one has some influence

on feelings or actions of the other. Travers, Elliot, and Kratchwill (1993) noted the key elements of a relationship include perception, cognition, and affection. In connection to relationships, Spencer (2004) suggested that members of the school community are more willing to work for a leader who cares. She defined caring as, "a connection or encounter between two human beings" with an emphasis on creating, maintaining and enhancing positive relationships (Spencer, 2004, p. 26). Within these relationships caring people try to generate a sense of community and demonstrate behaviors that will further the welfare and growth of individuals within the community (Spencer, 2004). Her research also indicated that caring principals are engrossed in the well-being of others, show empathy and support, and tend to make people a priority.

Davis (2004) described relationship building as, "showing an interest in others as individuals" (p. 10). Knuth (2006) stated that an effective principal establishes an open line of communication with teachers and demonstrates familiarity with and sensitivity to the personal lives of school staff.

The work of Blasé and Blasé (2002) suggested that effective principals cultivate positive principal-teacher relationships:

> Based on mutual trust, respect, openness, support, and understanding; develop learning communities of professionals and constituents able to openly communicate, make decisions, solve problems, and resolve conflicts; maintain a collaborative focus on teaching and learning; and encourage teacher reflection, peer coaching, and shared critique and inquiry. (p. 671-672)

In addition, Smylie (1992) noted that teachers are often more productive when they view their principal-teacher relationships to be open, collaborative, facilitative and supportive.

Leadership attributes. Constructing a caring school community on a foundation of positive relationships is different for every school. Although there is not a standard approach for principals to follow, there are certain leadership attributes that are significant in constructing positive relationships and a caring school community. In her study of how a principal practiced care in his school, Spencer (2004) identified the following as attributes of a caring leader: demonstrating interest and respect, supporting growth, communicating value, empowering others, encouraging collegiality and teaming, sharing leadership, reflecting, and serving the school community.

The first leadership attribute Spencer (2004) discussed is demonstrating interest and respect, specifically how the principal treats members of the school community including teachers, staff, students, parents and community members. Knuth (2006) classified effective leaders as individuals who are consistent, authentic, attentive, respectful and good listeners. Both Knuth (2006) and Butz (2010) identified the importance of an effective leader's ability to maintain open communication, and improve communication skills in order to build positive principal-teacher relationships.

Spencer (2004) characterized caring leaders as individuals who demonstrate caring by supporting "professional, personal, intellectual and social growth" (p. 78). By supporting personal mastery, principals model caring and reinforce the value and importance of personal growth (Spencer, 2004). Supporting growth involves, "building the capacity of teachers, figuring out better pathways to success, and providing the support teachers need to come together as communities of practice" (Burmeister & Hensley, 2004, p. 31). Spencer (2004) noted that by supporting teacher growth, principals are demonstrating their appreciation for the individual and creating a sense of value for them as persons rather than simply for their skills or the role they play; this support helps build positive principal-teacher relationships (Spencer, 2004).

In the third attribute, Spencer (2004) proposed that principals can demonstrate care for teachers and the school community in a symbolic fashion. Symbols such as, "equipment, office space and location, costumes, nameplates, uniforms, ceremonies, and rituals" (Spencer, 2004, p. 78) can express the value of a teacher or other staff member to the school. In addition Spencer asserted that expenditures in areas such as training programs, professional development or equipment displays trust in the individual and

demonstrates his/her importance to the school community. She noted that it is important to ensure all members of the school community feel valued and respected.

The fourth attribute identified caring leaders as those who empower others in the school community (Spencer, 2004). This empowerment fosters new leadership and the principal becomes a leader of leaders. When principals empower teachers, positive principal-teacher relationships are constructed and the power needs of both the principal and teachers are met (Herlihy & Herlihy, 1985; Tuell, 2006). Herlihy and Herlihy (1985) stated that empowerment gives, "principals power with, rather than power over, their teachers" (p. 95). Tuell (2006) asserted that positive principal-teacher relationships created through empowerment help to develop, support, and strengthen the school community.

In addition to empowering others, Spencer (2004) quantified that encouraging collegiality and teaming also contribute to positive principal-teacher relationships. She noted that when a principal nurtures teaming within the school community, it demonstrates caring leadership and "encourages cooperation rather than competition, supports the ownership of problems and solutions, provides the availability of more extensive information relevant to decisions, stimulates greater interest in potential solutions, and ensures that more effective solutions will be chosen" (p. 81).

Spencer (2004) defined leadership as, "the process of sharing power with others – teachers, students, parents, and community – for democratic purposes" (p. 82). Spencer (2004) and Burmeister and Hensley (2004) both suggested that through empowerment and shared leadership a principal becomes a leader of leaders. According to Burmeister and Hensley, teachers are appreciative of a principal's guidance, friendship and support. In addition, they desire some assurance that even small accomplishments will be recognized. These qualities help teachers to feel that the principal has a genuine caring for them and their opinions, and in turn, contributes to the development of positive principal-teacher relationships.

To be an effective and caring principal one must be willing to engage in continual reflection about decisions made and actions taken as a leader. According to Spencer (2004), reflective principals recognize the importance of theory and research, but at the same time acknowledge that every school is different and solutions must be tailored to meet the needs of each unique situation. In regards to caring principal-teacher relationships, Spencer (2004) asserted that self-evaluation and reflection support the development and maintenance of such relationships. Effective principals reflect on their leadership practices and how they affect learning and principal-teacher relationships.

It is the responsibility of the principal not only to lead, but to be a leader who serves the school community. Spencer (2004) observed that caring leaders are prepared to serve their colleagues as they work toward a shared vision. They take responsibility for responding to the needs of the school they serve, by providing assistance and support to all members of the school community, emphasizing school values and encouraging and supporting others to become leaders (Spencer, 2004).

Spencer (2004) noted that caring principals are individuals who tend to put the needs of the school community before their own. They engage in personal reflection and are willing to work collaboratively to reach solutions that best meet the needs of the school community (Spencer, 2004). Caring principals not only help to increase teacher efficacy and job satisfaction, but can increase student academic performance, and help to manage social issues within the school community (Spencer, 2004). By engaging in the role of a caring leader, principals can facilitate the development of positive principal-teacher relationships.

Teacher-student relationships. In addition to positive principal-teacher relationships, it is equally important for teachers to develop and maintain positive teacher-student relationships. Effective instructional leaders must be models for teachers and other staff in building positive relationships with students. DuFour and Marzano (2011) suggested that, "effective leaders embrace their responsibility", which in this context necessitates visibly engaging in positive relationships with Aboriginal students in the school (p. 199).

Berryman et.al. (2014) shared the insights of administrators regarding the importance of building relationships with Aboriginal students; one administrator in their research noted:

> I have learned [that] relationship is front and center….Sometimes we use the…metaphor cliché of family. But there is an expectation and a desire that students want to relate to you as a person so that's really critical and I don't think that's anything new.…In my opinion in an Aboriginal context that's just doubly critical. That's just part of …their life ways, their experience, they are connected, connected to family.…They want that relationship with an adult that respects them as individuals…and as Aboriginal students. So a good relationship is really, a really critical piece. (S1) (p. 119)

The development of positive teacher-student relationships has been found to have a significant impact on student engagement and achievement (Berryman et al., 2014; Whitley, 2014). Dolezsar-Glarvin (2010) suggested that positive teacher-student relationships require the development of personal connections and "includes creating a climate of trust with students, so students will want to learn what teachers have to share with them" (p. 9). In addition she noted the work of Mendler (2001) who advocated the importance of, "encouraging academic success and developing social connections with students as part of a positive teacher-student relationship" (Dolezsar-Glarvin, 2010, p. 9).

In order to develop positive teacher-student relationships teachers must understand the characteristics of such a relationship. Several researchers have identified high expectations as a key factor to building positive teacher-student relationships for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (Dolezsar-Glarvin, 2010; Klem & Connell, 2004; Whitley, 2014). Dolezsar-Glarvin (2010) also identified five additional characteristics of positive teacher-student relationships. First is the importance of networking with parents, family, friends and community. Following this she discussed the significance of trust and being able to show students that teachers are people too, by engaging in open and genuine dialogue while at the same time maintaining appropriate self-disclosure between teacher and student. The fourth characteristic Dolezsar-Glarvin (2010) identified was practice and opportunity to develop positive social skills through teaching and modeling. Finally Dolezsar-Glarvin (2010) professed the importance of the use of routines and traditions in the classroom to create a sense of community within the classroom. While building relationships may appear to be a simple task this may not always be the case for everyone; these characteristics create a strong foundation from which teachers can work to develop positive teacher-student relationships.

In addition to recognizing the characteristics of positive teacher-student relationships, teachers must acknowledge the effect these relationships can have on student success. Klem and Connell (2004) noted that students who experience positive relationships in school are more likely to demonstrate positive attitudes and values, experience more satisfaction with school, and are more academically engaged. Dolezsar-Glarvin (2010) identified five effects of positive teacher-student relationships as being: "(a) improved self-concept (b) increased motivation to learn, (c) increased desire for others' well-being, (d) increased feeling of security and attachment, and (e) increased desire to improve society" (p. 19). By working to develop positive teacher-student relationships there is significant opportunity to "enhance the learning outcomes for Indigenous students" (Berryman et al., 2014, p. 56).

School – community relationships. Stockdale et al. (2013) suggested that highly effective First Nations principals understand the communities they work in. They explained that this understanding involves knowledge of the community's history, in particular the impact of the residential school experiences of many First Nations peoples. Gaining knowledge and understanding of First Nations community's experiences and personal experiences with education is important not only for First Nations principals, but all principals and educators. Dion (2007) suggested that, "until teachers have an opportunity to investigate and transform their understanding of Aboriginal people and the history of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada dominant discourses will continue to be reproduced" (p. 330). Stockdale et al. (2013) noted that when individuals, principals and teachers included, have little understanding of the community, they experience culture shock and must battle their own biases before they will be able to build trust and relationships within the community. Instructional leaders must take the time to know and understand the communities their students derive

from and support and encourage their staff to do the same. Doing so will create a deeper understanding of students and reduce deficit theorizing that so often occurs due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal peoples' educational and life experiences.

In addition Stockdale et al. (2013) noted that highly effective First Nations principals take the time to really get to know the community, attend community functions and are trusted by the community. They recognized the important role building positive relationships plays in creating a successful school. Goulet (2001) stated that in many Aboriginal communities informal, personal dialogue or visiting are important cultural practices for building relationships. She also noted that while building relationships with students impacts their learning, these relationships must extend beyond the classroom to parents and the community. It may be difficult for some staff to step outside their comfort zones to build these relationships; therefore it is imperative that instructional leaders model, support and encourage staff throughout the process.

Developing a school environment in which Aboriginal parents and community members feel welcome may take time. Historically Aboriginal people's experience with education has not always been positive. Pushor and Murphy (2004) acknowledged that while many parents in our society experience marginalization in regard to their children's education, the experiences of Aboriginal parents are significantly intensified. Unfortunately when Aboriginal parents do not conform to the dominant society's expectations of parenting and school involvement, they are criticized as being bad parents (Pushor & Murphy, 2004). There is a need for educators to shift their thinking and to start exploring reasons why parent involvement is an issue and what they could be doing differently to invite and welcome Aboriginal parent participation (Pushor & Murphy, 2004).

Creating a school environment that is welcoming to parents and community members requires teachers and instructional leaders alike to acknowledge they too are part of the community. Educators are often perceived to have an ownership over school due to their professional education, knowledge and experience, which is typically accepted by parents and community members (Pushor, 2010). Pushor (2010) noted that policies, procedures and programs developed for children are often done in isolation from parents and community members despite their expected involvement after the fact. While their expertise is important to their role as educators, Pushor (2010) suggested that teachers and staff must reposition themselves to be both host and guest within the school community.

Pushor and Murphy (2004) proposed a question to be asked by educators, "How do public schools with First Nations populations facilitate the participation of Aboriginal parents in the public school experience of their children in fair, meaningful, respectful, and culturally relevant ways?" (p. 227). Preston (2013) advised that by involving parents and the community, schools are accessing additional means available to supplement and enhance the social, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual development of their students. The Aboriginal Services Branch and Learning and Teaching Resources Branch of Alberta Education (2005) suggested that by inviting Aboriginal parents and community members into the school, an opportunity is created for students to interact with role models who reflect their culture. In addition this interaction creates an environment in which Non-Aboriginal students can engage in learning opportunities from adults with different worldviews. They also stated that, "[r]esearch shows that parental involvement results in higher student achievement and safer school environments" (Aboriginal Services Branch and Learning and Teaching Resources Branch of Alberta Education, 2005, p. 61).

Implications for Research and Practice

While there is a wealth of information and research about instructional leadership, successful schools and student achievement, research is minimal when exploring effective instructional leadership and the relation to improved Aboriginal student achievement. The work of Stockdale et al. (2013) that examined attributes of effective First Nations principals provided a strong foundation for addressing the purpose of this research. Although their work specifically identified the qualities of effective First Nations principals on reserve, there were significant correlations between these qualities and those of

non-First Nations instructional leaders off reserve. In light of the fact that many Aboriginal students attend off reserve public and secular schools, further research and examination of best practices within these schools will be necessary to better inform teachers and instructional leaders on how to better serve their Aboriginal students.

The research as it pertains to principal-teacher, teacher-student, and school-community relationships was quite extensive. However while the research adequately demonstrated the importance of positive relationships in all three of these areas, it is evident that continued work must be done when considering the impact on Aboriginal student achievement. For example the more recent research conducted by Berryman et al., (2014), Stockdale et al. (2013), and Whitley (2014) has begun to identify the significant impact relationships have on Aboriginal student achievement. Continued work in this area will undoubtedly prove to be invaluable to individuals in education working to improve Aboriginal achievement.While further research is necessary there are implications for practice based on the present research to be considered. One finding of significance is that instructional leaders and teachers engage in opportunities to help them better understand Aboriginal culture, and how to incorporate it into the learning environment for the benefit of all students. These opportunities may include but are not limited to professional development, engaging in community events, and working with elders. The continued changes and improvements to teacher education programs in relation to Aboriginal education is one way that this area of interest is being addressed for future teachers. In addition to understanding Aboriginal culture, instructional leaders and teachers must participate in professional development and educational training that examines the importance of effective leadership, building positive relationships and the impact on student achievement.

Conclusion

In education, effective instructional leadership can have a significant impact not only on the success of the school, but student learning and achievement. Recent data shows that Aboriginal students continue to achieve at lower levels than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. As Aboriginal student populations in schools continue to rise, the need for further research on ways to improve Aboriginal student achievement is necessary. The purpose of this research paper was first to examine what makes an effective instructional leader and how this relates to improved Aboriginal student achievement and second how principal-teacher, teacher-student and school-community relationships impact Aboriginal student achievement. While there are various components involved in improving the success of Aboriginal students, effective instructional leadership will be fundamental to school improvement and the success of all students.

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