

USING THE EXPERIENCE OF A  
FIRST NATION PRINCIPAL WITH  
STUDENT SUICIDE IN A FIRST NATION  
SCHOOL FOR STRUCTURING POLICY  
PROBLEMS

A Thesis

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By

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### Abstract

There is a lack of effective policy to deal with suicide in First Nation schools. Considering the very high rate of suicide among Indian youth, logically there should be a concern in First Nation controlled schools that should be reflected in clearly stated policy that deals with this problem.

The purpose of this study was to investigate a First Nation principal's experience as he dealt with student suicide as a basis for policy making in First Nation Schools.

The study used a modification of Roe's Narrative Policy Analysis and Stephen's Fault Tree Analysis to analyse the circumstance of a First Nation principal who had direct experience with three student suicides and the suicide of his son. The study was conducted in a remote Northern Canadian Cree community. Narrative and story telling was a natural methodology because of the researcher's Cree ancestry and because it is an integral part of First Nation culture.

The study identified other perspectives that enhance or frustrate a principal's policy development effort in the school. The narrative method identified the subtleties of other perspectives, which influence policy development in different worldviews and culture. These perspectives need to be considered if effective policy is to be developed in a cross-cultural setting.

The method developed through this study has the potential to assist principals develop and to assist in the implementation policy in communities where multiple perspectives exist.

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## CHAPTER 1

### ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

It is not easy for school administrators, teachers, and counsellors to admit a lack of foresight and preparedness in dealing with the very difficult issue of suicide. The fact is, however, most schools are ill-prepared to deal with such a crisis. Few schools have taken a pro-active role in resolving the suicide issue before it becomes one. Perhaps it is human nature to act only after the crisis occurs (Vidal, 1992, p. 7).

It is estimated that one percent of the general population accelerate the natural end of their lives through suicide (Caldwell, Constance, Gottesman, & Irving, 1992). Since the 1950's, suicide rates have increased dramatically among young people in the United States and in Canada. Suicide, among people between the ages of 14 and 24, has become the third leading cause of death in the United States (National Centre for Health Statistics, 1989), and the second leading cause of death in Canada (Health and Welfare Canada, 1987). Although official suicide rates are much lower for children under 15, suicidal behaviour has been reported in very young children. It is generally accepted that many suicides are unreported or misreported as accidents or death due to undetermined causes (particularly for young children). It has been estimated that the actual number of suicides may be two to three times greater than official statistics indicate (Guetzloe, 1991).

### *Suicide in the Indian Community*

Before a discourse about Indians in Canada can be clear to the reader it is first necessary to clarify terms used to describe indigenous people of North America. "Indian" and "First Nation" are terms used to describe members of cultural and national groups occupying North America before the coming of European colonisers. Europeans imposed the term "Indian" on the indigenous peoples and the term has been used in major legislation governing the relationship between First Nations and mainstream North Americans. In Canada, the term "Aboriginal" includes Indians, Metis and Inuit; however, "First Nation" is the term preferred by Indian political groups in Western Canada. "Reserve" refers to lands set aside under the Federal Government Indian Act for Indians. The researcher will use mainly "First Nation" to designate the persons who are the focus of this study; however, "First Nation" and "Indian" will be used interchangeably.

Suicide and attempted suicide of First Nation adolescents has increased by almost one thousand percent over the past 20 years to become, as in Euro-Canadian society, the second most frequent cause of death (Berlin, 1984). Cooper (1996) reported that Indian youths are at two to six times greater risk for every alcohol-related problem (including suicide) than their counterparts in other segments of the Canadian population. He found that suicide rates for off-reserve British Columbian Indian people was 16/100,000. This rate closely paralleled that of British Columbians generally; however, there was an elevated risk to on-reserve Indian people, 37/100,000. Scott (1996) reported Indian children in Saskatchewan, zero to fourteen years, have a suicide rate that is much higher than their national or provincial counterparts. He

found suicides among Indian children were 27.5 times greater than among Canadian children generally and 33.6 times greater than other children in Saskatchewan.

Cooper (1996) suggested that specific factors are associated with the greater risk experienced by Indian youth. He identified that this higher risk was associated with “lower levels of education, living in households with larger numbers of occupants, [having] more children living in homes, including more single parents and fewer elders, and [having] lower incomes generated by a smaller portion of the population” (p. 21). *The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (1996) reported high numbers of First Nation students living in these “high-risk” conditions all over Canada. The Commission suggested that there was higher potential suicide risk in Indian schools all across Canada (Brant, 1993).

#### *Suicide in the Schools: The Policy Challenge*

Suicide is a problem for all school systems. Literature reviews conducted by staff at both school divisions in Regina as they developed their suicide policy, plus actual student suicides, indicated that the suicide problem was serious for them, warranting more attention and policy consideration. “The effect of the death on the school community is dramatic” (Regina School Division No. 4, 1991, p. 3). Similarly the Regina Roman Catholic Separate School Division No. 81 (1990, p.1) indicated that “If a student or staff member dies at school, the event tends to be more traumatic than if the death occurs off the school premises.” In either case, the reviews indicated that a death has the potential to affect everyone involved with the school.

Each year more people are choosing suicide to deal with life problems including acute stress and chronic depression (Berlin, 1984). Salzman, Girvan and James (1991) suggested that it was inevitable that school principals would have to deal with the impact of suicide because depression and stress-related circumstances have become more prevalent in schools. Recent statistics indicate that a high school of 2000 students will experience an average of one student suicide every four years (Gilliam, 1994).

In Saskatchewan, incidents of suicide among Indian youth are more frequent than among the youth of the non-Indian populations. As a result, Indian administrators in on-reserve Indian schools are more likely to have to deal with a suicide or attempted suicide than their counterparts. Yet research indicates that suicide policy is non-existent in many Indian schools.

*Expanding the Circle of Healing Report* (FSIN, 1994) showed that suicide rates were high in Saskatchewan and that many of the First Nation schools lack policy to deal with suicide and suicide crisis. The report suggested that how First Nation Education Committees and Band School Boards conceptualise and structure policy problems was considered a very important issue. The report recommended that before Indian community leaders and Indian school boards could begin to address the problem of suicide in their schools they needed to understand the jurisdictional problems. These problems are created because education in Canada is constitutionally the responsibility of provincial governments (with the exception of federal inmates, soldiers, and Indians), but Indians are the primary responsibility of the federal government. Since each province has the primary responsibility for all non-Indian schools in Canada the education standards they set affect the First Nation schools because reserves must

interact with the provinces in which they exist. First Nation youth need to compete with other Canadian youth for jobs, entrance to universities, technical institutes and community colleges. First Nation parents want their children to receive an education that will meet the highest provincial standards.

The Provincial, Federal and First Nation governments influence every aspect of First Nation school operation and each level imposes its expectations on the school. The Provincial government establishes education standards for curriculum and instruction. The Federal government influences the school operations through funding agreements and First Nation governments impose their expectations through local administrative structures. For example, First Nation governments want to hire local people, but the Federal government will only provide funding if the province certifies teachers. In this instance the local people are not hired. The expectations from all three levels of government are based on policy, politics and law. Whatever the motivation, the expectations have a significant impact on the operations of the First Nation school. To understand the influence of provincial legal authorities and structures on school policy in the Saskatchewan jurisdiction one needs to review the legislative frameworks of the province.

#### *The Duties and Responsibilities of Boards of Education in Saskatchewan*

In Saskatchewan, the duties and powers of the Boards of Education are identified in Section 91 (b) (c) of The Education Act (Government of Saskatchewan, 1995), An Act Respecting Elementary, Secondary, and Post Secondary Education in Saskatchewan. These sections describe the duty of school divisions to exercise general supervision and control over

the schools in the division and make such bylaws with respect to school management as may be considered necessary for effective and efficient operation of the school (Government of Saskatchewan, 1995).

The Education Act (Government of Saskatchewan 1995) creates autonomous boards that have the power to create policy. Many schools in Saskatchewan use the proliferation of materials in books, articles and instruction videos to guide the development of policy and procedure. Other schools in the province leave the responsibility for leadership in the hands of the principal (Eliason, 1996).

Section 175 of The Education Act suggests that principals have a duty to define and prescribe the standards of the school with respect to the duties of pupils. They are required to give such direction to members of staff and pupils as may be necessary to maintain the good order, harmony and efficiency of the school. Maintaining good order, harmony and efficiency in the school compels the principal to consider structuring policy problems for policy development.

In the area of suicide policy, some school boards have adopted detailed guidelines to maintain “good order, harmony and efficiency.” The Regina Roman Catholic Separate School Division No.81 *Administrative Guidelines* (RRCSD, 1990) described a systematic format for principals to follow immediately after a tragic event. The guide identified the required procedures and people to contact following a student death. It includes a form to record a brief description of date and time of each activity. The principal, as the in-school administrator, is responsible to ensure that recording take place. A “crisis response” team is

created to assist the principal and people affected through the event; however, the principal is responsible.

The Regina School Division No.4 encourages the establishment of a “Tragic Events Response Team” and provides the principal with a guidebook entitled *Procedures and Guidelines for School Response to a Tragic Event (RSD, No. 4, 1993)*. In practice, the principal is the administrator who has the immediate responsibility to deal with issues in the school. This includes suicide crisis response. The roles of the board and the principal are clearly defined by the policy document.

In Saskatchewan, each Board of Education is responsible for the development of policy on crisis and the principal, in consultation with the director, is responsible for the implementation of that policy. It is important to remember, however, that provincial law, unless adopted by the First Nation Band Council, does not govern First Nation schools. There is no requirement for First Nation schools to have policy related to suicide crisis response.

#### *First Nation Member Relationship to Their Schools*

In Saskatchewan there are two types of schools on reserves. There are Federal Schools operated by the Education Branch, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development with authority under the Government of Canada Indian Act and directly administered by Indian Affairs. There are also Band Schools that operate under the authority of the Indian Act, but are administered by First Nation Band Councils. The self-government

that is guaranteed by the Constitution of Canada (Government of Canada, 1992) Section (35:24) provides First Nation Band Councils the legal authority for education.

The First Nation Band Council's authority poses a unique challenge for principals in First Nation schools by creating a political climate that is different from that of other schools. With governance by the Band Chief and Council comes an organisational structure where education and other Band Council responsibilities are not separated. The policy of one Cree<sup>1</sup> Nation Band, for example, indicates that the Cree First Nation Council, as the government of the reserve, has ultimate authority to decide the responsibility of the Education Committee. The members of Council are the only representatives that can enter into a formal agreement with the Department of Indian Affairs with respect to finance and operation of Education Programs. The recent federal policy of self-government means that the First Nation Band Councils are responsible for reserve schools. The actual legal structure is different in First Nation schools. For example, Bands, rather than the provincial governments are the legal entity responsible for schools. This lack of separation makes the community paramount not only in the setting of policy, but also in how the principal interacts with the community in the setting of policy. In mainstream schools the principal can appeal to the higher legal authority of the province in disputes on policy with community. In First Nation schools, however, legal authority, Band authority and community are the same.

A survey of principals leading Federal and Band-operated schools reported that the most significant problems in their schools related to the community is lack of support or

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<sup>1</sup> Cree is one of the North American Plains Tribes.



interest, and social factors (Evaluation and Strategic Management Associates, 1983). In mainstream schools the acceptance of policy depends on the principal's disposition to act. As McDiarmid and Ball (1987) described, the difference in perceptions and the actions of principals was the result of their "inclination to behave in certain ways under certain circumstances" (p. 8). They suggested that administrators' dispositions to act involved their beliefs and knowledge. Their inclination to act did not mean that the administrator behaved in a certain manner on every occasion; rather, the administrator was "inclined to behave in a certain way if he or she perceived the occasion as appropriate" (McDiarmid, Kleinfeld, & Parrett, 1988, p. 156). Their inclination to act influenced how administrators involved the community in the process of structuring policy problems.

Litwak and Meyer (1966) suggested that there were three basic approaches a school administrator could take with respect to the degree of involvement the community would have in the school policy development. The "closed-door" approach was one where educators viewed community involvement as extraneous, if not injurious, to the education of a student. This basic assumption suggested that schools could best deal with all the major problems of education. Using this approach community participation should be kept to a minimum. They suggested that this approach actually decreased the involvement of parents and community in the school policy development process. Litwak and Meyer (1966) also identified the "open-door" approach that assumed that many of the basic educational processes took place outside the school building, in the family, peer group and neighbourhood. Such an approach to policy development necessitated intimate school-community contacts. From this viewpoint, an effective school encouraged closer contact between the community and the school.

Litwak and Meyer (1966) also identified a third, “balanced approach” to deal with the processes for structuring policy, which indicated that intimate and distant school-community relations needed to be balanced by degree. These authors showed that the lack of balance led to two kinds of errors. First they identified that a lack of balance could bring the schools and community too close so that policies compromised professional standards. Correspondingly, they suggested that the lack of a balanced approach would keep families and school so far apart that limited co-ordination could cause contradictory influences to emanate from both sides. To avoid errors in policy formation they suggested that some balance between the extremes should be found. Schools needed to be close enough to the community to co-ordinate activities with families, but distant enough not to impair the performance of professional educational tasks. The balanced approach suggested that the nature of the linkage between the family and the school was dependent upon the degree of social distance or involvement.

Directly applying this balanced approach to policy development in First Nation schools overlooks the political and cultural orientation of Indian schools in First Nation communities. There is very little social distance between the school and the community. This close relationship creates the expectation that members of the First Nation community will be involved directly in the school and the school will become a primary bureaucratic organisation for the achievement of First Nation social goals. In this regard, more than the school principal influences the formulation of policy process. Although Litwak and Meyer (1966) did not study First Nation schools, they did recognise the impact of culture. From their perspective the

balance between school/community and professional objectivity was affected by the cultural reality.

*The Challenge of Perspective*

The Constitution of Canada (Government of Canada, 1992) reaffirms the right of the First Nations in Canada to exercise self-government. First Nation governments have the responsibility to deal with the causes of suicides. They are beginning to communicate their understanding of the crisis of suicide in their communities. In most communities, self-analysis, introspection and contemplation are replacing acquiescence, submissiveness and complaisance. Many First Nation people are now beginning to question and challenge the perpetual dysfunction in their communities and in so doing are setting policy guidelines to address crisis (FSIN, 1994).

In February 1994, the Brighter Futures/Family Violence Steering Committee of the Health and Social Development Commission of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians (FSIN) challenged their consultants to develop a methodology that would accommodate individual and community self-analysis, introspection and contemplation. As a result of, and in order to begin to solve problems such as family breakdown, family violence, and high suicide rates, the *Expanding the Circle of Healing Report* (FSIN, 1994) prepared by the Commission identified over 500 issues First Nation leaders needed to consider as they dealt with crisis in their communities.

As one of the two consultants who reported to the Commission, the researcher became keenly aware of the potential impact of crisis on individuals, families and communities. The experience heightened the researcher's understanding of the importance of taking into

consideration new ways of “seeing/interpreting” unique circumstances and problems within First Nation communities.

Scott, Chief of the Kiniston Band (1994) initiated the process of seeing the world through another’s experience. He suggested that, among people, many views of the same thing were possible. To illustrate his point, he encouraged individuals to imagine that they were sitting with others in a large circle. In the centre of the circle was a rock. He suggested that each person had a unique perspective of the rock because of his or her position in the circle. Even persons sitting next to each other in the circle had uniquely different perspectives unable to be seen by others. With respect to dealing with a crisis within a First Nation community, Scott suggested that one’s own perspective of that crisis was limiting and that it was important that other perspectives be considered.

Earlier and exemplifying Scott’s perspective, Freire (1968), working in Brazil, reported the following insight regarding perspectives.

One of Freire’s co-workers showed his students a picture of a drunken man stumbling down a city street. The teacher, expecting this picture would provoke a discussion of alcoholism, was surprised by the men’s first response: The man must have a job, they said. He must be earning wages if he had money to spend on drink. The picture did not appear to them as it did to the instructor (Freire, 1968, p. 134).

Similarly, Foucault’s (1973) work with respect to mental health policy and traditions illustrated the importance of perspectives. His research introduced an analysis of the social construction of mental hospitals, which was very different from what was thought to be the role of those institutions. From Foucault’s perspective mental hospitals did not support the notion of caregiver as perceived by society, but were primary institutions for “concealing and

warehousing society's outcasts (e.g. the poor, deviants, sufferers from contagious and/or sexually-transmitted diseases, the insane)" (p. 28).

Considering perspective, and in addressing policy formulation and suicide crisis in First Nation schools, many questions arise: Is there another perspective or a "new way of seeing" suicide crisis in First Nation Schools? Considering the likelihood of suicide in a First Nation school does perspective influence why some First Nation schools in Saskatchewan lack suicide crisis response policies? Is there a perception of such crisis that is uniquely recognised and understood by First Nation principals? Would an understanding of other perceptions help in understanding more fully the treatment of suicide crisis in First Nation schools and especially their response to suicide and attempted suicide? Could Scott's, Friere's and Foucault's insights about the necessity for "a new way of seeing" help one develop a different perspective on the policy issues of suicide and attempted suicide in First Nation schools? Is there another way to understand the meaning of crisis in a First Nation community? Is there a social construction of suicide, which leads to the lack of policy to deal with suicide, and attempted suicide, in First Nation schools?

### *The Purpose of the Study*

The major purpose of the study was to investigate a First Nation principal's experience as he dealt with student suicide as a basis for recasting the policy problem of suicide in such a way as to make it more amenable to decision making and policymaking in First Nation schools. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggested that researchers and policy makers tended to speak for principals rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. Fundamental to the

purpose of this study was the need to identify the influence of perspectives, which enhanced or frustrated principals from initiating policy development efforts in First Nation schools.

### *Significance of the Study*

As Dunn (1981) suggested, policy analysis may be considered as a process of inquiry or examination that involves an integrated framework. Critical to the process is the importance of structuring policy problems, in ways, which reflect the “reality” of circumstance. As Dunn stated:

many people believe that policy problems are objective conditions whose existence may be established simply by determining what the ‘facts’ are in a given case. This naive view of the nature of policy problems fails to recognise that the same facts . . . are often interpreted in markedly different ways by different policy stakeholders (p. 97).

The methodology of this study takes into consideration Dunn’s (1981) observation. The methodology marginalised conventional policy practice by drawing attention to the unique needs of First Nations. It does this by questioning contextual perspectives through recasting policy problems. As Dunn (1981) stressed, successful problem solving requires finding the right solution to the right problem. He suggested that we fail more often because we solve the wrong problem than because we get the wrong solution to the right problem. The significance is that the methodology may allow you to comprehend the actual problem and suggest ways to develop solutions to it in each unique situation.

### *Boundaries of the Study*

The study was delimited to the experience of one First Nation Principal who had direct experience with three student suicides and the suicide of his son. The study was

delimited of one northern Cree community. The contextual story, which provided the foundation for the research, told of the experiences of six key stakeholders in a broader First Nation community in northern Canada.

### *Limitation of the Study*

The limitations of the study are closely connected to the internal and external validity of the research design, which follows Roe (1994), Spradley (1979) and Stevens (1988). Accordingly, the study was limited by the choice of the Roe's Rural Participatory Appraisal and Steven's Fault Tree processes used to collect and analyse the data. The Principal's and community stakeholders' ability to recall and describe events, and their willingness to discuss truthfully their perceptions concerning events further limited the study. The ability of the researcher to accurately record and analyse the stories was also identified as a limitation.

### *Organisation of the Thesis*

Chapter I identified suicide policy development as the focus of the research. Chapter II is designed to orient the reader to the relevant literature on structuring policy problems using Narrative Policy Analysis, Fault Tree Analysis and related aspects of policy perceptions. Chapter III is an overview of the research methodology and a detailed account of the research process. Included in the chapter is a synopsis of the study and descriptions of the data collection techniques, data analysis methods, and procedures employed to collect and analyse the narrative. Chapter IV is the metanarrative that includes the Contextual Story and the Principal's Story. Chapter V presents the analysis of the themes of the story and outlines a

new view of the meaning of policy development in First Nation education. It also suggests a new set of procedures using Roe's and Steven's frameworks for the development and implementation of these policies. Chapter VI discusses the implications of the metanarrative and implications for further research.

*About the Researcher*

There is another voice that must be acknowledged and that voice is mine. Because social, political and economic experiences and beliefs influence what a researcher sees, the reader needs to know who I am and what I bring to this study.

My full name is Christopher Joseph Comeal Lafontaine. I was born in Lestock, Saskatchewan, Canada. I am an Aboriginal male (Saulteaux, Cree and Irish) raised in a small agricultural community of about 460 people. There are eight children in my family and we were raised in poverty.

My name, Comeal, is after my grandfather, and my names Christopher and Joseph are after religious persons, Saint Christopher and Saint Joseph. My family is Roman Catholic. My grandmother was very strict in her observance of Catholicism while she remained strong in her practice of Indian spirituality and medicine. I spent much of my childhood near her so I was influenced by her religious activities. My grandfather in his youth was also a very good Catholic, then an argument over a burial of an uncle changed his views. The priest refused to allow the casket to be taken through the gate at the cemetery for burial because my great uncle was divorced. The casket had to be lifted over the fence. This offended many of the members of our family, especially my grandfather. My grandfather left the Roman Catholic Church.



For much of our early life we lived in a log house next to my grandparents. They had 5 acres of land and most of their children started their families while they lived in one of the four log houses on that land. My grandfather built the houses. He was very good at building log houses. For the first three years the floor of the building was dirt which was watered and cleaned daily. The interior walls were brown wrapping paper painted bright colours. The house was heated with wood and each morning the fire had to be started. Each fall we all mudded the walls with dirt, straw and manure. This blocked the gaps between the logs and kept out the cold.

I started school in Lestock while we lived next to our grandparents. After one year we moved to a land designated by the Provincial Government as a Metis Farm. The farm was a quarter section of land a mile east of Lestock. Eight to ten families lived there. The farm was established as a means of reducing the cost of municipal welfare. The government provided the land and the Catholic church provided assistance of the priest.

My father worked for the hospital in Lestock. It was owned and operated by the Catholic Church. He became a little frustrated with the Church because he had a family and they always classed him as seasonal even though he worked full time. My mother stayed at home. My father was aboriginal and my mother Irish/Ojibway. Her father came from Ontario, he had Irish and Ojibway parents. Like most people of the mixed marriage they were ashamed of the Indian heritage.

My childhood memories are filled with good stories of family life, except for the drinking and parties. After a while, my father decided that British Columbia would provide us more opportunities. There were a number of years where the family always needed to move.

In Lestock, our family was the focus of much racism because we lived on the Metis Farm, my parents were alcoholics, and we were poor. I remember being chased home by the "town kids." Each Friday, we would go to confession because we would get out early from school. If we had a short confession, we would get out of the Church before the school bell so we had little fear that the kids from school would be able to catch us.

When I was eleven my mother, tired of the poverty and verbal and physical abuse, left the family for another man so as a single parent, my father, raised us. I was the oldest so it was my responsibility to look after the family. It was an emotional time. I didn't want to be an adult at eleven. At first, the children did not accept our parents' decision to separate. We always had the hope that they would work it out. Although we never talked about our collective desire, we just thought that one day our mother would return because she missed the children and all would return to the good old days. It did not happen.

For two years, after the separation of my parents, my father continued to drink. He would get his pay cheque, go to the store and buy groceries, and then he would go to the "pub." Things got so bad we often had relatives care for us. I was required at a young age to take on the responsibility of raising the children. To assist during those two years my grandmother, an aunt and uncle with their spouses and children moved in and cared for us. At first it seemed an ideal relationship. They needed a place to stay and we needed supervision, but two families in one home was a real challenge. You always have two bosses.

The day my father quit drinking started like any other "pay-day." He got his cheque, but this time he went to the welfare office to make arrangements for them to pick up his six children. After he made the arrangements, he went to the bar to buy two cases of beer, got

into a taxi and headed for home. He said that he sat in the back seat thinking how he was going to party afterwards and the taxi pulled up to a stop light. At the stop light the taxi waited. He suggests the wait was long. He told the driver to go at least two times, but the driver just responded that the light was red. At the stoplight he began to think about what he was doing. This was one of the first times he truly reflected on what he was doing and he decided at that time that he was going to quit drinking. We were excited that he had made the decision, but the excitement was short lived. He never drank again, but many of the problems, which led to the drinking, continued. Watching my father has helped me understand why so many people who sober up return to drinking. If you maintain the same lifestyle that contributed to drinking you are likely to return because of the pressure. Something so basic, but it is overlooked by so many.

Education has always been a challenge because the first language in the family was Cree-Saulteaux English. We called the mix Metchif. I remember my grandparents, uncles and aunts used this as their first language at home. When others would visit it was English, but as soon as the company left we used our first language. Even if the response was in English the questions were always in Cree, Saulteaux or Metchif. English is a difficult language to learn, especially if you have little opportunity to use it correctly.

At the age of fifteen, I started working as a youth organiser for *the Association of Metis and Non-Status Indians*. I was the first youth organiser in the province. The goal of the organisation was to improve the social and economic conditions of our community. This early exposure to the lives of other Aboriginal people in the province gave me a unique perspective on life in Saskatchewan. My father taught us that learning comes from books, experience and

travel. In two years of organising I logged over 80,000 miles in travel. At the age of sixteen, I managed an Opportunity for Youth Program. The project employed 138 staff under the age of 24. The youth worked all over the province. During the term of the project, we established recreation programs, cultural programs, and community centres all over the province. I have often reflected on its impact as I watch the staff grow over the years. It was during this time that I made a commitment of my time and efforts to improving the social and economic conditions of the Aboriginal community. I am political and I continue to work as an advocate for community. I believe in community-based decision making because I believe that alternative institutions need to be created and maintained to prepare Aboriginal children for a better life.

I come from a spiritual background that taught me to listen more than speak. I still remember the teaching of grandmother to be patient, caring, and to sacrifice. She taught by her example. You learned to read her looks of approval, her quiet laugh or smile as she talked with you. She loved unconditionally. We all respected her. Grandma had a hard life. A single parent - her mother, also raised her. Early in her life she was sent to a Residential School. Residential schools had different objectives. If the school was Anglican it stressed academics. If the school was Roman Catholic there was more work. This does not suggest that the schools didn't have a unique personality that followed the leadership of the Priest, but they were different. My grandfather's brothers and sisters were also in a residential school, but their time was short because they ran away. Grandmother's job at the school was sewing. She patched clothes for most of the children at the school. All the time she spent with us I remember her sewing. She made blankets. I loved the feather ticks, mattress and blankets.

She patched the rips and tears in anything. Seeing the white community's negative response to my grandparents because they were Indians helped me make a commitment to building a society that is focused on social justice.

My late teen years and early twenty's taught me how much influence my father had on my life. Although he taught me many good things, I spent a period of about eight years trying to emulate his negative example. I started drinking. My life got so it was unmanageable. I knew alcohol had got the best of me and if I continued I would die. This realisation was a result of a close call drinking and driving. It was that day that I decided to stop drinking. I didnot announce it, but inside I made myself a promise that I would seek a life without alcohol.

The decision to quit drinking closed a few doors, but opened up many more. It was during the next three years that my life really changed. I started to apply myself at school, I was baptised a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) and I was married. It was during these early years that I began to give rather than take.

Since that time I have obtained a Bachelor of Education and a Post Graduate Diploma from the University of Regina. I have apprenticed with Kenneth Patey, Patey Seminars, Robert J. Doman, National Association of Child Development, and Dr. Guy Berard, Berard Auditory Training. The special training they provide is to help children with learning disabilities.

I have worked for the Association of Metis and Non-Status Indians in the area of housing, communications, economic development, training and administration. I was Executive Director of the Gabriel Dumont Institute for nine years and Vice-President of the Native Services Division, Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST)

for four years. In the last five years, I worked as an independent Consultant and President of Lafontaine and Associates. I am affiliated with Sage Institute of Canada and Patey Seminars International. I have taught for the University of Regina and developed curriculum for the Kapachee Training Centre, Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan. I now work as Executive Director, Saskatchewan Aboriginal Courtworker Program.

I am very active in the Argyle Park Englewood Community Association, Chairman, Southeast Area Board, Association of Metis and Non-Status Indians and I am District President of the Fort Qu'Appelle Saskatchewan District, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

I am interested in computer programming, archery, hunting and physical fitness. I have a black belt in Tae Kwon Do and a blue belt in Judo. Of all the things that I do the most important is my desire to be a good parent to my five children and serve in the community. I want to make a difference.

## CHAPTER 2

### POLICY FORMATION IN THE LITERATURE

#### *Introduction*

The structuring of policy problems is essential for successful policy development. However, even the term “policy” has a number of meanings. This chapter reviews the literature that focuses on the development of educational policy using Narrative Policy Analysis, Fault Tree and Sage Analysis.

#### *Educational Policy-Oriented Research*

Husen and Postlethwaite (1995) suggested that the problem of how research in education was related to policy-making was hardly studied before the 1960s; however, during the next decade, resources given to educational research by governments and private foundations grew markedly. They suggested that policy-makers expected educational research to help them in the planning and execution of reforms that would improve the quality of schools. Educational research was applied research, designed to bring about changes in the way education was carried out, rather than simply adding to the existing stock of knowledge. Husen and Postlethwaite (1995) described policy-oriented research as:

research which has direct application to current issues in educational policy or practice... It usually operates within the context of accepted theory: it does not aim to modify theory, though it may do so incidentally. Similarly, fundamental research does not aim to affect practice, but it may do so indirectly. Policy-oriented research is responsive, whereas fundamental research is autonomous. Policy-oriented research modifies (and hopefully improves) the existing situation, protecting it from running into trouble by identifying or anticipating problems. It may challenge established policy by demonstrating its impracticability, or may develop or explore alternative policies (1995, p. 4556).

The focus of policy-oriented research was the direct application of theories to current issues in educational policy and practice and was expected to provide a “prescription” for the successful solution of school problems. Husen and Prosthlethwaite (1995) argued that policy-oriented research in education was best defined in terms of its function rather than by topics of study used in “fundamental” research:

When research in education is designed, managed, and reported with the specific purpose of informing a policy decision, or assisting or monitoring its implementation, or evaluating its effects, the term ‘policy-oriented’ is used to distinguish this approach from ‘fundamental’ research which is designed primarily to extend the frontiers of knowledge (Husen and Postlethwaite, 1995, p.4556).

Dunn (1981, p. x) suggested that policy-oriented research needed to be pragmatic, applied and interdisciplinary. He argued that:

today’s policy problems are so highly interdependent that any effort to understand and resolve them demands that we step outside of the boundaries of disciplines and professions whose structure and content no longer mirror the contours of society. (p. ix, x)

The challenge of policy development in an interdisciplinary environment is defining the term “policy.” Guba (1984) stated that the term “policy” was not defined:

in any uniform way, indeed, the term is rarely defined at all. Authors assume their readers know what the term means. And, of course, these authors have their own implicit or tacit definitions in mind, which shape what they have to say (p. 69).



Guba (1984) suggested that the lack of a stated definition of policy has significant effect on the nature and outcome of policy analysis. The lack of a stated definition was “misleading and confusing” because the author’s definition of policy was used to support the author’s approach to policy development. To illustrate the confusion that may result from such vagueness in the definition of “policy” Guba (1984) used eight definitions of policy to identify the problem. The first grouping were definitions of policy which are “policy-in-intention,” or statements about policy:

- policy is an assertion of intents or goals.
- policy is the accumulated standing decisions of a governing body, by which it regulates, controls, promotes, services and otherwise influences matters within its sphere of authority.
- policy is a guide to discretionary action.
- policy is a strategy undertaken to solve or ameliorate a problem.

The second grouping were definitions of “policy-in-implementation” or behaviours or activities that are displayed in the process of implementing policy:

- policy is sanctioned behaviour, formally through authoritative decisions, or informally through expectation and acceptance established over (sanctified by) time.
- policy is a norm of conduct characterised by consistency and regularity in some substantive action area.
- policy is the output of the policy-making system: the cumulative effect of all the action, decisions and behaviours of the millions of people who work in bureaucracies. It occurs, takes place, and is made at every point in the policy cycle from agenda setting to policy impact.

The third grouping were definitions of “policy of experience” or what is actually experienced by the client:

- Policy is the effect of the policy-making and policy-implementing system as it is experienced by the client. (Guba, 1984, p.64)

Guba observed that: not all definitions are equal in their consequences for policy analysis because each definition calls for its own data, sources and methods, and produce unique outcomes. Different definitions, he argued, had an enormous impact on the processes and products of policy analysis. He suggested that the particular definition that was selected depended on the purposes of the analysis. What constituted a better definition was a matter of values and the selection of a particular definition was a value choice. Guba concluded that it was nonsense to ask, “What is the definition of policy?” because all definitions are “constructions.” Any policy definition could be used as long as a rational case could be argued for the particular usage. The political implications of the choice of a certain policy definition may be:

to advance certain values and to check others. Policy analysis was not value free so to be ethical the policy analysis was obliged to point out the particular definition used in the analysis and to characterise its consequence for the variety of stakeholder audiences concerned with the analysis (Guba, 1984, p. 70).

*Policy-Oriented Research in First Nation Schools*

Husen and Postlethwaite (1995) suggested that policy-making was a plan of action using practical knowledge, wisdom and prudence and policy-oriented research was the direct application of current issues in education policy and practice. Policy-making was the act of using a process to devise policy. Educational policy was defined as a “governing principle, plan or guide for a course of action and policy development as the formation of these governing principles, plans and guides for courses of action” (1995, p. 357).

Christenberry and Burns (1991) suggested that “no scientific study has attempted to assess either the extent to which Canadian and American schools have established suicide crisis

response policies or the effectiveness of alternative response practices” (p.13). By this they inferred that the decision to do policy-oriented research was often influenced by the urgency of the immediate situation; however, pressure and necessity often led to the development of policy in a pragmatic or intuitive way. Dunn (1981) described the intuitive approach policy claims as pragmatic, based on arguments from insight, judgement, and understanding of the nature of the problem. The policy adopted was based on developers’ experience, insight, judgement and understanding of the nature of the problem of suicide. Eliason (1996) suggested that his school division utilised this intuitive policy development process. The process was based on an immediate need for action because of the urgency of the immediate situation. According to Eliason the process included:

- the administrator being faced with a crisis (e.g. suicide of students in the school division).
- a decision being made that the crisis had to be attended to immediately.
- the research being undertaken to identify possible courses of action and protocols that were utilised in other school jurisdictions.
- the screening of the information used to develop guidelines and the experience of those involved in the process.

The intuitive policy development approach may simply adopt materials from other agencies and make appropriate organisational name changes. Currently, commercial products provide generic policy manuals that require the developer to use a “search and replace” routine that is available on most word processing programs. *Employee Manual Maker* (JIAN, 1996) is one such commercial product. The lack of research that describes policy-oriented research in

First Nation communities made it necessary to interview First Nation principals with experience in policy-oriented research.

Dunn (1981) suggested that there is perhaps no concept in contemporary policy analysis that is more difficult to grasp than that of intuition. Using an intuitive approach in formulating education policy creates immediate benefits and challenges in First Nation schools. Asapass (1996) suggested that the lack of financial and human resources for research into suicide policy development in First Nation schools has influenced the decision by in-school administrators to adopt the intuitive approach. This method of policy development results in a written policy, but a policy that is often inappropriate for the circumstance in which it is used. The challenge, he suggested, is often noticed in the implementation of the policy. As the principal tries to implement the policy to resolve a specific crisis, the “critics” arrive and chasten the creators of the policy because it may not meet the specific cultural needs of the community and/or the school from their perspective. Asapass used the example that most First Nation schools have inappropriately adopted *Indian and Northern Affairs* education policy using the intuitive approach. The resulting policy, he indicated, was not usually relevant to specific community problems. Furthermore, he suggested that those First Nation schools that have adopted this approach were now struggling to adapt the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development policy to their schools. For Asapass, this policy approach was limited. With respect to policy linked to suicide, he suggested that the reason some First Nation Schools do not have suicide crisis policy was because Indian Affairs and Northern Development did not have a specific policy related to suicide.

As Dunn (1981) recognised, structuring the policy problem was essential to successful policy development. From his perspective, the same policy-relevant information could and often did result in conflicting definitions and explanations of a policy problem. He further suggested that the need for a policy was often in the “eye of the beholder” (p. 97).

Accordingly, structuring policy problems is as necessary in First Nation schools as it is in mainstream Canadian schools. For First Nation schools, the need to take into consideration culture and political circumstances is more pronounced because of the political involvement of community and Band Councils. They both expect to participate in the consensual decision-making of the school.

#### *Personal Narrative and Policy Formulation*

Personal narrative, storytelling, and case studies have been used in a variety of policy-making approaches. They have also been used to identify and resolve policy issues. Some of these issues are: leadership in schools, motivation of minority students (Fox, 1993), encouragement of cross-cultural student peacemaking (Hudson, 1994), identification of needs for professional development (Thompson, 1993), and development of sexual harassment policy (Larkin, 1994). Narrative as a basis for policy development has also been used for the development and implementation of the United States Pentagon's press policy (Katz, 1992) and as a means of offering alternative perspectives and direction to tribal and state education planning, public schools and teacher education curricula (Souers, 1992).

Because story telling is a traditional form of Aboriginal communication (Hampton, 1993), storytelling is a preferred approach (Storm, 1975) for communicating in First Nation

communities and narrative is an appropriate way to explore the insights of First Nation people. Hampton (1993) recognised that conversation is a natural approach for First Nation research and was based upon the importance of personal relationships, which allows people to give undivided attention to each other's concerns. Florio (1991) suggested that the exploration of insights be based upon a two-way flow of ideas that did not place the researcher in a position of privilege.

This two-way flow needed to begin with the selection of an informant. According to Spradley (1979) almost any person could become an informant, but not everyone would make a good informant. By a good informant, Spradley meant someone who could assist the novice ethnographer in learning about that informant's culture. Spradley identified five minimal requirements for selecting the informant. It was his view that informants should have the following characteristics:

- thorough enculturation (knows culture so well they no longer think about it),
- current involvement in the issue,
- an unfamiliar cultural scene (this unfamiliarity keeps them from taking things for granted),
- adequate time to participate, and
- an understanding that the goal of the research is to discover patterns of meaning (pp. 46-54).

The exploration of the informant's insight was also enhanced by the data gathering techniques employed. Spradley (1979) suggested that data gathering could be accomplished using "descriptive, structural and contrasting questions" (p. 60). Using different questioning strategies was important to developing relationships between the researcher and the informant. Florio (1991) suggested that collecting data using different questioning strategies was important to the two-way flow of ideas and prevented placing the researcher in a position of

privilege. Spradely (1979) suggested that it was also important for ensuring the validity and reliability of results.

### *Rural Participatory Appraisals*

Roe (1994) described a four-step process that uses narratives or personal stories as a basis for policy analysis that advocated community involvement in policy development. He developed a Rural Participatory Appraisal process to assist with the conceptualisation of policy problems. Roe suggested that the lack of recognition of another's perspective and resulting lack of a method to use this perspective in policy creation limit the conceptualisation of policy problems which is the first challenge of policy development. Roe suggested that it was not a question of a "top-down" or "bottom-up" orientation, but whether the process had an "outside-in" (conceptualising policy problems utilising the "outsider" perspective) or an "inside-out" (conceptualising of policy problems utilising the "insider" perspective) orientation. His concern stemmed from the usual practice of utilising an "expert" who developed policy from a "top-down," "outside-in" orientation which kept the community group from participating. Roe cautioned that local people needed to lead the process and only bring in the experts to assist in that process. He strongly advocated the "inside-out" process and suggested that in dealing with particular societal issues, conventional policy approaches were no longer adequate.

The Rural Participatory Appraisals requires the stakeholders of the community of concern to be identified so their stories or description of the issues can be collected and later analysed. Using interviews, the descriptions of the issue are collected. Once all stakeholders

involved have been interviewed, data were analysed and the issues that emerge were disaggregated into problem statements and are written into policy narratives. According to Roe (1994) the metanarrative is “the contextual and counter story that includes the accounts for how two policy narratives, each the opposite of the other, can both be the case at the same time” (p.35). Using Roe’s method of analysis, the researcher searches for different group perceptions. Roe defines these stakeholder perceptions as “the policy narratives that dominate the issue in question, namely, those used to underwrite and stabilise assumptions for policy making” (p.35).

In the preparation of the metanarrative all interviews are analysed and disaggregated into problem statements. A frequency table of problem statements is used to reveal the policy problems, confirm the complexity of the problems and determine if further interviews are needed. The contextual story and counter story are then written into the metanarrative. The metanarrative re-casts and conceptualises the policy problem for conventional policy analysis. Roe (1994) suggested that the conventional policy analysis include the following steps:

The problem is defined, information needed to analyse the problem is defined. Criteria to evaluate different alternatives for addressing the problem are selected. Alternatives are formulated. Consequences associated with each alternative are projected. Trade-offs between those alternatives are assessed and finally a decision among the alternatives is made (p. 156).

#### *Decision Tree, Fault Tree and Sage Analysis*

To understand the inter-relationship between Decision Tree, Fault Tree and Sage Analysis, it is important to refer to the work of Vroom and Yelton (1973) and Stevens (1988). Vroom and Yelton advocate the Decision Tree Analysis for resolving policy problems as one making decisions in environments that expect simple solutions to complex problems. Stevens,



however, suggested that there were inherent problems with the convergent thinking used in the decision tree approach and enhanced the process. From his perspective, conceptualising the policy problem required contextual information. Fault Tree Analysis and Sage Analysis were pragmatic methods to use when addressing this challenge.

### *Decision Tree Analysis*

The premise of Decision Tree Analysis was a belief that decision-making strategies must adapt to the particular situation. The method encourages management to strategically focus on an issue and reduce the participation in decisions without sacrificing quality or acceptance. The framework identified the type and extent of staff and community involvement in decision-making given the specific character of a decision. The long-term benefit of doing so, Vroom and Yelton (1973) suggested, was that good decisions will be made more efficiently.

According to Sample (1988) the use of the DTA model had definite application in the school system. In a paper presented at the Quarterly Meeting of the School Improvement Network, Sample described how the Vroom and Yetton Decision Tree Analysis was applied to a public school system using actual examples by describing its effectiveness in education organisations. From Sample's perspective, the model was an effective strategic management tool used to identify potential outcomes of a decision or a series of decisions. Earlier, Holloway (1979) used the Decision Tree Analysis to map specific decisions and forecast the possible outcomes of specific decisions. He used the process:

1. to identify the options and potential outcomes of a decision or a series of decisions,

2. to assign probabilities to events and calculate the likely outcomes of alternative decisions, and
3. to structure the decision task to identify where and how research should be used.

As outlined by Holloway (1979) the procedures used in the Decision Tree Analysis

were:

1. Identify decision alternatives and alternative situations or 'states of nature.' Identify all the feasible alternatives and the different situations that might prevail after the decision, focusing on a variable (or several) of relevance to the ultimate outcome of your decision.
2. Diagram them on a Decision Tree illustrating the decision alternatives and the situations.
3. Calculate the possible financial returns and costs and enter these on the diagram. The numerical sum will determine the payoffs for each combination of decisions and situations.
4. An optional activity is estimating the probability of each situation and weighting payoffs by probabilities to calculate expected monetary values of each alternative. Select the decision with the highest expected value (p. 27).

The critics of Decision Tree Analysis have suggested that the process relies heavily upon convergent thinking, management judgement, and providing structure to the normal judgmental decision process; others, however, suggested that the method was easily used and, once mastered, was a useful "back-of-the-envelope technique" (Holloway, 1979). Lee (1984) improved on the process by assigning a value between zero and one to each Decision Tree item and with this variation numerically predicted success and failure. Using this modified Decision Tree Analysis, Lee consistently predicted outcomes of research by basing his decisions on the results of his Decision Tree Analysis. Other similar applications of this structured approach are found in computer programming, quantitative methods research and strategic planning.

Another critic of Decision Tree Analysis was Stevens (1988). He argued that its use of convergent thinking limited access to essential information because the only focus of the process was the goal. He also suggested that for organisational decision-making there was a heavy dependence on the judgement of managers. The limitation of the Decision Tree Analysis was reflected in the output. The output was a simple reflection of the pre-dispositions and assumptions of management. In this case, the results of the decision analysis were limited to the limits of the knowledge and experience of the managers.

#### *Fault Tree Analysis*

Fault Tree Analysis is a research process used for identifying and reducing undesired events. In Fault Tree Analysis an analyst investigates potentially undesirable events and then looks for failures in sequence that would lead to their occurring. Relationships among these events are “symbolised by ‘AND’ or ‘OR’ logic gates, and used when single events must coexist to produce the more general event” (Stevens, 1988, p. 7). Fault Tree Analysis introduces new questions, which encourage divergent thinking and capture contingency items that are not considered by Decision Tree Analysis convergent thinking. Stevens believed that focusing on a goal or using convergent thinking was limiting and argued that goals were simply positive statements of something negative.

Fault Tree Analysis has been used to help school administrators improve in-service training, and effectively allocate resources (Barker and Peterson, 1984). According to Orlich (1988), Stevens’ (1988) approach “could improve staff development efforts for teachers, administrators, and other members working in the education community” (p.9).

Decision Tree and Fault Tree Analysis provide a systematic process to identify issues. However, both decision-making approaches lack a mathematical model that incorporates the impact of management judgement. Stevens (1988) recognised the significant impact of human judgement on organisational challenges. He suggested that the failure to identify the impact of human judgement severely limited the information needed to make good decisions. Incorporating human error into a structured decision-making process becomes the basis for Sage Analysis.

### *Sage Analysis*

Sage Analysis is a method of using the creativity, energy, ideas and initiative within all of the concerned interest groups to anticipate, identify, and resolve difficulties in making the changes required by all the interested parties. The process allows a wide range of people at all levels in the community to contribute creatively to problem solutions and as these contributions are made, commitment to solutions also grows. Energy is channelled in creative positive directions. The process also allows contributions from several academic disciplines to be focused on problem areas using a common language. The required changes occur because stakeholders in the community understand the need for change and they have the information that they need to contribute to the decisions leading to those changes required (Chirlin, 1988, p.19).

Sage Analysis uses seven steps: orientation, information gathering, Sage Diagram construction, validation, rating process, developing action strategies, and follow-up and reporting. After an orientation to the process, the steering committee identifies the study objective or mission statement. The mission statement is then re-stated in a negative format as an undesired event. The Sage analyst completes the information gathering stage and the information is written into issue statements beginning with the words "because of." The statements are then organised into a cause-effect format as contributing to the undesired event

and the Sage diagram is developed. The objective is to list the information in a cause-effect chain of issues, inhibitors, and deficiencies that each interviewee feels must be addressed in working toward successful realisation of the mission.

Stakeholders identified by the steering committee complete the validation and rating. Stakeholders are those who have a stake in the resolution of the problem. While Sage analysts make every effort to construct a diagram that correctly portrays reality, the steering committee, in the validation process, helps the Sage analyst to ensure that: each statement in the diagram is appropriately placed, causal sequences are logically interrelated, and items are analysed down to root causes, or actionable levels.

When the steering committee is satisfied that complete and accurate descriptions of perceptions are contained in the diagram, the information is reformatted into booklets in preparation for rating. An example of the rating instruction sheet is included in Appendix 3. The rating involves a broad representation of stakeholders. The person doing the rating is asked to make the following judgements: the causal contribution (causal impact, or importance) of each cause relative to the other causes of the statement, and the degree of familiarity or amount of knowledge the person rating has relative to each specific item. For each root cause, the person rating will also make judgements about its future frequency or likelihood of occurrence and the ease with which it can be corrected or avoided.

The statements in the rating booklets are assigned a strategic event value using a computer program. These strategic event values provide a measure of the consensus concerning the severity of each item and cluster of items. These measurements represent a blend of the judgements that are made in the rating process described above. When several

groups rate the booklets, the strategic event values calculated by the computer reveal both the similarities and differences in perceptions from one group to another. High priority areas become readily apparent. The collective judgements of the people who have been involved in the study can now be accommodated in the development of creative solutions. The Sage process is easy to understand, includes a variety of stakeholders with conflicting views and allows each view to be assessed without political influence. The process builds a consensus on the priorities that need immediate attention. The details needed to identify the questions regarding what has to be done are already available; therefore, the implementation process is accelerated.

### *Summary*

Educational policy uses practical knowledge to guide responses to future crises. The urgency of the immediate situation often leads to the development of policy in a pragmatic or intuitive way. The pressure or necessity to respond quickly often limits access to other sources of information, which would help structure policy problems. Often conventional policy approaches ignore alternate perspectives when structuring policy problems. This is a specific challenge of policy-making in a cross-cultural environment because some problems originate in the other cultural perspectives. Rural Participatory Appraisal introduces new perspectives using metanarrative to assist individuals, groups and communities to deal with the structuring of problems of conventional policy analysis in a cross-cultural environment for conventional policy analysis. This new approach recognises the need to incorporate other perspectives in structuring policy problems.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Introduction*

The major purpose of the study was to investigate a First Nation principal's experience as he dealt with student suicide as a basis for recasting the policy problem of suicide in such a way as to make it more amenable to decision making and policy making in First Nation schools. The Principal's perspective was triangulated with the experience of the Chairman of the Board and the Director of Education. Fundamental to this purpose was to identify, from narrative, and to structure policy problems for policy development using an adaptation of the work of Roe (1994) and Stevens (1988). This study introduces a methodology, an adaptation of Roe's (1994) Rural Participatory Appraisal using Steven's (1988) Sage analysis, as one way to identify other perspectives especially cultural perspectives and themes which may be used to structure policy questions originating in that culture.

#### *Steps of the Analysis*

The researcher adapted Roe's (1994) Rural Participatory Appraisal and Stephen's (1988) Fault Tree Analysis method. The researcher used both methods beginning with the definition of the issue and the identification of informants. The researcher interviews focused

on understanding the informants' perspectives. Open-ended questions were used to encourage the informants to express themselves.

In the analysis of the interviews, the researcher used Roe's disaggregation process to identify the Chairman and the Principal perspectives about the suicides. The lack of a suicide policy in this First Nation school was identified. The researcher then wrote the contextual story. This revealed the dominant issues, namely, those used to justify, underwrite and stabilise the assumptions which support the lack of a suicide policy in this school. The Principal's story was used as the counter story. To organise the many issues the researcher used Stevens's (1988) Fault Tree Analysis. The final step in the analysis was the re-definition or re-casting of the policy problem for presentation back to the community for policy development.

#### *Locating the Informants*

Finding a First Nation principal with a direct experience with a suicide or an attempted suicide who was able and willing to participate in the study was difficult because First Nation principals and communities are reluctant to allow researchers into schools. Community Education Committees must approve all research before it is undertaken. Many First Nation communities have adopted procedures to "protect" the community from researchers, thus requiring researchers to seek permission from the informant, the Education Committee and Chairman of the Education Committee before the research can begin. For this study, the Principal, Chairman and Director were required to give their consent in written form.



### *Choice of Community*

For the purposes of this study, identification of community and potential candidates were completed using community characteristics which included:

- a First Nation community in Saskatchewan or Manitoba. Saskatchewan and Manitoba were selected because of the growing number of First Nation people and ease of collecting the data.
- a First Nation school with a First Nation education committee or board located in the community.
- education leaders must provide permission to conduct the research. The Principal and the education authority in the community gave this.

The informant selected had these characteristics:

- a principal
  - a First Nation member
- direct experience with suicide/attempted suicide of a student while principal of a school.
- prepared to share the experience.

To locate the informant the researcher contacted the Tribal Council Director of Education. The results of initial calls were referrals to other educators. After contacting a number of Aboriginal teachers and principals, the researcher was able to identify a short list of candidates. The list of names included many non-First Nation principals and seven First Nation principals with direct experience with a suicide or attempted suicide. After discussions with all the people on the short list the researcher identified three First Nation principals who had the direct experience needed for the study and met the criteria listed for characteristics. After contacting each of these principals an informant was selected.

*Getting into the Setting*

A number of telephone meetings to the participants introduced the research project and the process that was to be used. To assist with the development of rapport, the researcher contacted a local community leader with whom he had personal experience for an introduction to the principal. The local community leader contacted the Principal and described the researcher as a credible individual. After the introduction the researcher contacted the informant twice each week for four weeks before the first interview. The telephone conversations provided an opportunity to build on the rapport established by the local leader. During the telephone conversations the researcher was also able to answer all questions posed by the Principal and further the relationship by identifying local people with whom both parties were familiar.

During the conversations with the informant the researcher described the process of the study in detail. In this way the researcher, without a formal meeting, was able to begin to develop a relationship with the informant before going to the community. The development of the rapport was far more than “simply granting or withholding of permission for research to be conducted” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1992, p.56).

The first meeting between the researcher and the informant was scheduled around a sporting event. The Principal coached a volleyball team. This meeting did not take place. Nevertheless, the opportunity to discuss these arrangements introduced the researcher to the routine of the Principal. The second scheduled meeting was at the home of the Principal. The family warmly welcomed the researcher. The openness of the Principal and the family assisted greatly in furthering the relationship. The meeting was spent on introductions, discussion of

mutual acquaintances and planning for the activities for the week. Further meetings were scheduled and completed.

### *Collecting the Data*

The primary data for this study were gathered in seven interviews using “descriptive, structural and contrasting questions” (Spradley, 1979, p. 60). The First Nation Principal was selected and oriented to the nature of the study during the first interview. The interviews with a First Nation Principal focused on his personal experience with the suicides of three students and his son. Supporting interviews were held with the Education Committee Chairperson, the Director of Education for the Band, and the reporters who reported on the suicides.

The Principal, Director and Chairperson knew their culture and were fluent in their first language. All of the informants had been involved in their positions for a number of years and knew the culture of the school and the community. The informants at the time of the interviews were involved in another death-related crisis. The informants allowed the researcher ample time to carry out a number of taped interviews over the course of twelve weeks. They also participated in lengthy phone interviews and the review of transcripts and final stories.

The researcher had to collect data from primary sources because most of the major actors in this kind of crisis do not write about their personal experience or involvement (MacPherson and Vann, 1996). There is therefore little literature to use to check perceptions.

To collect the data the researcher travelled to the informant’s community. The researcher spent five days observing and interviewing during the first trip and four days on the

second trip. Interviews were held with the Principal, Chairman of the Education Committee, the Director of Education for the Band, the newspaper reporter and the radio reporter. To assist with the collection of information the interviewer developed a weekly description of the Principal's routine and then the researcher also followed him on his routine.

The researcher adapted Spradley's (1979, p.85) descriptive, structural and contrasting questions. The interviewer asked a number of short probes intended to elicit a detailed reconstruction of the events, the informant role and meaning. The conversation was audio taped and a written transcript was prepared. The interviewer also videotaped the Principal's physical environment to contextualise the experience. The intent of the narrative or stories was not to identify agreement by collaboration, but to provide an opportunity to identify the differences in perception.

Most of the data collection time was spent on the first detailed interview with the Principal where he described his experience as he recalled the details of the four incidents. All materials collected were transcribed, and disaggregated into problem statements before the second interview was undertaken. The format of the Principal story followed a model designed by Macpherson and Vann (1996). The use of "bolded" phases in the text of the Principal story highlights their format. The second interview was shorter and focused on identified gaps in the detail of the description or clarification of what was said and the Principal edited the text of his story until he was prepared to adopt it as his own.

*Creating the Narrative*

All the interviews were taped and transcribed, The researcher maintained confidentiality of data, sources and reports by limiting access to tapes to the typist and himself. Once the data was collected, it was disaggregated into problem statements for the writing of the metanarrative (contextual and Principal's counter story). At that time, the researcher again met with the Principal and the Chairman of the Education Committee to examine the accuracy of this representation of the data. Jointly, the interviews and the metanarrative were edited until both of the informants accepted the stories as accurate. The Principal also had the opportunity to review the final transcript before included in the thesis.

Individuals and families who experience crisis are often frustrated and confused when they try to understand what has gone wrong. It was hoped that a written perspective would enhance the Principal's understanding. Roe (1994) suggested that the crisis would be maintained with every new reinterpretation, or more properly, with the continuing felt need to reinterpret experiences. Telling the stories about the crisis in the past tense becomes a way of concealing a crisis that is very much with us in the present tense (Pinar, Reynolds, Slatter & Taubman 1995). Pinar, etal (1995) further suggest that it is in the re-storying or re-telling that we experience the profound positive impact of understanding the experience. The researcher observed this positive impact as the Principal read the final stories and expressed his appreciation emotionally. The Principal's acceptance of his story was a milestone for him. Finally he was able to see his thoughts and feelings on paper.

### *Making the Statement List*

Once the interviews and the metanarrative were accepted the researcher developed the discrete problem statement list. A further step in Roe's (1994) process is to use the disaggregation of the interviews to determine if more interviews are needed and to develop accurate problem frequency tables. Disaggregation is the process of analysing the data for problem identification and breaking the larger problem into discrete problem statements. Grouping similar problem statements to determine frequency creates frequency tables. Roe uses frequency tables to prioritise problem statements and identify the policy problem for conventional policy analysis.

### *Building the Wall Chart*

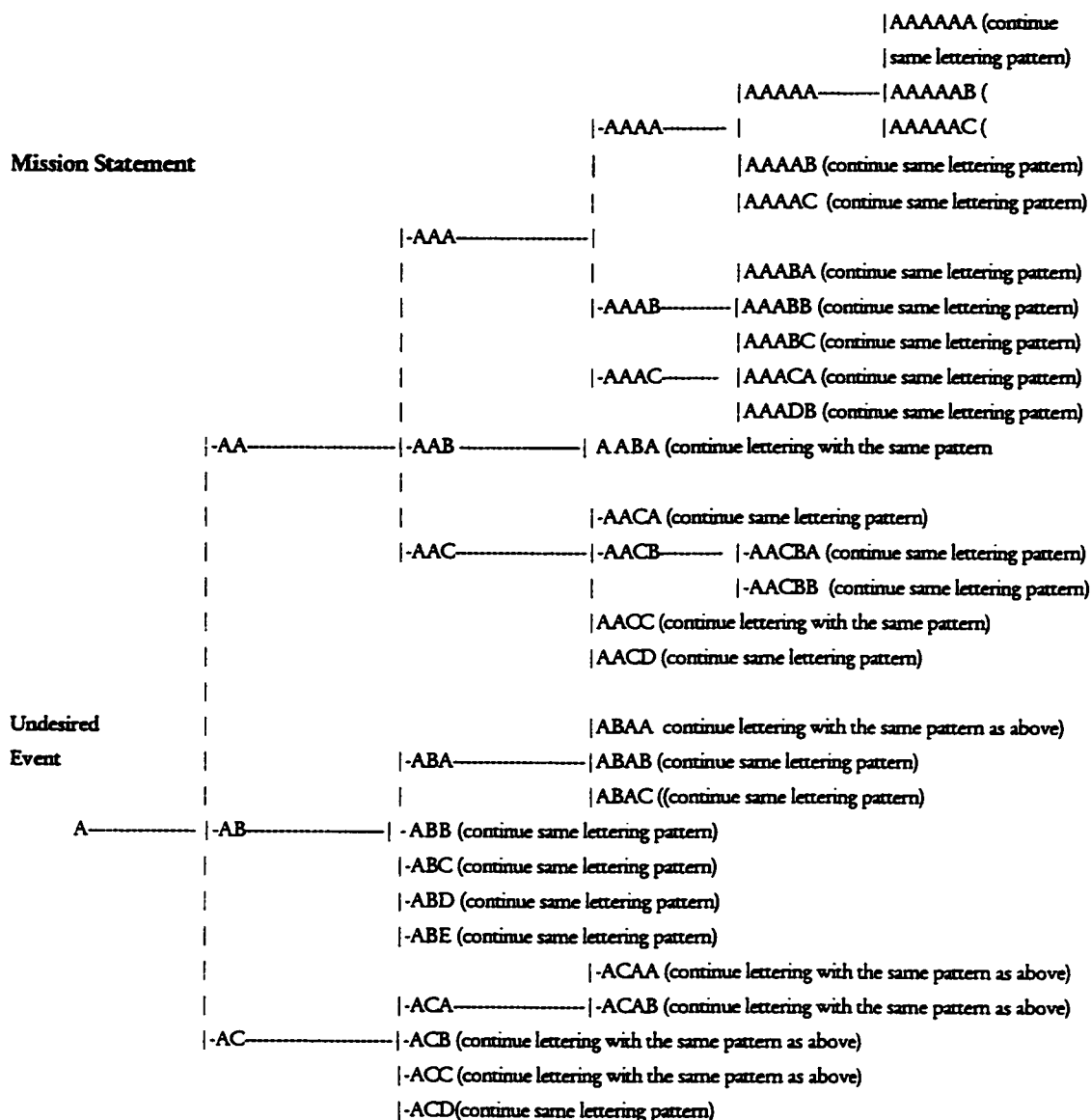
At this stage of the analysis, the researcher modified Roe's methodology with the introduction of Steven's (1988) Fault Tree Analysis. Instead of developing frequency tables to identify priorities, the researcher used Steven's (1988) Fault Tree Analysis to organise all problem statements into a wall chart. The construction of the wall chart was used to identify relationships between problem statements and theme groupings. In the building of the wall chart the first step was the identification of a mission statement. The mission statement was a general statement of what must be accomplished in the school to deal with the problem of suicide. The goal identified by the school Principal and Education Committee Chairman was to effectively deal with the problem of suicide in their school. Prefacing the mission statement with the words "the undesired event is the failure to accomplish..." The undesired event statement becomes "a failure to effectively deal with the problem of suicide in this school."

With the undesired event stated, all discrete problem statements were organised to show that they were contributing factors to the undesired event. This was done in order to begin to determine how each problem statement had a negative impact on the accomplishment of the mission. The statements were then re-worded for ease of reading. When necessary they were organised to show probable cause-effect relationships. For ease of reading the wall chart (Chart 3 in Chapter 5), the reader should insert the words “because of” before each statement. To identify the position of the problem statements on the wall chart, each statement is labelled with descriptors A, AA, AAA, AAB, AAC, etc. The labels identify the position of the statements and relationship between them. See Chart 1 for an illustration of a typical Fault Tree structure.

#### *Themes and Descriptions*

A Fault Tree chart was constructed using the method described. The Tree provides a structuring of relationships that are then used to identify themes. These groupings of problem statements become the other perspectives or themes to explore for further policy development and analysis. The groupings of the statements are once again written into a description of the policy problem and a summary is prepared. The description and summary are used to recast the policy problem. The study stops here. The remainder of the process, the community adoption of a redefinition of problem, metanarrative, themes and policy problem as identified by Roe (1994) and Stevens (1988) so policy can be developed and action can be taken, must be done by the community where the study was carried out.

Chart 1 - Sample Fault Tree Structure



The lettering establishes the position of the issue on the chart. Note that each sequence of numbers includes the lettering in the root statement. In this way the reader is able to easily identify position.



All the data records were examined to ensure validity and reliability. Two administrative experts reviewed the contextual story and Principal's story. They declared it to be realistic and compatible with their experience.

### *Summary*

The purpose of this study was to investigate a First Nation principal's experience with student suicide. A narrative method was used. The study enables recasting of the policy problem. Locating the informants was difficult because of the reluctance of First Nation leaders to allow researchers into the school. The primary data for this study were gathered using Spradley's (1979) descriptive, structural and contrasting questions. The data were summarised into problem statements and organised into a Fault Tree for Sage analysis. The methods described above also produced the metanarrative presented in Chapter 4. The metanarrative includes the contextual and the Principal's story.

## CHAPTER 4

## THE METANARRATIVE (1996)

*Introduction*

The metanarrative includes the contextual story and Principal's counterstory. Empirical and subjective data for the metanarrative were collected through participant interviews with the Chairman of the Education Committee, the Director of Education for the Band, the Principal and interviews with community members. News reports on radio, and articles in local newspapers and conversations with individuals used by the community to deal with suicide were additional data sources.

*The Contextual Story*

Loss. Multiple losses. Multigenerational trauma and grief. Loss of ways of life, loss of language, loss of ceremonies and traditions, loss of a land base and loss of meaningful control over day-to-day life. Despite this picture of multiple loss, there are reservoirs of strength and pockets of traditionalism still present in First Nation communities right across this country. There is mention by several of the presenters of a renaissance of traditionalism burning across the land. It remains for us to nurture and fan this flame... Ramon Cajal in 1899, said, 'every disease has two causes. The first is pathological; the second, political.' As all of you know, Indian medicine is political (Government of Canada, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p.12).

*The Reporter's Experience*

I am a reporter for the local newspaper. It's early Monday morning, and consistent with my daily routine, I make my daily routine call to the RCMP. The dialogue is as follows:

"Hi Corporal, any news over the weekend? This is me, your favourite reporter."

"No. Nothing that I can think of that will make the newspaper more interesting. Nothing unusual," is the reply, by the officer.

"Thank you, have a good day. I will make my regular call tomorrow," is my final comment.

Later that day as part of the regular review of the on line news service, I read a story from one of the southern papers. The headline reads, "Third Suicide in Northern Community." The story announced a weekend student suicide in our community. As I read the story, I discover that it is the third student suicide in three weeks. Why didn't they tell me? It was happening right under my nose.

I decide that I will phone the Corporal again. This time I have a copy of the news report in my hand. When he answers the phone I re-ask him the question. "Any news over the weekend?"

"No," he says, "I already told you that."

"I am phoning back because I am reading a news story over the wire that says that we have had our third suicide." I say. I then notice his voice change.

The officer replies, "No comment."

"Did it happen?" I ask.

"You will have to call the Band because I have no comment," was his reply.

It was frustrating, but not wanting to damage my rapport with the local RCMP, I stopped questioning. "Thank you for the information," I concluded. After I hung up, I decided to phone the RCMP Detachment in Winnipeg. I introduced myself and asked about the suicide.

"Yes, there was a death in the community and it was a student. But you will have to get the other information from the local detachment and the Band. All the files are kept with the investigating officer."

He didn't have the details so I cut the conversation short. After I hung up, I decided that I would phone the Band. When the secretary answered I asked, "I heard that there was a death here over the weekend."

"I don't know for sure" was the response. "I will let you talk to the Band manager."

After waiting for a few minutes on the phone a voice answered, "Band Manager, Cree Nation Band." I waited.

"Was there a suicide on the reserve?" I ask.

"Who is calling?" he responds.

"I am a reporter from the newspaper," I answer.

"I have no comment" was his response.

It didn't take very long to get the feeling that I wasn't going to get the information. I was beginning to get the message. I was frustrated. I thanked him and hung up.

"The editor is not going to publish my story if I don't get details on what happened. I know someone died, but I don't have the details surrounding the death because no authoritative sources will verify the information. I can't say it was a suicide if I don't have a source." I thought to myself. "It is the third suicide in three weeks. I wonder if someone is hiding something. How can community people deal with suicide if the authorities don't provide the information?" All I had was questions, and more questions, but no answers. I began to ponder, "if one person says that there is a problem and another person says there is no problem, is there a problem? I wonder how many suicides it will take before community leaders see suicide as a problem? I sure hope that they are not denying that there was a suicide." I contacted a number of people, but I never got a straight answer until I spoke with the Health Portfolio Band Councillor. I started by asking, "Was there a suicide on the reserve?" He answered my question with a question.

He replied; "If the Band leaders provide you with the information you want and you publish the story, what will happen to other students who read it? All of a sudden the situation will get blown out of proportion and maybe even glamorised. We don't want any 'copy cat deaths' in our community. The leaders of the Band have decided that we will not talk to the media about the situation."

“A publication ban?” I ask.

“Yes, there will be a publication ban on information regarding these student suicides. In our community, it is the Chief and the Council who have the final authority and this is their decision,” he said.

“So there is more than one suicide,” I respond. The Councillor didn’t respond to my comment. He continued by explaining what self-government means for the Band.

“With self-government the authority for decisions is now vested in the Band,” he said. Then he quoted the Band’s administrative policy manual, “The Cree Nation Council, as the government of the reserve, has ultimate authority for the responsibility of the Education Committee and so they have complete authority over the school.”

All I did was listen. I did get some information. He did confirm it was a student at the school.

He continued and said, “The Band has an election process to elect Chief and Council. They have adopted and approved this policy and personnel manual. As a matter of fact, each year the Chief and Council review the manuals and changes are approved. The Chief and Council only delegate their authority to the Education Committee so they can operate the school consistent with the policy. I want to remind you that the Band can veto any or all decisions of the Education Committee. They keep this power, although they haven’t used it.”

“What policies are in place to help and guide them?” I ask.

“To guide who?” asks the Band manager.

“The school staff who have to deal with this situation like the principal, the teacher and the education co-ordinator,” I respond.

“The Education Committee manual have a policy in place,” he responds.

“Thank you,” I said and I hung up the telephone.

The Band is a good customer of the newspaper and I do have relatives on the reserve; I don’t want to push him. If they have already decided what they are going to do with the information on the suicide, who am I? I decided that maybe I could take a little different angle on this story. If they won’t tell me about the suicide, I thought, then maybe they can tell me

about the help they have for the people directly affected. I will call the Chairman of the Education Committee.

I telephoned the chairman and he agreed to meet later that day. I have worked with the Chairman for a number of years because he has been on the Education Committee for over ten years. He is popular. The parents elect the seven members of the Education Committee for a two-year term . . .

*I began to reflect on my personal experience in the community. Self-government has sure changed the reserve. I have lived all my life beside the reserve and I have seen many changes. My grandmother is from the reserve. I went to school here in the town and after I graduated I attended University and got a journalism degree. I have a number of relatives that still live on the reserve, but we are a small family so they don't get the advantages available to the leaders' families.*

*I remember as I was growing up how much control Indian Affairs had over people's lives. You couldn't do anything without a permit or permission. If someone wanted to sell wood they cut, they needed a permit. If they wanted to sell grain or hay they needed a permit. When they got the money it went into a trust and only a portion went to the worker. My dad always said that Indian Affairs has control over the people's lives from birth to the grave. Indian Affairs staff decide which hospital you will have your baby in, and they tell you where you would be buried.*

*When I was in University I took a political science class discussing the concept of colonisation. At first I didn't understand what was meant, but as you look at the reserve you understand completely. The government has done so much damage to the people. Sometimes you hear what is happening to the people in South Africa, but you don't have to go there to see a colonised group. It is right here. In South Africa, they put people on specific lands; in Canada they call these lands reserves. In South Africa, they have an Act of Parliament to govern the people; in Canada they call it the Indian Act. In South Africa, the Blacks were not allowed to vote in Canada Indians were not allowed to vote, enter into contracts or attend a beer parlour because they were considered children. The laws have changed, but the impact is still there. Colonialism makes people very dependent. Self-government means the Federal Government staff no longer makes this type of decision, but Band leadership and staff are forced to deal with the dependency.*

*Now the Band has control over most of their affairs, but they are cautious that others don't take away their powers. It is interesting because when you don't have power over most of your life's decisions, then you get this power, you still have to learn how to use it.*

*Right now there is a contentious issue between the Chief and Council and the Local School Committee. The parents elect members, but some of the Band Council members feel that the Local School Committee members have too much influence, so they would like the Band Council to appoint the Local School Committee. This is also happening in other Cree Nation schools.*

*The education Band Councillor for education is ex-officio on the Education Committee, but he doesn't vote on items. He tells me that he has his say, but Education Committee members have the vote.*

*Members of the Education Committee serve without a salary, but are paid an honorarium and expenses. The Education Committee hires staff, develops policy, and updates the policy and operations manual. The Education Co-ordinator and the principal report to the Committee. The committee meets every second Tuesday. If there are important issues that come up (things they have to address), they will meet more often. Sometimes they meet three to four times a month.*

#### *The Interview with the Chairman of the Education Committee*

The Chairman had agreed to have an interview at 2:00 P.M. I met him at the local cafe and recorded the following during that interview.

"What are typical agenda items for Education Committee Board members?" I ask.

"Typical agenda includes all issues related to the operation of the school," he responds. "The principal reports on items that he is concerned with like the operation of the school, student issues and concerns from the community. At a typical meeting over half the time is spent on letters from parents or community members. Parent concerns include problems between the school and their children, discipline and individual personal problems. Community members are concerned with hiring and firing staff, vandalism, etc."

I ask, "What type of protocols are in place to help guide decision-making?"

He responds, "To assist the in school administrator the Education Committee has developed a protocol, but this sometimes does not work because parents will 'jump' the protocol and come directly to the School Committee to deal with a concern. This is usually

done by letter or by personally showing up at the regular meeting. If this happens the Education Committee, because we are elected, is obligated to deal with their concern right at the meeting.”

“Is there a protocol to govern the interactions of staff with other agencies on the reserve?” I ask.

He responds, “To deal with requests from other agencies we have set an inter-agency group with a protocol to deal with emergencies. I chair these meetings.”

“Who is the person that the staff at the school reports to?” I ask.. “Although the staff reports to the Education Committee, they also have to report to the Director of Education for the Band,” he responds. “The Education Co-ordinator has a dual reporting relationship. Staff reports to the Director of Education and the Band Education Committee. Most of the time the Director doesn’t get involved in what goes on in the community except in budget decisions. He is always involved in budget decisions. The Local School Committee gets an approved budget and the Band administers it.”

“What kind of decisions does he usually get involved in?” I ask.

He responds, “The Director is always directly involved in any changes to expenditures, special budget requests, construction of an addition to the school, buying buses, etc.”

“Does the principal have any responsibility for expenditures?” I ask.

“He gets involved a little bit,” he replies. “He doesn’t have a say where expenditures will be made, but he can suggest, like a community member or other staff could suggest.”

“What is the role of the principal?” I ask.

“The principal is to run the operation of the school including curriculum and staff supervision. The principal makes sure the things in the school run in an orderly way. He is responsible to make sure all activities are in accordance with the manual. He is required to stick to strict guidelines. They are all set out so you know how the school should operate. Another important responsibility of the principal is to make sure the Education Committee is informed of any issues. As Chairman, I don’t like to get involved with the school on a day to day basis, but I insist that the principal inform me about what is happening. The Education



Committee needs to know about what is going on because if an agenda item comes up, we need to respond. For example, I chair the Building Project Teams so when there are issues like the new high school I need to know the issues. Only if the Education Committee has the information can they 'jump right in' and politically support the request. Often the principal prepares information for the Education Committee so the case can be made for a particular request. We need good reasons for all the requests. For example, we need the numbers of student enrolment now and in the future so we can get ready to make the case to the Band politicians. At this time, we are after a high school so we have to do the work so it can be presented to Indian Affairs" he responded.

"What do you see as your biggest responsibility?" I ask.

"My biggest job is dealing with the community concerns," he responds. "The Education Committee receives 'tons' of letters from parents on what they think we should do and what should happen. They include issues like hiring local people, if a position is open at the school, or implementing new programs. There are lots of concerns about local hiring. Lots of the concerns are related to qualifications. We are stressing to the community that we need to hire the best person for the job and they press us to hire local people because they come from the community. So there is a lot of time spent dealing with these issues. We don't want to have any surprises so we discuss what happened at the meeting and if there are any policy changes."

I ask, "What kind of policy process does your Committee undertake to change policy?"

He responds, "If we are looking at a hiring policy or a discipline policy we establish the policy. But with other things the Band sets the policy. Principals stay within their guidelines and they inform me about the contentious issues."

I thought that I would shift the focus of the interview to these deaths. I began by asking, "What is your definition of crisis? For example, if you were to receive a phone call during this interview and were told that there is a crisis at school, what would you think would happen?"

“I will begin with an easy one,” he responds. “If we have a heavy snow and we are snowed in, the principal has the power to make that call and say we are closing the school for the day. He phones the Education Programs Co-ordinator and I’ll get the information and I will get hold of the Band Councillor for Education and pass on the information that the school is closed. The principal tells the bus drivers. That is an easy one.”

He continued, “Now if there is an angry person or parent that comes to the school wanting to meet, we have an established process. The principal will meet and see if they can resolve the issue or set up the meeting and as soon as possible if we’re out of the community for a meeting. We have a system. If I’m out of the community we have a vice-chair, four members that could be on call immediately. Within the quorum system, and the vice-chair and four members will begin to deal with the crisis and they will go as far as they can within their mandate. If the crisis is more serious, I am contacted by telephone and we resolve the situation over a telephone meeting.”

“Can you describe what happens if there is a suicide crisis? For example, one of the teachers or one of the students commits suicide?” I ask.

He continued, “We do have an agreement in place, but I am not sure it specifically mentions suicide, but it’s for emergencies like that. For example, when we have a real serious injury to staff or to students there is a protocol. The principal or supervisor is involved right away and if medical attention is needed there is a direct line to the health clinic. If it looks like there is a death or something more serious the RCMP and whoever is involved from the local council will be notified right away along with Education Committee members. And if it is a life-threatening situation that needs medical attention, treatment is given before any type of investigation takes place. There is a system, if there is a suicide and we do need outside help, Tribal Council Health services are able to bring in people to look after the situation. If it is a student that commits suicide these people are used to help other students that may need counselling, or the other staff. It is a situation that we don’t want to see happen, but the preparation is there to deal with the situation.”

“So there is a protocol?” I ask.

“Yes, there is a protocol in which the major players are involved as quickly as possible,” he responds.

“Is this protocol written?” I ask.

“It’s written in the manual,” he said, and continued, “When there are extreme emergencies, although it is not specifically there for suicide or anything like that. But it is for emergency, things that are deemed important where you have to react quickly.”

“What do you see as your role in dealing with an emergency?” I ask.

He responds, “We use the following process for an emergency. Well, usually they will call me right away, soon, as there is an emergency. Emergency meetings are very easily called. For emergencies, we can meet three or four times a month. These meetings are to discuss things that have to be dealt with right away. A lot of times it is discipline of children, or a related matter. If there was a letter that came forward and it was addressed to the Chairman of the School committee I would open and read it. If it is really serious and needs attention right away, I will speak to the Education Program Co-ordinator and see how severe it is. If it comes from the principal he calls the education program co-ordinator or myself. We have a quick meeting to see how serious it is. A lot of times we are readily available, so we meet. We just deal with the issue right there. In most emergencies a letter is received so we deal with it. We deal with it as the situation arises. We will meet for the time that is necessary. Sometimes we meet a whole day or sometimes it is just an hour. We do give the staff a ‘lot of room to play around with’ where the administration can deal with a lot of these problems.”

“What are the issues that you are aware of that cause you greatest problems? And how would you rank them?” I ask.

He responds, “What we deal with most of the time are discipline problems. Sometimes it is only a certain age group, which will act up once in awhile. Like last year we had a lot of trouble with grades five and six. There are some services we can’t deliver because we don’t have the budget. We know some of the students need counselling and we do what we can. We have taken the position that we will try to handle our own kids before we send them to the residential school. At this time the residential school deals with kids at the third and fourth level of behaviour problems. We don’t have that capacity at the community level.

We know that some kids need that extra attention. We have to deal with that and just lately we brought back the high school students to our community and we are having problems with the facility right now. We don't have the facility to give them a good high school program. When the residential school closes we are going to come face to face with the level three and four children and we are not going to be prepared for them. These are the extreme case that we are going to have to deal with. Hopefully, we will be able to use the Health workers and Indian Child Family Services. We see the next few years as the opportunity to work closely with other agencies in our community. For example, Health and Social Development will work closely with the school because our students are often their clients."

I ask, "Are there any other issues that you are dealing with?"

"Yes, Indian Spirituality is an issue," he responds. "We have said 'no' to teaching Indian Spirituality in our schools. It is not part of us at all. I know there are some that want to introduce it. They leave the community and get introduced to Indian Spirituality because of teacher education programs. In Saskatchewan and Manitoba there are a number of programs including Northern Teacher Education Program (NORTEP), Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP), and Brandon Urban Native Teacher Education Program (BUNTEP), but the Local School Committee said 'no.' I don't think the issue is dead yet so somewhere along the line someone else will want to re-introduce it. It will come back."

He continued, "My personal view about suicide is as follows. We had a young guy in the jail cell hang himself with a sock, a really troubled youth. Yet of late there have been a lot of attempts. We hear of them at inter-agency meetings and we deal with a lot of social problems in our communities. So now we get reports from the health services there are a lot of attempts by the young people. How serious it is I am not sure. It is not out in the open. But we do hear and we get reports that it is a problem. There is a tendency for the youth to start to think about taking their lives. We are finding that there is a lot of pressure on the young people for whatever reason. You know, I listened to a person speak one time and what he said actually made sense. He was talking about when a person dies or when a person commits suicide. And when they are taking him to church people always talk about this better

place. They teach that the better place is in heaven. The speaker said they are sending the wrong message to the young people.”

“What message do you think they are sending?” I ask.

He continues, “They are saying to the people when you are dead you are on your way to heaven and the young people may be listening. He made a lot of sense just listening to what he was saying. If young people have this idea in their head or if that is what they are taught at home or at church once you are dead you are on your way to heaven I begin to understand why they consider suicide. Some churches also do that and to me it is the wrong message. If that is the message young people get they will have no thought of killing themselves because they will believe that they are on the way their to heaven. They end up on a better road after death. So that is kind of scary when that is in the young people’s head. Suicide becomes nothing. You kill yourself and you leave to another place that is better. So when I heard that it made a lot of sense. This is the message that is going out. Once life is over here on earth and you get some holy water sprinkled on you, you are home free. There are no consequences for their actions. I am not sure why they do it, but it may be a factor especially for young people.”

“What happens when there is a death in the community?” I ask.

He responds with an actual example, “We just had a drowning. When something like that happens in our community all the people come together. Religious boundaries temporarily disappear and all the bad feelings are replaced with a desire to help. If they had them, they are gone while they support others in the crisis. That point in time all people are out there to help. For example, they had to look for the body. It was amazing, they had forty boats in a matter of minutes. It was sort of a community thing. It just comes together. We shut down the community for a week just to deal with the families.”

I interrupt and ask, “When you talk about shutting down the community what do you mean?”

He continues, “We close the school including the elementary. If you are looking for ‘the body’ it is OK to leave your job at the Band or if you are working for someone else. All the employers are prepared to give time off to allow their workers to go. Essential services are

there and we all get together to deal with the crisis. It is like a big family especially when it is young people. Health services are available right away. Mental health people come in quickly to talk to our students. I think that is a characteristic of our community whenever there is an emergency, whenever there is something, we just work to come together. If someone has to deal with suicide in our community we all help because we have to deal with it as a community.”

“Are there other similar issues which need to be dealt with by the community?” I ask.

He responds, “There is another item that we are slow to move on, although we have discussed it, the interagency agreement. The inter-agency committee includes people from the RCMP, health, education, economic development, child and family services and the Band. We all sit down on a regular basis and discuss problems. For example, if we want a curfew in the community we do a survey and based on the results we try different things. But eventually we are going to have to deal with AIDS. If it comes to the community, it is a death sentence, and we are not sure how we are going to deal with the issue. We haven’t sat down as a community to discuss it. If something like that was to be introduced to the community I am not sure how our community would react. I am not sure what they would do. But, we do have health services, but still, AIDS will be a major thing in the future. We will have to deal with it at the school level, the community level and the Band level.”

I ask the following questions, “Have you researched any policies on suicide crisis? I know you have a protocol with the RCMP, but are there any other agreements?”

He responds, “We have these emergency protocols and I think suicide would fall under this type of emergency. If a student confides with a staff member on drugs, the teacher needs to contact the supervisor, either the principal or the education program co-ordinator, and sometimes it comes to us to deal with. And I think if a student confides in a teacher his intent to commit suicide I think that the same process would be used. That staff member has a protocol to follow so the inter agency group is informed. Maybe the student already has worked with the Health clinic so we just continue the support that they need. This is the way they deal with it.”

“Is there anything else related to crisis and your principal that will help me understand what you do?” I ask.

He responds with the following question, “You mean describe for me what a principal does?”

“Yes.” I respond.

And he continues, “The principal is responsible for the day to day operations of the school and lots of times the community expects him to get involved in community affairs. For sure they take a lot of the heat regarding the operation of the school because they are ‘front and centre.’ But, we are there to give them support as they run the school. We depend on one another. They depend on the school committee to give them support and we depend on them to educate our children.”

“Basically, if I wanted something done we use the school staff. If someone wants to use the school gym tonight they contact the principal and he uses the policy to guide the use of it following the procedure. I am not sure the community knows that administration can do these things because they keep coming to the Education Committee when they could be going directly to the principal. The principal is responsible for implementing the policy that is developed by the local school committee. Outside of those guidelines they come to the Education Committee. The principal is also responsible for staff supervision, teaching of the curriculum and operation of the school. He is responsible for making sure that staffs are doing things consistent with the policy and personal policy manual. They are expected to spend a lot of time doing extra curricular activities. We tell them this when we hire them. All the staff are doing their fair share of volunteer work.”

“Do you have a policy to govern community participation?” I ask.

“Yes, we have a policy that asks people to volunteer so many hours a week. When they are hired they promise us ‘the moon.’ But, we have to remind them that we expect them to participate in the community,” he responds.

Just then a colleague from my office came to the cafe for coffee. He said, “John is looking for you.”

I told the Chairman, “John is my editor and I will need to phone him.”

As I was dialling the telephone I thought, I wonder what assignment he has for me now.

John's first question is, "What story are you working on?"

I respond, "The suicide article."

"You will have to do that story on your own time," he responds. "There is a fire in town and I want you to get over there right away."

He gave me the location of the fire and I returned to the table. I thanked the Chairman for his time and I left. On my way to the fire, I thought of the work I had put into the suicide article. Would I ever use it? By the time I get back to the article it will no longer be news. Just then I saw the smoke from the fire.

### *The Counter Story*

#### *Introduction*

The Precambrian Shield of northern Canada provides the setting for an adventurer's paradise. In the mist of this beauty, is a remote Cree community.

In the five-year period 1988 to 1993, there were 37 attempts and 23 deaths by suicide in this one Cree Band. From July of 1991 to November 1991, a five-month period, there were 11 attempted suicides and 4 suicides. Most were persons under 25. The preferred methods were prescription drug overdose, illegal drug overdose, slashing of wrists, gunshot wounds and hanging" (Weidlich, 1993, p.1).

The impact on the small community was traumatic as they struggled with the questions, What is happening? Why are so many young people killing themselves?

The remote Cree community is located on a northern Canadian First Nation reserve. Three of the suicide victims were students at the First Nation High School. The counter story is a description of the First Nation Principal's experience as he deals with four of these deaths. Three of these children were students and one was his son. All these events happened within a four-week period.



The voice is the voice of the First Nation Principal, therefore, the language used should reflect his conversation in Cree, but for the benefit of the researcher he explains his recollections in English. The entire interaction with community members that includes most school staff, family members and friends should be in their story language - Cree. However, this would severely limit the ability of the general reader to understand. Therefore, the researcher writes the story in English. The Principal reviewed the story a number of times and it was not considered complete until he accepted it as his story. The story is written in the first person. Pseudonyms are used to protect identities.

### *Jeannie*

Grief has received little attention in the literature of educational administration. Ironically, the scant literature on the management of radical institution and system rationalisation has drawn on studies of bereavement to help explain events and to develop guidelines for education leaders. (Macpherson and Vann 1996, p.24)

**The first four days - death and burial.** I first became aware of Jeannie's death on Sunday morning. My niece came to our home to tell us the news. Sunday is a day of rest in our home. We attend church and deal with family matters because family is very important to me. We usually sleep in a little later in the morning, but we are always up to go to church. I am an Anglican, but I attend my wife's church. She is Catholic.

My niece started with these words, "Did you hear what happened? Jeannie shot herself in the stomach." Now that she had our attention, she calmly related the story. It was as if she was describing a news event from somewhere else.

I was devastated. She was a student at the high school. How could she do such a thing? She was only sixteen. "Where did it happen?" I ask.

She responds, "I don't know, all I know she did it and the ambulance took her to the hospital. The family is there with her now. She is in critical condition."

It is good that she has a family that is caring and supportive. It would be hard to recover by yourself. Jeannie's parents had just got back together. They put a lot of effort into dealing with their problems. Over the past six years the drinking and the fighting has led to a number of separations and reconciliation. Just then I heard a knock on the door.

My son yelled "come in" and the messenger entered. The messenger's first words were "I have some bad news, she died." Then he related how he had received the information. We talked about what had happened for the next few minutes.

Rumours spread quickly in a small community. Our community has 1200 residents and I think every one of them had their own opinion on why it happened. As soon as someone heard the story, they would embellish it by adding their tidbit, and pass it on to the next person. It was, at least for some, the newest bit of gossip for the day. For many it consumed their waking hours, but it was only a passing interest for my children. They didn't seem bothered or interested in what was going on. It was as if they had been prepared for the news. They listened to the story and then they returned to their previous activity of watching TV.

"I heard that your reporter friend from the newspaper called to get the specifics from Joe, the Band councillor," the messenger added. "Apparently, the reporter wants to do a story on what happened. A death is surely news in our community. I guess, it sells papers because everyone wants to know what really happened. The police and the Band councillor told the reporter, 'no comment.' So she may be phoning you."

As principal, I had frequent contact with the paper because of school projects. The reporter did a very good job covering our events. If we had a bingo or a speaker she was always willing to do an article on the activity. I guess, it would be considered free advertising. In exchange, I passed news items on to her. The paper was always willing to support our efforts. I thought, if she phones I will tell her that I don't have the information and she should contact someone else from the Band.

Our Cree Nation is in Northern Manitoba, Canada. This is my home community. I was born and raised here. It is a small community with about three hundred homes. The Band leaders are elected. The Chief and Council run the community. The Band is the largest

employer in the community. It owns the store, the gas bar and the cafe. The staff in the nursing station and the RCMP work for the federal government. Everyone, including the garbage truck operator and the grader operator, works for the Band. If you work for the school you are a Band employee. If you work for the Band you work for the Chief and Council. They hire you and they fire you. The Band's efforts are the centre of most of the activity in our community. The housing project, the road improvement and the health centre, these are all Band projects. If you want information on the community, like what is going on or if you are looking for someone, call the Band office and they will be able to help you.

I got the call from the reporter about ten minutes later. I listened to her request and suggested that she phone the Band office.

"I already tried," she responded. "The Chief thinks that reporting the event will provide unnecessary recognition for what has happened," He says, "it will send the wrong message to the young people. I am not trying to send messages, I am trying to report what has happened. What do you think he means?"

I didn't respond. The leaders are afraid that the newspaper report will result in unnecessary notoriety and will be perceived as giving glorification to the act of suicide. I said to myself, "It probably means that the police, Band and school staff will all be asked not to discuss what happened." The Education Co-ordinator never told me. "I told the reporter that I was sorry, but I couldn't help her." They must be concerned that other youth may look at the outpouring of emotion, grief, and notoriety, and think that is what they can expect if you take your life. It will probably be perceived as an appropriate way to get attention. It is interesting that someone had the foresight to understand what could happen. Probably a result of the number of attempted suicides we had in the last few years.

I report to an Education Co-ordinator and he reports to the elected Education Committee. The committee meets about twice per month and discusses the concerns of the school. The agenda has standing items like budget requests, staffing and reports, but most of the agenda focus is on letters and requests from parents. Parent letters are usually sent directly to the Chairman. He says that he gets them in the mail, while shopping, and delivered to his

home. Most of the meeting time is discussion of the Chairman's responses to the different letters and concerns.

Many of the concerns are covered in policy or practice from previous meetings, but each item is always discussed until an appropriate consensus emerges. It is important that you attend these meetings so you can get a sense of the changes that are happening. I was never told I shouldn't make a statement to the press regarding Jeannie, but I am sure if I did, I would have been reprimanded in a subtle way. I am sure happy that I didn't give a statement and I found out before I was quoted in the press.

Communication is seldom formal in our community. I can't remember the last time I received a written communiqué from my supervisor, from the Local Education Committee or from the Band's Board of Education. People usually communicate using the "moccasin telegraph." It is not formal, but it sure is effective. I got the information regarding the publication ban, but to this day, I still didn't get the information from my supervisor.

Later that evening I found out from my cousin that the Band imposed a publication ban on the subject of Jeannie's death and if there was any information provided to anyone, the staff was to utilise a communication protocol for sharing information. The Councillor for Health is identified as the spokesperson and she was the spokesperson for the Band.

Even with the official publication ban the children knew or suspected something was amiss. When I was in the store to pick up milk, I heard two young girls express their astonishment regarding what had happened. It reminded me of when I first heard that my father was dying. I was young, only eleven years old. I felt something was wrong even before they told me. I was at the residential school. I went to school when my parents went on the trap line. My dad spent much of his life on the trap line. We made our living from trapping. When they were out on the trap line, and I was not at school, I was reared by my Cree-speaking grandmother and aunt. As a young child, Cree was all I spoke. I think it is important that you speak your first language. It gives you a sense of who you are. You can see the difference in the self-esteem between young people who speak their language and those that don't. Parents need to encourage their children to speak their own language.

As I arrived at school age of six years, I was sent away to residential school in the south. This was to become the pattern of my childhood - living in the south for the school term and returning home for the summer. Trapping was always done in the fall and winter when I was away at the residential school. It was late fall when I first heard that my father had passed away. They came to pick me up and take me home so I could attend the funeral. I remember how lonely I felt as I was told. It was a premonition. It is interesting that you know something is wrong long before you are told. It was very emotional for me, but I didn't cry. Even if I was hurting, I was expected to wait and cry when I was alone.

I have many good memories of residential school; there are really no bitter ones. You hear the horror stories, the trauma that many of our people went through, but it wasn't an alien place for me at all. I always felt at home with the others at the school. I was never denied an opportunity to use my language. I was always speaking Cree with other children from the north. The traditional values I learned at home, such as sharing and respect for elders, helped me to do well at school. Respect for others helped me listen and not rebel. I got along fine. In a way, I had the best of both worlds.

I remember the deep pain and sorrow I felt at the funeral, but it was the loneliness inside that was the hardest to face. It is the knowledge that you will not see the person for the rest of your life that troubled me. At the funeral, people all filed by to express their sorrows and condolences, but somehow their words lacked impact. They expressed how they felt, but the words didn't really comfort me. It was hard to really say how I felt.

Emotions are hard to express in words. After the first ten or twenty people, it almost became more of a routine.

"Life is hard," one man said.

"You will get over it," another woman counselled.

When you lose someone there is a great outpouring of emotion, but you are never given time to deal with it. You are expected to bounce back immediately. Often these feelings are intense and you don't understand them.

It wasn't long after my father died, my mother followed. I was barely accepting the death of one and the other passed away. Now I had to leave school to work to support the

family. At least it happened at the right time. It was just after I graduated from grade twelve. Now it was my responsibility to support myself and my brothers and sisters.

I was young so I thought I would return to the north and try trapping. It didn't take long to find out that I didn't have the special skills so I started by attending a trapping school. I had some experience in the bush, but it wasn't enough to make a living. I learned a valuable lesson from my brief experience with trapping. "You should listen to those that are teaching. It makes a difference. Ask them questions, because watching someone, and doing what they are doing is quite different. Eventually we all have to do the task ourselves. After a few more lessons, I left the trap line to become a guide. For the next few years, I guided fisherman. Now I found something I was good at and I loved. I love to fish and what you love you always do good at it. This was my summer job for the next few summers. After a couple of years, I began to think I want to do more. Although I enjoyed the work, I wasn't content. I knew I could do more, I decided that I was going to attend university. Because I had felt at home in the south, I returned there and enrolled in Business College. It wasn't very long when I completed a Diploma in Administration. I enjoy school and as I said, "what you enjoy you always do good at, therefore, I excelled academically." After I completed the course, I travelled north again and worked for one of the nearby Bands for seven years. It was during this time that I got married. Marriage changes your life. Once you have responsibilities you have to really focus on your work life. I adapted quickly and we began to raise a family.

The opportunity to attend university to become a teacher came to me in an unusual way. The principal of the community college while we were fishing approached me. "You should become a teacher. I have been watching you and you are good at teaching," he said. Soon my hopes to help my family, my community, and myself became fixed on the TEP Program. TEP is a teacher-training program for First Nation people offered by a number of Universities in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The program is offered in the north and the student completes a Bachelor of Education degree in either elementary or secondary education. I chose to teach secondary.

I thought of Jeannie. How could she lose hope? All the same opportunities were there for her. When I was growing up there were only a few choices available. I was an adult

before they created the off campus degree program. Why didn't she seek help? There is a lot of Band staff that are hired to assist people that have problems. If I have a problem, I always seek help. I thought how much different it might have been if she would have contacted the guidance counsellor, the ICFS worker, the NADAP worker or the CHR.<sup>2</sup> It helped remind me that I need to contact them so they will be available if I needed them at the school. I wonder if the person who found her had contacted the local resources for personal support. They will need emotional support because death is not a routine experience.

No one explained to me the circumstances that led to Jeannie taking her own life. Probably because no one really completely understands what leads people to make this decision. You really don't understand the feelings of another person. Nobody, even professionals, knows the mind of another. I didn't get any detailed explanation of what had happened. It seems that everyone just seems to think, because you are a principal, you have heard all the details of the incident and you understand. This is not true and I never ask because I think it shows how insensitive you are. Asking a person for more details and describing the event actually causes more grief. I believe, if you are meant to know you will get the information. Through the many conversations, I picked up enough to understand some of the general issues. She lacked self-esteem because she was over-weight. This was not the first time she tried to take her own life. This was her third attempt. I knew it happened after a fight with her boyfriend. They were all drinking. It seems that alcohol or drugs are always involved. She saw him with another girl. They argued, she left crying and two hours later she was found dead.

With every disagreement people say things that are unkind. I imagine a lot of things that were said in anger were never meant. All I had to do was to reflect on the disagreements that I was part of or witnessed. Anger sure brings out the worst in people. When people are angry they always say things to hurt the other party. I know they wouldn't say those things if they were in their normal state of mind.

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<sup>2</sup> NADAP is the National Addiction Drug and Alcohol Program worker, ICFS is the Indian Child and Family Services worker and CHR is the Community Health Representative.

I suggested to my wife that we should go see the family, but when we phoned the family we were told that they are still at the hospital with the body. They wanted to spend time with Jeannie before she was taken away for the autopsy and the mortuary. I think spending time with the body is good because everyone has to go through a grieving process. Unfortunately, when we experience all that emotion we think it is unique to us. We think that we are the only ones who have had the experience. It is my experience that understanding the grieving process with others helps us understand that we all need to go through a healing process. It was like that when I heard my parents had died. I thought that no one had ever gone through a similar experience. As I went through my healing process I got over it.

In the evening, I spend some time watching the TV, but in fact I am pondering what I was going to do the next day? During the evening I even talked about my options with my wife. I remember what she said when I asked her, "What do you think? Should I close the school tomorrow or should we leave it open?"

Her answer is exactly what I expected. "We always close the school when there is a death in the community."

The community did usually close the school, but closing the school was what was troubling me. What would happen to the children? They were going through a lot and they needed a "safe place."

We recounted what happened with the last three or four funerals. The school did close, but I am still troubled. Death is so final. How are the children going to sort out truth from rumour? If they don't have a good home environment then where are they going to get the emotional support? Should the school make a big thing out of it? All the children must be talking about it. What will happen to them? Some of the children are living in similar home situations and they are going through a lot. Their parents drink, party and fight. Blended families cause a lot of these problems. The children have often told me about their fears and their hopelessness. Some students are even scared to go home so they "hang out" and walk the streets or they stay with relatives. Everyone knows what is going on, but what can they do? The decision to close the school is left to the principal.



Counsellors and teachers often make the point that the school is the only safe environment that is predictable, normal or routine. What if the children need to talk to someone? Who will they go to? After reviewing these things in my mind I decide that the school will remain open. We will close on the day of the funeral, but on the other days we will remain open. If children need help, we will be able to help them.

I again suggested to my wife that we should visit the family. I should go because I am the principal, but what was I going to tell them? What if they are not taking it well and they have started drinking? What if they have a number of people visiting? I convince myself that it is probably better to wait. I will see them in the morning. After all they need to get their family together first so they can make funeral arrangements.

Just then I got a phone call from one of the teachers. "Did you hear about what happened?" was the first question.

"Yes, I was already told," I respond.

"What are we going to do at the school? Will it be open tomorrow?" the teacher asks.

I again thought of the students and a picture of Jeannie's face came to mind. I waited for a moment before I respond. "Yes, the children need a place. The school will be open tomorrow, but we will close for the day of the funeral." We need to meet in the morning, I thought. Maybe a staff meeting or an assembly of the students would help the situation. What about the teachers that may need help? I need to phone the NADAP worker.

I went to bed early that evening, but I couldn't get to sleep. For over an hour I tossed and turned all the time speculating and trying to answer the question. Why? Why would she do such a thing? I couldn't get Jeannie off my mind. She wasn't the best student, but she was doing OK. She was even considering joining the volleyball team. What makes a person think that it all has to end that way? With a rifle!

**Day two: the first day back at school.**

What did I do? The next morning I was slow to get up so all I had time for was a quick coffee and one cigarette. I was thinking of the reasons that I was going to give as I announced my decision to keep the school open. What was I going to say to the Education Co-ordinator, the other principal, and the Chairman of the Education committee? I will

phone each of them right now. I was ready to answer their questions if they wanted to know why I made the decision. I phoned each of them, one after the other, but each one of them already knew of my decision. They already had the information. The conversations were all short, and we ended by agreeing that we needed to keep the other informed.

On my way to the school I thought of the things I was going to have to do. I would have to arrange for all her things to be gathered from the classroom. We would have to close her student file. I would need to visit her family this morning.

As soon as I arrived, I got a call from the Band office. It was the Band councillor in charge of education. He asked me if I had heard of what happened.

I responded, " Yes. I tried to contact you at home, but you had already left for the school."

" What are you going to do at school? Will it remain open?" was his first question.

I respond, "The school will remain open and we will maintain the timetable the best we can. If students have a problem we will contact their parents and send them home." We talked a few minutes about the reason. He expressed his feeling that it was unusual to keep the school open when there was a death, but it was my decision. As long as the school was closed on the day of the funeral and children were not expected to do regular work, he thought it was OK.

He closed by saying, "The children need time to deal with the situation."

I thought I would go outside into the hall to greet the kids. At the time of the bell, I was still out in the hall greeting everyone. You could see in the eyes of the teachers and students that they were all hurting. I felt that I should make myself available to talk to the staff and students or even give them a hug, but I didn't.

We tried to maintain the routine the children were used to. There were the usual questions on activities, requests for information and statements like "Did you hear?" But, most of the students were holding up well. The exceptions were those in her class. Many of the other students she hung around with did not come to school. Only about half the class was there. I announced to the teachers if a child wanted to go home we will let them, but

phone the parents before you let them go. It was not necessary to contact parents because no one made the request.

**I had contact with?** For most of the morning I stayed in my office. There were a number of requests for report card information from teachers. Teachers were keeping busy preparing the report cards and providing the office with the updates on each student file. I got a call from another school principal who he made a request for a student's records. The student had not attended our school for about two weeks. Apparently, he had moved to stay with relatives on another reserve. After a week of not attending any school, he decided that he would attend school there. I met with the secretary and teacher to update his file before it was sent. After I prepared the material I phoned the school. The principal was not aware of the tragedy so he wanted to talk. I knew him from the principal training we received each year. I cut the conversation short by just saying that I didn't have time. He was complaining that some students "come and go" all year long and at the end of the year parents are amazed that they don't pass or do well in their studies.

"Most parents don't have education as a priority," he said. "They are more concerned with immediate family needs for a driver, babysitter or cook," was his final comment.

I committed to get the file to him immediately and said goodbye. After the call, I spent about twenty minutes reviewing the file, getting it ready to send to the new school. I was just finishing when two girls who were responsible for the canteen asked me to drive them to the store to pick up chips, candies and drinks. I told them that I would do it later on. They were insistent and pleaded their case that they needed the supplies right now. They were going to miss the sales expected during the lunch break. I wasn't in any mood to debate, so I made arrangements to go immediately. As we travelled to the store, we didn't talk. I lit a cigarette when one of the girls announced that a date and time of the funeral was set. Her announcement reminded me that I needed to go and visit the family. The morning was almost gone so I decided that I will do it right after lunch. As we returned to the school with the supplies the lunch bell rang. "Just in time," one of the girls said. We unloaded the boxes and I told the secretary that I was going home for lunch and right after my lunch I was going to visit the family.

“Who is going to teach your class?” she asked.

“I will.” I respond. “I am not thinking too clearly these days, I will visit the family after school.”

On my way home for lunch, I did a little thinking of what I was going to do with the students in the afternoon classes. I am the principal, but I teach half time. After lunch I returned to the school and prepared to teach my classes. Just as I was going to class the telephone rang. It was a message from one of the parents. Their daughter will not be at the school in the afternoon because she has to baby-sit.

“My husband and I are going to pick someone up from the bus,” she said. “They are coming to the funeral. My daughter will be back at school tomorrow.”

Right after school I went to visit the family. There were a number of vehicles parked in front of the house so I had to park a couple of houses away. As I walked up to the house I heard a couple of dogs fighting. One growled and the other yelped and it was all finished. I knocked on the door and someone in the house yelled, “Come in.” As I walked in, there were a number of family members who had come home for the funeral. One woman travelled all the way from Winnipeg with her children. Two other women had come over to see the family and stayed because they wanted to see the family from Winnipeg. I asked where Jeannie’s father was.

One of the visitors said, “He and his wife had left to go see the Chief. The Band is going to make a donation to the funeral. They need some food for the wake.”

“Where will the wake be held?” I ask.

“It will be here for the family tonight and at the school gym tomorrow, but you are welcome to come tonight,” was the reply.

I was surprised because no one had contacted the school to book the gym. I tried to think if there would be a conflict, but whatever there was it could be re-scheduled. I thought someone from the Band must have given them permission. I shook everyone’s hand and announced I was going to leave. “I will see the parents at the wake tonight. We will come tonight about 9:00 PM.”

After the visit to the parent's home, I stopped at the store and the Band office. By the time I was finished it was time to go home. There was no discussion regarding the funeral all that evening. I watched a hockey game. By the time it was over it was 10:30 PM so I decided that I wouldn't go to the wake that evening.

Day two, the second day at school. The next day, I arrived at the school early. A box containing Jeannie's books and school supplies was in my office when I arrived. It was all Jeannie's school effects. How would I inform the students and teachers about the funeral? I should call a meeting of the teachers to announce the time and place of the wake and the funeral. I changed my mind after I talked with the math teacher. It was just before the bell. The math teacher came into the office for his messages. I said, "Hi," and asked him if we should have a short meeting to announce the times of the wake and funeral.

He responded, "Everyone already knows."

To check, I asked a number of the other teacher assistants and teachers. The math teacher was right. To call a meeting to tell everyone something they already knew was redundant.

I considered writing letters to all the parents to tell them that the school would be closed for the funeral, but after thinking about the wake and funeral announcement, I convinced myself it would not be necessary. "If anyone wants to know they will call." That morning the secretary took only two calls from parents asking if the school was closed the next day. So my letter would have helped at least two people. As usual, I reviewed the attendance and noticed the number of absent students. But considering the circumstances, what else could you expect?

"Moccasin telegraph" works very well in the school and in the community. If you don't have the information you want you usually have access to a network of people who can give you a daily briefing. It works almost too well sometimes. In a crisis most of the families don't want everything talked about, but if you have a personal communication network like the "moccasin telegraph" everyone seems to know. It is good when you want to inform everyone, but sometimes that is not your goal. Unfortunately, the "moccasin telegraph" doesn't seem to help identify the specific supports needed to meet family member needs, handle rumours, and

reaffirm support. The “moccasin telegraph” doesn’t work that well meeting caregiver’s needs, encouraging professionalism and explaining the grieving process. One thing that can be said for sure, it doesn’t take long for information to get distributed. Unfortunately, it also doesn’t take long for misinformation to circulate either. The strength of these processes is effectiveness, but the weakness is indiscretion.

In our community, when something like this happens, bad feelings from previous incidents disappears. Everyone rallies to offer the grieving family support. Everyone focuses on the healing of families as they come together around this specific crisis. This is a positive side of a death.

We arrived at the wake at 9:30 PM. My wife took the food to the kitchen and I waited at the door. When she returned we went to the family “receiving line.” At a wake, the family members sit in a line near the casket. When you go in you are expected to go directly to the family, shake their hands, hug them and then walk by the casket. After you do that you join the other people who are sitting around the gym. As expected, we shook hands with everyone in the line and gave most of them a hug. My wife ended up hugging the mother for a long time as they talked. We expressed our condolences and committed our family’s support during this time. The conversation with the family that followed focused on the questions like: “Why did this happen?” “Why did it happen to us?” If you read between the lines you will hear the pleas for an understanding of what will happen next. Death brings with it many questions that can only be answered through faith. There was another family behind us so we moved through the line and walked by the casket. The casket had a cross affixed to it. A rosary was clasped in Jeannie’s hand, a blanket and flowers decorated the lid. There was a large burning candle and a large picture displayed as reminders of our hope that there is a life after death. I thought, “A corpse is so cold.” Death is so final.

We made our way to sit down. We just started to visit others at our table when a couple of young girls brought us a coffee and sandwiches. All the people in the gym were visiting each other. Some were even laughing at the things others said. There were small children running around while parents tried to encourage them to be reverent. We visited a number of people for about two hours and decided that we would go home. Just before we

left the gym, we went back to the parents and informed them that we were leaving, but we would be at the funeral the next day. We shook each person's hand again. They thanked us and we left. As we made our way to the door we noticed a number of other people coming and going. Some of the people we had not seen in years so we stopped to talk to them. We knew people would be with the family all night. We knew that the family would not leave the casket until it was put in the ground.

**Day three. Today is the funeral.** The school was closed today so I got up at eight thirty. The kids were watching TV. They welcomed the holiday. The funeral service was scheduled for one o'clock so I started my preparation for the service at eleven. I showered and changed my clothes. I wanted to get there early so I was ready to go by noon. My children were taking their time so I offered a little encouragement. Even though I was ready to go at twelve we left the house at 12:35 PM.

When we arrived, there were already a number of people at the church. We made our way inside and noticed that most of the benches were occupied. The service was going to start a few minutes late. As I sat waiting for the church service to start I recall thinking that church services sure have changed. Now the services cater more to the congregation. It seems that the minister is so easy on the people. They are beginning to treat the suicide as a natural death. People seem to accept it as natural. You sure don't have to do much to be "saved" today.

Jeannie's parents are Anglican so they are deeply troubled by the suicide. During the service the minister only talks about Jeannie in positive terms. After the service, we left the church and followed the procession to the graveyard. There is sure a long line of vehicles with their lights on. It seemed that the whole town attended the funeral. When we got to the graveyard the men had just finished digging the grave. The Elders teach us that it is no good to dig a grave and leave it open over night. So early in the morning they get up and start digging the grave. In the wintertime they do the same thing. Sometimes it takes more time than expected so they are late with the burial. That is one of the reasons funeral services all start in the afternoon. I asked an Elder, "Why do we do that?"

He said, "This is the way we have always done it. At least as long as I can remember."

He didn't give me a reason. After the burial we returned to the gym for a lunch. After we returned, a family representative thanked everyone that attended. We ate and left. It is interesting that there is still no more discussion of Jeannie. The lunch is an opportunity to show your support to the family and visit with others that you have not seen for a few years. It is unfortunate that it takes a death to bring families together.

The day after. Today things were getting back to normal. The students and teachers were getting back into their routines. It seemed as if everyone wanted to put things behind him or her. There is a calmer atmosphere at the school. It surprised me that there are still no requests for help from the students. We arranged for counsellors to be available, but no one has requested any help. Maybe they went directly to the community agency. I will have to ask the Chairman to check at the inter-agency meeting. I assumed that there were requests for help that we were not aware of. I hope that they went directly to the counsellor.

How quick we forget. A day or two after the funeral you are expected to get back into the routine of life. In the next few days there was no mention of Jeannie. The only reminder was a box in my office that I had to deliver to the parents. All that I recall was deterioration in the children's behaviour.

### *Jeannie 2*

The first five days - death and burial I first became aware of Jeannie 2's death from my wife. Jeannie 2 attended high school with my daughter and had returned to the community after living much of her life at the residential school. My wife was returning from the store on Saturday when one of her friends passed on the information. It was a casual announcement. Jeannie 2 was not liked by many of the parents because she was considered a troublemaker and a loner. She was very smart and doing well in school, but she was very self-conscious. She was a big girl and we noticed that she was not a regular attendee so we put her in home study through correspondence.

She had attempted suicide the year before, but coped quietly with her problems for another year before she committed suicide. I have found if you had taken the time to understand what she had gone through you would find that she was a nice girl. She grew up in



a home where the parents did a lot of drinking. Over and over, I have seen the experiences of children who have alcoholic parents. Jeannie 2 knew Jeannie well and much of the time you would see them together.

Her friends had no idea there was a problem. Even my daughter, who was close to her, didn't have any idea why she did the final act. When asked she said, "Nobody knows why. I don't know why." No one even knew she was thinking about suicide. A month after the death we heard a report from a counsellor from the residential school saying the earlier attempt was an overdose of pills, but our therapist had worked with her and thought she was over the problem. Well, she really didn't get over the problem.

**How it happened?** Jeannie 2 hung herself and we knew that there was liquor involved. The young people in the community have taken up the "passing out" activity for "kicks." They take a towel or piece of cloth and they wrap it around their necks and choke themselves. After a few seconds of the blood not getting to the brain they pass out. As they fall backwards they release their grip on the towel which releases the pressure on the neck and the blood starts flowing again.

My younger son says they do this to get a "rush." In most cases, there is a complete recovery.

I asked him, "Why do they do it?"

He responded, "I don't know. Just because other kids do it, I guess. One of the boys says, hanging is the easy way because you pass out so quickly. He says hanging is promoted as a painless way to die. The young people say hanging is considered an easy way to take your own life because you just put yourself to sleep."

"Where do young people learn these things?" I thought.

**My daughter was devastated.** This is the second suicide in three weeks. The community has not even dealt with the first death and now we are faced with a second. Jeannie 2 was struggling with home correspondence, but she would have passed. She missed a lot of school because she had to baby-sit. Weekends were her free time. I guess, she got sick of being tied down. Unfortunately when she went out she got involved in activities which involved alcohol and drugs.

I didn't have to deal with drugs when I was growing up, but they are sure available now. There are so many different types. Some give you a high, some are depressants, some are prescription and some are non-prescription or street drugs. Others you mix together to get the high that you want. Some doctors over prescribe. We had a meeting with one of the doctors once because of our concerns. It didn't seem to help. He just continued to prescribe. It seems that the word spreads quickly when there is a doctor who will give you what you want. It seems that the pushers know where to go for a supply of prescription drugs.

I have never used drugs, but I have been told that you can get anything if you pay. Everyone in the community knows the "bootleggers" and the "pushers," but no one "squeals." We have been taught that we don't interfere with others. If they are to get caught then they will get caught. Sometimes these people are very influential and take leadership positions. They think they are smart because they get away with it for years. Most of the people know who they are, but no one will tell the police. If they are caught, members of the community are happy they are charged especially if they go to jail. It is part of our culture not to get involved. We don't interfere. If it is going to happen then it will happen. It is not under our control.

I continue to struggle to understand. How could someone so young even consider such a thing? We just went through this three weeks ago. Even though we have experienced it before, it still brings the same questions and pain as it did the first time.

The police were meeting with the family this morning to try to get more information. Everyone was drinking last night so no one was up when the police went to get statements. The family is not taking it well.

**Where did it happen?** She was found in a shed behind the house. No one knows how long she was there. She left early in the evening with a group to go out. They drove around and ended up at a party. The young people said, she went home early, about two o'clock. The family said she didn't come in so no one knows how long she was outside before she did the final act of hanging herself. No one knows. The family was also having a party so I don't think they would have known if she came in or not.

**Circumstance that led to the discovery.** A passing fisherman found her early the next morning. He was walking past the yard on his way to the lake and saw her hanging there. He was not sure at first, so he approached the building to see her up close. It was then he knew what had happened. Immediately he went to the neighbours and they phoned the police. If the door of the shed had not been open it might have been days before they found her.

The rumours spread quickly because at first the police suspected foul play. But after an initial investigation they said the death would be recorded as a suicide. The news of the death spread quickly and it wasn't long before a small crowd of people was at the home. Most of them just there to get a look. When I got up and looked out the kitchen window I noticed that there was a police car and an ambulance down the street, but didn't give it much thought. It wasn't until my wife returned that I understood.

When something happens in the community it seems that I am the last to know even though I am the principal. Discreetly, I made my inquiry as to what happened. Since my daughter was a close friend, I didn't want to ask her. It turned out that my daughter wanted to talk so we did. I am happy that my daughter is not part of the drinking crowd.

My daughter's first question was "Why did she do it?" Then she continued to talk, "No one even knew she was having a problem. No one knew she was so depressed. Imagine, so depressed that she saw suicide as the only way out. She didn't seem like the type."

I was speechless. I didn't have the answers either. Later I learned that everyone is the type. All the students were asking questions of my daughter about Jeannie 2, but she did not want to talk about the death. Jeannie and Jeannie 2 were friends so people began to ask if there was a connection. Someone suggested that there might have been a pact or an agreement, but it was never substantiated.

Once again, the Band requested a ban be maintained. Formal inquiry would go directly to the Councillor responsible for Health. When this happened the first time, I questioned if the death could have had an impact of encouraging others to consider suicide, but after the second self inflicted death in three weeks I began to reconsider my position. Maybe the influence of peers was a factor. Was Jeannie 2 encouraged to do this when she

noticed what happened to Jeannie? The community really came together to support the family. Was she envious of all the community members caring? All that caring and support with the outpouring of emotion, grief, and interest. I wonder if it had an effect? The total community was caught up in the tragedy.

I began to see the wisdom of a ban, but the ban did not stop the rumours. Young people in the community were living on rumours, although they didn't completely understand what was going on. Many thought that there was foul play, others knew it was foul play and they got involved in the "rumour mongering." The family members knew she had taken her life. "Moccasin telegraph" usually doesn't have official sources. There is no established source to validate what is being said. In our community most parents don't talk about the way a person died, they just say the family has had "bad luck." It means that they have had a death in the family.

Children take the information from any source they can get it. They get it from anyone they can. Children, I imagine, heard their parents discuss the situation so they knew or suspected that what happened was unusual, but they didn't get a clear message that it is right or wrong. One of the community elders blames the problems on the liquor or drugs and others blame their lack of a Christian faith.

He said during a conversation that I had with him, "They don't know who to believe or what to believe. They think that if they die, or kill themselves, everything will be all right. But they don't realise that everything is not all right. They don't see it hurts the people who care about them. These mixed messages happen because the children don't usually get correct information from the parents so they get it from anyone they can."

After a death you only hear someone speak positive about the person. It may be confusing. I don't know. The information ban stops the glamorising of the event, but it doesn't stop the misinformation. The lack of information still leaves it open to speculation, especially speculation by the children. The ban deals with the formal communications, but this did not stop the gossip. Who does the child believe?

What was I going to do? We had just had this experience so I decided that I was going to do the same thing I did last time. We will leave the school open, but close it for the

wake and the day of the funeral. I thought that I should go see the family. Even with the experience of this happening three weeks ago it is like I was going through it all for the first time. I hope I always see a death as something unusual, because the impact of death should never be considered routine. In our community, there are people that have gone to war. They handle the horrors of war by talking about the experience. When are we going to get the opportunity to talk about what has happened as a community? It is in the talking that you find that many people hide their experiences behind a facade of "I am strong and able to deal with it." I have come to understand that death always has an impact.

What was I going to tell the family? My daughter had already gone over. She expressed her sorrow to them and said that she was going to return to the wake the next night. She reported to us that they were drinking, but they were not drunk. Families that have problems with alcohol use it to deal with many of their problems. I hope that they will be able to limit their drinking at least until after the funeral. We decide that we will go to the wake at the school on Monday night. As we talked about the death with others on Sunday at church we noticed that there wasn't as much compassion for Jeannie 2 as there was for Jeannie. Some people in the community seemed to lack compassion for some teenagers. They took the attitude that she made her bed, now she should have to sleep in it. Maybe it was because she had spent so much time out of the community. Maybe it was the stigma of being a loner or troublemaker. Maybe it is just because people did not know her. Maybe it was because people don't care.

I had contact with? Later in the day, Sunday, I met a couple of the teachers walking and announced that school would be open on Monday because the funeral was on Tuesday. Her death didn't seem to receive as much attention as Jeannie's. Was the community still numb from the first death or was it becoming callous? What makes a young person think that it all has to end that way? Hanging themselves. I thought of the anguish that she must have gone through as she deliberated her final act in the shed. As she looked for support from her family they were trying to drown their sorrows inside the house. What could have happened?

**Monday: The first day at school.** On my way to the school I was thinking how were teachers going to keep their students occupied for the day? It is going to be hard to keep the students focused on academics. Maybe I will let them do some self-directed learning. The school would be closed tomorrow for the funeral, but what was I going to do today? I decided that I would invite the NADAP worker to the school. Everyone knew him and I thought that it would be good just to let him be near if someone needed to talk to him. If they didn't want to talk to him at the school they could make their own arrangement. I remembered what happened the last time. Nobody asked me to arrange for counselling even though I knew that there were students that would be hurting. If the invitation was discreet or casual I thought it might work. I called the Band office as soon as I got to school, but he wasn't there. I left him a message. The school day was almost considered routine. It is interesting that death affects people in different ways. Some of the children attended school and took it all in stride, while others were severely impacted. There were no students who asked to go home, but there were a few students that missed afternoon classes. The reasons were not related to Jeannie 2. We didn't work the students hard that day and when I asked the teachers to pay close attention to see if the children had been preoccupied with the death, they said no.

There were a number of visitors at the wake and the funeral. Jeannie 2's father was born in another community. Most of the visitors were the father's relations. It made me think that each person exerts their own sphere of influence. Some of the family members were drinking through the whole ordeal. We didn't spend as much time at the wake that night as we planned.

I had family members return to the community and I used the opportunity to get time for a visit with them. Families don't spend much time together these days. At the wake, I saw the NADAP worker. He said he was away taking a person to a treatment centre. He spent a lot of his time transporting people to and from treatment centres. Although he worked and worked, it seemed that he was losing the battle. For every person he sobered up, there were at least two or three others that started drinking. The statistics didn't deter him. He simply said, "I am here to help the one person that needs help. Some day, we will have enough influence on those that drink that we will win the war." He said that part of the problem was the ease of

access that youth have to alcohol and drugs. It is too bad that the police don't stop the "bootleggers" and "pushers." He knew who they were, but he never told the authorities.

At the table where I was sitting there was a discussion around the question of "foul play."

"What if the police are wrong and there was someone else involved?" one of the men asked.

The concerned parent in me said that I was happy that my daughter didn't hang around with this group. This was one time I was glad my daughter had a boyfriend. I was sure glad that they were not involved in drinking.

It seemed that we continued using the "moccasin telegraph" for our daily briefings. Information just seemed to be attracted to the people who needed to know. The telegraph continues to be effective in meeting communication needs. It was sure effective when we needed to get the message out.

**The day of the funeral service.** My family and I decided the way that we were going to face her death was collective worship. I thought, as I was dressing for the funeral, "Today I will stay close to my daughter." She was the one that seemed to be most affected. We attended the funeral and went to the gravesite without incident. She seemed to be holding up very well. I asked her a number of times if she felt OK and she always responded in the affirmative, but I just kept checking anyway.

**The day after the funeral.** What did I do? School really helps me to get my mind off of what has happened. The demands put on you, as principal, requires you to adjust quickly. You return to school, it again takes over the use of your time, because you are required to focus on the lessons of the day, other student concerns and staff situations. Soon you lose yourself in working for others. It sure helped me. Jeannie 2's parents were definitely troubled by the suicide. Their drinking was clear evidence of that. I thought that I should go over and talk to them, but you can't communicate well to someone who is drinking. Today things were getting back to normal in my life and in the lives of children. The teachers were getting back into their routines. The result was a calmer atmosphere. No requests for help were received. We will keep making the opportunity available. We decided that they have to make the effort

to seek the help. I notice that there is a continuation of the deterioration in the students' behaviour.

### *Jamie*

**Jamie is the third suicide in three weeks.** Suicides in our community came in waves. The first was a teenager that shot herself. She was 16. Then Jeannie 2 hung herself, barely three weeks later. She was 17. And Jamie is the third. He was 15. During the same period there were also a few attempts, but they recovered so few people in the community heard about them. I usually heard about them because I was at the school. Teachers have one of the best intelligence forces - children. They are everywhere and are usually into everything. If the incident involved a parent or one child's family, we were usually looped into the information cycle. Sometimes the information wasn't clear so we had to put two and two together, but that was unusual.

As I look back at those who committed suicides in the last year, most of them were young people breaking off relationships. It was like "dominoes." One would do it and then the next person would pick up on the idea. In the last ten months, there were eight suicides and at least 16 attempts. There were more, but I wasn't aware of the circumstances. The boys were usually the ones that attempted suicide. There were a number of girls, but I only knew two girls personally. When I say I knew them it means I had a relationship with them because they attended school. Even though you know and work with them, you still don't know what caused them to do what they did. In both instances I had no reason to suspect that they had the intent to kill themselves.

**The first five days - death and burial.** I taught Jamie in grade nine. I was his homeroom teacher. You would never think he would do something like that to himself. Things were going so well for him. He was a popular kid with a good sense of humour. He was always making us laugh with his stories and jokes. He just seemed to enjoy everything he did. I thought he loved life. His death really shocked me. He lived with his mom. I really don't know what led up to his decision to take his own life. I didn't notice any change. It just



happened so fast “like just right now.” Today he was OK and everything was well and tomorrow he made the final decision.

From what I heard later, he had been planning his death. It is frustrating because you always get the experts telling us to look for the signs and track their feelings. They always say you will see this or that, but the signs could apply to anyone going through a problem. Lots of people have the signs, but they never do it. His real feelings were hidden because no one seemed to see a real difference. Listening to the experts really makes a person feel guilty, as if it is somehow your fault. I feel sorry for his mother. She said that he had done a number of the things to prepare for his death, but her son taking his own life was furthest thing from her mind. Nobody even knew that he was suicidal. He left a note that said, “He loved his friends and family, and he was sorry for what he was doing, and hoped that they should not follow” His mother said she didn’t even see his depression.

I was devastated. His death hit the community hard because this was the third in three weeks. He was so young and his method was so violent. He shot himself in the head. He put the gun barrel in his mouth, pulled the trigger and it was over.

I first became aware of what happened at the school. One of the teachers passed the information on to me. I couldn’t believe it. He was at the school yesterday. I guess, there is a serious stage that they go through as they prepare for death. We were told later that he had all the signs, but if you are not thinking that a person is suicidal, how do you know? No one thought that this was happening. Signs don’t mean much if you don’t know their meaning. He was such a nice boy, he was popular, and it happened so fast.

With a violent death the body is always taken for an autopsy. They want to check for drugs and alcohol. Because the damage was to the head the coffin was kept closed through the wake and the funeral. I keep asking myself, “How could someone feel hopeless enough to do this?”

How did it happened? The news of the death spread quickly. What was the circumstance that led to the discovery? I never found out the exact place all this happened, but I thought of how helpless the person was who found him. You find someone who has been shot. You call the police and only after the investigation you find out it was self-inflicted.

The death has a double impact. I think of the disbelief of the mother as the police try to convince her it was self-inflicted. I didn't believe it because he had so much going for him. How do you make sense of something like this?

After the third death, leaders began to say that our community was in crisis. For the first couple of times leaders were looking at the deaths as isolated incidents, but three students in three and one half weeks. We are facing a big problem in our community.

By now, my family was beginning to accept a wake and a funeral as routine. I never thought it would come to a time where I just started to go through the motions. Death is supposed to be an unusual event. Emotionally, you seem to get numb to what is going on. You want to be helpful, but it takes a lot out of you emotionally. Everyone was trying to be caring and supportive. Rumours spread quickly. This is the first time I began to question what was happening in the lives of my children. Was I overlooking the signs? Can this be happening?

I was fast becoming a convert to the idea that showing emotion, grief and interest was contributing to the actual deaths. Inside, I was prepared to accept any explanation for what was happening. I was afraid that all the attention now focused on the youth was probably more attention than most youth have had all their lives. But that doesn't make any sense, Jamie got a lot of attention. He had a lot of friends and his family supported him. Everything was going well. What could have happened?

The Band Councillor contacted the Tribal Council and suggested that they consider bringing in outside experts. He said, "When you drive down the street and see all these young people and you begin to ask who was next, it is time for a call for help." Children knew or suspected the attitudes were shifting. I think that the children were also looking for answers. When the leaders and the police were asked to give their explanation they blamed the liquor. I think it is unfortunate that when we face these situations and we don't understand what is going on we seem to have the habit of blaming.

I sought help. I contacted the NADAP worker, health workers and requested that they be available if they were needed. They said that they would come if they were needed. I

was beginning to see that we were facing a bigger problem than those that were around me suggested.

At the school during the afternoon we were going to announce what happened, but the students were more informed than we were. They were telling us. The “moccasin telegraph” travels at the speed of light and the formal system travels at the speed of sound. Teachers got the information about Jamie after the students did.

What was I going to do? I invited the NADAP worker to visit the school. He showed up and spent time in each classroom describing what services were provided and answered questions from the students. When I asked him to report to me what type of questions he was asked he said, “They were more interested in the details of what specifically happened to Jamie than what was happening to themselves or others in the community.” It is frightening that the students seemed to be so casual about themselves and the impact of what had happened. Maybe it’s their way of coping.

I should go see the family. I planned to go see Jamie’s mother. She was raised here and I went to school with her. What was I going to tell her? She is such a good woman. She has always worked hard and everything she did always was for the benefit of her children. Jamie really helped her. She is going to miss him. When I arrived, the family was waiting for information on the time that the body would be returned for the wake and funeral. I visited with the family for a few minutes, but I knew I could do little but express my sorrow. Anything I said seemed inadequate.

When I arrived home the children and friends were talking about all the rumours about what happened. It seemed that there was still interest in the idea of foul play. All the speculation was the topic of the evening. The investigation was not complete, but that did not stop the speculation.

The next day. We will close the school on the day of the funeral. I will tell staff as soon as I get the date. I had the teacher collect his belongings. When someone dies their personal belongings become special. You seem to take extra care with their disposal. What if there were other letters in his personal effects? Jamie’s effects were brought to my office immediately. I glanced through the box and asked if there were any other articles of clothing

and books. What makes a person think that it all has to end that way? Shooting oneself with a rifle. From the things in the box it was easy to see that he was interested in Nintendo games. A lot of the children spend time playing these types of games. For me it is impossible to get past the first level. Our children have so much ability. Unfortunately, their abilities are seldom taxed.

Just as I set the box down in my office I got a phone call from the elementary school. They asked me to send over the children to see the dental assistant. Each week the dental assistant comes in to clean the children's teeth and today is the day. I asked the secretary to round up the students that need to go.

"They are already on their way," she said.

"I passed the information on to the elementary school secretary." "They left already; they should be there in five minutes," I said.

As I hung up the phone I sat back in my chair. Nothing stops even though there is a tragedy. When do we get a chance to deal with our hurts, our grieving and our problems? It has been three and half weeks since the first crisis happened. We haven't even had time to stop and think about the effect on the school, our families and ourselves. If we take a day off, there is still an expectation that we catch up when we get back so we take work home and our families don't get the attention they need. It is like walking in front of a slow moving grader on the highway. You have to keep walking because as soon as you stop it catches up. Even if you run ahead of it for a while so you can rest, by the time you are rested it is there again. In the mail today is an invitation to attend a weeklong training session on capital planning at the Tribal Council. Indian Affairs wants to know our needs for the next five years. I don't have the time. You put in the proposal and we won't get funded anyway. Our school needs a lot of repairs. We need labs and computers.

Later in the morning I got a call regarding the trapper's camp. We are sending five children out trapping in the late fall. We have two of the most experienced trappers staying with them in the bush for two weeks. It is a good opportunity to learn trapping skills, but I am interested in the character building. The experience will help develop character. I sure will be happy when this starts in the fall.

**Speculation.** All that day I couldn't get my mind off of Jamie. He and I always talked when we were waiting for the bell in homeroom. He sat right in front of my desk.

Some students have so much going for them.

I thought of the presentation to the Education Committee. They want to keep abreast of all that is happening. They don't want to be in a situation where they don't know the background to the issues. They will want a report on the suicides. There is one committee member that wants a detailed briefing on every child in the school in case someone asks him. Some members of the committee are new so it will take them a little time to get an idea of their responsibilities. I will have to give the information on Jamie to the Education Coordinator so he can brief the Committee. What am I going to write into my report? I haven't seen all the letters sent to the Chairman. I think, I will wait until he sends a copy before I start to prepare my report.

**I had contact with?** "I had better phone the Band office and tell them that my report for the meeting will not be ready for distribution. I will hand it out at the meeting."

**Friday, Saturday, Sunday.** What did I do? Thursday, we became aware of the death, today, they say that the funeral will be held on Monday. On my way to the school I stopped at the Band office to get the agenda for the Education Committee meeting. When I got there I was told that the meeting would be postponed but a special meeting would be held to meet with Tribal Council representatives. They will want a report on what we have done for the students. We have had two students come forward and request counselling. Young people are resilient.

I arrived at the school and I was told the date and time of the wake and the funeral. I patiently listened, but I had already been told at the Band office. The rest of the day was considered routine. There was no discussion about Jamie. On my way home I thought of stopping in to see the family, but I noticed a number of vehicles there so I postponed my visit. That evening I spent watching TV. I had visitors later in the evening. My brother and his wife made a few initial inquiries about Jamie, but after they expressed their surprise, our conversation drifted to other things. We spent about two hours visiting and watching TV. They left about eleven o'clock and I went to bed.

Saturday is the day I sleep in. It was about nine o'clock before we got up. After a coffee and cigarette, I suggested that we go shopping. The centre where we do all our shopping is about fifty miles away. That morning we got up and went. My older children stayed home, but my younger children were ready for the day trip. We spent most of the day shopping for groceries and looking for clothes. About six o'clock we picked up something to eat and headed home. By the time everything was into the house it was eight o'clock. The rest of the evening, I read the newspaper and watched TV.

Sunday morning was time for church. Having a spiritual understanding helps you to emotionally centre. The Elders tell us that the reason we have so many problems in the community is because the youth have no spiritual training. In a sense they are right. If you don't have faith in the Creator, life is shallow. It has no purpose. The church service was appropriate for the situation. The minister spoke on helping our neighbour. Tonight is the wake. We will go early because there will be a lot of people for this funeral. Jamie is from one of the larger families on the reserve.

The wake was the first time that I saw Jamie's mother. She was crushed. She couldn't understand why her son had done what he did. She looked exhausted from crying. There were no more tears. She took the death very hard. During our brief conversation she broke down and sobbed. She said she had nothing to hold on to. We expressed our condolences and moved on. I thought how few of us are prepared for death. We all know it is going to happen, but we don't prepare. When it happens unexpectedly, we are not prepared.

The funeral services were similar to the other funerals we attended, but the minister said something that still troubles me. He said that we (people in the community) are beginning to accept suicide as another way of dying naturally. I am not sure I understood his point, but I was taken back. If we were beginning to accept suicide as a natural way to die then more and more will consider this as an option. Were we teaching the children of our community that this is now more acceptable? What a horrible conclusion to end a life.

The collective worship helped me to face Jamie's death, but it also raises a number of questions. The greatest problem I had was to publicly acknowledge the grief of the family.

There was the burning question of the family and friends, “Are we partially responsible for what happened?”

**The day after.** Today things were getting back to normal. The teachers were getting back into their routines. There was a calmer atmosphere, but there is a continuation of the students’ misbehaviour. This was an added challenge to the counselling process.

### *My Son - The Final Act*

If telling my story can help just one person understand what you go through personally when this happens it is all worth it. I thought I understood when I lost my parents. I thought I understood when it happened to Jeannie, Jeannie 2 and Jamie, but I only got an introduction to the “internal conversation of the mind” when your child that you love so much takes his own life. The internal discussion totally consumes you. It is the first thing on your mind as you rise and the last thing on your mind as you fall asleep exhausted in the wee hours of the morning. You keep going, but the influence is unrelenting. Each of us needs to come to terms with death, but a death in this way, and it is your child, is hell. No parent should have to go through what I have experienced. I can’t adequately describe it in words because most of it is caught up in my emotions and feelings. How do you describe the emptiness, the loneliness, the anger, the guilt, and the helplessness until it happens to you? You experience feelings that you never knew existed and most of them you don’t understand. The emptiness manifests itself in physical pain deep inside. The loneliness can only be visualised as desolation. It cuts deep. Anger from the helplessness is focused on those you love. The guilt that you feel when you think, you are responsible. Maybe, it is my fault because I should have seen what was going on, I should have known and could have taken action. What action I don’t know, but something. The helplessness can only be described in the knowledge that you can’t change what has happened; it is final.

With the number of children at my home every day visiting, I often think that I have more than five children, but my wife assures me there are only five. We have four boys and one girl. As parents we have always encouraged our children to do well in school. Our children

are normal children. We consider ourselves a typical family. We have our challenges, but no more than others we associate with.

I am not really sure of all the events and the details that led to what happened. I have reviewed each piece of information over and over again. For the past few months it has consumed most of my waking hours. I am searching for an explanation, "Why?" I don't know of a parent that wouldn't seek that understanding.

As I described what happened to the three students I cannot say all that happened. I recall the things to the best of my ability, but it is still only my perception. But in my son's case I was not a bystander. I was beside him at the hospital after he took an overdose of pills and I was in the home when this all happened. In all the cases of suicide that I have been associated with, I knew the person was involved with drugs and alcohol. It was surely the case with my son.

The first five days death and burial. Weekends were always an opportunity to spend time visiting family. I remember what happened as if it was yesterday. My son was drinking, I guess that's what encourages them, I am not sure. As a parent I thought everything was going well for him. He just completed his training as a health professional. He had a good paying job. He and his girlfriend had just moved their family into a new house that is provided to them by the Band. He had a new truck, a snow machine, and furniture. He was well down the road to success. But his job required that he move from home to another reserve.

The children liked their new home, but his girlfriend didn't like the new reserve so she came back and stayed with us. I guess that is when she started to "fool around" with another guy. My son tried to come home every weekend, but he was there and she was here. She was drinking more than usual and with the drinking came the parties. He suspected that she was unfaithful, but at the time we convince ourselves that it was still speculation. I had a first cousin that had the same experience.

After a while, my son realised his relationship wasn't working. He decided to take a year leave because he was so concerned about his family. He applied for another job close to home and got it. I don't think he knew she was "fooling around." He tried everything to



keep his family together and keep his girlfriend happy. He was making good money, but nothing seemed to work. That is when he took the overdose of pills. I was teaching a computer class when they came and got me. I know the trip to the hospital was one of the longest trips I have ever taken. To this day, I still don't know what he took. How relieved I was to know that they got him to the hospital in time. There is a lot of discomfort when you get your stomach pumped, but he was OK. When he returned home we encouraged him to seek help, but they seemed to be working things out. For the next few weeks, everything seemed to be returning to normal. We were concerned, but we did not want to interfere. They were adults and they would have to work it out.

It was the Easter long weekend. My son's girlfriend's sister had come home for the weekend. One Friday the two sisters decided they were going to go drinking. They started the party on Friday and it lasted most of Friday night and all day Saturday. My son was drinking with them on Friday while they were at home, but when they left for more liquor on Saturday he stayed at home watching the children. Although he didn't mind his girlfriend spending time with her sister, by Saturday evening he was getting tired of looking after the kids so he decided that he would go look for her. It was late Saturday night that he caught her first hand with another guy. He was so upset he came and stayed at our home the rest of the night and all of Sunday. Later that Sunday night after I had gone to bed, he left. We don't have any idea where he went, or what was said. As a matter of fact we all assumed that he was in bed. About four o'clock Monday morning we heard a loud knock at the door and I got up to answer it. I was wondering who it was. We never lock the door if the kids are out, but it was locked because we assumed everyone was home. I opened the door and there he was. He was angry. I don't remember seeing him so angry. I went to his room downstairs to talk to him. He was furious with her. We talked for awhile and then I asked him to go to bed. He did. I went upstairs. I heard him moving around in the kitchen; I supposed that he was getting himself something to eat or drink. He normally did that when he came home late. My daughter must have heard him and thought he brought the children with him so she got up and went downstairs to see if the children were all right. That is when she saw him hanging on the beam downstairs. She screamed. The scream was a sign of terror so I immediately got up

and went to her rescue. The scream came from downstairs so I quickly made my way to the stairwell. As I turned the corner I saw my son hanging. I remember it as if it was yesterday. I grabbed his body to take the pressure off his neck. We cut him down and tried to revive him, but it was too late. I was overcome with horror. I looked around at the other members of the family. All of them were crying. This wasn't supposed to happen. We phoned the clinic and they sent for an ambulance. While we waited we tried to get air into him, but our efforts were futile.

**Caring and supportive.** News travels like a wild fire. Within minutes relatives and others from the community were coming over to see what was going on. Rumours spread quickly. Over the next two hours it almost seemed like they were attending a spectator event. I came very close to sending them out. I guess it is their way of supporting us. They brought food, coffee and extra chairs all at six o'clock in the morning.

The RCMP had to take our statements before they took the body. As they were about to take my son I asked them to explain the process we would have to go through to get the return of the body. They were supportive, but their questioning was probing. Their continued questioning upset us, but I guess they are only doing their job. It was about six-thirty in the morning before they removed his body. It was after seven before the spectators left. All that day I stayed home. I felt guilty, frustrated, helpless and empty.

**I soon sought help.** A very good friend of mine who works with NADAP and my wife's family came to stay with us until after the funeral. Lots of people phoned to say how sorry they were and what they can do to help us. I personally didn't want anybody to be around. I just wanted to be alone. I was very upset. When this happens you are overwhelmed with emotion. It is hard to put into words the intensity of how sad you can get. It is hard not to break down when others depend on you. I was mortified. My wife and children were devastated. Knowing that they needed my support made me try harder, so much harder not to cry. The support we got we really appreciated. It was great. You need people when this happens. It is a sense of being normal that really helps you. They didn't seem to do anything special, but it was having them there that made such a difference. I didn't see it at the time but as I reflect on what they did, it made a big difference.

The next day we drove to town to meet with the funeral home to discuss the preparations of the wake and the funeral. They sure can take advantage of a person. You are not thinking right and they ask you to make these major financial decisions. The wake and the funeral were held in my wife's community. That night we asked them to return the body to the community for the next day. We held the wake in my mother-in-law's house. Family and close friends were with us all night. Most of the time we spent talking and reminiscing. We cried. We laughed. We hugged each other. Wakes in our community are the first step in the healing process. People came and went all night.

In the morning we were tired, but we continued to stay with the body. It is our way never to leave the body alone. So many people came to pay their respect and offer their condolences. We moved the wake to the school gym the next day.

The funeral service was packed. Family members attended, my wife's family, my son's colleagues from the health clinics, and government representatives from National Health and Welfare Medical Services Branch from the regional office. There were just so many people there to show their respect. I often wonder if my son knew the positive impact that he had on people's lives. I wonder if most people ever realise how many people that we touch in our lifetime. After the burial and the lunch we stayed overnight at my wife's mother's place. We were exhausted. I went to sleep early. The next day we left for home.

When we returned home, all I could feel was the anger at my son's girlfriend. She didn't attend the funeral. I continued to re-trace the events. What if I would have done this? What if I would have done that? What if? What if? I was always asking the question. I still wonder how people in the community felt. Many of the community are directly related to my family, and how many were related to her? To help deal with the pain, I convinced myself that what happened was meant to be. It was his time to go. There was no other choice.

I was feeling anger, frustration, and hopelessness. It brought back all the feelings I felt when we lost my parents. We were friends. The experience of my son helped me understand why the others became so upset with the loss. As a result of my personal experience, I feel it is a responsibility of the school to provide support while children go through all these mixed emotions. The school is one of the only places where young people

can get support. Although I am open to other suggestions, I feel we need to be there for the children. Death is an incredible crisis. It is usually a new experience. It's so final and there is so much emotion.

What was I going to do? As I reflect on what I have learned as I have gone through these four events as Principal, I know families who need support as they face these situations. The school board has a bereavement policy where they give you one week off. But you may extend it without pay. They allow you to stay away as long as you feel you need, but I wanted to go back to work. Our children went back to school immediately after the death and they seemed to take it better than I did. My wife also went back to work. It seemed to help her. She didn't have to go back to work, but she did. Work became the way she dealt with the death. She now puts in a lot of time at work. She works a lot. It is OK because working at the health centre really helps her. They were there when she needed someone to talk to. She is slowly getting over the death. She is beginning to accept what happened. She feels a little better. She is now able to cope.

As I reflect on what has happened, how it affected me personally and as I watched it affect my family, I think there are some things that I would like to see happen. In a small community everybody knows one another and we are all related to each other somehow. Students need to have someone immediately to help them work through their feelings. They call it critical incident debriefing. Before my son's suicide I thought establishing volunteer debriefing sessions were enough. We would make services available only if students or staff made a request. Now I arrange these sessions as part of the school program, a critical debriefing workshop for everyone. With the workshop they will be able to put the death into perspective. It will help them understand more fully what is going on. Even if they don't come forward we need to help those that are hurting. Some students and staff make it a habit to hide their feelings. When something happens that they must face, they usually keep it inside. Often you can't see the pain. I have suffered the consequences of denying these feelings. Sometime we begin to think "it is only happening to me" and we feel shy or embarrassed. Some think it is their fault. "I shouldn't have done what I did." I have experienced all these feelings and more.

There needs to be workshops to help people understand that we need to go through the natural grieving process. We have been taught not to cry. Everyone is shy. They hold their feelings inside. You can see what it does when people drink. That is when it all comes out. Many don't understand that there is a natural healing process. The only ones that know crying is natural is the NADAP people. They allow you to cry because it is good for you. It is one way to get out all your feelings. Crying is good for you. In my home community the people don't cry, even when they need to. It is different where my wife comes from. The people there hug you and cry with you, and that helped me more than anything else. I am not sure if they have participated in the program to teach them this or if they do it naturally, but when we went there we did lots of hugging and crying. This is one of the reasons why we moved to my wife's home community. We thought we would get more support here. We thought that our children would get more help. We thought the process that people go through here is much better. I have learned that you need to release your feelings. You need to let your feelings go naturally. Don't be afraid to talk to someone.

When someone is going through an emotional crisis we don't know how to react. All we will do is shake hands and maybe hug them. We are lost for words and we really don't know what to do. You get the feeling that they want to cry with you, but they hold back. I wasn't introduced to the challenge until after my son's death and became intimately aware with the next suicide in our community. It was then I able to see the challenge. We went to lend our support to the family. As we made our visit I felt awkward and as a result I didn't know what to say or do. It wasn't until later that I went back and I asked if I could talk. During the conversation I explained my feelings to him. He said it was OK and cried. We had a really good talk. I learned you have to say what you feel. When you can be honest with people you speed up the healing process. When we are afraid that we will say the wrong thing, we don't say anything.

If I am ever faced with a death of a student or staff at the school again, I will take charge and leave the school open. While children are going through this time I will bring in a person to work with the children. The person will describe the grieving process so the kids will understand what they are going through. I will also hold a service. I will invite the priest

here and we will deal with the death as a group. I will open the school to others in the family. Parents and other immediate family, cousins and relations will be invited. The time we spend together will last as long as it takes. Even if that means you work with children all day.

The schools I have worked in don't have a policy or guidelines for you to follow when a suicide crisis happens. If there is a loss in the community, everyone assumes the community knows what to do. In practice, we close the school for a half a day to show respect for the family. We allow the students to go to the funeral if they want, but it is their choice. For the elementary children, we will not allow them to go unless their parents take them. That is what we do even though there is no written policy. Nobody has evaluated what we are doing to see if we could be doing more.

I know that if you come from the outside it would be better if there was a policy or a protocol. These processes will make it easier for you to deal with outsiders by doing the right things when they come into the community. Sometimes it just means you go for coffee with them. They need someone to be with them as they sort things out. If they cry, and you feel like crying, cry with them. Even the handshake helps. It is knowing that people are there if you need their help. After a while you begin meeting your emotional needs yourself. In the final analysis, we all must face emptiness inside. We need to do it ourselves. We need to work at it. If we get stuck we need to arrange for someone to help us. It has been several months and I wasn't making much progress, so I began meeting with a therapist once a week so we could talk. It helps me. It would be nice if my children would go because I know what happened still bothers them.

I can still see what they are going through. Each week they are able to cope a little more, but I know that they are still hurting. I try to tell my other son to go and see the counsellor. "Get some help," I say, but it is not the right time. I think of the hurt the families of the three students are going through. I wish that I could have done more. During the wake, the funeral and the days right after the death, there are a lot of people who are prepared to help. There are people who will support you. Unfortunately, it doesn't take long for them to withdraw their support. Another crises, back to work, or back to school and they begin to get involved in their own life again. They just withdraw. They seem to look at you and

assume that you must be dealing with it by yourself. They see you coping at school or at work and think that you are doing well. Maybe on the outside you are doing well, but on the inside you are still hurting. I know that sooner or later you must do it yourself, but people should be there to get you to that point. Community members are really helpful to get you to that point. You deal with it yourself and you get on with life. I think I would like to make sure people are still there to visit you when the support is all gone. At the school we can be that support. As principal I can always take that time. In our school we have talking circle the last period of every Friday. In the circle the topic of death always comes up. Death! What happens to people after they die? Are those that commit suicide going to heaven or hell? Just talking with the class in this meeting really helps. It is a way the high school can meet the emotional needs of their students.

What happens to a person after they die? I have been reading about near death experiences. A lady wrote that she saw her spirit leave her body. She was travelling down a tunnel towards a bright light. She was told it was not her time yet, she said. "It was so beautiful there." They did not force her to go back but they told her it's not her time and she still has things to do. I know that our body at death dies, but our spirit continues to live. I hope there is a good place after death. This earth must be a place of learning and growing. The thought that there is a better place keeps me going.

I am back at school and I am doing what I love - teaching children. There are challenges, but all these experiences have been for my good. It has given me the knowledge that I need to help others. I am involved with a counsellor and doing well. I have attended a number of conferences to help me understand more of what has happened and it really helped. It still affects my family, but I would be disappointed if it didn't. We are going to make it.

## CHAPTER 5

### INTERPRETING THE METANARRATIVE

#### *Introduction*

The major purpose of this study was to investigate a First Nation Principal's experience, as he dealt with student suicide, as a basis for re-casting the policy problem of suicide in such a way as to make it more responsive to decision-making and policymaking in First Nation schools. However, the Principal's experience enabled the researcher to gain a glimpse of a broader and more fundamental problem in policy analysis in First Nation communities. This is the effect of perception and worldview on policy work.

Fundamental to the investigation was the need to identify the influences that enhanced or frustrated policy development efforts in First Nation schools. Dunn (1981) suggested that structuring policy problems was often influenced by what are accepted as fact, definition, and explanation of problems and competing assumptions. Structuring policy problems was often "in the eye of the beholder" (p. 97). Since defining the right solution to the right problem is critical to resolving problems it is important that other perspectives regarding the issue be considered. To do this we must first consider the nature of perspectives.

Patey (1987) described different perspectives as one's models, frameworks and assumptions about a circumstance. He suggested that over time one would develop a strong



emotional commitment to these models, frameworks and assumptions or personal perspectives. When one's personal perspectives are challenged it leads to a point of difference with the person who authored the alternative perspective. Patey further suggested that in the point of difference one would not find a clear statement of the facts, definitions and explanations of the problem if individually one were not able to move past the emotional commitment to one's personal perspective position. If a problem is to be resolved, points of difference needed to be stated clearly and considered as policy is developed. Only with a clear statement of the policy problem will one find the solution that considers all perspectives.

#### *Models, Frameworks and Assumptions*

Points of difference result from different sets of beliefs, and from what one accepts as the appropriate models, frameworks and assumptions about a circumstance (Patey, 1987). What one accepts as fact, definition and explanation influences how one describes the way things work – one's perceptions. Patey further suggested that as one gains new information as one analyses circumstance, one's explanation of the circumstance changes. Introducing new models, frameworks and assumptions influences how one makes judgements about: What is right? What is wrong? What is successful? What corrections must be made? One's perceptions influence one's choices of what should change and who should make the changes. Unfortunately, this change process is slow, especially if there is a challenge to an individual's traditional way of thinking. Patey suggested that many seldom even know that "one's model distorts and sometimes hides other ideas" (p.4). Similarly, Hansen (1985) suggested that one's worldview actually hide alternate descriptions of policy problems. Hansen argued that this was

especially true when considering how the dominant world viewed the First Nation world. Hansen uses the example of the First Nation right to health care guaranteed by Treaties signed between representatives of the Queen and First Nations. First Nation members view health care as a Treaty Right. The right to health care, they suggested, should be available to all First Nation people regardless of residency. The Federal Government policy expressed the view that the Treaty obligation to provide health care was limited to on-reserve Indians. The issue, however, became a point of difference when Indians who moved off reserve no longer received health care benefits from the Federal Government. The Provincial Government provided health care to off-reserve Indians often different from that provided to those on reserve. The Federal Government argued that under the British North America Act, provincial governments are responsible for health care of citizens. Both the provincial governments and First Nation groups argued that Indians have a special relationship when it comes to health care and providing these benefits are a federal responsibility. The source of the argument originates in the same place, the Canadian Constitution; however, two different conclusions are reached. First Nation leaders argue that they are not a provincial responsibility and the Federal Government should provide health care to Indians. The debate is not over. This point of difference has resulted in a number of First Nation court challenges, but the Federal Government is still refusing to provide health care to off-reserve Indians promised by treaty. This is an example where a perception of federal policy makers is influenced by what they accept as assumptions regarding policy development.

Roe (1994) suggests that one needs to deliberately look for the other perspectives. Patey (1987) suggests one needs to constantly remind oneself of the difficulties related to the

emotional commitment to one's models, frameworks, and assumptions. Patey further suggests that not searching for other points of view limits understanding and adversely affects one's ability to see the other perspective. As a result he suggests that such a limitation would have a significant impact on structuring policy problems in policy development. In most situations, Roe suggested, there are at least two distinct points of view. The metanarrative of suicide, (see Chapter 4), is a depiction of these two perspectives regarding a particular policy problem in a northern school.

#### *Discrete Problem Statement List and Fault Tree Analysis*

Using Roe's and Steven's analysis reveals discrete problem statements which describe the Chairperson's and the Principal's perspective regarding suicide. These discrete problem statements highlight alternative perspectives. These problem statements, as Roe (1994) suggested, are the scenarios that dominated the suicide issue. He argued that such scenarios underwrote and stabilised the assumptions of the policy making process. Dissaggregation of the scenarios into discrete problem statements also revealed many different dimensions of these individual perspectives. These discrete problem statements were descriptions of issues that need to be considered to resolve the larger policy problem.

The researcher identified the following list of problem statements from the interviews and the resulting metanarrative. The problem statements are recorded as identified. When the random list is complete each item was given an identification number. At this time the Fault Tree methodology was used to organise the random list into a cause-effect wall chart. The numbering and lettering was used so the reader can follow the steps in the process. The final

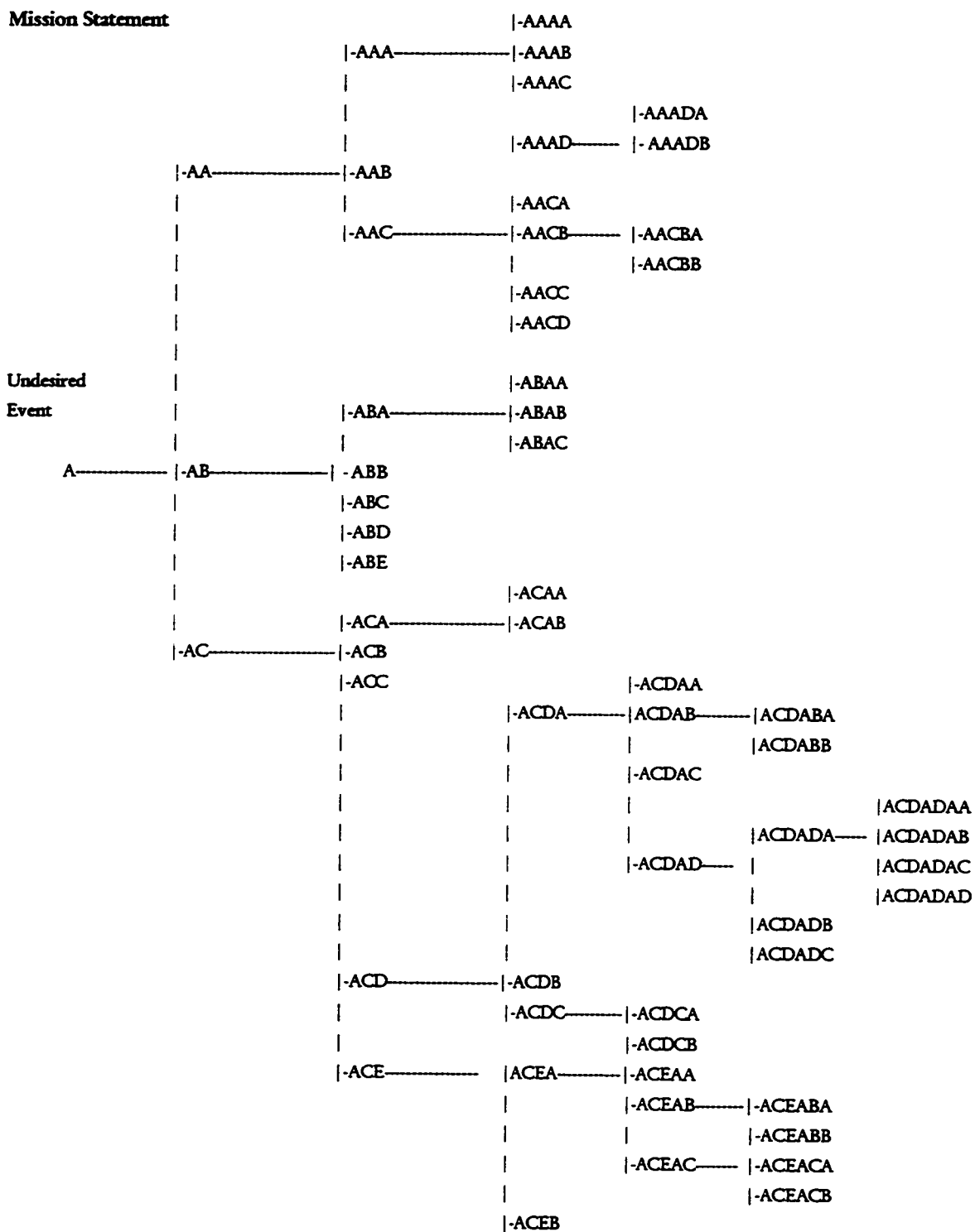
list (see Chart 2) cross-references the problem statements so the reader can locate the statement on the wall chart model (see Chart 3) on page 111.

### Chart 2 – Discrete Problem Statements

- |    |   |     |  |
|----|---|-----|--|
| 1  | (ACA) Conflicting stories that are told to describe the crisis situation.   | 17  | (ABB) The delivery of education needs to be non-political.   |
| 2  | (ACAA) The lack of recognition that another story exists (counter story told by the Principal).   | 18  | (AACC) Lack of spending authority for financial decisions by principal. [At this time no delegation of spending powers exists.]  |
| 3  | (AAB) A belief that a detailed death-related policy exists detailed in the Band policy manual when no policy exists.                                      | 19  | (ABD) Lack of a clear statement of role of the in school administrator, education co-ordinator and the Education Committee, Director of Education and Band School Board. |
| 4  | (AAA) The lack of a written policy to govern present practice of dealing with suicide results in the crisis being handled using one's "gut feeling."      | 20  | (AACBA) Lack of commitment by the Education Committee to follow established policies.  |
| 5  | (AA) School staff has to deal with these crises with only the benefit of their own experience.  | 21  | (ACDAD) Lack of counselling staff at the school to assist with crisis.   |
| 6  | (AAAC) The failure to recognise that decisions may be challenged in the court which creates a legal liability.  | 22. | (ABA) Misuse of authority as a result of self-government.  |
| 7  | (AAAD) A failure to recognise that decisions will increase the need for liability insurance.  | 23. | (ABC) Self-government being interpreted as more authority for leaders, but not for the grassroots people.  |
| 8  | (ACAB) Another story besides the dominant story as represented by the Chairman and Director of Education.   | 24. | (ACDB) The responsibility for school based activities being shared with the interagency committee.   |
| 9  | (ACEAC) The belief that the problem of suicide is a community problem best handled internally by the community.   | 25. | (ACEB) The interagency committee discussions not shared with the school staff.   |
| 10 | (ACEABB) Information given to the media will result in "copy cat" suicides by students.   | 26. | (ACEA) The need to keep things confidential.   |
| 11 | (ACDADB) Problems not being shared freely isolates people and they continue to experience by themselves. (They believe that it is only happening to them) | 27. | (ACC) Narrow definition of a crisis. The school staff seeing one's death as a crisis, while the Education Committee sees something different.                            |
| 12 | (ACB) Present practice is not solving the problems that lead to crisis.   | 28. | (ACDA) Lack of recognition of the impact of a death.   |
| 13 | (ACEAA) Information regarding death is not perceived as public information.   | 29. | (ABAB) Sharing of the decision making by the Band leadership.  |
| 14 | (AC) The community denial that there is a problem.  | 30. | (AB) The conflict between the Education Committee and the Band Council over who has authority.   |
| 15 | (AAAB) The sharing of information will negatively reflect on the leadership and staff in the community.   | 31. | (AACD) The Board not sharing or delegating authority over staffing and financial matters.  |
| 16 | (ACEAB) The sharing of information will blow things out of proportion.  | 32. | (AACA) The Education Committee prioritises the issues of community members and parents over the issues of staff.   |

33. (ACDADA) The education system's increasingly dependency on outside resources (outside the school) to deal with issues in the school.
34. (AAC) The lack of communication between the Education Committee and Staff.
35. (AAADB) The protocol between the Band and the RCMP is not written.
36. (ABAA) The nepotism used in hiring.
37. (ACDADAB) The colonialism the community has been subject to over the past hundred years.
38. (ACDADAA) The lack of self-reliance of the people - high dependency on others.
39. (ABE) The self-government accepted by Bands limiting the community's ability to deal with crisis.
40. (ABAC) The lack of experience of leaders to use the power they have.
41. (AAADA) The lack of written protocols with other agencies that govern decision making.
42. (AACBB) Parents "jumping" protocol to get their issues dealt with immediately.
43. (AAAA) The lack of a written protocol to deal with the interaction with other agencies. The Chairman is kept informed; however, the confidential nature of the work limits what he is able to share with others.
44. (AACB) Two separate official lines of reporting action take by staff. (Staff reports to the Education Committee and the Director of Education).
45. (ACDADAD) Policy being set by a group that may not understand the detail of a particular issue. (The Band sets policy for the school.)
46. (ACE) The process issues are dealt with as though they were new issues. (Because they lack any formal process for policy development.)
47. (ACDABB) The lack of people to support the people who need help.
48. (ACDADC) Decisions are made and the information is not passed on to those who need the information.
49. (ACEABA) Communication is primarily word of mouth and not written.
50. (ACD) Lack of forum to discuss emotional issues.
51. (ACDC) The breakdown of the traditional Indian family.
52. (ACDAA) Lack of an understanding of the grieving process.
53. (ACDADAC) The respect the community has for the professional.
54. (ACDCA) Lack of support to deal with a blended family.
55. (ACDAB) Lack of an opportunity to deal with your own emotions.
56. (ACEACA) The desire to support others in their time of crisis.
57. (ACDABA) Organisations who support people in crisis don't work together (e.g. Churches).
58. (ACDAC) Information about the person doesn't follow the person (i.e. counselling in one situation may not be passed on to the person now helping).
59. (ACDCB) Some health professionals over prescribe.
60. (ACEACB) Some community people protect those who do damage to the student (e.g. bootlegger or drug pusher).

Chart 3 - Fault Tree Structure



As discussed earlier, the Fault Tree begins with a mission statement. Using the mission statement, an undesired event is identified which is “a failure to accomplish the mission.” The first statement on the fault tree is the undesired event. This statement is positioned on the left of the wall chart and all other statements are appendages. With the problem statements identified into groupings the researcher is able to use the wall chart structure to identify themes. The themes identified from the problem statement are later written into a narrative.

#### Chart 4 – The Fault Tree

**Mission** To deal effectively with the problem of suicide in this school

**A** *Undesired event is the failure to deal effectively with the problem of suicide in our school.*

**Theme 1 : The School Principal is concerned that staff, when faced with a crisis, have to deal with the suicide crisis with only the benefit of their own experience.**

**AA** *School staff has to deal with these crises with only the benefit of their own experience.*

**AAA** *The lack of a written policy to govern present practice of dealing with suicide results the crisis being handled using one’s “gut feeling.”*

**AAAA** *The lack of a written protocol to deal with the interaction with other agencies. The Chairman is kept informed; however, the confidential nature of the work limits what he is able to share with others.*

**AAAB** *The sharing of information will negatively reflect on the leadership and staff in the community.*

**AAAC** *The failure to recognise that decisions may be challenged in the court which creates a legal liability.*

**AAAD** *A failure to recognise that decisions will increase the need for liability insurance.*

*AAADA The lack of written protocols with other agencies that govern decision-making.*

*AAADB The protocol between the Band and the RCMP is not written.*

*AAB A belief that a detailed death-related policy exists in the Band policy manual when no policy exists.*

*AAC The lack of communication between the Education Committee and Staff.*

*AACA The Education Committee prioritises the issues of community members and parents over the issues of staff.*

*AACB Two separate official lines of reporting action take by staff. (Staff reports to the Education Committee and the Director of Education).*

*AACBA Lack of commitment by the Education Committee to follow established policies.*

*AACBB Parents "jumping" protocol to get their issues dealt with immediately.*

*AACC Lack of spending authority for financial decisions by principal. [At this time no delegation of spending powers exists.]*

*AACD The Board not sharing or delegating authority over staffing and financial matters.*

**Theme 2 : The Education Committee and the Band Council are Competing Authorities.**

*AB The conflict between the Education Committee and the Band Council over who has authority.*

*ABA Misuse of authority as a result of self-government.*

*ABAA The nepotism used in hiring.*

*ABAB Sharing of the decision-making by the Band leadership.*

*ABAC The lack of experience of leaders to use the power they have.*



*ABB The delivery of education needs to be non-political.*

*ABC Self-government being interpreted as more authority for leaders, but not for the grassroots people.*

*ABD Lack of a clear statement of role of the in-school administrator, education co-ordinator and the education committee, Director of Education and Band School Board.*

*ABE The self-government accepted by Bands limiting the community's ability to deal with crisis..*

**Theme 3 : The School Committee and Community Denial that there is a problem with suicide.**

*AC The community denial that there is a problem.*

*ACA Conflicting stories that are told to describe the crisis situation.*

*ACAA The lack of recognition that another story exists (counter story told by the Principal).*

*ACAB Another story besides the dominant story as represented by the Chairman and Director of Education.*

*ACB Present practice is not solving the problems that lead to crisis.*

*ACC Narrow definition of a crisis. The school staff seeing one's death as a crisis, while the Education Committee sees something different.*

*ACD Lack of forum to discuss emotional issues.*

*ACDA Lack of recognition of the impact of a death.*

*ACDAA Lack of an understanding of the grieving process.*

*ACDAB Lack of an opportunity to deal with your own emotions.*

*ACDABA Organisations who support people in crisis don't work together (e.g. Churches).*

*ACDABB The lack of people to support the people who need help.*

*ACDAC Information about the person doesn't follow the person (i.e. counselling information in one situation may not be passed on to the person now helping).*

*ACDAD Lack of counselling staff at the school to assist with crisis.*

*ACDADA The education system increasingly dependent on outside resources (outside the school) to deal with issues in the school.*

*ACDADAA The lack of self-reliance of the people-high dependency on others.*

*ACDADAB The colonialism the community has been subject to over the past hundred years.*

*ACDADAC The respect the community has for the professional.*

*ACDADAD Policy being set by a group that may not understand the detail of a particular issue. (The Band sets policy for the school)*

*ACDADB Problems not being shared freely isolates people and they continue to experience by themselves. (They believe that it is only happening to them)*

*ACDADC Decisions are made and the information is not passed on to those who need the information.*

*ACDB The responsibility for school based activities being shared with the interagency committee.*

*ACDC The breakdown of the traditional Indian family.*

*ACDCA Lack of support to deal with a blended family.*

*ACDCB Some health professionals over prescribe.*

*ACE The process issues are dealt with as though they were new issues. (Because they lack any formal process for policy development).*

*ACEA The need to keep things confidential.*

*ACEAA Information regarding death is not perceived as public information.*

*ACEAB The sharing of information will blow things out of proportion.*

*ACEABA Communication is primarily word of mouth and not written.*

*ACEABB Information given to the media will result in "copy cat" suicides by students*

*ACEAC The belief that the problem of suicide is a community problem best handled internally by the community.*

*ACEACA The desire to support others in their time of crisis.*

*ACEACB Some community people protect those who do damage to the student (e.g. bootlegger or drug pusher).*

*ACEB The interagency committee discussions not shared with the school staff.*

### *Themes*

Themes are the re-definition of the policy problem of interest. The challenge was to understand what these themes might really mean if seen from a First Nation worldview and how we might adapt Roe's method to enable us to do this. Roe (1994) describes themes as re-casting the problem with the express intent of policy development using the conventional policy-analytical process and tools. The metanarrative's relevance to policy can be specific or broad, depending on the extent to which the narrative analysis helps the analyst in addressing

the “seven common elements in a conventional policy analysis” (Roe, 1994, p.156). The metanarrative was the intertext that accounts for how two policy narratives, each the polar opposite, can both be the case at the same time. Application of the Fault Tree process, which organises the list of problem statements, guided the development and assisted in the identification of these themes. The themes were developed from the groupings of related statements. For ease of identification in the following description of themes, statements of the themes are bolded in the text .

The writing of the themes into text represented a re-storying. Pinar, Reynolds, Slatter, & Taubman (1995) suggested that as “stories are retold, understanding changes”(p.558) new insights become evident. These new understandings that develop were the intrinsic value in re-storying. This was a valuable activity for the writing and structuring of the policy problem statements.

### *Theme 1*

**The school Principal is concerned that staff, when faced with a crisis, have to deal with the suicide crisis with only the benefit of personal experience. The staff lacks the training to effectively intervene to help students. This limits the help which students receive. As a result, the staff dealt with suicide crisis based on their best guesses as they respond using their own experience. The Principal did not consider this as adequate guidance and protection for students or staff. At this time, the School did not have a written policy to govern present practice dealing with suicide of a student or staff. The result was that staff react to crisis only using their past experience. Often emotion overrides clear thinking because**

of the pressures from the crisis. In the words of the Principal, “we act with the guidance of our gut feelings.” The lack of a written policy also means that there is no protocol to deal with other stakeholders during and after a crisis. The result is poor co-ordination of the efforts of the staff, students, parents and other agencies. At this time, the Chairman is kept informed because he chairs the interagency committee; however, the confidential protocols adopted by the committee limits what he is able to share with others on the Education Committee or in the school.

The lack of a written policy raises other questions among staff. Why is there no policy? What are the reasons? Some staff suggests that the only reason there is no policy is because the public sharing of information will negatively reflect on the leadership and Band staff in the community. This idea is considered absurd by the Band leadership, but the lack of an explanation to the contrary perpetuates this idea among the staff and perhaps the community.

The Principle suggested that Education Committee failed to recognise that they have a legal liability because there has been no legal challenge. He believes that eventually a successful lawsuit “wake-up” call will be a “rude” awakening. The potential financial impact of a lawsuit on the Band resources, if a lawsuit is successful, will be serious. Liability insurance should be considered now. After the lawsuit it will be too little too late.

The lack of a written policy results in no written protocols with other agencies to govern decision making. This puts a strain on new relationships. For example, the protocol between the Band and the RCMP is not written and shared. As a result, the only people who understand the relationship in a crisis are the Band leaders and RCMP staff and the insights

happen as a number of situations are dealt with. Others in the community who may be directly affected have no clear understanding of the expectation of their roles in a crisis. The result is a lack of co-ordination of scarce resources.

The Chairman of the Education Committee, members of the Education Committee and Band staff believe there is a death-related policy included in the Band's policy manual. They believe that the policy covering emergencies would apply in this case; however, after the Chairman carefully reviewed the Band policy, he conceded that there was in fact no written emergency policy. His explanation of the oversight was that the Education Committee had discussed the need for an emergency policy about three years ago, but there was no follow-up. The lack of a policy leads to different expectations by different stakeholders in the community.

There is a lack of communication between the Education Committee and staff. Often the communications between committee members and staff is verbal. In the community it is called the "moccasin telegraph." Information is shared verbally among all the key people, but there is no guarantee that all the people who need the information get the information. Some may not be in the moccasin telegraph loop so they don't get the information or they don't get the information in a timely manner. This lack of sharing of information is due, in part, to the Education Committee's lack of a communications policy that leads to the prioritising of the needs and issues of community members and parents over the needs and issues of staff and students. The Education Committee suggests that they are very supportive of staff, but rank staff needs and issues as secondary to the needs and issues of community and parents.

This lack of communications is exacerbated by the dual reporting structure staff is expected to use. Communication must not only be shared through the supervisor line of

authority where the Principal reports to the Education Co-ordinator who reports to the Band's Director, but the Principal and the Education Co-ordinator must report to the Education Committee. The Band Director is not located in the community and the Education Co-ordinator travels extensively so the Principal often deals with the Chairman of the Education Committee or Band Councillor who is available. It is easy to see how communication problems develop. The problem heightens with the lack of commitment of the Education Committee to follow policies they have approved. The situation that causes most problems is parents jumping protocol to get their issues dealt with immediately. When they have a problem with the school they go directly to the Education Committee member or Chairman. This lack of delegated authority also causes other concerns for the Principal. He has no authority over expenditures. At this time, no delegation of spending powers exists. The lack of any spending authority for financial decisions by the Principal influences his ability to lead other staff and encourage projects. A specific concern of the Principal is his lack of participation in the decisions of the Education Committee over staffing and financial matters. There is little sharing of decision making and little delegated authority. The lack of policy leaves staff in the school without guidelines to act in an emergency. The result is poor communication and lack of a co-ordinated approach that will solve problems. The authority to act is shared and causes confusion. The reason for the absence of authority is because groups politically compete for the favour of constituents.

*Theme 2*

The Education Committee and the Band Council are competing. There are ongoing conflicts between the Education Committee and the Band Council over which group has the authority over education decisions. Both are elected groups so both compete for the support of the same constituents. In most cases this is not a problem, but in some situations disagreements arise. For example, there is some misuse of authority as a result of the Federal Government self-government policy. This is evident in the hiring of staff at the school. There is a view held by some leaders that nepotism is acceptable and should be the common practice in hiring. Credentials may not be a deciding factor when selecting staff. Parents want teachers with the best training for the job, but leaders want Band members hired. Both groups jealously hold fast to their decision-making authority. The Education Committee doesn't share its decision-making authority over staffing and the Band leadership takes the same posture and doesn't share its decision-making authority over budgeting and spending. The Chairman suggested that lack of delegation of authority might be attributed to a lack of experience of leadership with their new authorities after self-government. The power is sometimes abused. The Principal is concerned with the influence of the Band politicians over education. As resources from Federal and Provincial governments decrease, some school staff visualise school resources being used more for political patronage. "Hire this person or we won't give you the budget you requested," might be a condition for budget approvals. The Principal wants to keep the education program free from political influences that may have a negative impact on a student's education. For some parents, Band self-government means more authority for leaders, but less influence on decisions by the grassroots people. Authorities,



roles and responsibilities are not clear. This leads to abuse by some leaders, especially during elections. This is evident as you review the work of the in-school administrator and the Education Co-ordinator. There is extensive sharing of responsibilities and a lack of a clear statement of roles. When a problem occurs there is a lot of finger pointing and claims that it is not their responsibility

### *Theme 3*

The community denies that there is a problem resulting in conflicting stories, which are told. This demonstrates that there are different views of the same crisis. The stories often describe very different perspectives of the situation or incident. This becomes apparent as you listen to the storytellers. Inherent in the descriptions is the lack of recognition that another story or perception exists, for example, the counter-story of the Principal as he describes a perspective quite different from the Chairman and Director's story. The Principal sees a need for immediate help in the school so it can deal with suicide and the Chairman feels that the support needed is readily available. There is, in the view of the Principal, no recognition that there are other stories besides the dominant story. This was evident with the Chairman's assertion that there was "no problem." This raises an interesting philosophical question: If one person believes there is a problem and the other believes there is no problem, is there a problem? It depends on your perspective. Inherent in the defending of positions is a failure to recognise that present practice is not working and it is not solving the problems, which led to the crisis. The Principal saw a policy gap that contributed to the crisis while the Chairperson recognised the lack of policy only as a situation that needed minor adjustment.

This is, in part, a result of the narrow definition of crises. The school staff sees one death as a crisis. The Education Committee sees the death, as isolated family incidents not directly related to the school. The different perspectives limit the development of the consensus that is needed to solve problems. As a result, problems are not identified and solved.

In the community, there is a lack of a forum to discuss emotional issues. The lack of recognition of a need for a forum is influenced by the lack of an understanding of the intense emotional impact death has on relationships. The Principal says that it is a lack of an understanding of the grieving process and the potential impact it has on an individual that is overlooked. Leaders and caregivers overlook “the obvious” because there is a lack of an opportunity for leaders and caregivers to deal with their own emotions and there seems to be a stigma attached to emotional issues. This is further complicated because the agencies that assist people don’t work together. The result is a lack of co-ordination between the people who support the individuals who need the help and support. This is evident when people from the community are sent outside to get specific help. They return, but the information doesn’t follow the person (i.e. counselling in one situation where information on what has been done is not passed on to the person helping). An example is the youth that is sentenced to three months in a detention centre for vandalising the school. During the stay at the centre he is required to attend counselling sessions. During the last week of his stay, it is determined that he has been sexually assaulted. The youth is returned to the community and two days after he returns the “perpetrator” again confronts him. He commits suicide. At the inquest all the information which led to the death becomes available after the fact. The death, in part, is a direct result of a lack of sharing of information so community staff could follow up. This is an

example of how caregiver failure to share information led to a tragedy. There was the intent to share information, but the protocols were not in place to ensure that it actually happened.

There is a lack of certified counselling staff at the school to assist with crisis. The holistic approach encouraged by the community to provide services means more co-ordination is needed. A political process impairs the co-ordination as we have seen. A side effect is that the education system is developing a growing dependence on outside resources (outside the school) to deal with what are perceived to be school issues. Schools no longer meet their own needs. This is similar to the breakdown of many families who now lack the ability to meet many of their own needs and have developed a dependency on others, particularly social welfare systems. This is in part a result of the colonialism the community has been subject to over the past hundred plus years. Colonialism has developed in people an unhealthy respect for authority. Many of the people in the community call for professional interventions for all problems because they have accepted the belief that they no longer can do it themselves. They overlook the negative impact of dependency on community, for example, the over prescription of treatments such as counselling and drugs. There is a failure to see the negative impact of the dependency, which often occurs.

As with this specific Cree Band, the Band Council sets the policy for the school; however, the Council may not understand the need for the policy or the impact of implementing the policy because they lack the specific detail regarding the specific issue. Policy needs to guide the actions of the group for which it was designed. In this case policy was developed in the absence of intimate knowledge of the school environment. The result was no policy at all, or a policy that lacks credibility. So when policy fails people believe that

they have done something wrong as they implement guidelines, and also believe, what is happening is only happening to them. An example of this is the isolation that is created as decisions are made and information is not passed on to those who need it. Whether the information is not passed on, or the information is inadequate, the result is the same. Those who need the information are isolated. The lack of a process to consider issues results in each crisis being dealt with as if it involved new issues.

The need to keep information confidential was the reason local authorities gave to explain why no review of present practice was ever undertaken. They were concerned that information given to the media would result in “copy-cat” suicides by more students. Not sharing information also had the impact of not dealing with the problem. Again the difference is in perception. When is a death regarded as a crisis? Or a result of a crisis? Or a response to a crisis? In the deaths described in this study, the circumstances relating to students were not perceived by the leaders to be legitimate public information. They were afraid that sharing information would blow things out of proportion. Publicising information also has another impact. It would be a “black eye” for the community and for their leadership. Some might suggest that leaders didn’t know how to deal with community problems.

Leaders also felt a strong sense of community, which resulted in a belief that the problem of suicide was a community problem best handled internally by community people. Although there was a strong desire by families to support others, the support took the form of protecting those who actually damaged students (i.e. bootleggers and drug-dealers). The leaders’ faith that all people would eventually come to the knowledge of the wrong and change (a common stance in First Nation philosophy) assumes that those contributing to the crisis

directly feel the impact of their behaviour. Leaders also assume that those who contribute to student crisis have the traditional cultural beliefs. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. As a result of dependence on outside authority, inter-agency committees discuss the problems, but the community takes no action. The result is that some in the school are beginning to question whether the community can handle its own problems.

The issues are intertwined. This creates a unique challenge for those who work in First Nation communities. The work is further complicated because alternative perspectives result in different views on re-structuring policy problems.

#### *Theme 4*

**Self-government for this community means community people need to handle community problems.** Unfortunately, the self-government the Bands have accepted commits them to deal with the crises created by Indian Affairs. The self-government used by the Band imitates the Federal Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. The Band leaders criticised the approaches used by Indian Affairs, but when they had an opportunity to introduce new approaches they adopted and used Indian Affairs policies, practices and structures with their inherent problems. As a result, Bands are making similar types of decisions as the Department and as a result are receiving the same criticism from members as once directed at Indian Affairs. Community leaders' successful negotiation for self-government is not having a profound effect in changing the decision-making process in the community. Leadership abuse authority, political decisions are biased, and the community members still feel that they lack influence over decision-making.

*Summary of Problem Redefinition*

Chart 5 provides a summary, which again recasts the problem so we can re-define the policy issue. Dunn (1981) states that policy problems may rarely be dissected into independent, discrete, and mutually exclusive parts. The analytic approach is not only likely to result in mistaking symptoms for causes, but may also contribute to the creation of new and unanticipated problems (p. 100). Recasting the problem of a lack of a suicide policy in the school actually revealed a number of unanticipated problems, which need to be considered by the Education Committee. The problem as originally perceived is summarised in Chart 4. Chart 5 organises and compares perspectives from the main sources of information, the Chairman of the Education Committee and the Principal. Differing perspectives on the same issue are thus highlighted for comparison. The third column represents researcher recommendations of actions that could be taken by the Education Committee in the case of each issue. They are based on the dominant worldview since Roe's (1994) method enables one to do only this. However, we may extrapolate to suggest actions which might be taken to begin to help this community to structure and solve suicide related policy problems from within their own worldview. This is done in the Implications section of this chapter. Chart 5 provides for the community recommendation arising from this study.

Chart 5 - The Summary

CHAIRMAN	PRINCIPAL	RECOMMENDED ACTION
<p><b>ORIGINAL ISSUES - What is the experience of a First Nation principal with a student suicide or attempted suicide?</b></p> <p>Failure to deal effectively with the problem of suicide in the school.</p> <p><b>The existence of a policy -</b> The Chairman of the Education Committee is adamant that there is a suicide policy in the Band Policy Manual, but it is under the emergency response section.</p> <p><b>The existence of a policy creation process.</b> There is no policy creation process so items are handled as new problems each time they come forward. Often similar situations are handled in different ways.</p>	<p><b>ORIGINAL ISSUES - What is the experience of a First Nation principal with a student suicide or attempted suicide?</b></p> <p>Failure to deal effectively with the problem of suicide in the school.</p> <p><b>The existence of a policy -</b> The principal is adamant that no policy exists to deal effectively with suicide and there is no emergency response section.</p> <p><b>The existence of a policy creation process.</b> A policy development process is not described, therefore, the needs for policy development may never be recognised. This is further complicated because the present bodies (Education Committee or Band) that identify a policy problem may not understand the important details of a particular issue. Even when a policy is developed there is a noticeable absence of intimate knowledge of the issue, which results in a lack of credibility, and further isolation of those affected by the policy problem.</p>	<p><b>ORIGINAL ISSUE - What is the experience of a First Nation principal with a student suicide or attempted suicide?</b></p> <p>Formal recognition that present practice is not working and also recognition that there is no school policy to govern how they handle suicide.</p> <p><b>The existence of a policy -</b> Write a school policy to deal with death related issue (suicide) and as part of the policy develop a protocol to identify roles of other agencies. Policy needs to be developed with reasons for the policy.</p> <p><b>The existence of a policy creation process -</b> The lack of a policy creation cycle promotes created what Roe (1994) describes as non-stories. Non-stories have no beginnings, middles and ends. E.g. The first step in the non-story is the incident. Step two. There is no recognition that a number of separate incidents have common themes and present a policy problem. As a result, the third step never happens. There is no research and discussion stage. Besides public discussion will encourage another incident - copy cat suicide. The result is no discussion, which results in an inadequate policy, or no policy. The fourth step is a continuation of the frustration when another incident happens and the process begins again.</p> <p>Establish Board training program that includes a process for policy development and provides training to all new members.</p>

<p><b>Theme #1</b>  <b>The belief by some leaders that a suicide policy exists and is a result of a policy creation process. In actual fact, the policy does not exist.</b></p> <p><b>Inadequacy of present approach -</b> The Education Committee Chairman also chairs the inter-agency committee (RCMP, Nurse, ICFS and NADAP). He feels all situations can be handled utilising the inter-agency partnerships and he believes a policy exists.</p> <p><b>Supporting staff -</b> Education Committee supports the staff. They are committed to the staff.</p>	<p><b>Theme #1</b>  <b>The existence of a policy creation process.</b> School staff, because there is no policy to deal with suicide, only have the benefit of their own experience - gut feeling. Staff feels inadequate in this area.</p> <p><b>Inadequacy of present approach -</b>The Chairman is kept informed, but the confidential nature of the work limits what he is able to share. Inter-agency discussion and decisions are not shared with school staff. He is a volunteer, travels extensively, and is often not available. No protocol exists to govern the decision making process and use of inter-agency resources e.g. RCMP protocol is not written and agreement details are not shared. The Principal passed on the comment that there are some who believe that sharing information will negatively reflect on the Band leadership and staff because they are not prepared for these types of crisis. There is a failure to recognise that there is a need for insurance to cover the legal liability of school staff. From the view of the Principal, to date, the Band leadership has been lucky.</p> <p><b>Supporting staff -</b> General held belief that there is a lack of commitment to staff is evident in the lack of communications, no sharing of financial authority, or spending, or decisions on hiring. Education Committee doesn't follow its own policy and procedures when it deals with parent concerns. The Education Committee allows parents to jump established processes when they encourage parents to bring concerns directly to the meeting.</p> <p><b>Communications -</b> General lack of communications due to the dual reporting structure (Director and Education Committee) and the lack of co-ordination of information. Information is not passed on to the people who need it. Communications are seldom written.</p>	<p><b>Theme #1</b>  <b>The existence of a policy creation process -</b> Provide critical incident response training. The training needs to be considered a first step to help students and school staff begin their healing.</p> <p><b>Inadequacy of present approach -</b> Inter-agency committee discussions and decisions need to be shared with the school especially when they affect students.</p> <p>Investigate the school's legal liability and insurance requirements.</p>	<p><b>Supporting staff</b> have more direct involvement of staff in the activities of the Education Committee. Establish a process to share verbal and written information. The process should describe: What is shared? Why is it shared? Who receives the information? When is it shared? And How is it shared? Insist on the policy being followed. Review hiring process to make sure the process is not unnecessarily influenced.</p> <p><b>Communications</b> Request a report from the Band therapist that describes what was done, the impact and recommendations for follow-up by local staff.</p>
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<p><b>Theme #2</b> Education Committee and Band Council compete</p> <p><b>Authority</b> - There is a debate over who has authority? The Band Council and the Education Committee jealously protect their authority and decision making.</p> <p><b>Politics</b> - Band needs to have some influence over the decisions made by the school. Strive for consensus and a little nepotism is appropriate.</p>	<p><b>Theme #2</b> Education Committee and Band Council compete</p> <p><b>Authority</b> - The Education Committee recognises the need to have delegated authority to maintain the school, but does not recognise the need to delegate their authority to the principal. It seems like a double standard.</p> <p><b>Politics</b> Education needs to be non-political. Nepotism is not acceptable in the school. Hiring decisions need to be based on the academic qualifications. The Band approves policy even though they may not understand the details of a particular issue.</p>	<p><b>Theme #2</b></p> <p><b>Authority</b> Formulate a clear statement of roles (Principal, Education Coordinator, Education Committee and Director) which reflects what is actually done.</p> <p><b>Politics</b> - Curb interference with a clear statement of roles and responsibilities.</p>
<p><b>Theme #3</b> Community denial that there is a problem with suicide and attempted suicide.</p> <p><b>Definitions</b> - Narrow definition of crisis. The deaths of students are considered isolated incidents that happened as a result of personal problems unrelated to the school or community. Denial that there is a problem.</p> <p><b>Other points of view</b> - Lack of recognition that another point of view exists.</p>	<p><b>Theme #3</b> Community denial that there is a problem with suicide and attempted suicide.</p> <p><b>Definitions</b> - The death of a student affects everyone, the family, other students, staff and community. All deaths are a crisis, which need a response. The isolation, which is created because information is not shared, encourages people to believe that it is only happening to them.</p> <p><b>Other points of view</b> -The principal recognise that another (Education Committee) point of view exists besides his; however, his view lacks the recognition that there is a third, fourth and fifth point of view.</p> <p><b>Dependency</b> - Generally, there is a high dependency rate in the community. There are few people who are self-reliant. Leaders of the Band fail to recognise that present</p>	<p><b>Theme #3</b></p> <p><b>Definitions</b> - Define, in relationship to suicide, a crisis. Create forums for students to express their concerns and discuss emotional issues. Ask them to express what the impact of death has had on them personally. Hear their story because different stories need to be told.</p> <p><b>Other points of view</b> - Describe present practice with the outcome. Expand the inter-agency group to provide more opportunities for groups to work together.</p> <p><b>Dependency</b> - Most approaches used in communities at this time encourage dependency. (FSIN Health and Social Development Commission, 1995). There is a need to identify alternative approaches, which create independence. It was noted that families are continuing to become more</p>

<p><b>Dependency</b> - There are a number of options available to people are: NADAP, Nurse, Teacher, ICFS worker or therapists. These groups are there to help although it would be nice if the churches worked together and counselling reports followed the person.</p> <p><b>Forum-</b> there are a number of forums available for people to receive help.</p>	<p>practice is not solving problems that lead to crisis. The Band doesn't have enough people who are willing to help because of the breakdown of the family. The school is becoming dependent on outside resources, especially professionals. School based activities are being shared with the inter-agency committee. The result is sometimes health professionals over prescribe treatments.</p> <p><b>Forum</b> - There is a lack of a forum to discuss emotional issues that are confidential. There are no counsellors at the school. Band staff gossip about people's personal problems. Staff lack training to deal with emotional issues - they don't even understand the grieving process.</p> <p>Lack of recognition of the emotional impact of death.</p>	<p>dependent on the schools, the schools more dependent on the agencies and the agencies on the Band. All groups suggest that a professional is needed to solve community problems. Band leaders could look at other options to promote self reliant families and communities. E.g. Encourage approaches that provide families with the opportunity to become self-reliant.</p> <p><b>Forum Leaders</b> sometimes overlook the obvious because leaders and caregivers have not started their healing process. They have not dealt with their emotions. Provide training to help them (leaders and caregivers) begin the process.</p> <p>Specific training on the grieving process</p>
<p><b>Theme #4</b> <b>Self-government</b> What Bands have accepted as self-government means they have to deal with over 100 years of crisis that has resulted from the colonialism of Indian Affairs.</p> <p>Community people need to handle community problems as an internal problem.</p>	<p><b>Theme #4</b> <b>Self-government</b> - Bandleaders sometimes misuse their authority which results from self-government. They may lack the experience to use the power appropriately. Self-government at this time has meant more authority for leaders, but little authority for the grassroots people.</p> <p>Community people protect those who contribute to crisis among students. E.g. Bootleggers and drug pushers.</p>	<p><b>Theme #4</b> <b>Self-government</b> - More community discussion regarding self-government.</p>

## CHAPTER 6

## REFLECTING ON THE QUESTION OF POLICY

*Introduction*

The grouping of problem statements emphasises different perspectives, but as one explores the data one has the sense that something else needs to be considered in policy development. Policy is planned and policy is lived. It is necessary to explore the impact of the local culture, values and beliefs on institutions in cross-cultural problem settings. To understand the nature and effect of different cultures or worldviews on policy formation, one must explore the culture or worldview of the community members lived experience. The Fault Tree grouping of problem statements helps one recognise relationships between many issues in the community's experiences with suicides. Roe (1994) suggested that this would enable one to begin to explore the local culture's contextual meaning of these experiences. He argued that the recognition of alternative perspectives regarding the same event helps policy makers understand so they can re-define, for policy development, the problem experienced. Hansen (1985) suggested that this was the beginning of the understanding of the existence of other cultural perspectives.

In this study, the alternative perspectives on suicide policy are as described by the Principal and school committee Chairman. Roe (1994, p. 88) describes two perspectives as

“two different perspectives emerging, entwined, and often confusing each other.” Roe (1994) suggested that the recognition that there are alternative perspectives help one understand the need to search for other solutions. Roe (1994) suggested that alternative perspectives, which are not recognised, limit the one’s ability to identify and structure policy problems. Patey (1987) suggested that these two alternate perspectives often lead to a point of difference in the implementing planned action. The point of difference often was a result of defining policy problems from one’s cultural perspective.

*Discussion about Implications of Culture, Values, Beliefs and Institutions*

Patey (1987) describes a society’s similarity in language, values and beliefs as “culture.” Problem identification or structuring policy problems was severely limited if done within one cultural context. Hansen (1985) said that all societies create institutions to promote and maintain societal language, culture and values. It is a matter of cultural survival. He suggested that those languages, values and beliefs are formalised in that society’s institutions. Bennett (1987) suggested that these institutions reflect the needs and values of that society. These societal institutions include family, education, justice, recreation, social, religious, and association systems. One role of these institutions is to pass on the society’s cultural values.

Hansen (1985) describes the “dominant” value system in Canada as the Western European value system. He argued that the primary purpose of institutions and societal systems (education, justice, etc.) in Canada seems to be the maintenance of these Western European values. School systems, he argued, teach “cultural values,” justice systems maintain the “cultural values and standards,” recreation systems promote the “cultural ideals,” and

churches teach the “cultural morals” of that society. Hansen (1985) further argued that before European colonisation, First Nation people in North America had their own cultures. First Nation institutions promoted and maintained their many languages, cultures, and values; however, European colonisation has displaced First Nation systems or institutions. As an example of the displacement, Hansen (1985) points to the school system now operational in First Nation communities. He indicated that the school systems in First Nation communities were now the education institutions of the “dominant” culture. The language, curriculum, and administrative structure are modelled after the “dominant” culture. First Nation languages, cultures and values are not promoted in these First Nation schools.

Hansen (1985) also suggested that a prime purpose of societal institutions was to maintain the status quo. This is reflected in their policies. He argued that, at first glance, First Nation people in Canada seemed to have a choice regarding the establishment and use of their institutions, but a careful examination revealed that all choices were couched in Western European values. First Nation education, justice, recreation, and association systems have all been displaced in favour of Western European institutions. The institutions in First Nation communities promoted the Western European value system and are not based on the First Nation values system. For example, the Western European value system was built on the belief that the individual was important. This value was reflected in Western European, and therefore Canadian, institutions and systems; therefore, the justice system creates laws that protect the “rights of the individual,” the education system evaluates success by the “performance of the individual” and the recreation system develops “the individual star.”

Patey (1987) argued that members of the dominant society often assume that members of other societies want to be assimilated. Hansen (1985) described this idea as the “ethnocentric characteristic” of most societies. As an example, Hansen argued that it was the belief of many Canadians that all First Nation members want to be assimilated and aspire toward European cultural ideals. Hansen (1985) suggested that this idea was a myth.

The themes in this study also suggests that this idea was erroneous. The themes suggested that the imposition of a dominant value system has actually created extensive conflict in the community. When traditional First Nation people promote an alternative value such as “harmony of the group” over the “individual” there is an immediate conflict with the dominant culture institutions. For example, Storm (1975) suggested that in traditional First Nation communities, land was a gift from the creator and could never be individually owned and therefore never to be traded or transferred. Land was referred to as “Mother Earth.” It provides one with all that was needed and one needed to respect “her.” She is our “mother.” Storm (1975) suggested a traditional First Nation person understood that the Creator provided the land for one’s use. Hansen (1985) suggested that the concept seems inconceivable to those who have adopted Western European beliefs, and as a result, the institutions, especially the court system, simply reject the First Nation’s argument that land could not be bought or traded. Treaties are peace treaties, argued traditional First Nation people, and the land was never traded. The argument is simply inconceivable to Europeans and the point of difference is reflected in the many court cases referenced in the recently released Royal Commission on Aboriginal People in Canada (1996). Hansen (1985) argued that these worldview differences are at the root of the points of differences between First Nation leaders and Canadians.

Hansen (1985) recognised varying degrees of tolerance by members of Canadian societies, but noted that imposed limits or boundary lines were always delineated and maintained. The Canadian Constitution (Government of Canada, 1992) established the boundaries of the tolerance in Canada. And these limitations are reflected in Federal Government policy, which governs Canadian institutions. Canada's Prime Minister, Jean Chretien, in an election debate on May 12, 1997, claimed that Canada was one of the most tolerant countries of the world; even more tolerant than the United States. Tolerance, he suggested, was part of Canada's national character; however, he failed to discuss the boundaries of this tolerance. He suggested that unlike the United States "melting pot" Canada had a more open policy of multiculturalism. In the United States, using another language and culture continues to be discouraged. Canadians have welcomed other minorities; however, the limits or boundaries of Canadian tolerance have never been highlighted. The policy and practices of many Canadian educational institutions is a good example. As discussed earlier, a society's education system's primary objective is the development and maintenance of values, language and culture. But whose language and culture was developed? Hansen (1985) notes that Canada's official languages are promoted. Other languages are taken as electives, but in Canadian schools the official languages are French and English except in Quebec where the only subject that can be taught in English is English. If you fail to write or speak one official language in Canada you will be labelled "illiterate." Even if you have advanced academic degrees or training in another language, if you move to Canada you will be considered illiterate. It is Federal Government policy. This federal language policy does not only apply to immigrants. First Nation and Inuit leaders or Elders who speak, read and write their language,

but don't speak English or French, are also considered illiterate. The official languages are English and French only. First Nations and Metis see this as lack of tolerance. It has led to much frustration as First Nation and Metis seek recognition. (Government of Canada, Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1996).

Another example of the limits of tolerance is evident in the Canadian justice system. The justice system in Canada is patterned after the British system in nine provinces and two territories and on the French system in Quebec. Although the Canadian justice system protects some minority rights, the courts would never consider evaluating misbehaviour using a First Nation tribal court system. Justice is not considered justice in Canada unless it is reviewed within the British and French common law principles. In the past few years, the courts in Saskatchewan have used First Nation "sentencing circles." Sentencing circles are modifications of First Nation traditional "healing circles." Sentencing circles use a group of people from the community to help the judge sentence offenders and healing circles traditionally were established to restore relationships in the community. Provincial government judicial policy which requires a review of all sentencing circle decisions limited the potential impact of healing relationships because decisions of the community groups in the circle have often been appealed. First Nation communities interpret Crown appeals as marginalising and trivialising alternative perspectives in the justice system. Patey (1987) suggests that our culture (values and beliefs) limit our ability to see anything that challenges our cultural mindsets, pre-sets and assumptions. He also suggested that this might be why members of all societies resist change and are committed to maintaining the status quo. How does the existence of alternative worldviews affect the structuring of policy problems?



### *Basic Needs*

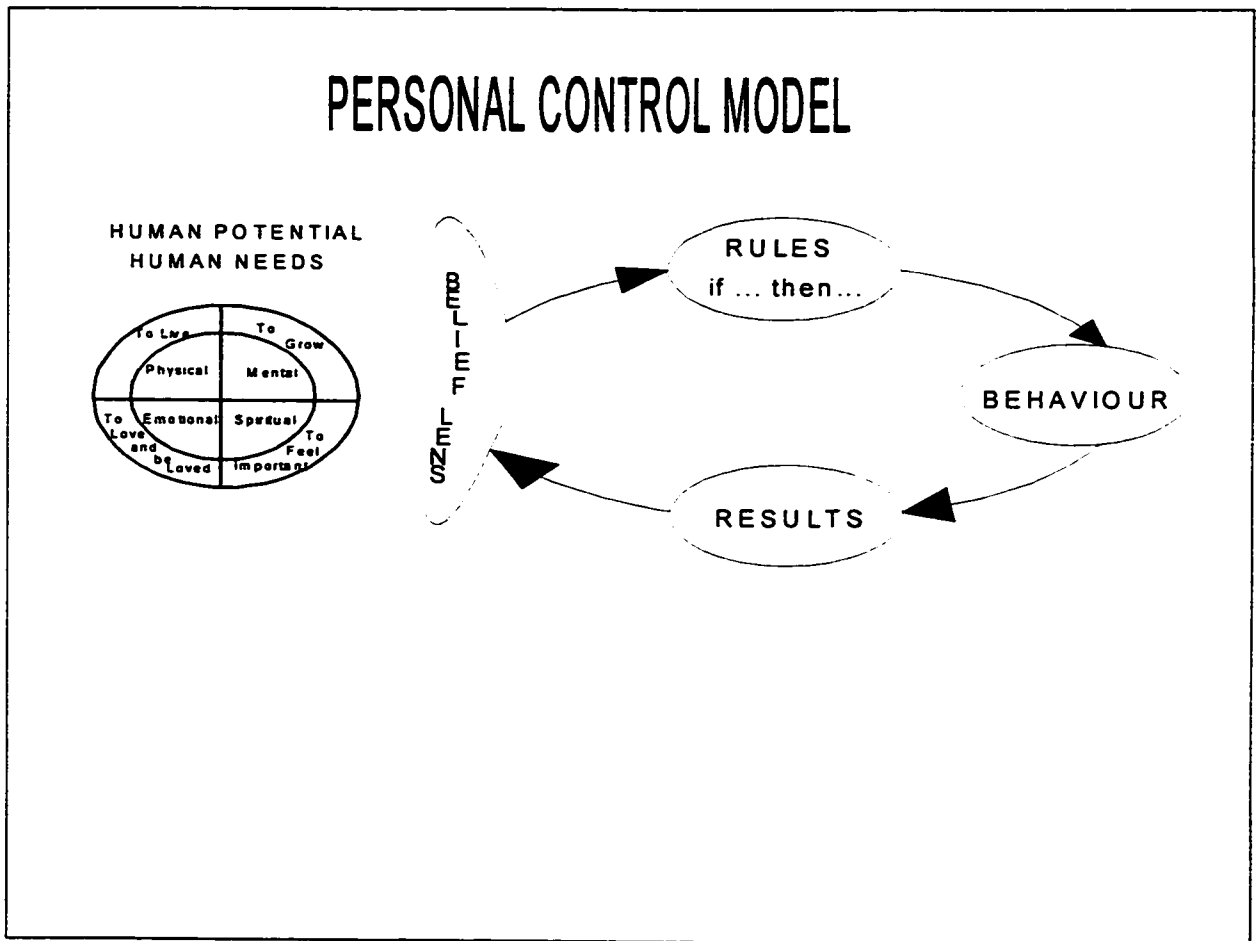
Bennett (1987) suggested that individual or societal commitments to maintaining the cultural “status quo” go beyond values and beliefs. They are founded in basic needs. Peoples’ needs are powerful driving forces. He identified these needs as a need “to live” (food, shelter and clothing), “to feel important” (self esteem, self worth), “to love” and to be accepted, which included being loved and loving others, and “to grow” which included personal growth activities such as spiritual and academic endeavours.

### *Personal Control Model*

The first component of Bennett’s (1987) model is a circle divided into quadrants. Each basic need is one quadrant of the circle. For later comparison, the medicine wheel’s four components (physical, mental, emotional and spiritual) have also been inserted to show the connection between Bennett’s basic needs and the First Nation Medicine Wheel as described by Storm (1975). The researcher placed each component into a cycle adapting Bennett’s linear model with the First Nations medicine wheel. The adaptation highlights the differences between dominant and First Nation worldviews as seen in this case. The first component of Bennett’s model is the four basic needs. This basic need drive the development of the second component of the model, which are one’s beliefs. Bennett calls the second component of the model “the belief window.” The researcher changed window to lens because he believes that, like using glasses, one sees the shape of the world through one’s beliefs. He says that the beliefs and values are the framework (the window or lens) through which we see the world. Beliefs, Bennett (1987) suggested, help us establish the third component of the model: one’s

rules. These rules may be referred to as personal policy to govern the fourth part of the model, one's behaviour. Behaviours are reviewed against the results, which is the fifth part of the model and results are evaluated against our basic needs. This completes the process. Basic needs are considered the driving force of the model, because deciding how we meet our basic needs prioritises the value and beliefs we will consider important.

Figure 1 – Personal Control Model



Bennett (1987) in describing the model makes the following points:

- the only part of the model you see in another is the behaviour. This limits your understanding of the context of the behaviour.
- we evaluate another's behaviour through "our" belief lens. This often makes their behaviour seem "irrational." One's assumption that their behaviour is irrational results from a lack of understanding of the person's needs, beliefs and rules, and often leads to a point of difference.

Patey (1985) suggested that it is in how one personally prioritises one's values that we see the points of differences in cultures. For example, the dominant value system in Canada strongly values the basic needs of survival and growth at the exclusion of love (acceptance) and feeling important. The First Nation value system prioritises love (acceptance) and feeling important partly to the exclusion of survival and growth (FSIN, 1994). Patey suggested that this was evident in what one considers important. To illustrate the impacts of the concept consider how one who was asked to speak at a conference would like to be introduced. What aspect of one's life would one like highlighted, and how would one ask the information to be prioritised. Individuals who are committed to the Western European value system want academic achievement (growth) and work done to survive highlighted. An introduction may be as follows: Hello, my name is .... I am the Executive Director (survival, feeling important) of ..... and I received my academic training (growth) at these prestigious academic institutions. I have accomplished this and that (growth) and I am an expert (growth) on the topic on which I will speak.... The other two basic needs - acceptance and feeling important - usually have less importance and are not highlighted. At a traditional First Nation ceremony love (acceptance) and pride in self are highlighted. The introduction would acknowledge family and community

(love/acceptance), reverencing the person's relationship with the Creator (feeling important) and pride in the tribe. Academic and work related achievements are trivialised. The speaker may introduce himself to the group by saying, I know very little (growth) and I own very little (survival) and I acknowledge everything that I have is a result of the efforts of the Creator and family.

The important relationship for the dominant value system when defining success was described with a focus on individual achievement - property one owns, the titles and degrees and formal recognition of what one has achieved. The traditional First Nation value system defines success in terms of one's relationship with the First Nation family, community (love/acceptance) and the Creator. Pride was described in acknowledging the relationship with Creator, the family and the tribe (feeling important).

The above analysis helps one understand why there are two cultural perspectives in this First Nation School which are clearly evident from the themes. As Roe (1994) suggested, the two value systems emerge, entwine and confuse each other. This is significant because differences in values and beliefs have often led to points of difference or conflict in identifying and structuring policy problems. Traditionally, structuring policy problems was done within the context of the analyst's value and belief systems. This approach is inadequate, because one may miss the obvious as seen through the belief lens of other value systems simply because one overlooks the presence of another value system. Bennett (1987) suggested that we overlook the presence of another value system because we don't see another's beliefs and rules. All we observe is the behaviour, but we observe it through our own basic needs and value system. A point of difference occurs when two groups look at the same issue from two

value systems. Patey (1987) also suggested that the emotion, which accompanies the point of difference, was a result of seeing another's actions through one's own value system. Not understanding the context often makes another's actions seem irrational. The themes suggested that both groups seem to overlook the significant impact of the other's needs, values and beliefs system. The results were the different perspectives.

Bennett (1987), referenced above, sees value and belief through the decisions one makes as one tries to meet one's needs. Since basic needs are the driving forces, but values and beliefs are the lens or framework, one should seek to understand the other's framework. When dealing with another groups culture one should endeavour to understand it. First Nation philosophies use the "Medicine Wheel" (Storm, 1975) to describe the cultural framework for meeting needs. The "Medicine Wheel" uses the circle to describe the teachings of "the grandfathers and the grandmothers." Through the stories Elders teach morals, standards and values. If people follow the counsel given it will help the families and communities. These teachings are seldom written, but passed on as part of participation in ceremonies. It is the symbolism in the ceremonies that teaches the participants. The Medicine Wheel is often described as a mirror. As you begin to understand what is taught you begin to understand yourself. What is written is, at best, a vague description of the teachings. Elders in First Nation's communities pass on knowledge orally. Their teaching and experience provide information on the culture. This lack of detail in written description is often criticised by the dominant culture, but it is a reflection of First Nation cultures. The dominant culture has a written tradition and the First Nation culture is an oral tradition. Other examples of differences are observable in ceremonies of birth, marriage and death in both sets of cultures.

Both groups start with the same basic needs, but prioritising the basic needs leads to value and belief or cultural differences which are reflected in the decisions that guide what is considered acceptable, in other words policy.

### *Lack of the Alternative Worldview*

What is the nature of this lack of alternative worldview as we see it in this case? It appears to have two parts: the lack of understanding of the possibility of developing policy for a completely different worldview and lack of models for the act of developing policy within the alternative, in this case the First Nation worldview. The challenge of structuring policy problems in a First Nation community was, in part, the challenge of understanding another perspective based on another culture. In this study, this was accomplished by focusing on the significant emotional experience. Death, birth and marriage, are powerful experiences that expose for public view important beliefs and values of a culture. It was in the response to these emotional experiences and ceremonies that societal institutions maintained the “heart felt” values of the culture. The researcher’s study of death related experience, suicide, as a means for policy analysis, was a conscious choice because the emotion surrounding death makes manifest values and beliefs of a culture. It was in the culture’s values and beliefs that policy problems were structured. Language was the medium.

It was in the first language that the expression of the significant impact of an experience would be really understood. Hansen (1985) describes the dilemma. In the translation from Cree to English meaning was lost, although in the translation there was a greater understanding of others. It would be desirable that the metanarrative and analysis of

this study would therefore be completed in the first language of the participants and policy analysis would be done within the framework of First Nation values. This became evident in the process of disaggregating interviews. Without the First Nation framework, policy development and analysis described by Roe (1994) and Dunn (1981) lacked the recognition of the possibility of an alternate perspective. The model is useful in a cross-cultural context, however, it does not conceive of alternative worldviews within which differing perspectives are situated. In cross-cultural problem settings one must consider the effect of worldviews if one is to help communities solve problems. The presence of the First Nation alternate perspective would best result from policy analysis in the first language. Dominant cultural processes are useful to develop further understanding of “outsiders” researching and structuring policy problems from an outside-in cultural perspective; however, it is not an inside-out perspective (Roe, 1994). This was evident as one reviews the policy process found in this First Nation school. Structuring policy problems and policy development was from the dominant culture using the dominant model, framework and language as a basis for understanding the problem. The result was mainstream policy, which had the impact of creating conflict in the community. This approach is inadequate for First Nation administrators.

Although the researcher recognised the limitations of using a dominant concept (Roe, 1994) in policy development for First Nations, other inside-out policy development tools were not available. Appropriate tools to help deal with the immediate problem of a suicide crisis in First Nation schools are not yet available. Roe (1994) was faced with this similar challenge while assisting Third World countries create *Narrative Policy Analysis*. He helped the process of

analysing policy problems by alerting the researcher to the need for alternative perspectives. **Inside (culture)-out** is the need to have policy reflect the culture of the group. His approach only makes problems “more amenable to the conventional policy-analytical tools of microeconomics, legal analysis, statistics, organisational theory, and public management practice” (p. 156). It is still outside (culture)-in policy development, but nevertheless it is a useful step toward a more appropriate inside (culture)-out process for structuring policy problems. Roe (1996) suggests that in the present state of theory development in policy-making no one has developed a good inside (culture)-out process. As one begins to discuss other alternatives to conventional policy frameworks one needs to consider approaches that are more inclusive of cultural perspectives. As one raises the need to be more inclusive of cultural perspectives, this leads to the questions: Does the policy research and analysis need to be in the language of the group? Does speaking a First Nation language mean the values and beliefs of the culture have been maintained? This study suggests that language was a necessary, but not sufficient condition for maintenance of culture. The act of including those who speak their first language may or may not solicit alternative perspectives of the policy problem. In this study, the informants and most members of this community were fluent in their first language, but they had adopted the Canadian value system. Their religion and educational systems were not based on First Nation traditional practice. The community had actually formally rejected First Nation spiritual teachings. The traditional values and beliefs were displaced, but the first language had endured. One of the challenges of “inside (cultural)-out” planning is that the structuring of policy problems must be in the culture, which includes the language.



Roe (1996) suggested that there was a need for “inside (culture)-out” policy process for developing policy in other cultures. The Principal and the Chairman both sought culturally sensitive policy processes for policy problems. This may be a result of the frustration or it may be a reflection of the frustration of the First Nation community as they try to establish policy, a dominant notion, on a traditional First Nation value system. This dilemma is certainly another example of colonised societies’ struggling for identity all over the world as they struggle with the question: Whose values should prevail as systems and institutions are established to meet the basic needs of the individuals, families and communities? The usefulness of this study is in the realisation that there are other perspectives; therefore, suicide policy in First Nation communities cannot be simply copied from the dominant society’s value systems. Structuring of the policy problem described in this study using conventional policy analysis, as described by Roe (1994), was inadequate because it lacked the recognition of other cultural perspectives. Roe’s process of structuring the policy problem allowed the views of other stakeholders to be expressed; however, it was still “outside (culture)-in” policy planning. Although Roe encourages the search for other perspectives for structuring policy problems, when the policy problem is structured, conventional methods are then followed. It is still within the dominant policy-making framework. There was no thought of expanding the process to include other world view perspectives. Roe has not yet been able to include this in his narrative policy process. He is like most others who write about policy analysis, clearly ethnocentric, but readily admits that there is a need to include alternative perspectives. Recognition of the shortfall of Roe (1994) and Stevens (1988) does not negate the usefulness of their processes to provide us with a significant amount of information

regarding the structure of policy problems and the identification of other themes which need to be considered. It does mean that we cannot use them uncritically.

The lack of a suicide policy, in this First Nation Band school, was more than an instance of a separation between dominant theory and practice in policy development. This policy problem was more than one space on a linear description of the options on the spectrum of theory couched in the European value system. Truly different value systems, beliefs, and languages, from which theories have developed, need to rise to the challenge of structuring policy problem from the “inside-out.” In this First Nation school, they must now begin asking other questions: What would a useful policy process look like within a First Nation value system as described by Storm (1975)? What process should be used to structure the policy problem? How can we use dominant knowledge and process, if at all? What is the knowledge from the values system of the Northern Cree community that must be the basis of policy development? Does the notion of policy development make any sense at all in traditional First Nation communities?

Souers' (1992) challenge to recognise the significance of the use of “generic” processes needs to be kept in mind as we considered the following identification of themes using Roe (1994) and Stevens (1991). Souers (1992) reminds us that the impact of dominant language use is generally negative because the words used often suggest that the aspirations of First Nation communities are the same as those of the dominant community. According to Sours, the media in the United States of America over the years since early colonisation has applied this generic terminology to describe all tribes. This historical use of language [and policy

development processes] has had a tremendous impact on how outsiders view Native people and how Native people view themselves (Souers, 1992).

Commitment to a suicide policy in the northern Cree school studied in this thesis was lacking because the process overlooked the existence of an alternative worldview while creating policy. Although using a generic process created a policy, staff at the school did not embrace the policy. The Principal identified the process as being inadequate. He suggested that this process lacked the cultural perspective needed to solve problems in the school. The process failed to identify a clear statement of problem. The policy failed to address concerns of all the groups. This is a limitation of policy development “outside the culture.”

### *Implications*

The review of literature for this study identified the lack of research about policy in First Nation schools. It is non-existent. The researcher was unable to find any studies giving reasons for this. This seems remarkable given the high suicide rate among First Nation people and the potential for the occurrence of suicide in these schools. This study attempts to understand these apparent discrepancies. It also suggests an alternative approach to the structuring of policy problems in First Nation school systems.

The study revealed the inadequacy of conventional policy development in First Nation schools. The researcher assumed when designing the study that the community members recognised that there was a problem, they wanted to act, and the authority for decision making was clear. This turned out to be completely untrue. The study reveals this misconception and

showed how *Narrative Policy Analysis* (Roe, 1994) may provide a useful means for analysis of other policy problems in First Nation schools.

Structuring a policy problem is critical in conventional policy approach. However, the conventional process failed to enable us to consider the multiplicity of the perspectives with a First Nation worldview. Conventional policy processes appear to be inadequate for understanding problems such as suicide in traditional First Nation communities. Seen from this analysis the rush to have a policy developed which then resides in First Nation schools as they attempt to meet standards imposed by dominant values and practices can be seen to create problems rather than to help solve them. Implementation fails because the structuring of the policy problem was not relevant to the realities of the First Nation community. The policy, which resulted ignores their worldview. Worse, it masked that worldview even from themselves.

The differing perceptions identified in this study highlight a need for methods which include alternatives to conventional policy approaches, especially in the structuring of policy problems. The original problem of this study is likely to be only one of the many issues that need action. Using a conventional policy development process in this First Nation school may overlook issues such as competing authorities, differing patterns of communication, the ambiguous role of staff, etc. To clearly identify the policy issues in First Nation schools so policy developers can accurately structure policy problems before creating policy requires the researcher to go beyond conventional process. Understanding the lack of a policy on suicide in this First Nation school within the spectrum of theory based on European value systems is inadequate. A First Nation framework needs to be introduced. This study reveals a need to

consider what introducing a First Nation framework entails. At this time, the researcher believes that this requires a process based on the First Nation value systems. New perspectives on policy making must be introduced.

Introducing new perspectives will take strong leadership in schools especially because anything being done at the present is so strongly critiqued. To see and understand other perspectives presents interesting challenges. School leaders will have to look at their own contribution to the problem as they examine how the present systems often contribute to crisis faced by individuals and families. For example, the present system creates “winners” and “losers.” Change requires an intimacy with both cultures. Hansen (1985) describes a person with an intimacy with both cultures a person who is “bi-cultural.”

The study demonstrates that the relationship between the school and the community in the Euro-Canadian community is quite different from the relationship between the school and community in First Nation communities. First Nation parents who elected School Committee members are very active and exert their influence directly on Committee members. This relationship in First Nation communities is encouraged so community leaders get immediate feedback regarding the impact of their decisions. Community needs and wants are paramount. As a result of the politicising of the process it leaves staff at the school feeling powerless. They seem to feel that most decisions are imposed on them.

The other concern expressed by the Principal was the parents pressuring the Education Committee to have the school expand its role. Many parents expected the school to become a surrogate family that maintains language and culture; provides recreation activities; meets individual student social and spiritual needs; provides an academic education

and disciplines those students who need it. This is unrealistic. The Education Committee in First Nation schools is following the public system. The ability of the staff of First Nation Schools to resist this notion of the school as providing everything is difficult. One result is a high staff turnover rate in First Nation schools. This provides another example of how using mainstream policy tools does not reveal the management role of the semi-volunteer Education Board in running the school where the Chairman of the Education Committee assumes the decision-making authority of the Principal. The hands on nature of the Education Committee with the ultimate authority of the Chief and Council to veto all decisions of the Education Committee, the Principal and teachers leads directly to staff dissatisfaction. This distinguishes the First Nation school as having a unique school environment. With frequent leadership changes, decisions are often more political than acceptable even for this environment. This has resulted in the principal having little or no role in policy development.

This is not a study of suicide although the subject is important to the Aboriginal community. What the study does help to clarify is the difference in perspectives that need to be considered when we deal with problems in our community. Successful problem solving means participants' differing views need to be understood and respected. Each time we defend our position or "dig in" and justify our position we interrupt the dialogue needed to create a climate for change.

*Recommendations for further research*

The introduction of self-government has had a significant impact on the First Nation school because of the changing relationship between schools staff and the Chief and Council.

This new relationship creates a number of challenges. Little is understood regarding the structure and operation of a First Nation school. Prior to the Federal Government adopting a self-government policy, Chief and Council and the school were allies against the decisions of Indian Affairs. Decisions, historically made by Indian Affairs, are now made by Chief and Council. Requests for more money, more staff, better facilities are still there, but this time the School Committee needs to argue its case before the Chief and Council. Because the Council also decides who gets a house, who goes to university, and who gets a job with the Band, they are able to significantly influence those elected to the Education Committee. When the parents pressure the Education Committee to pressure the Chief and Council for a decision, it may become very political. The political impacts need to be understood so erroneous assumptions are dispelled. Imagine the surprise when a Band hires a principal who has had no previous contact with First Nation communities. The principal starts the job assuming a First Nation principal has powers and authority similar to those in mainstream education. This lack of understanding alone may create unnecessary problems and ultimately turnover in staff. The impact will have a significant impact on the school environment. Teachers and administrators need to know all about this. Universities need to consider the differences between Euro-Canadian and First Nation schools as part of the academic training teachers and administrators receive.

The negative affects of colonialism are evident in First Nation Schools. Self-government has empowered Band Councils to control most activity on the reserve. Decision-making and policy development is at the pleasure of the Band leadership. This means “outsiders” who want to help First Nation communities structure policy problems need to

examine their own ideas. Failure to be curious to understand may lead to many unnecessary problems even though the intent is honourable. This study provides a method to identify the subtle issues intertwined in this school. This study was designed to look at the lack of a suicide policy in a First Nation School. In the course of the research it was determined that the lack of a suicide policy was just a symptom of other problems. The problem is that First Nation schools are different. How they are different is summarised on the chart 3. These issues are part of the problem of policy making in First Nation schools.

### *Inference*

Is there a policy development approach that may be closer to the culture of First Nation people? Conventional policy research methods can give much information about alternative perceptions on the First Nations schools. Narrative and Fault Tree analyses do provide additional information. These alternative policy development processes increase the availability of information for structuring policy problems. Telling stories is consistent with First Nation culture. Using Roe's (1994) Narrative Policy Analysis process will provide school decision-makers with alternative perspectives to use to structure their policy problems.

Other research questions related to the suicide question identified during the course of the study include:

1. How many Saskatchewan public schools have a suicide policy? How many First Nation Schools have suicide policies?
2. What are the actual processes used to structure policy problems and design suicide policies in Saskatchewan public and First Nation schools?



3. What are the similarities and differences between First Nation communities in relation to suicide policy in schools?
4. What will the stakeholders, First Nation and otherwise, do with this new information on structuring policy problems?

The results of this study introduce other concerns that need to be considered as policies are developed in First Nation schools. Whose responsibility is it to act? How are Band Councils held accountable for their decisions regarding education? Are they accountable only to their electorate? Are they accountable to the broader public? Can the Education Committee do something about its concerns? If the answer is yes, what specific actions can the Education Committee undertake? What would a policy development process, which took these questions seriously, look like?

### *Summary*

The interviews with the Principal and the school committee provided a rare opportunity to learn and share the realities of life in a First Nation school experiencing severe crisis. As the researcher got to the stage of disaggregating the Chairman and the Principal interviews in order to write the metanarrative, the interwoven nature of the issues and themes in the study became evident. Resolution of these problems will require action by a number of stakeholders. The alternate perspectives we have uncovered highlight the conflict, which is the result of generations of acculturation to Euro-Canadian ways by First Nation's peoples.

The Principal spoke of his love for children, family and community and of how this sustained him as he tried to make a difference in a difficult administrative environment. He

worked so the children and grandchildren would have the opportunity to learn and experience the benefits of an education. He is committed to resisting the result of colonisation, which has used the transmission of culture through families, communities and the schools. In his words, children should not have to make a choice between their heritage and living in a contemporary world. Education is a key to success in Western European society, but this does not mean replacing the “White” Residential School System with an “Indian” controlled public system that does the same thing. There has to be more. The public school system is failing most Indian children in the cities and rural areas (Government of Canada, 1996). Substituting the “white” bureaucracy with a “brown” bureaucracy is not enough. The Principal in this study wants collaborative efforts and more outreach from the Education Committee in the schools, but the effort must be control that is shared. The children are the keys to the survival of a First Nation. Already they experience too much stress in their daily lives. He is adamant in his determination that school leaders make a stronger effort to meet the Indian student’s needs and not be self-serving. If his dream is to be realised we need much more knowledge about the way things really are in First Nation schools. Only then can we resist colonisation and develop relevant means to solve problems.

#### *Issues for the Researcher*

As I began to work with the Principal, I realised that this complex process involved more than the design and implementation of research. I became aware of issues of language, values, ownership of knowledge and access to privileged institutions. My whole life was a preparation to do this research. It began when I was fifteen and became a youth organiser for

the Association of Metis and Non-Status Indians (AMNSIS) and I was charged with the responsibility to advising the AMNSIS Board on policies that would address the needs of youth. During the years that followed, I have learned to walk in the formalised structures of two worlds. Often I did not see the impact on me personally. Survival has meant constantly reflecting on language and the process necessary to negotiate these worlds. Ownership of traditional knowledge has been and continues to be a primary issue for First Nation people. Who will decide on the use of this information to support or criticise the efforts of leaders in this community? Many Indian parents ask themselves, "When will my child have the opportunity to attend a First Nation school that is reflective of who we are?"

As the story was read and re-read, each time there were new messages in the voices. I shared in the grief of the Principal as he shared his story with me and I still reflect on those who are so overwhelmed by family and personal circumstance that they make the final choice of suicide. I, too, feel the frustration of dealing with unresponsive systems that devalue life. I empathise that there has to be more. I want to share the metanarrative, as a way of showing there is more. There are other perspectives. The Principal's insights and wisdom need to be presented. He needs to make the decision to present this other perspective. I will honour the bond of confidentiality.

Self-government in the next century must be more than replacing one system with another. Emerging from the narrative are issues of power relationships, political processes and racism, but these are issues for another time. In the meantime, I struggle with what the Creator wants me to do with this new knowledge. I am very happy that I have had the opportunity to work with these special people. Despite the intrusion into their lives, they

generously shared their time, memories, recommendations and homes. I appreciate them and thank them from the bottom of my heart. All my relations.

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*Appendix I Ethics Review*



UNIVERSITY OF REGINA

OFFICE OF ASSOCIATE VICE-PRESIDENT AND DEAN  
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

DATE: October 8, 1996

TO: Christopher Lafontaine  
Faculty of Education

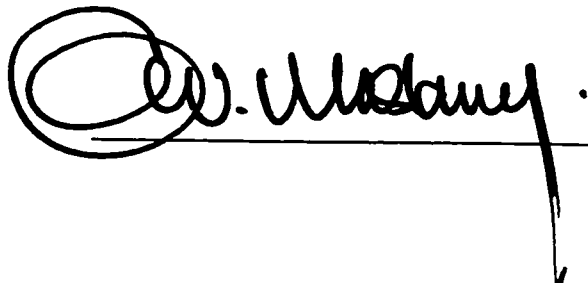
FROM: G.W. Maslany, Chair  
Research Ethics Review Committee

Re: **The Experience of a First Nation Principal with Suicide or Attempted Suicide  
in a First Nation School**

---

Please be advised that the committee has considered this proposal and has agreed that it is:

- 1. Acceptable as submitted.  
(Note: Only those applications designated in this way have ethical approval for the research on which they are based to proceed.)
  
- 2. Acceptable subject to the following changes and precautions (see attached):  
**Note:** These changes must be resubmitted to the Committee and deemed acceptable by it prior to the initiation of the research. Once the changes are regarded as acceptable a new approval form will be sent out indicating it is acceptable as submitted.  
**Please address the concerns raised by the reviewer(s) by means of a supplementary memo.**
  
- 3. Unacceptable to the Committee as submitted. Please contact the Chair for advise on whether or how the project proposal might be revised to become acceptable (ext. 4161/5186.)



---

/mm

cc: G. Pickard, supervisor  
(Ethics2.doc)

*Appendix 2 Request for Consent from informants*



UNIVERSITY OF REGINA  
FACULTY OF EDUCATION

September 1996

Dear Sir

Thank you for agreeing to consider participation in the study of The experience of a First Nation Principal with suicide or attempted suicide in a First Nation School.

The purpose of this study is:

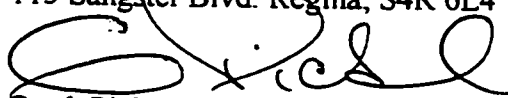
“Few First Nation schools have adopted written policies and procedures to guide school staff when a student or staff member commits or attempts to commit suicide. Research regarding suicide in First Nation schools in Saskatchewan is limited. The purpose of this study is to examine the experience of one First Nation principal with suicide in his/her school to advance understanding of the context of the lack of written policy.”

You will be asked to participate in a series of interviews about your experience with this topic. If at any time, up to final publication of the study, you wish to withdraw from this project you may do so by writing to the researcher. All written reports and interview typescripts will be submitted to you for correction before they are seen by anyone other than the researcher and his masters' committee. Should you withdraw all materials will be destroyed in your presence.

A copy of the final report of the study will be provided to you.

Thank you once again for agreeing to help with this research. Please sign at the bottom of the page to indicate your agreement to participate.

Christopher Lafontaine  
115 Sangster Blvd. Regina, S4R 6L4



Garth Pickard, Thesis supervisor

---

participant signature

*Appendix 3 Rating Instruction Booklet*



## QUANTIFICATION INSTRUCTIONS

The Quantification Phase of Sage Analysis requires several estimates and judgments about each group of events contained in the Quantification Document. Please refer to the following instructions in completing this task.

1. Each group of events may be considered independently of all other event groups. Each event group begins with a "leading event" at the left-hand margin and is followed by two or more "subordinate events."
2. If you do not feel comfortable in making estimates and judgments for a particular group of events, leave it blank and go on to the next group.
3. Make your estimates and judgments according to how the organization is presently functioning rather than how it may have functioned in the past.
4. Please base your estimates and judgments upon your personal experience, perception and understanding of the events presented.
5. Please discriminate among the sub-events.
6. Make your estimates and judgments according to the Rating Guide which follows on the next page.

## RATING GUIDE

**REL. CONT.**  
Relative Contribution

Mark the appropriate number (0-5) which reflects, in your judgement, the relative contribution of each subordinate event to the failure of the leading event. If the event is not applicable mark "0" for no contribution.

**FAM**  
Familiarity

Indicate your confidence in making your judgement about the subordinate event. If you are only slightly familiar with the situation, mark "s"; if moderately familiar, mark "m"; or if very familiar, mark "v".

REL. CONT.						FAM			FREQ			REMED		
0	1	2	3	4	5	s	m	v	r	p	f	e	d	v
-						+			-			+		
<i>N/A or No Contribution</i>						<i>Slightly Familiar</i>			<i>Rarely</i>			<i>Easy</i>		
<i>Little</i>						<i>Moderately Familiar</i>			<i>Periodically</i>			<i>Difficult</i>		
<i>Average</i>						<i>Very Familiar</i>			<i>Frequently</i>			<i>Very Difficult</i>		
<i>Very Great</i>														

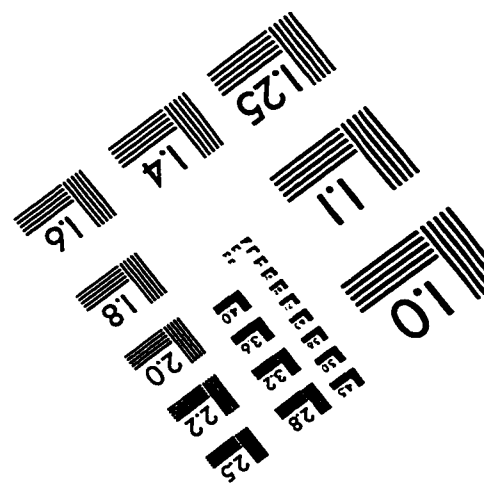
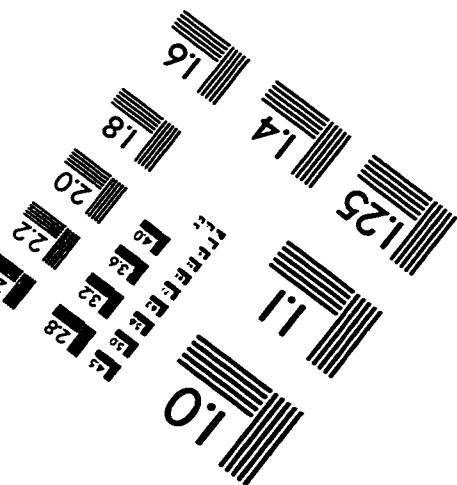
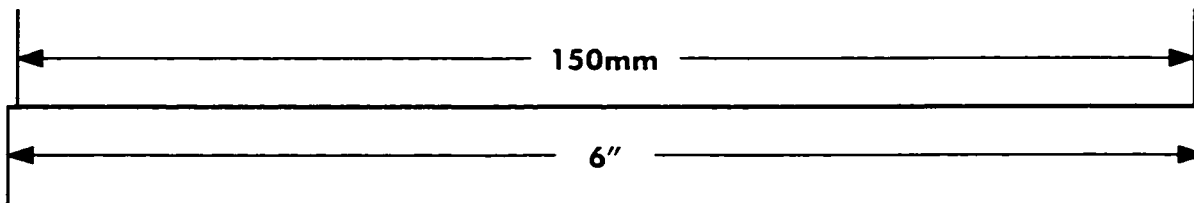
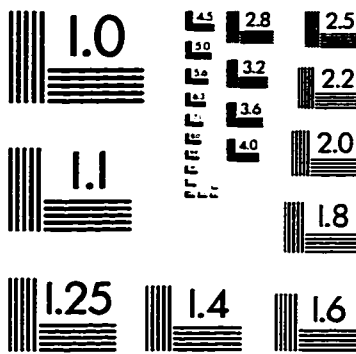
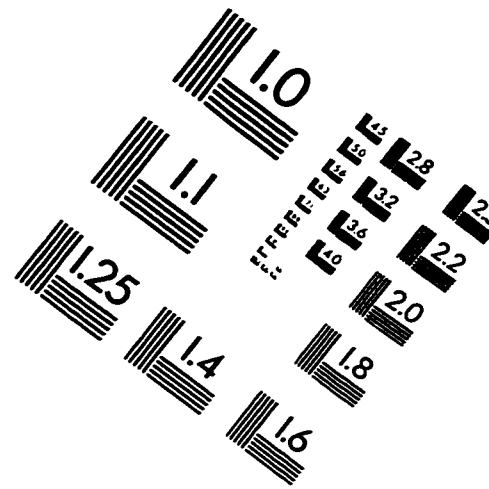
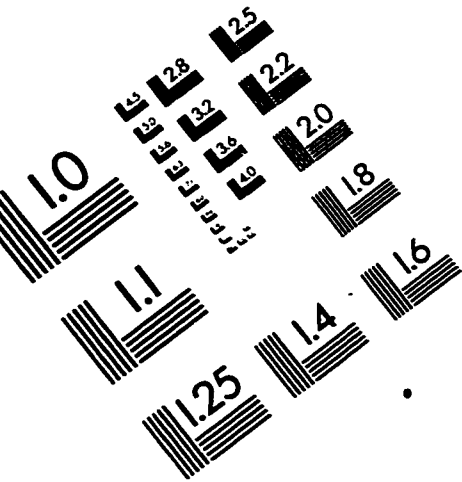
**FREQ**  
Frequency

Indicate how often the subordinate event might be expected to occur. If the subordinate event represents a situation which will occur rarely, mark "r"; if it will occur periodically, mark "p"; or if it will occur frequently, mark "f".

**REMED**  
Remediation

Estimate the difficulty that might be expected in eliminating, controlling, or modifying the subordinate event. If in your opinion it will be easy, mark "e"; if it will be difficult, mark "d"; or if it will be very difficult, mark "v".

# IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



APPLIED IMAGE, Inc  
1653 East Main Street  
Rochester, NY 14609 USA  
Phone: 716/482-0300  
Fax: 716/288-5989

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