

PERCEPTIONS OF LOCAL CONTROL IN A FIRST NATIONS TRIBAL COMMUNITY¹

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ABSTRACT. Local Management of schools, commonly called Local Control (LC) or Community Control (CC), is an established policy of Canada's First Nations. However, little is known about the operation of LC at the community level. The present study was designed to identify community perceptions about the implementation of LC in a tribal community in Manitoba using assumptions from position papers of the Assembly of First Nations – that an informed and involved community would better bring about school effectiveness. The subjects for this study were 47 males and 53 females from three communities in the tribal organization. Data analyses were carried out using analysis of variance. While ANOVA revealed no significant differences between the communities for five of the tested constructs, the simple statistics and crosstabulation data indicate that the devolution process has not produced anticipated results. Consequently, First Nations should re-examine how they are implementing LC.

RÉSUMÉ. La gestion locale des écoles, plus connue sous le nom de contrôle local (CL) ou encore de contrôle communautaire (CC), est une politique bien établie des premières nations du Canada. On sait toutefois très peu de choses sur le fonctionnement du contrôle local au niveau communautaire. Cette étude a été conçue pour identifier les perceptions communautaires sur la mise en place du CL dans une communauté tribale du Manitoba en partant des hypothèses émises dans les déclarations de principe de l'assemblée des premières nations selon lesquelles une communauté avisée et active est plus susceptible d'atteindre à l'efficacité scolaire. Les sujets de cette étude se composaient de 47 hommes et 53 femmes de trois communautés à organisation tribale. L'analyse des données a été entreprise au moyen d'une analyse de variance. Alors qu'ANOVA ne révèle aucune différence significative entre les communautés pour cinq des construits testés, les statistiques simples et les données des tabulations recoupées indiquent que le processus de transfert n'a pas donné les résultats escomptés. En conséquence, les premières nations devraient réexaminer la manière dont elles mettent en oeuvre le contrôle local.

COMMUNITY CONTROL – WHAT IS THE CONTROVERSY?

Local management of schools, commonly called Local Control (LC) or Community Control (CC), has been for over a century a fundamental principle of the Canadian education system. However, in First Nations Communities, it is only a recent phenomenon gained through hard-fought battles which began actively with the 1969 *Government White Paper* and culminated with Jean Chretien's (then Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development) proclamation speech in Regina, June 1972, to the Council of Ministers of Education.

In that speech, the federal government accepted the principles embodied in the National Indian Brotherhood's (NIB, 1972) position paper *Indian Control of Indian Education*, essentially a booklet published by the NIB. Since then, the Federal Government's Indian and Northern Affairs, Canada (INAC) policy on Indian education has been predicated on the principles outlined in that position paper. The basic principles endorsed by the NIB's paper include **parental responsibility** and **local control**, and the two major planks in the Federal Government's policy towards Indian education has been "the need to improve the quality of Indian education and the desirability of devolving control of education to Indian Society" (INAC, 1982, p.2). In Manitoba the devolution process is far advanced, more than any other province in Canada.

LC in First Nations schools is intended to be a radical transformation, a paradigmatic shift of the educative community from a technocratic, non-participative system, into a collaborative human activity system. Both the national and provincial native organizations argued emphatically in their position papers², for example, "Indian Control of Indian Education" (NIB, 1972), "Wahbung: Our Tomorrows" (Manitoba Indian Brotherhood, 1971), and, more recently, in "Tradition and Education: Towards a Vision of our Future" (AFN, 1988), that without community control by the First Nations themselves, their educational system cannot be truly successful; those most directly concerned must have input into the system. The low participation rate of Natives in the education system, as well as the structural organization of education for Natives, provided validity for the above assumption.

Such ecological views of education development and the role of the community have been endorsed by a number of restructuring agencies in other regions, such as the United States and the United Kingdom. For example, in the United States, John Goodlad (1984) sees the school-community linkage as a major plank in the revitalization of

American education. More recently (January 1995), the Royal Commission on Learning in Ontario (1995), as well as the Minister of Education in Manitoba (1995), have outlined strategies for more community involvement in the public education system at the local level.

Control as conceptualized by First Nations is an ecological, symbiotic, and holistic process that recognizes the interdependence of the home, the school and community. It is a visioning process that allows community educators to see and influence their own futures through changes in their education systems. CC is an empowering, inclusive process that incorporates the values, hopes, and dreams of the community.

In Canada, LC has been in operation for a number of years. However, a national review by the Assembly of First Nations, in 1988, designed to "examine the impact of the 1973 Indian Control of Indian Education Policy" and "First Nations jurisdiction over First Nations education . . ." (AFN, 1988, p. 12), concluded that "in practice, First Nations have very limited jurisdiction over education programs", because of the Federal Government's "control over the determination and allocation of resources needed to establish, manage, and operate local First Nations schools" (AFN, 1988, p. 13).

In response to such problems, Ovid Mercredi, the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, at a special chiefs conference on education, held in November, 1991, stated:

[T]he challenge now is for each community to take ownership over the process – involve everyone in making decisions and contributing to the education system – working together for our future. (AFN, Education Secretariat, 1992, p. vi)

In Manitoba the policy of LC by First Nations has been established for quite some time now, though in the Great Lake Tribal Council³ (GLTC) the policy of LC has been in operation for less than five years. In one of the four communities that make up the tribal council LC has been functioning for less than two years.

During the seventies and eighties, following the acceptance by INAC of the First Nations position on education, the GLTC proposed education development for their community from a perspective that is "reflective of community needs, philosophy, language, culture, lifestyles, history and visions" (AFN Education Secretariat, 1992, p. 27). The GLTC through a regional coordinating committee also facilitated the process of creating community awareness of LC of education through local workshops.

Conscientization at the local level

By the fall of 1992 all four communities in the GLTC had assumed control of their education systems. The constitutional battles for LC were fought and won at the political level. The problem then remained for the communities to follow the course charted in their mission statement to produce the desired results.

In the last few years, the issues of LC and self-government have received renewed attention, particularly since the publication of *Tradition and Education* by the AFN (1988), and the failure of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords. However, it appears that not many data exist on how community members perceive the operation of LC, how the education systems are functioning, or whether the communities are actually involved in their education systems.

The present study, therefore, was designed to identify community perceptions about the implementation and operation of LC in the GLTC using the general assumption from the position papers of the AFN – that an informed and involved community would enhance **school effectiveness**, traditionally defined as community involvement and better student performance.

The significance of this study is of most utility to those involved in current and future implementation of LC for the improvement of educational practice in First Nations schools; and, as noted by Nisbet (1980), case studies such as this have heuristic value in shedding light on forces that shape education.

Through the eyes of the locals

This study utilizes and extends the construct of **local control** in its operationalized form at the community level. The following subconcepts have been identified to help define the operation of the system of local control as carried out at the community level:

- **School visitation** is the degree to which community members visit the school to consult with school officials about the performance of their children.
- **School achievement** is the current level of performance of children in the system when compared with performance before LC.
- **Communication** is the degree of contact by school board members and school officials with parents and community members.

- **Education System** is the totality of community schooling and education.
- **Local Control** is the control and operation of the education system by the local community.
- **School Curriculum** is the current program of studies offered in the school.

RESEARCH PROCEDURE

The subjects for this study were one hundred community members (47 males and 53 females) from three communities in the GLTC. Subjects were approximately equally divided between the three communities. Due to logistic problems the fourth community was not sampled.

The age of subjects varied from just under 20 years to over 55 years and there was a representation of various levels of skills, coded according to the *National Occupation Classification Skill Level Criteria*, a system of occupational coding used by the federal government. In order to obtain a satisfactory cross representation from the three communities, the subjects to be included in the study were selected on the basis of stratified sampling according to the criteria noted above.

A five-point Likert-type scale was designed for the study with the assistance of 20 final-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) students from the three communities surveyed. Students were involved in the final development of the guide to assist in determining its content validity (Figure 1).

With the use of Digital Equipment Corporation Program VAX/VMS Version V5.5-2 reliability coefficients were calculated for the constructs and a standardized alpha (α) of .60 was obtained.

The twenty final-year B.Ed. student researchers from the three communities discussed the scale with subjects from those communities. All subjects were interviewed in their homes or places of employment, and the questionnaires were filled out indicating the respondents' perceptions of the different constructs. Free comments by respondents were annotated by the researchers for later cross-referencing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data analyses for the three communities were carried out using analysis of variance (ANOVA) and the results are presented in the following

Age: <20 _____ 20-30 _____ 30-35 _____ 55 _____
 Youth Lower middle Middle Elder

Sex: Male _____ Female _____

1. How do you feel about local control?
 Very good Relatively good Not so good Fairly OK Bad

2. Do you visit the school often to consult with teachers about your child(ren)?
 Very often Often Sometimes Little Not at all

3. How do you feel about the education system now compared with before?
 Very much better Much better Better About the same Worse

4. How do you feel your child(ren) is (are) performing in school now compared with before?
 Very much better Much Better Better About the same Worse

5. How often do school board members/teachers contact you?
 Very often Often Little Very little Not at all

6. Compared with before local control, do you think the curriculum is:
 Very much better Better About the same Worse Much worse

FIGURE 1. Questionnaire – Local control of education

tables. As shown in the tables, analysis of variance was carried out to identify differences between communities on the six constructs (Table 1) as well as differences by age (Table 2), sex (Table 3), and skill level (Table 4).

The data on differences between communities (Table 1) revealed no significant differences between the three communities for five of the constructs (1, 2, 3, 5, 6); however, there was a significant difference ($p < .05$) between the communities for the construct, *achievement*.

None of the moderator variables – age, sex, and skill level – showed any significant differences by communities, though there was a significant difference ($p < .05$) between the communities on the construct, *visitation*, when age was factored in (Table 2).

While ANOVA revealed no significant differences between the communities for five of the constructs, examination of the simple statistics and crosstabulation data (available from the author on request) reveal important information on the constructs about the communities. Most of the data appear to cluster around the middle value points, i.e., around 2–3 on the Likert scale.

Perceptions of Local Control in First Nations Communities

TABLE 1. Perceptions of local control by community

ANOVA						
Variables	Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
1. Local control	BG*	0.8875	2	.4437	0.71	0.4935
	WG	56.1017	90	.6233		
2. School visitation	BG	2.3687	2	1.1843	1.46	0.2367
	WG	76.0848	94	0.8094		
3. School board communication	BG	2.8811	2	1.4405	1.39	0.2532
	WG	97.1394	94	1.0333		
4. School achievement	BG	2.1191	2	1.0595	2.94	0.0581
	WG	33.2071	92	0.3609		
5. Education system	BG	1.0598	2	0.5299	0.77	0.4669
	WG	64.8782	94	0.6901		
6. School curriculum	BG	0.3154	2	0.1577	0.40	0.6681
	WG	37.0008	95	0.3894		

TABLE 2. Perceptions of local control by age

ANOVA						
Variables	Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
1. Local control	BG*	1.4313	3	0.4771	0.74	0.5291
	WG	55.1908	86	0.6417		
2. School visitation	BG	7.6130	3	2.5376	3.25	0.0255
	WG	69.5052	89	0.7809		
3. School board communication	BG	0.1548	3	0.9516	0.05	0.9860
	WG	95.7376	89	1.0757		
4. School achievement	BG	0.2461	3	0.0820	0.12	0.9502
	WG	62.6785	89	0.7042		
5. Education system	BG	0.4161	3	0.1387	0.35	0.7921
	WG	34.8805	87	0.04009		
6. School curriculum	BG	0.3803	3	0.1267	0.33	0.8050
	WG	34.7791	90	0.3864		

* BG Between group
 WG Within group
 Sig. Significance

TABLE 3. Perceptions of local control by sex

ANOVA						
Variables	Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
1. Local control	BG*	0.7138	1	0.7138	1.14	0.2876
	WG	56.1556	90	0.6239		
2. School visitation	BG	0.0027	1	0.0027	0.00	0.9541
	WG	78.4508	95	0.8257		
3. School board communication	BG	0.3454	1	0.3454	0.33	0.5675
	WG	99.6752	95	1.0492		
4. School achievement	BG	0.4279	1	0.4279	0.62	0.4341
	WG	65.1960	94	0.6935		
5. Education system	BG	0.2063	1	0.2063	0.55	0.4617
	WG	35.1200	93	0.3776		
6. School curriculum	BG	0.7262	1	0.7262	1.89	0.1727
	WG	36.5521	95	0.3847		

TABLE 4. Perceptions of local control by skill level

ANOVA						
Variables	Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
1. Local control	BG*	1.7673	4	0.4418	0.70	0.5912
	WG	55.2219	88	0.6275		
2. School visitation	BG	6.0465	4	1.5116	1.92	0.1136
	WG	72.4070	92	0.7870		
3. School board communication	BG	0.3036	4	0.0759	0.07	0.9909
	WG	99.7169	92	1.0838		
4. School achievement	BG	4.0527	4	1.0131	1.51	0.2069
	WG	61.8854	92	0.6726		
5. Education system	BG	0.6414	4	0.1603	0.42	0.7966
	WG	34.6848	90	0.3853		
6. School curriculum	BG	1.7682	4	0.4420	1.16	0.3352
	WG	35.5480	93	0.3822		

* BG Between group
 WG Within group
 Sig. Significance

On the construct, *education system*, in the crosstabulation data, 52.5% of respondents cluster around the value 2 (no difference in perception) on the Likert scale and 25.7% cluster around value 3 (feel better). These values do not indicate a favourable perception of the current education system.

On the key construct of *control*, 56% or approximately half of the respondents cluster around value 3 (not so good), and 25% cluster around value 4 (relatively good), a somewhat better perception of the construct, *local control*. However, the data are still some distance from the ideal perception. Only nine respondents felt *very good* about LC.

Similar observations are noted on the other constructs and moderator variables. Some variations, however, are noticeable when the crosstab data are examined more closely. For example, on the construct, *local control*, reported in the crosstab data where 56% of respondents cluster around value 3, 35% of these respondents are between the ages of 20–29 and 49% between the ages of 30–55. However, of the 25% clustering around the value 4, only 22% are between ages 20–29, whereas 74% of respondents are between ages 30–55. Even though older residents feel much better about LC they are in the minority.

DISCUSSION

Given the current and recent widespread discussions about sovereignty and self-government by First Nations in Canada, and given the argument that LC can bring about positive changes in First Nations Communities, the constructs tested in this research were deemed to be important, and were intended to reveal a deeper insight into the nature of LC as it actually operates at the community level.

Through an examination of such constructs, it is possible not only to gain conceptual understanding of the political process and education system, but be able to identify areas of deficiencies for corrective action, and, hence educational improvement in First Nations communities.

While the data did not reveal significant differences between the communities, the prevailing perception and conceptualization that local control would galvanize the First Nations communities for better community involvement and school effectiveness did not appear to be realized in this study. Anecdotal comments from some respondents and further discussions with education leaders provide support for the findings.

However, while the majority of respondents appear not to be overly impressed with LC, in all the communities about one-third of respondents appear to be favourably impressed with the movement.

Changes may be taking place, as noted by some respondents, but these changes are not communicated to community members by educational leaders, nor are they viewed to be effective. Hence participation and the implied empowerment appears to suffer. Stated rhetoric does not appear to match results. Is the problem of "limited jurisdiction", as stated by the AFN, resulting in low esteem of LC, or is the problem a creation of the community itself? While comments by participants, identified in the data, show some local problems, for example, the low communication score, it is possible that the current structure of the education system has not changed sufficiently to create the inclusiveness and empowerment promised by the devolution of LC.

More efforts are needed on the part of community leaders to inform their publics and gain full participation in the education system. Only then would an informed and involved community better be able to bring about school effectiveness.

While this study is exploratory, it nevertheless surveyed a cross-section of community members and as such does provide relevant data on the current state of the LC movement as it is operationalized at the community level in a northern region of Manitoba.

NOTES

1. Support for this research was provided by Brandon University.
2. The latter two documents are published in book form and are available to the public. The document *Indian Control of Indian Education* is available as a booklet.
3. The tribal council name has been changed to provide anonymity.

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