

# Teachers' Work in Canadian Aboriginal Communities

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## Introduction

Public school teachers, regardless of where they work, face ongoing challenges to balance sensitivity to the social and learning needs of the communities they serve with pressures to meet broader labor market, social, and political objectives. Contemporary educational reforms have jeopardized that balance by calling on educators to elevate learning capacities for all groups in a more efficient and effective manner while simultaneously containing tensions induced by social and economic restructuring.<sup>1</sup> In the process, Andy Hargreaves emphasizes, teachers are trapped between conflicting pressures to be “both catalysts for a successful knowledge economy and effective counterpoints for some of its more socially disruptive effects.”<sup>2</sup> Within communities that have historically been poorly served by schooling, teachers are also likely to be confronted with competing claims about the nature and forms of education required to enable minority populations to achieve meaningful social and economic participation.

This article explores the changing, often contradictory character of teachers' work shaped by reforms oriented to improve educational prospects for Aboriginal people in the Canadian provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan.<sup>3</sup> Despite an extensive array of policies and programs committed to meet these objectives, the present educational “landscape” for Aboriginal people remains one in which “hope and possibility live side by side with constraint and

This article is based on research supported by SSHRC research grant 410-2000-0710. An earlier version of this article was presented at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting, San Diego, CA, April 2004.

<sup>1</sup> For example, see Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *The New Economy: Beyond the Hype* (Paris: OECD, 2001), 151; UN Development Program, *Human Development Report, 2001: Making New Technologies Work for Human Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Geoffrey E. Hale, “Innovation and Inclusion: Budgetary Policy, the Skills Agenda, and the Politics of the New Economy,” in *How Ottawa Spends, 2002–2003: The Security Aftermath and National Policies*, ed. G. Bruce Doern (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Andy Hargreaves, *Teaching in the Knowledge Society: Education in the Age of Insecurity* (New York: Teachers' College Press, 2003), 79.

<sup>3</sup> Government agencies, employers, and indigenous organizations have identified educational improvement among Aboriginal people as a core priority demanding both immediate and long-term attention. See Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), *Gathering Strength*, vol. 3 of *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1996); National Indian Brotherhood/Assembly of First Nations (NIB/AFN), *Indian Control of Indian Education: A Position Paper* (Ottawa: National Indian Brotherhood, 1972).

*Comparative Education Review*, vol. 50, no. 4.

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0010-4086/2006/5004-0006\$05.00

frustration.”<sup>4</sup> The article addresses how teachers make sense of and affect this uneven terrain as they attempt to reconcile diverse educational demands.

### Aboriginal Education in Canada

The coexistence of hope and frustration that marks Aboriginal education in Canada parallels the experiences of indigenous and minority groups in many nations.<sup>5</sup> More than 3 decades have passed since First Nations brought to national attention their desire to achieve “Indian control of Indian education” in response to the failure by Canadian education systems to provide meaningful education for Aboriginal people.<sup>6</sup> In the subsequent interval, Aboriginal people have fulfilled many of their objectives to achieve educational improvement in a manner that maintains and integrates indigenous values with capacities that enable them to adapt successfully to modern socioeconomic conditions. First Nations have assumed control over schools previously operated by the federal government; educational policies and practices in provincial and territorial school systems have taken greater consideration of the needs, desires, and participation of Aboriginal communities; and substantial progress has been made in increasing rates of educational participation and attainment among Aboriginal people.

Although these advances are significant, the educational achievements of Aboriginal people lag behind those of other groups and fall short of their own targets. By 2001, just over one-third (35 percent) of Aboriginal people (compared to 17 percent for non-Aboriginal people) aged 25–44 had not completed high school, while nearly half (49 percent) of young Aboriginal people (compared to 36 percent for non-Aboriginal people) aged 15–24 were not attending school.<sup>7</sup> A 2004 report from the auditor general of Canada estimates from current trends that it will take up to 28 years for the proportion of high school graduates in First Nations communities to reach comparable national levels.<sup>8</sup>

Aboriginal people, consistent with perspectives raised by numerous minority communities, emphasize a strong association between educational difficulties and schools’ failure to connect with the communities in which they

<sup>4</sup> Marlene Brant Castellano, Lynne Davis, and Louise Lahache, “Conclusion: Fulfilling the Promise,” in *Aboriginal Education: Fulfilling the Promise*, ed. Marlene Brant Castellano, Lynne Davis, and Louise Lahache (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000), 251.

<sup>5</sup> Marie Battiste, ed., *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000); Margaret Gibson and John Ogbu, eds., *Minority Status and Schooling: A Comparative Study of Immigrant and Involuntary Minorities* (New York: Garland, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> NIB/AFN, *Indian Control of Indian Education*.

<sup>7</sup> Calculated from Statistics Canada, *Selected Educational Characteristics, Aboriginal Identity, Age Groups, Sex and Area of Residence for Population 15 Years and Over, for Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2001 Census—20% Sample Data*, catalog no. 97F0011XCB01042 (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Auditor General of Canada, “Chapter 5—Indian and Northern Affairs Canada—Education Program and Post-secondary Student Support,” in *2004 Report of the Auditor General of Canada* (Ottawa: Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2004).

are located.<sup>9</sup> In its 1996 report, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples highlights the distance between the “deep desire [expressed by Aboriginal youth] to be involved in their communities, to see the school joined to the real issues of their lives, to see relevance in what they are learning, to make a difference” and their frequent experience of education as “something removed and separate from their everyday world, their hopes and dreams.”<sup>10</sup>

These “everyday worlds” of community life and education are changing and multifaceted. Canada’s Aboriginal population is relatively small but much younger and growing at a faster rate in comparison with the overall population.<sup>11</sup> Aboriginal people, sharing many features of an indigenous heritage and a colonial legacy that continues to have devastating impacts on many communities, also exhibit substantial heterogeneity marked by numerous forms of differentiation, including cultural heritage, identity, legal status, region, class, age, and gender.<sup>12</sup> Their educational experiences are similarly fragmented. Aboriginal people have relatively high school dropout rates, for instance, but they are more likely than average to return to school later in life, well after their age cohorts would normally have graduated from high school or completed postsecondary studies. As a growing complement of Aboriginal youth demonstrates remarkable educational growth and success, many of their counterparts experience educational difficulties exacerbated by serious social problems including poverty, family breakdown, domestic violence, frequent relocation from one school or district to another, inadequate housing and nutrition, and substance and alcohol abuse. Educational services for Aboriginal people cut across a complex array of jurisdictions and programs, including provincial and territorial systems of education, First Nations–controlled institutions, and alternative public and private agencies, each of which has adopted particular guidelines and action plans to address more effectively Aboriginal people’s social, cultural, and learning needs.<sup>13</sup>

Manitoba and Saskatchewan are typical of jurisdictions that have introduced specific policies and initiatives to improve educational achievement among Aboriginal people in response to both immediate social circumstances

<sup>9</sup> June A. Gordon, *The Color of Teaching* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2000), 50–51; Christine E. Sleeter, *Multicultural Education as Social Activism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> RCAP, *Report of the Royal Commission*, 482–83; see also Bernard Schissel and Terry Wotherspoon, *The Legacy of School for Aboriginal People: Education, Oppression, and Emancipation* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Aboriginal people represent about 3.3 percent of Canada’s population, as determined by those who declared an Aboriginal identity in the 2001 census, and have a median age that is 13 years younger than the non-Aboriginal population. In comparison, Aboriginal populations constitute about 14 percent of the New Zealand population and 2.2 percent and 1.5 percent, respectively, in Australia and the United States. See Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Peoples of Canada: A Demographic Profile; 2001 Census, Analysis Series* (Ottawa: Minister of Industry, 2003), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Schissel and Wotherspoon, *The Legacy of School for Aboriginal People*, 7–12.

<sup>13</sup> Most Aboriginal students attend public schools; about 60 percent of the school-age registered Indian population living on reserves attend schools controlled by First Nations; see Schissel and Wotherspoon, *The Legacy of School for Aboriginal People*, 10–11.

and the growing significance the Aboriginal population holds for future regional sustainability.<sup>14</sup> Both provinces—reflecting the social democratic orientation of recently reelected New Democratic Party governments—advance education policy frameworks that formally emphasize principles of inclusion, social justice, and community-based education. Their educational policies, though driven less overtly by neoliberal ideas, market principles, and disciplinary forms of accountability that frame educational reforms in many other jurisdictions, contain economic rationales as well as social inclusion orientations.<sup>15</sup> Manitoba’s Aboriginal Education and Training Framework highlights three primary goals—improved student success and completion rates, increased skill training and rates of employment, and strengthening partnerships—guided by principles of community participation, coordination of programs and services, an orientation to inclusion (rather than assimilation), and the development of a strong provincial economy.<sup>16</sup> Comparable recommendations from Saskatchewan’s Aboriginal Education Provincial Action Committee have prompted the establishment of provincial goals to see “Aboriginal young people with Grade 12 and post-secondary educations, flourishing in all professions” and “Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and young people knowledgeable about Aboriginal peoples and their history.”<sup>17</sup>

#### Teachers’ Work and Aboriginal Community Contexts

Aboriginal education initiatives have several direct and indirect implications for teachers and their work. Modest in their own respects, the changes these policies represent take on added significance in the course of more general socioeconomic changes and pressures to modify teachers’ work, orientations to teaching, and relationships with diverse communities and educational participants. Saskatchewan’s Aboriginal education action plan, for instance, stipulates that “the intentions of including Aboriginal content and perspectives in curricula be understood and attempted by all teachers and administrators” and that teachers must become “flexible to support different

<sup>14</sup> Nearly 30 percent of Canada’s Aboriginal people live in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, with growing concentrations (Aboriginal populations currently constitute about 14 percent of the total population in each of the two provinces); see Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Peoples of Canada*, 23.

<sup>15</sup> In a recent article in *Phi Delta Kappan*, referring to findings from the OECD Program for International Student Assessment that revealed Saskatchewan’s strong performance on the basis of educational equity indicators linking socioeconomic background and student achievement scores in mathematics, science, and reading, Heather-Jane Robertson identifies Saskatchewan as “An Overlooked Success in an Underlooked Province” (*Phi Delta Kappan* 83, no. 9 [May 2002]: 555).

<sup>16</sup> Aboriginal Education Directorate, “Aboriginal Education Directorate Strategic Plan, 2002–2005,” information overview (Manitoba Education, Training, and Youth and Manitoba Advanced Education, Winnipeg, 2002), 2; Manitoba Education, Citizenship, and Youth, “Aboriginal Education” (Winnipeg, 2004), <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/ks4/abedu/index.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Saskatchewan Education, *Aboriginal Education Provincial Advisory Committee Action Plan: Year 2000–2005* (Regina: Saskatchewan Learning, 2000), 4.

learning processes, styles and abilities” and be able to “develop and use appropriate approaches and techniques.”<sup>18</sup>

Such objectives, stated formally, appear as relatively straightforward extensions of responsibilities that lie at the core of teachers’ work. However, as numerous studies of teaching in Aboriginal communities in Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand reveal, there is mixed evidence about the implications these kinds of guidelines hold for teachers and communities. Policy or program directives that require teachers to broaden their understanding and incorporation of cultural issues have limited effectiveness in the absence of promised organizational actions, adequate resources, and mechanisms to support these initiatives.<sup>19</sup> Teachers encounter numerous personal and systemic difficulties that influence their commitment and ability to foster education improvement among Aboriginal students. Interactions in and out of the classroom are affected by teaching circumstances that may require attention to serious social problems, school-community tensions, apparent disregard for schooling among parents and other community members, and issues of physical safety.<sup>20</sup>

Many of the core challenges that arise for teachers who work in Aboriginal community contexts reflect the paradox that schooling, historically associated with colonization and marginalization, has come to be regarded as the primary vehicle for cultural reconstruction and social transformation. In the course of meeting new expectations, teachers must negotiate the difficult terrain that interconnects the often disparate and multifaceted worlds of school, economic requirements, and social experiences. Although contextual, institutional, and structural factors constrain both students and teachers, Aboriginal students are highly sensitive to the fact that teachers’ actions and orientations can sometimes make a substantial difference to the specific education and life pathways they follow.<sup>21</sup> Teachers, for these students, represent both “cultural brokers” and curricular experts whose efforts to enable Aboriginal people to gain the skills and credentials required for success in globally competitive societies intersect with demands to foster a strong sense of cultural heritage and identity among indigenous people.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Saskatchewan Learning, *Aboriginal Resource List Kindergarten–Grade 12* (Regina: Saskatchewan Learning Aboriginal Education Unit, 2003), 4–5.

<sup>19</sup> Doug Hewitt, “A Clash of Worldviews: Experiences from Teaching Aboriginal Students,” *Theory into Practice* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 111–17; Richard J. Reynolds, “The Search for Relevance and Identity: The Education and Socialization of Australian Aboriginal Students,” *International Education* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 18–32.

<sup>20</sup> Ted Shockey, “Teaching on the Res,” *Educational Horizons* 81, no. 4 (Summer 2003): 172–73; Helen Harper, “‘There Is No Way to Prepare for This’: Teaching in First Nations Schools in Northern Ontario—Issues and Concerns,” *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 24, no. 2 (2000): 144–57.

<sup>21</sup> Schissel and Wotherspoon, *The Legacy of School for Aboriginal People*; Sleeter, *Multicultural Education as Social Activism*.

<sup>22</sup> Castellano, Davis, and Lahache, “Conclusion: Fulfilling the Promise,” 255; Arlene Stairs, “Learning Processes and Teaching Roles in Native Education: Cultural Base and Cultural Brokerage,” in *First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds*, ed. Marie Battiste and Jean Barman (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1995), 139–53.

This can be a difficult balancing act to perform, especially when teachers become immersed in tensions over the meaning and nature of culturally inclusive education. Many teachers of Aboriginal ancestry, in particular, indicate that while they are drawn to teaching in order to enable their students to have better opportunities than they encountered in their earlier lives, they continue to struggle to define and reconcile what it means to be an “Aboriginal teacher” contributing to the development of “the right kind of Indian.”<sup>23</sup> For any teacher working in an Aboriginal community context, there are strong pressures to transform their actions well beyond the simple introduction of curricular materials and pedagogical styles deemed appropriate for Aboriginal learners.<sup>24</sup>

#### **Teachers’ Work: Intensification and Capacities for Action**

The educational roles expected of educators in Aboriginal communities constitute part of a broader educational landscape in which teachers are confronted with changing policies, diverse educational expectations, and periodic attacks on their profession. Public school teachers in Canada, like their counterparts in other advanced industrial nations, have seen their work conditions altered significantly through educational reforms incorporating market logics, stronger forms of accountability, cost-effectiveness, performance indicators, and greater degrees of public choice and community participation.<sup>25</sup> Emerging policies, regulatory regimes, and practices have undermined teachers’ power and limited teachers’ autonomy in several important respects.

Academics and teachers express widespread concerns that teachers’ work is being intensified as shifting forms of control increase demands on their time, workloads, and productivity. Teachers are under pressure to work longer hours or “work harder” as they assume more responsibilities and activities through expansion of their work duties, resource cutbacks, and related measures imposed by particular policy guidelines and administrative decisions. These elements, in their most extreme forms, contribute to processes of proletarianization that confine teachers’ work to a set of technical operations and leave little room for effective professional discretion and participatory

<sup>23</sup> Verna St. Denis, Rita Bouvier, and Marie Battiste, “Okiskinahamakewak—Aboriginal Teachers in Saskatchewan’s Publicly Funded Schools: Responding to the Flux” (unpublished research report prepared for Saskatchewan Education, Regina, SK, December 1998); Darlene Lanceley-Barrie, “The Devolution of Post Secondary Student Support Program to First Nations: I Am Not the Right Kind of Indian,” MA thesis (University of Saskatchewan, Department of Sociology, Saskatoon, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Patricia Monture-Angus, *Thunder in My Soul: A Mohawk Woman Speaks* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1995), 79–84.

<sup>25</sup> See Geoff Whitty and Sally Power, “Making Sense of Education Reform: Global and National Influences,” in *The International Handbook of the Sociology of Education: An International Assessment of New Research and Theory*, ed. Carlos Alberto Torres and Ari Antikainen (Latham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 305–24; Christine Hall, “Theorizing Changes in Teachers’ Work,” *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy* 32 (July 2004): 1–14.

action.<sup>26</sup> Various studies suggest that teaching is being rationalized, deskilled, reconstituted, and reskilled in numerous more or less subtle configurations that take shape through continually shifting educational relationships, procedures, and conditions.<sup>27</sup> Educational managers may impose direct measures intended to routinize teaching or channel teachers' activities in prescribed directions, but structural conditions can also lead teachers, acting in apparently autonomous ways, to contribute inadvertently to the intensification and deskilling of their own work.<sup>28</sup>

Canadian teachers have drawn public attention to their experiences of work intensification posed by "relentless pressure" to perform and keep up.<sup>29</sup> Continuing assaults on the welfare state have left teachers increasingly vulnerable to tensions related to work, family, domestic, and community commitments both in and out of classrooms.<sup>30</sup> Extensive workloads and hours of work have contributed to high turnover rates, illness, personal stress, morale problems, and frustration that they are unable to fulfill core tasks and caring-related responsibilities. The Canadian Teachers' Federation, in a full-page advertisement in Parliament's *Hill Times*, has alerted policy makers to how "cutbacks in funding and support services combined with unrealistic expectations that schools solve complex societal issues have also added to teachers' stress."<sup>31</sup> These burdens and tensions have been heightened by educational reforms imposed with little involvement by teachers or implemented without clearly defined procedures and supporting resources.<sup>32</sup>

Similar trends and sentiments are echoed in numerous societies, reflecting a general convergence in educational policies and structures, although significant variations exist between and within contexts.<sup>33</sup> Educational relationships involve competing dimensions that influence the extent to which teachers' work is intensified, the ways in which teachers experience and

<sup>26</sup> Martin Lawn and Jenny Ozga, "The Educational Worker: A Reassessment of Teachers," in *School-work: Approaches to the Labour Process of Teaching*, ed. Jenny Ozga (Milton Keynes: Open University Press), 81–98.

<sup>27</sup> Mike Bottery and Nigel Wright, *Teachers and the State: Towards a Directed Profession* (London: Routledge); Andrew Gitlin, "Bounding Teacher Decision Making: The Threat of Intensification," *Educational Policy* 15, no. 2 (May 2001): 227–57.

<sup>28</sup> Michael W. Apple, *Teachers and Texts: A Political Economy of Class and Gender Relations in Education* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

<sup>29</sup> Verna Gallén, Bruce Karlenzig, and Isobel Tamney, "Teacher Workload and Work Life in Saskatchewan," *Education Quarterly Review* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 56.

<sup>30</sup> Charlie Naylor, "Teacher Workload and Stress: An International Perspective on Human Costs and Systemic Failure," *Our Schools/Our Selves* 11, no. 3 (Spring 2002): 140–41.

<sup>31</sup> Doug Willard, "Keeping Canada's Teaching Profession Alive and Well," *Hill Times*, October 8, 2001.

<sup>32</sup> Council of Ministers of Education Canada, *Enhancing the Role of Teachers in a Changing World*, report of Canada in response to the International Survey in preparation for the Forty-fifth Session of the International Conference on Education (Toronto: Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 1996).

<sup>33</sup> See John Smyth and Geoffrey Shacklock, *Re-making Teaching: Ideology, Policy and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1998).

respond to pressures to rationalize their work, and the consequences those responses have for particular groups of students.

Teaching, as an “occupation with an intangible product,” is devoted to expanding, as well as restraining and disciplining, human capacities within workplaces constituted as “modalities of uncertainty.”<sup>34</sup> Teachers’ work involves a dialectics of control in which “moments of autonomy” remain possible amid reforms intended to rationalize or constrain educational participants. R. W. Connell emphasizes that teachers’ relations with other social actors involve “capacities for action” that may be alternatively empowering or disempowering insofar as educational relations involve struggles “to control the production of capacities for practice, and thus to limit or shape the social capacities that emerge and the society they in turn generate.”<sup>35</sup>

The varied capacities for action that enter into educational relationships normally leave spaces for teachers to retain some discretion over their work even as states and educational managers implement particular regulatory and control mechanisms designed to secure educators’ compliance with mandated educational policies, adherence to prescribed curricular guidelines, and contributions to more predictable learning processes and outcomes.<sup>36</sup> Efforts to circumscribe and control teaching involve shifting boundaries and varied consequences exacerbated by educational reforms that frequently overlap with one another and encompass unclear objectives, competing expectations or directives, or tasks that enable or require teachers as frontline workers to exercise professional discretion and independent action.<sup>37</sup>

Teachers, in other words, are highly constrained by institutional frameworks and deep structural inequalities, but they remain educational actors with capacities to have an impact, positively or negatively, on lives and life courses of students and communities. Amidst multiple or competing curricular and social mandates, the interests and actions of educational managers, teachers, and communities from which students are drawn are likely to complement one another on some issues or levels and diverge on others. Teachers work and make choices within specific contexts in ways that do not necessarily conform to or deviate from formal curricular mandates in a unified manner; thus, teachers may selectively adopt highly creative orientations or fulfill their

<sup>34</sup> Quoted citations, respectively, are from Robert Dreeben, *The Nature of Teaching: Schools and the Work of Teachers* (Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman, 1970), 25–26; and Susan L. Robertson, *A Class Act: Changing Teachers’ Work, the State, and Globalisation* (New York: Falmer, 2000), 145. See also Terry Wotherspoon, “The Incorporation of Public School Teachers into the Industrial Order: British Columbia in the First Half of the Twentieth Century,” *Studies in Political Economy* 46 (Spring 1995): 121; Kate Rousmaniere, Kari Dehli, and Ning de Coninck-Smith, eds., *Discipline, Moral Regulation, and Schooling: A Social History* (New York: Garland, 1997).

<sup>35</sup> R. W. Connell, “Transformative Labour: Theorizing the Politics of Teachers’ Work,” in *The Politics of Educators’ Work and Lives*, ed. Mark Ginsburg (New York: Garland, 1995), 101.

<sup>36</sup> Robertson, *A Class Act*; see also John Smyth, Alastair Dow, Robert Hattan, Alan Reid, and Geoffrey Shacklock, *Teachers’ Work in a Globalizing Economy* (London: Falmer, 2000).

<sup>37</sup> R. W. Connell, *Teachers’ Work* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1985), 202–3.

roles in a routine, rigid, or defensive manner; they may develop alliances with or separate themselves from particular segments of the community; or they may engage in acts of triage as they attempt to manage competing responsibilities or work overload by selectively attending to some aspects of their work and sacrificing or ignoring others.<sup>38</sup> Teachers activate, through their work, relationships that have important implications for students and communities who rely on schooling as a crucial point of access to social and economic opportunities that are otherwise denied them.

### **Teachers' Accounts of Their Work in Aboriginal Communities**

#### *Survey and Respondents*

Data from surveys completed by 344 Canadian public school teachers provide insight into how teachers respond to divergent elements that accompany their work in Aboriginal community contexts. Beginning in the spring of 2001, Manitoba and Saskatchewan school districts in which at least 5 percent of the student body was identified to be of Aboriginal ancestry were approached for permission to enable their teachers to participate in a survey on teachers' work in Aboriginal communities.<sup>39</sup> Twenty-seven school jurisdictions eventually granted permission to distribute the surveys during the 2001–2 and 2002–3 school years. These jurisdictions include a diverse array of larger cities, small urban centers, towns of various sizes, and remote northern communities. Ten are First Nations band-controlled school jurisdictions (five in each province), and 17 are provincial school districts (10 in Saskatchewan and seven in Manitoba).

The sample cannot be considered representative for statistical purposes. Because participation was voluntary, the results are likely to reflect the views of those with strong sentiments or commitments one way or another to the core issues. Nonetheless, respondents exhibit a wide range of demographic characteristics and diverse orientations that are likely to reflect the population and teaching circumstances with which the research is concerned. Most of the respondents (over nine out of 10) work in schools within provincial jurisdictions, while about 7 percent (and 15 percent of those of Aboriginal ancestry) work in band-controlled schools. There are teachers representing all grade levels, with slightly higher proportions at the high school level. Two-

<sup>38</sup> Chris Easthope and Gary Easthope, "Intensification, Extension and Complexity of Teachers' Workload," *British Journal of Sociology in Education* 21, no. 1 (2000): 43–58; Andy Hargreaves, *Changing Teachers, Changing Times: Teachers' Work and Culture in the Postmodern Age* (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1994); Gitlin, "Bounding Teacher Decision Making," 251–52.

<sup>39</sup> Initial letters were sent to all provincial school divisions in Saskatchewan and Manitoba that met these guidelines, as well as to all First Nations school jurisdictions in each province. School board policies, discretionary variations, and personnel changes affected the prospects that surveys would be approved and the means and extent to which surveys would be distributed in participating districts. The rate of return (about 11 percent out of a total of 3,100 surveys distributed to schools or district offices), though relatively low, was close to levels anticipated in the research design.

thirds of the respondents are female, and 90 percent of respondents teach on a full-time basis. About one in 10 teachers in the sample overall, and 23 percent of those in band-controlled schools, identify themselves as being of Aboriginal heritage. By comparison—although existing databases on teachers in the two provinces do not allow for exact measures—about 6 percent of all teachers in Manitoba and Saskatchewan are of Aboriginal heritage, two-thirds are female, over 90 percent work in provincially controlled schools, and 85 percent work on a full-time basis. Age and geographic distributions among respondents to the survey also parallel general teaching profiles in Manitoba and Saskatchewan.<sup>40</sup>

The survey instruments incorporate both Likert-scale and open-ended questions related to current teaching positions, Aboriginal education programming initiatives, teacher training and in-service opportunities, teaching conditions in relation to school and community climates, and teachers' background characteristics. The discussion in this article highlights issues that arise from qualitative responses volunteered by teachers, illustrated through quotations selected to represent prevalent themes and voices. Respondents are anonymous but referred to, where appropriate, with information about gender, race, and teaching circumstances. Major themes are further highlighted through tables that provide a quantitative summary of related questionnaire items. The sections that follow explore teachers' perceptions of educational reform initiatives to support Aboriginal people and communities, changes to their workplaces and teaching as a result of compliance with mandated reforms, key points of tension within teaching and between schools and communities in the course of reform implementation, the impact of competing and overlapping demands on teacher workloads, and the implications that teachers' orientations and actions hold for educational prospects in Aboriginal communities.

*Teachers' Orientations to Aboriginal Education Reform Initiatives*

Manitoba and Saskatchewan teachers typically represent themselves as active agents working with their administrations to embrace educational reforms intended to promote educational improvement among Aboriginal students. They reinforce general support for educational reforms to promote greater inclusiveness for Aboriginal students with an impression that they are making positive contributions, where school environments allow, toward fulfilling these new mandates. Despite some convergence of views and interests, however, teachers reveal highly divergent orientations to and experiences

<sup>40</sup> Data from Joanne M. Archibald, Michelle Pidgeon, Shelley Janvier, Heather Commodore, and Rod McCormick, "Teacher Recruitment, Retention, and Training: Implications for First Nations Education" (report prepared for the Minister's National Working Group on Education, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Ottawa, October 31, 2002); Statistics Canada and Council of Ministers of Education Canada, *Education Indicators in Canada: Report of the Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program, 2003* (Ottawa: Canadian Education Statistics Council, 2003).

with these reforms. Their perspectives reinforce an understanding of education as an endeavor in which the pathways to and consequences of reform are somewhat rocky and irregular rather than rational and unidirectional.

With few exceptions and regardless of context (whether in urban, rural, or band-controlled settings), respondents cite widespread evidence that curricular and programming measures are being guided by increased sensitivity to Aboriginal students and cultures. Most schools have introduced one or more initiatives such as programs in Native studies, antiracism, Aboriginal cultures and crafts; visits by elders and other community members; and content in areas like indigenous languages, Aboriginal spirituality, indigenous knowledge of nature, and tours to indigenous heritage sites. The schools also deliver numerous awareness programs and services covering areas such as breakfast and hot lunches, community kitchens, child care and family support, justice mediation, substance abuse, fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), sexual assault, antiracism, anger management in order to address pressing social and community needs.

Despite the array of programs and services, most appear to be offered in a limited or selective manner rather than systematically. Many teachers, especially those of Aboriginal heritage, perceive these approaches as being inadequate. They feel their schools should adopt more proactive approaches to support Aboriginal students and identify ways in which their schools are not complying with mandated educational policies. A high school teacher in a large urban district, for instance, observes that “even though we have a policy regarding the percentage of Aboriginal staff, it has always fallen short.” Table 1, which summarizes teachers’ responses to questions that relate to the extent and form of educational changes, reveals that about one in five respondents (including 12 of 35 teachers of Aboriginal heritage) suggest that their schools have not introduced sufficient programming or curricula to meet the learning and social needs of Aboriginal students.

A non-Aboriginal female teacher working in an urban high school ex-

TABLE 1  
TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATIONAL CHANGES TO PROMOTE  
EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT AMONG ABORIGINAL STUDENTS  
(Percentages of Total Responses to Each Question)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N
School has sufficient Aboriginal curricular programs	17	48	16	13	6	335
School has introduced Aboriginal social programs	14	40	24	16	6	335
Education equity measures should be implemented	18	35	33	9	6	331

NOTE.—Row totals may not equal 100 because of rounding.

presses a widely shared sentiment that Aboriginal students “require special considerations at times and that the school must meet these needs,” adding “that all schools should offer a ‘Native Studies’ course so that non-aboriginals can come to understand the differences between the cultures.” A city elementary school teacher suggests that teachers need more training to learn that “fair is not Equal, especially when dealing with other cultures.” Over half of respondents agree that school districts should implement formal equity measures to ensure that Aboriginal students have the opportunity to succeed in school, while only about one in eight disagrees. An indigenous city high school teacher articulates her perspective on the need for significant changes to both content and pedagogical approaches:

We need more Native curriculum in the schools. We need more positive literature to read and discuss. We need to get rid of the old stereotypical texts that either dehumanize Aboriginal people or romanticize them. The truth needs to come out on what has happened to Canada’s First Nations people . . . meaning why are First Nations people suppressed, oppressed, depressed. Everybody needs to know this— [and this should be taught] not just native studies but in English, Science, Biology, Sociology, Psychology, etc. . . . Sitting in rows, taking notes, and someone lecturing doesn’t always work, especially for First Nation students. Language is a hands-on type of learning (people learn by seeing and doing).

Numerous participants echo specific concerns like those cited here, though few advocate such a holistic orientation to educational reform. Teachers typically view educational modifications to serve Aboriginal students in terms of incremental changes to what they are already doing. In other words, while the teaching force shares a general sense that some proactive measures are required to support Aboriginal education, it is highly segmented in its interpretation of the nature of these initiatives and how they affect teaching.

The issue of formal policies to promote equity is one of the few areas in which findings reflect noticeable differences with respect to respondents’ gender and, more so, race. While just over half of female teachers, and slightly fewer than half of males, agree or strongly agree that there is a need for education equity measures, one-quarter of males versus 10 percent of females disagree that equity measures should be implemented. Two-thirds of teachers of Aboriginal ancestry support the need for such measures, while only two out of 35 indicate their disagreement. In contrast to the stronger equity advocacy among women and Aboriginal teachers, elements of white male privilege may be reinforced by liberal individualist orientations. Male teachers working in higher grade levels and more specialized subject areas are more likely than other teachers to contend that no group warrants special consideration since all students have the same chances to succeed, expressed in comments such as “we treat everyone the same,” “students need to be treated as individuals,” “I am a white boy who teaches math,” “doesn’t affect me in the gym,” and people “need to take responsibility for [their] own

educations . . . [and] spend less time making excuses.” Nonetheless, perspectives based on race and gender are often obscured through more immediate concerns within specific working contexts.

*Changes to Teaching and Teachers' Workplaces*

Contrary to competing images that indicate that teachers have either lost their autonomy or are resistant to curricular reform initiatives, teachers suggest that they are driving mandated educational changes, at times more extensively and effectively than are their school boards. Some of the strongest variations in sentiments and experiences occur among teachers who work in band-controlled schools. While 11 of 22 respondents working in band-controlled schools support equity initiatives, for instance, another 10 express uncertainty. Two quotations from teachers (neither of Aboriginal ancestry) working in different First Nations reserve contexts illustrate opposing experiences and views on band control. The first, contending that local control (or what he labels “‘uncontrol’ of education”) is a “dismal failure,” indicates “if the community (remote one in my experience) has not sufficient leadership and organizational skills to handle the big budget and responsibility, then failure is certain. In many places there is the façade of an operating ‘real’ school but no real ‘product’ is produced.” The other, by contrast, reveals his regained passion for working with children since moving to a band-controlled high school after 30 years in the public school system: “I now have the drive to make myself a better teacher for Aboriginal people and a better team worker. I have developed a better understanding of where Native people are and where they want to go and how I can help them achieve this. Teaching in a reserve school has allowed me to be passionate for teaching again.”

Teachers’ orientations are partly influenced by policy requirements to provide at least some new course content and teaching adaptations to serve Aboriginal students. Pedagogical modifications are especially prevalent in schools controlled by First Nations, though relatively few teachers in any setting suggest that such requirements are extensive in scope. The limits to implementation are illustrated in the comment by a woman teaching in an elementary school in a small city: “Even though we have an equity representative in our school, no one talks about the issue or really understands it or how we need to accommodate different groups to provide equality in education.” A city high school teacher states it more bluntly: “Despite all efforts so far, the public school system is still a white patriarchal system—too inflexible to accommodate significant change.”

Respondents indicate that they have modified their own teaching to some extent—as data in table 2 indicate, 70 percent of them to levels they regard as moderate or extensive—in order to take into account the interests and needs of Aboriginal students. Teachers convey a strong sense of professional

## CANADIAN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

TABLE 2  
TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON CHANGES TO THEIR TEACHING  
TO MEET THE NEEDS OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS  
(Percentages of Total Responses to Each Question)

	Extensive Amount	Moderate Amount	A Little	Not at All	Uncertain	N
Modified teaching for Aboriginal students	22	49	23	5	2	331
New course content required	6	24	22	37	12	330
New teaching techniques required	3	18	25	44	10	331
I determine what is best for students	40	48	10	2	1	333
Engage in consultation with parents	5	22	26	43	5	328
Job demands interfere with family	10	31	33	24	3	334

NOTE.—Row totals may not equal 100 because of rounding.

discretion, reinforced in the sentiment expressed by all but eight (about 2 percent) of respondents, and by all respondents in band-controlled schools, that they feel competent to determine what is best for the students they teach.

Aboriginal educational initiatives, at their best, can energize teachers who consider their teaching to be enhanced as it is integrated more fully with the particular demands associated with the lives of Aboriginal students and community members. A female city elementary school teacher relates how “my teaching has become more holistic and inclusive. Students not only learn about their own Aboriginal culture from a new point of view but they learn about other minorities too. Together we are learning to accept each other for our diversity.” A male rural high school teacher observes, “it is important that traditional activities and values are maintained in the community. [P]articipating in those activities and having the Elder around makes the local knowledge respected and valued. The students respond in a much more positive manner.”

Such optimistic assessments illustrate the potential for schooling to mutually enhance capacities for action when teachers' interests converge with educational reforms, student needs, and community values. Most teaching contexts, by contrast, contain divergent stances and outcomes or moments of autonomy that are not so constructive. Tensions frequently infuse teaching and relations among schools and communities.

#### *Tensions in School and Community Relations*

Teachers' emerging professional roles, both in Aboriginal communities and more generally, are framed by expectations for increasing engagement with parents and other community groups. Comments expressed by teachers who work in diverse Aboriginal communities reveal participation to be a highly contentious matter. Besides requiring a reconfiguration of their ped-

agogical roles, the challenge to engage with community members frequently reinforces for teachers the substantial distance that remains between school-based expectations and realities and those they attribute to Aboriginal people.

Respondents cite repeated instances in which connections with the community have benefited both students and their own development as teachers. One rural high school teacher observes that community members and speakers in his classes have made him “more aware of and more familiar with the literature of our Native people,” while a teacher in a rural elementary school observes that “most effective learning takes place when learning in one area is facilitated in other areas” and when she is able to “integrate learning by use of community resources/elders.”

Comparable levels of outreach and connection appear to be absent in many contexts in which surveyed teachers work. Differences in orientations to engagement can sometimes signify or reinforce serious divisions between schools and communities. Qualitative responses volunteered by over one-third of respondents attribute blame for lack of educational and social success among Aboriginal students to family problems, parental disregard for education, band politics, indigenous cultures, or other community-based circumstances. Typical of such a view are the comments of a rural high school teacher who observes that many Aboriginal students do not make it through the school system because of a lack of desire due to “problems at home [and] on the reserve, . . . their family doesn’t place as much importance on education, or all they see in their family for income is welfare and band house. They may feel that this is all they need. I don’t know how to change those ideas and I think societal pressures (or conditions) on the reserves plays a bigger factor for aboriginal education than their ability, or what we do in non-native schools.”

As noted previously, with respect to those who do not fully support the need for proactive equity measures, some teachers view the school’s mandate primarily in technical terms. They see their role to deliver the curriculum in a manner that employs a universal standard independent of students’ cultural heritage or any other background factor; working with Aboriginal students makes no difference to their teaching “because I teach computers” [math and other sciences are also cited in such statements]. In contrast to counterparts who consider the adoption of social and pedagogical accommodations to promote inclusion among Aboriginal people to be essential for their work, teachers who express technically oriented perspectives resist such measures for the “time taken away from core subjects” or “throwing good money after bad” by failing to ensure that Aboriginal people “take on responsibilities for their own actions and their own expenses.” An urban high school teacher emphasizes: “If parents do not value school, what are the odds that their children will value it? . . . The faster students realize that they are responsible

and education will increase the odds of having a successful life, the better they will do.”

In table 2, data in the second to last row reveal that over two-thirds of respondents indicate that they consult with parents and Aboriginal community members only to a limited extent or not at all when they make decisions about what to teach students. Aboriginal teachers are nearly twice as likely as non-Aboriginal teachers to consult on a moderate or extensive level and half as likely not to consult at all, while half of the teachers who work in band-controlled schools indicate that they consult with parents and community members to at least a moderate degree.

While expressing personal values that may be translated into different pedagogical actions, respondents also reveal through their responses a strong sense of frustration and resignation (e.g., “I don’t know how to change those ideas”) induced by different aspects of their work. A teacher in a composite elementary/high school in a small town suggests circumstances have compelled many of his counterparts to alter their teaching focus: “Most of our parents do not provide the support necessary for students to succeed. Most of our parents struggle with addictions and, as a result, provide very poor role modeling. Because of this we spend a large chunk of school time teaching behaviour skills.” Teachers may contribute to curricular reforms despite strong pessimism concerning their effectiveness. The most distressing accounts convey a profound sense of failure, as expressed by an elementary school teacher in a larger city who feels her efforts to build on her students’ sparks of interest in art are undermined by irregular school attendance and indifference by parents and students to schooling. After purchasing supplies herself, she observes that her students would “just sit and stare at the art materials. Their greatest interest was in organized gangs, their clothing, and ‘logos’ and signatures which they loved to draw. Help! I am retiring.”

The reference in this case to teachers’ reliance on self-provided resources to support educational activities points to a related concern that barriers within the school, as well as parental, community, or cultural indifference to education, can be a major source of educational tensions and problems experienced by Aboriginal students. For a minority of teachers surveyed, educational success among Aboriginal students requires extensive changes in educational policy and educators’ approaches, mandating schools to have more Aboriginal teachers, positive role models, proper support programs and resources, appropriate teaching methods, and more flexible institutional procedures and regulations. They frown on colleagues who reinforce students’ educational difficulties because they are “too busy in the day-to-day activities to find out about their students” or “teachers who worry about covering course content rather than thinking of individuals, processes, learning styles, etc.”

A somewhat broader perspective is offered by respondents who question

how effective schools can be, even if institutions and teachers make substantial accommodations, given the prevalence of racism; the damaging impact of residential school experiences on previous generations; limited social, employment, and recreational options; and other nonpedagogical factors. An Aboriginal teacher in a city high school, for instance, observes that racism is reproduced with “the majority of students and staff not aware of cultural issues,” while a rural counterpart stresses that educational problems will remain “until there are greater employment opportunities on reserves.”

These observations contain some potential to develop linkages between teachers’ actions and broader transformative struggles that align education with movements to promote more fundamental social change. Such possibilities, nonetheless, are generally derailed by a sense of resignation that major changes are beyond the scope of schooling and unlikely to occur or, more frequently, blunted by the pressure to attend to daily concerns in and out of the classroom.

Teachers’ engagement in community activities beyond the classroom occurs most frequently through service that complements or supports school-based actions. One high school teacher describes a situation common in many small towns and inner urban settings: “Two bars and a pool hall. . . . No community center open in the evening offering sports or arts or cooking or craft classes. The only after-school/evening activities for students and children are those run by teaching staff extra-curricularly.” Another rural high school teacher reinforces the notion that educational success often requires efforts on the part of teachers and their schools to reach beyond the classroom focus in order to improve conditions and relationships within the community as a whole: “The Aboriginal students that I have taught in the past were all eager to learn and experience new things. I have also realized how much of an impact you have on the community when you put that extra effort in learning their culture, language, and helping out around the community.” Teachers’ diverse orientations to their roles in promoting educational improvement in Aboriginal communities—ranging from minimalist stances to more holistic realignments of perspectives and activities in and out of school—are assessed in the next section in relation to the multiple demands associated with teachers’ general workloads and working conditions.

#### *Teachers’ Workloads*

Comments reported in the previous section reveal the diverse, often contradictory, ways in which teachers experience and respond to demands to balance curriculum-related responsibilities with broader student- and community-focused issues. The process of intensification of teachers’ work is advanced through overlapping time and workload pressures, contributing to conditions that potentially undermine the interests of both teachers and

students.<sup>41</sup> Respondents, sensitive to how intensified workloads have imposed difficulties, by calling upon them to respond to competing priorities, express concerns like “the day is too short, the workload is not equally shared,” and “[there is] not enough time to implement [Aboriginal program initiatives] in the class because of other subject demands.” Data in table 2 (the last row) reveal, as well, that nearly three-quarters of all respondents consider their job demands to interfere with family responsibilities at least a little.

Respondents cite numerous burdens imposed by administrative policies and funding frameworks that require teachers to engage in extensive reporting, planning, consultation, meetings, professional development, and self-directed learning well beyond their standard duties. Large class sizes, inadequate resources, “too much paperwork and conditions [that] meet policy goals rather than needs of students” represent conditions that undermine teaching effectiveness and inhibit student success in the schools. Most schools appear to be well equipped with learning resources and information technologies, but in a few cases, particularly in smaller rural or more remote communities, teachers work in schools that lack up-to-date textbooks, computers, and other basic educational amenities.

As data in table 3 suggest, surveyed teachers’ orientations to these issues diverge strongly. About one in four respondents agrees with the statement that their workload is too heavy to do their job well, but 60 percent express a contrary sentiment. An even stronger split is evident in teachers’ perspectives on time for course preparation, with slightly more than half expressing agreement, and just over 40 percent disagreeing, that they have adequate time to prepare for their classes. Fewer than one-third of respondents agree

TABLE 3  
TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR WORKLOADS AND SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS  
(Percentages of Total Responses to Each Question)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	<i>N</i>
Workload is too heavy to do job well	5	19	17	49	11	334
Adequate time to prepare for classes	15	36	9	25	16	337
Level of school funding is adequate	7	22	19	28	24	336
Sufficient school resources to meet Aboriginal student social needs	10	32	25	23	10	336
Sufficient time to help students having difficulty	5	31	10	37	17	332
Overall I am satisfied with teaching	29	58	6	6	2	333

NOTE.—Row totals may not equal 100 because of rounding.

<sup>41</sup> Apple, *Teachers and Texts*; Naylor, “Teacher Workload and Stress.”

with the statement that levels of funding to their schools are adequate, while over half disagree. Teachers are more likely, by a small margin, to agree than disagree that their schools have sufficient resources to meet the social needs of Aboriginal students (though one-quarter of respondents express uncertainty regarding this issue). On the question of whether they feel they have sufficient time to help students who have difficulty, however, just over one-third of the respondents agree, while over half disagree.

A teacher of Aboriginal ancestry, working in a high school in a medium-sized city, highlights the struggle that accompanies “the ongoing effort to meet the basic needs of students first so that they are in a receptive state for learning. Hunger, safety, clothing are discretely addressed” in conjunction with “culturally affirming activities.” His concerns are magnified by the impact that combined funding cuts and special program initiatives have had on the schooling process as educators struggle to work effectively with large numbers of students in overcrowded classrooms. However, as a high school teacher in a small town indicates, the burdens imposed by such demands tend to be heavy but manageable: “Teaching Aboriginal students is no big deal. The content and delivery may need to be adapted but is still teaching. The social issues in our community (i.e., substance abuse and domestic violence) are what make the job difficult. Many of the kids are FAS . . . and have poor homes. Add to this the fact that teachers’ responsibilities are being increased (more paperwork, less prep time) and it makes it bloody hard to find the time to prepare for the daily challenges of the job.”

*Teachers’ Orientations: Implications for Teaching and Aboriginal Education*

Teachers’ circumstances frequently lead to questions about the cumulative impact that various demands associated with teaching have for both teachers and students. A teacher of Aboriginal ancestry working in an elementary school in a medium-sized city articulates the contradictions associated with her work: “The school/education systems have been given more and more ‘parental’ responsibilities which take away from teaching time for basic and other skills children need to have to become competitive in or active participants of society. Schools feed, clothe, and try to impress respect upon children—children who go home at 3:30 to not safe surroundings where even the most basic of their needs are not or cannot be met.”

Compounding these concerns is a sense that responsibility to modify their knowledge base and pedagogical actions in order to accommodate Aboriginal students lies, ultimately, with teachers, either as a professional obligation or by default. Respondents indicate that while most of their schools and districts provide in-service activities and other resources to support their work, the extent to which these services are effective or even taken advantage of is limited. Teachers indicate they are more likely to be informed about Aboriginal education matters through formal and informal learning activities

on their own time. A city elementary school teacher, stressing the need for shared responsibility to implement educational reform, observes that “although [the education ministry] and school boards recognize that there is a need for teachers to be more informed on Aboriginal education, it still remains up to the teachers to do this. . . . Many staff members come with their own agendas.”

The comments of a teacher working in a remote rural area reveal how the joys of working with the high proportions of Aboriginal students in her district can sometimes be offset by the onus on teachers to take on unrealistic fiscal and professional burdens:

The classroom has become a safe secure environment for many students. Issues of abuse, incest, depression, and alcoholism come up on a regular basis in my class. I do not feel I am equipped to deal with such issues. There are two school counsellors—who are not trained professionals and are often absent—for 445 students. Therefore, they are extremely busy and overwhelmed. I feel I should receive some training to allow me to better deal with these situations. I have been to one professional development workshop, however, [my school district] would not fund it, nor would the school. Therefore, a one-day workshop cost me half my monthly salary. I am also overworked. I teach [six courses]. I receive one hour for preparation time for every six days of teaching. The school also mandates I coach a sport team, run an after school club, and supervise detention hall after school for one half hour. I do not think it is possible for many people to work that many hours under duress.

This combined sense of empathy for colleagues and students, accompanied by a litany of duties and expectations, conveys a near-crisis situation for both the individual teacher (who is “overworked” and “overwhelmed”) and the education system itself (with a staff “under duress” unable to attend to students who see schooling as a mechanism to address serious problems in their daily lives).

Teachers confronted with difficult expectations and working conditions point to various strategies that might be employed to make their work more bearable or meaningful. An urban elementary school teacher, for instance, observes that teachers in community-oriented schools should “be given opportunities for a change of venue so they don’t burn out. It takes incredible mental energy to continue to teach in a way that connects with these children and honours their cultural and social needs.” Teachers sometimes manage the competing elements and tensions in their work, emphasized in the lament of a beginning teacher in a city high school, by making choices or engaging in triage, attending to an immediate set of educational priorities (defined here as the science curriculum), while delaying another (Aboriginal content) that they acknowledge “should” be present: “I feel that for the present time, my teaching could and should incorporate more Aboriginal content. However, ‘coping’ with first year duties has not presented me with the opportunity

to do so. I feel incorporating quality Aboriginal content into my science classes is something that will take many years, and it is something I plan for.”

Such comments point to the complex intersection of joys and hopes along with frustrations and limitations that teachers express in the course of constructing their working lives. Table 3 shows that over eight out of 10 respondents agree with the statement that they are satisfied with teaching while fewer than one in 10 disagree. A teacher working exclusively with Aboriginal students in a small town high school expresses a widely shared sentiment—“I am quite pleased with the school and attitude of the administration. . . . My greater problems are [related to] teaching load. . . . The kids are a little crazy but I like them!” Teachers, albeit with some uncertainty, tend to remain confident that their efforts in conjunction with other community groups are gradually making a difference for their students. As a male teacher in a small town high school observes: “Over the last decade we have had an increasing number of graduates. They are slowly taking over the running of the community. We have a local town council that ha[s] been making improvement to the community (recreation). We also have a number of local people in the health field that are helping people have a more positive outlook on life. Police have been trying too, since the new officers came.”

### Conclusions

The evidence and themes explored in this article highlight teaching and schooling as complex processes that do not present themselves in a seamless integrated manner. As multifaceted and multidimensional endeavors, teachers’ work and the conditions in which it is performed carry mixed implications for both teachers and the communities with which teachers work. School systems that seek to improve education for Aboriginal people and other minority groups must establish mechanisms that simultaneously balance teachers’ occupational interests with community needs and desires. At the same time, the pace and scope whereby meaningful educational change can be accomplished is limited to the extent that educational actors have sufficient scope, support, and validation for the roles they are expected to play.

Teachers’ actions and accounts reinforce the depiction of Aboriginal education terrain as a space in which hope and frustration continue to co-exist.<sup>42</sup> Teachers represent a small but significant part of that environment. Like teachers’ counterparts in many nations, Canadian teachers who responded to the survey view themselves as trying to make a difference for minority students whose immediate circumstances restrict chances to attain the levels and kinds of education being advanced as requisites for active participation as citizens, workers, and consumers in a knowledge-based so-

<sup>42</sup> Castellano, Davis, and Lahache, “Conclusion: Fulfilling the Promise.”

ciety. They are pivotal agents in struggles to advance educational achievement, but they often act, or feel compelled to act, in ways that impede such progress.

There are promising signs insofar as many of the teachers surveyed tend to hold in common with Aboriginal communities and educational authorities a general commitment, reinforced by specific institutional and pedagogical actions, to make schooling a place better informed by and infused with community interests and needs. These Manitoba and Saskatchewan teachers, embodying in part what Connell highlights as the empowering aspects of teachers' capacities for action, typically present themselves as educational agents who exercise discretion to select within broad curricular directives strategies and actions appropriate to their teaching circumstances.<sup>43</sup> At least some of these teachers keep alive hope for transformative potential to the extent that they integrate constructive dialogue with community members into the autonomous spaces they encounter or create in their daily work.

Educational changes, however, involve measures that take on many guises, often restricting teachers' willingness and ability to convert working relations with communities into successful pedagogical and social transformations. Teachers' agency is heavily bracketed by intersecting and potentially unmanageable requirements posed by curricular demands, institutional requirements, student needs, community relations, and broader social structures. The experiences of teachers in Aboriginal communities confirm many of the general tendencies toward intensification and restructuring of teachers' work as education systems are repositioned amid processes of economic liberalization and globalization.<sup>44</sup> Teaching is being reshaped in conjunction with emerging public expectations and regimes of control, even if the exact form and impact of change remain indeterminate. Downward pressures on teachers to manage educational reform are evident in the individualized and varied responses that figure prominently in the written testimony of teachers included in this study, most strongly in circumstances in which respondents consider themselves to be overwhelmed or powerless to alter their teaching conditions. Fragmented and individualized occupational identities, Susan Robertson suggests, endanger teachers' collective interests.<sup>45</sup> The loss of teachers' professional voice or its dissolution through tensions among various segments of the teaching force and other educational participants, in turn, is likely to prove detrimental to community interests, particularly among groups whose social, political, and economic assets are restricted.

Teachers' experiences in Aboriginal communities have substantial relevance for educational policy and practice. They demonstrate, in part, the benefits that can be derived when policy processes driven by sincere commitments to enhance capacities among minority groups include provisions

<sup>43</sup> Connell, *Teachers' Work*.

<sup>44</sup> Smyth et al., *Teachers' Work in a Globalizing Economy*.

<sup>45</sup> Robertson, *A Class Act*, 213.

to integrate teachers and the communities they serve as both subjects and objects of reform. Educational success, in these circumstances, involves a dialogue grounded in clear understandings about community circumstances and needs facilitated in part by assurances that the teaching force is representative of and open to those communities. By contrast, ongoing divides related to Aboriginal education are likely to be deepened when guidelines and directives, which are framed in terms that are either too prescriptive or too loose, lead teachers to compromise, respond selectively to excessive workload expectations, and, therefore, sometimes ignore and subordinate community interests.

Community confidence in educational processes is also an important precondition for improved student outcomes. Findings from this study suggest that school-community relations are at their strongest when teachers work in supportive environments that facilitate their ability to integrate respect for the communities with which they work into their pedagogical actions. Teacher professionalism is meaningless if it is restricted by either teachers or educational managers to academic and technical considerations required to promote formally validated educational credentials and knowledge. If teachers are to fulfill the transformative potential linked to their work, they will have to cede some of the authority conventionally associated with professional status in order to create welcoming environments and engage community members. This transaction presupposes that districts and government agencies provide educators with appropriate training, adequate resources, manageable workload expectations, sufficient professional scope, and a clear message that teaching entails linkages between service to community needs and broader educational competencies. The potential for educational improvement in minority communities requires policies that are less oriented to strategic control than to seeking a balance that enables teachers' capacities for action to be employed effectively to advance interpersonal relations and capacities for action within those communities.

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