

INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP CASE STUDIES

K'àlemì Dene School, Northwest Territories

Gabrielle Donnelly

COADY INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE & EXTENSION DEPARTMENT
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Igniting Leadership

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About Indigenous Women in Community Leadership Program Logo (Front Cover Illustration)

Painting by Melissa S. Labrador, Mi'kmaw artist

This painting, named *The Teachings*, represents three generations of women standing on Mother Earth beneath the blue hues of our universe. One of the most important teachings is survival and the ability to understand connections on earth. If you were to remove the soil and look beneath it you would find that all life above ground is protected and held together by the roots of trees. Those roots intermingle to create strength in the forest community. If each of us, regardless of background, would hold hands and unite, we too could grow strong communities.

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All quotations in this case study, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from a video documentary by Catherine Martin, *K'älemì Dene School* (2011).

K'àlemì Dene School, Northwest Territories

Our school is more than just a school, it is our family!

— Stanley Mackenzie (K'àlemì Dene School, Grade 3, June 2008)

Introduction

Glass walls, blurring the lines between self and community, visually communicate that something out of the ordinary is happening at K'àlemì Dene School. A new facility that shines brightly in the centre of N'Dilo First Nation, Northwest Territories, K'àlemì Dene is lauded as a model Northern school that celebrates the cultural heritage of the area's Aboriginal people.

But the journey has not been an easy one. Thirteen years ago N'Dilo youth had to leave their culture behind each morning to be bussed “uptown” for their formal education. Desiring to put an end to this daily uprooting, a group of women strove for the creation of a school that would provide a more appropriate education for the community's youth, a school grounded in their rich ancestral culture. Owing to the unwavering commitment of these women, the school opened its doors in 1998 to welcome just enough students to stay in operation. Today, despite immense challenges along the way, K'àlemì Dene is a thriving educational institution tightly interwoven with the traditional Dene culture. Just as the diamonds that are mined in the surrounding area have required extraordinary, awe-inspiring conditions to form, the circumstances that have transformed K'àlemì Dene School from dream to reality were nothing short of unique. This case study aims to bring them to light.

Context

N'Dilo is a First Nation community located on the tip of the Latham Island—a peninsula that juts out into the waters of Yellowknife Bay which then yawns into the expanse of the Great Slave Lake. Separated from the bustling capital of Yellowknife by the Old Town where miners' cabins serve as reminders of the area's 20th-century gold rush, N'Dilo First Nation is currently home to some 250 Dene people.

This area of the Northwest Territories is part of the historical hunting grounds of the Tlicho people (also known as the Dogrib), featuring boreal forests dotted with myriad lakes (Helm, 2011). The Dene of N'Dilo—descendants of the Chipewyan and Dogrib tribes—are known as the Weledeh Yellowknives, deriving their name from the colour of their tools traditionally made from local copper deposits (Yellowknives Dene First Nation, 2011a).

As Yellowknife became the centre of gold mining gaining more services and amenities, the Tlicho people started to settle in the area. Dettah, originally a seasonal fishing camp, quickly became a year-round community where the Dene continued to live a traditional bush lifestyle within close proximity to the bustling, modern city. Today many N'Dilo residents are employed in Yellowknife. The major areas of employment include government, business services, and mining (Yellowknives Dene First Nation, 2011b).

Themes

From Dream to Reality

Many stories start with a small group of women coming together to create change. They may not necessarily know at the outset how they are going to achieve the change they want, but the navigational star of inspiration provides enough guidance to get started. For a group of N'Dilo women, the inspiration was their shared dream of an on-reserve school. As Eileen Erasmus, now a member of K'àlemì Dene's teaching staff, remembers, "We saw so many of our kids getting lost in the crowds uptown. We wanted to have a place where they are loved and they know we are here for them as Dene people."

Their heartfelt desire to create such a place spurred the women to promptly step through personal fears over whether they will be able to handle the task. One of them, Reanna Erasmus, endeavoured to run for the District Board of Education, becoming its only Aboriginal member. Those formative days are still fresh in her mind:

We were determined to learn about how to run a school and do the best for our children; so we built capacity in ourselves as women—women who didn't think that we should be at the Legislative Assembly talking to the Minister of Education or the Premier, saying: 'Our children deserve this.'

The founding mothers of K'àlemì Dene School describe the process of its creation as "fighting a tough battle," one that required a lot of perseverance and dedication. For example, the only facility initially made available to them was a dilapidated old building—the very opposite of a stimulating learning space. The message from the Minister of Education was that they would need to keep up enrollment for five years before they could get a new building. With 11 more schools located close by in Yellowknife, they knew that their proposition won't be an easy sell to the community.

Education on reserves is a controversial subject. In the not-too-distant past, education was wielded as one of the main weapons in a centuries-long war on First Nations' culture. It was only in 1974 that Canada's federal government started to fund band-operated schools through the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. Since then, one of the major challenges that many on-reserve schools have been facing is the widely held view that Aboriginal youth must be educated off-reserve in order to successfully complete at least the minimum requirements for high school graduation.¹ According to a recent study of public opinion on Aboriginal issues, the Canadian public at large as well as young Aboriginal people themselves feel that "the quality of on-reserve education is poor compared with the education received by the general population" (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2004). As reported by this study, a series of focus groups with Aboriginal youth yielded a surprisingly consistent assessment that students attending on-reserve schools were about two years behind city school students in any given grade. Such perceptions could not but translate into a widespread bias against on-reserve education that K'àlemì Dene founders needed to overcome.

When K'àlemì Dene opened its doors for the first group of 55 children ranging from kindergarten to grade 6 in 1998, it was a momentous achievement indeed. And it took enormous courage and determination to survive, the school's longtime principal Angela James says:

¹ Mendelson (2008) offers insight into the reasons behind this perception.

It was so hard at the beginning to get the school up and going. To not only do all the things involved in the office but also in the classrooms, and in the curriculum, and in the funding, and ensuring enrollment is up. People don't realize that you are running a small community school on the outskirts of the capital city that has 11 big beautiful schools. Who wants to go to the little, tiny, putzy Aboriginal school? We've fought with that for a long time. Every year there was a possibility of exodus.

After a decade of balancing on the precipice of closure due to fluctuating enrollment, with the staff working long hours to maintain educational standards that went above and beyond the average school, a brand new building was granted to K'àlemì Dene. Opened in September 2009, it currently serves a total of 100 students in grades K through 12.

Leadership

Angela James has played a major role in this story since taking the helm of K'àlemì Dene in its second year of existence. "It was challenging and we could have lost it," she recalls. Angela attributes her success in steering the school through choppy waters to the team of women surrounding her and the power of prayers:

There were many times, especially at the beginning, when I would come early in the morning in our little community school and I would be down on my knees praying for guidance, for strength, for patience, and for love. I couldn't have done it without these prayers and the strong team of teachers. . . . I couldn't have done it without them. I can go to these women with any issue I have and these women guide me, reinforce me, and give me feedback. I think that's how women operate. Especially good, strong women who know who they are and know the direction they need to be going as result of friendship with women. Then you can disagree with one another and that's indeed when growth happens.

Angela is a Manitoba Métis, who came to the Northwest Territories at the age of 18 and spent the next 32 years in N'Dilo, learning about the local culture through her parents-in-law after marrying into a Chipewyan Dene family. This immersion would prove vital to her work at K'àlemì Dene:

I was very privileged before I began to work here, at this school, to work with my father-in-law for the last three years of his life. We operated a traditional culture camp for all the kids in Yellowknife. . . . Those were my formative years for working here; I know how to celebrate the things that need to be celebrated by a school leader here in N'Dilo. That was like my college (in Edwards, 2009).

In early 2009, the Learning Partnership, a not-for-profit organization that has championed public education in Canada since 1993, honoured Angela's leadership abilities by presenting her the "Outstanding Principal" award. A few months later, she received another national honour: the Canadian Association of Principals named her "Distinguished Principal of the Year." Once you see her at work, you'll know why. Her colleague Eileen Erasmus has the following words for Angela:

She serves the teachers, making sure that they have everything they need to be successful in the classroom. She is always an empowering leader. She is quick to give her teachers leadership roles and opportunities. She is a very supportive leader.

Another K'àlemì Dene teacher, Ashley Deavu, offers further glimpses of Angela's leadership style: "She works in a different way than any other principal I've worked under. They are her kids and they come to her for issues, or just to give her a hug and tell her they love her" (in Edwards, 2009).

Culture-based Education

K'àlemì Dene has developed a unique educational model that promotes the culture of the community as the culture of the school. "The mandate of our little school," says Angela James, "is . . . to celebrate the language, culture and traditions of the people here in N'Dilo" (in Edwards, 2009). This is reflected in the leadership style, the teaching strategies, and the curriculum that incorporates local cultural events and traditional skills.

Just how important this mission is may be gleaned from an emerging body of research demonstrating the crucial role of culture-based education in helping Aboriginal students to build self-esteem, a key factor for their success both in school and later in life:

An educational environment that honours the culture, language and worldview of the Aboriginal student is critical. School needs to meaningfully represent and include Aboriginal people's contributions, innovations and inventions. Aboriginal students require a learning environment that honours who they are and where they have come from. These strategies nurture the self-esteem—the positive interconnection between the physical, emotional-mental, intellectual and spiritual realms—of Aboriginal students (Toulouse, 2008).

In the Northwest Territories, culture-based education has been made mandatory for all schools. Even off-reserve schools are required to offer Aboriginal language and culture courses. It is only such schools as K'àlemì Dene, however, that provide Aboriginal youth the opportunity to achieve true immersion into their ancestral culture and language through the Dene Kede Curriculum. This comprehensive educational program—now officially approved by the territorial Department of Education, Culture and Employment—has been developed by Dene educators with the guidance of many elders from all the five Dene regions of the Northwest Territories. It aims to empower Aboriginal children by helping them reconnect with their cultural heritage—and thereby develop a strong and proud sense of their identity. As Eileen Erasmus observes,

It's a way to make them feel strong about themselves and increase their self-esteem because they are not in a situation where their language and culture is ignored or taught in a limited way. Dene culture has to be acknowledged as valuable. All the Aboriginal students' going to the gym once a month for bannock isn't going to cut it.

The Dene Kede Curriculum is based on the principle that "in order to survive and to live to its fullest, Dene students must develop respectful relationships with the Land, the Spiritual World, other people, and themselves" (Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 1993, p. 5). In keeping with this principle, K'àlemì Dene follows an approach focused on cultivating these relationships. Its program of studies revolves around thematic units chosen by Dene elders and educators as being most important to their culture. Each of these units is explored in conjunction with the four key relationships. These relationships of respect are also developed through a range of on-the-land activities and cultural experiences offered to students throughout

the year, such as drumming, sewing, beading, dog sledding, bannock and drymeat making, and storytelling. Academic subjects—math, science, social studies, health, and language arts, including courses in the Weledeh dialect of Dogrib—are taught as “offshoots” to these cultural experiences.

Consistent with a Dene perspective, K'àlemì Dene has developed a cyclic model of teaching and learning, which follows the calendar of traditional activities. Throughout the year, it hosts a sequence of camps dedicated to culturally relevant activities according to the seasons—from berry picking to trapping to dog mushing to duck plucking. Every step of the way, a learn-by-doing strategy is the core of the school's approach. To realize this strategy on a daily basis, K'àlemì Dene has an elder-in-residence, Mary Jane Francois, who joined the staff in 2001 specifically for the purpose of passing on her intimate knowledge of the Dogrib language and other aspects of the Dene culture, which she had acquired growing up in the bush.

The presence of Mary Jane Francois is just one example of the many different ways in which the community is invited into the school. For instance, the new school building was designed jointly by the students, teachers, and community members under the direction of a Yellowknife-based architectural firm. Angela James is very well aware that involving the entire community is vital for successfully running a school with a backbone in local culture and tradition. As she points out, “We not only celebrate the culture and the language and the people at school but we also make sure that we have feasts and we invite the people and the people know that here at the K'àlemì Dene School they are welcome” (in Edwards, 2009).

Virtues Education

In harmony with its commitment to creating a safe and caring community, K'àlemì Dene has adopted the principles and practices of the Virtues Project, a global grassroots initiative that inspires the practice of virtues in everyday life. The Virtues Project is guided by the idea that all children are born with the virtues in potential and that parents and educators can awaken these gifts of character to make the world a better place. The Project is not affiliated with any particular faith, but draws inspiration and guidance from all sacred traditions, including the oral traditions of First Nations (Virtues Project, 2011).

Alongside the deep-rooted Dene customs of sharing and caring for each other, the children who attend K'àlemì Dene School are encouraged to cultivate a wide range of virtuous traits such as kindness, forgiveness, integrity, diligence, unity, and justice. As Angela James remarks,

These are universal virtues as well as Aboriginal virtues, and [bringing them to fruition] turns into just teaching these kids how to be good people. All of our kids know what integrity means. Integrity is doing the right thing when no one is watching except the Creator.

Every day, each multi-grade class has a circle time with Angela, Mary Jane Francois, and the teacher. This get-together involves a language lesson, a discussion of virtues, and a prayer. For the school staff, it is a good opportunity to demonstrate to the children how to show respect for elders, the land, and the spiritual world.

The virtues that are taught to children at K'àlemì Dene are also cherished by the teachers themselves. This, as Angela firmly believes, has largely helped the school to keep going:

We've maintained our integrity because of kindness, because of commitment, and because of our perseverance. We never gave up—to this day we don't. There was so much negative that I could have concentrated on in the beginning but I didn't. I only wanted to concentrate on the positive. It is the mentality and approach of all of the teachers here. We have to concentrate on what we can do.

Challenges

The biggest challenge for K'àlemì Dene over its 13-year history has been garnering full support of the community. As mentioned above, on-reserve schooling is not infrequently viewed with suspicion. Besides, there is still a lingering perception of education as a tool of assimilation among some Aboriginal people, especially the older adults.² These attitudes may significantly hamper the success of initiatives such as K'àlemì Dene. For much of the first decade of its existence, they entailed insufficient and unpredictable enrollment, which clouded the prospects of getting a new school building. Eventually, however, the growing number of student success stories has provided convincing evidence of the school's progress in implementing its vision of "building our children's future today by teaching and learning the Dene way" (K'àlemì Dene School, 2010). As Reanna Erasmus observes,

We don't always get one hundred percent support [from the community], but over time people are seeing that our kids are doing good. It is reinforcing that we care about the children and that we are there to support them every step of the way. Teachers have gone the extra mile and I think that's what we need to do for awhile. . . . [A]s the community observes that, the ones that aren't really that supportive will see that we're being successful and kids are our number one priority.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the journey they have taken together, the staff of K'àlemì Dene School marvel at how far their endeavour has come. With the sense of stability brought about by the opening of the new building, bigger questions and grander ideas are now grazing the horizon. Where do we go from here? How can we continue to prepare our children to become the leaders that will enable our communities to overcome the challenges we are facing?

This story hails strong women who have ventured into collective action for a noble and difficult cause, embracing the personal growth it has demanded of them. It also demonstrates the dance of grace required to effectively address the varied perspectives that inevitably arise within a community, and how to start and maintain a community-wide conversation that accommodates this diversity. However, perhaps the most important parts of the story have yet to unfold. Exciting possibilities lie within the children of K'àlemì Dene who are currently receiving the precious gifts of their ancestral culture and belonging—gifts whose full impact time alone will reveal.

² For a detailed discussion of the history and perceptions of education among Canada's First Nation peoples, see Chapter 13 ("The Role of Education in Building Sustainable Economies") in Helin (2006).

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