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## The Effect of School Closure on Principal Leadership

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### Abstract

School closures have long been the focus of educational research; however, the effect of this critical event on the school leader has received marginal investigation. This study examined the perceived effects of school closure on principals in the Province of British Columbia (BC). A narrative approach was used. Six principal narratives and two superintendent narratives formed data for the examination of the complexities of experiencing a school closure. The investigation generated understandings of principal leadership, and how leadership was affected by having lived through the closure of a school. The closure circumstances generated a unique and tense work environment, but one through which principals emerged stronger and more capable.

### Complete Text

Educational research has covered extensively such areas as instructional strategies, effective learning environments, and school culture. The importance of the school leader, the principal, for creating an effective learning environment and a positive and ethical culture has been established (Fleming, 2010; Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Razik & Swanson, 2010; Sergiovanni, 2006, 2009; Strike, 2007). Knowing how pivotal the principal's position is to the school and district's culture, and realizing the declining interest in this leadership position (Cooper et al., 2006), it is important to understand the impact of school closure on principal leadership.

Literature searches regarding the effect of school closure on school leadership resulted in little information. Searches did result in a number of previous school closure studies from an array of countries. Contentious issues and adverse effects, similar to what is being witnessed in Canadian jurisdictions, were identified. Intense and passionate discourses were focused on educational programming, finances, consultative processes, and sense of community (Egelund & Laustsen, 2006; Mercer v. Greater Victoria School District, 2003; Rural School and Community Trust, 2003; Valencia, 1984; Witham, 2000). The social and emotional costs for students and the community have also been investigated (Witten, McCreanor, Kearns & Ramasubramanian, 2001). A highly charged environment surrounded school closure considerations, and this is the difficult environment within which the school principal has to manage and maneuver. How principal leadership was impacted by a school closure was an area lacking adequate investigation.

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### **Personal Context**

The investigator had a rich background for deliberation and perspective into this study's topic. This unique position was acquired through the accumulation of 17 years of school-based administration, six years as a senior manager, and two terms as a School Trustee.

The last school-based assignment for the researcher was that of a full and educationally vibrant middle school which was abruptly closed without prior knowledge or consultation. While an Assistant Superintendent of a larger school district in the Metro-Vancouver area of BC, the investigator had to manage multiple school closures. All the closures were tumultuous and accompanied with much rancor. These past experiences positioned the investigator to appreciate the difficulty that a school closure brings to both community and staff, particularly the principal.

It is from the multiple horizons of a committed school leader, district manager, and experienced Board member that this study was undertaken. These personal perspectives allowed the investigator to feel the emotions, identify the contextual cues, and interpret the circumstances that emerge from the school closure environment.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine a principal's perception of how his/her leadership changed as a result of experiencing the closure of his or her school. How was leadership different after experiencing the school closure? Was professional outlook and engagement altered as a result of this experience? In previous studies that examined school closure, only a few aspects came into view that connected school leader's reactions to closure. These included administrator background, time as a principal, years of service, and ethnographic setting (Egelund & Laustsen, 2006; Goddard, 1997). Many questions remained. Two central issues propelled the need for an analysis of the effects that the school closure milieu has on principal leadership: the paucity of related literature, and the confirmed importance of school-based leadership for school effectiveness.

Following a prolonged and intense closure experience, a school principal may move on to another school to provide further educational leadership. Student and district success rely on principals having the abilities and attitudes for creating optimal environments to attain many diverse goals (Fleming, 2010; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Sergiovanni, 2009; Strike, 2007). Closure consideration could impact that individual's professional and personal life. Maintaining a school leader's welfare promotes strong school-based leadership (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006) and

also strengthens the reserve for senior management positions. A need existed to understand how school leaders were affected by school closure.

### **Conceptual Background**

With negligible literature directly related to leadership aspects and school closure a range of linkages to the research topic were pursued. The review surveyed topics such as past school closure findings, policy and communication, the importance of principal leadership, and effects of critical incidents.

Using his situated experience as a superintendent of a large urban-rural district, Trider (1999) discussed how critical district events create "turbulent" situations for school district employees, but it was not specific to principals. Goddard (1997) examined the perceptions of 113 principals who experienced extensive school district amalgamations and reconfigurations throughout the Province of Nova Scotia. He identified the increasing "political and economic aspects of school management" (p. 12) and the sense of isolation for principals in situations of organizational change.

Ylimaki, Jacobson and Drysdale (2007) found that in time of instability the school community relied on the principal, stating that "when schools become less stable and take on the characteristics of a "frontier culture," community members may seek strong formal leadership in order to reestablish coherence and direction" (p. 365). How a principal demonstrates support for the school community through turbulent times while at the same time being accountable to legislated obligation is a difficult precipice from which to operate. Specific to this leadership conundrum, Lashway (1996) wrote:

Having moral obligations to society, to the profession, to the school board, and to students, they find that it often is not clear what is right or wrong, or what one ought to do, or which perspective is right in moral terms. (p. 1)

Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski completed four narrative studies investigating critical incident effects on educational leaders, culminating in their book *The Wounded Leader: How Real Leadership Emerges in Times of Crisis* (2004). They used the term "wounded leader," augmenting this with phrases such as "loss of essential spirit" (p. 19), "a disorienting" (p. 15), and "the endemic and chronic tension" (p. 16). They supported the necessity for sustaining the emotional health and leadership capacity that districts' already have in place and buttressed their position by stating, "in an era of high-stakes testing, accountability demands and shifting reform agendas, we are experiencing an epidemic of leadership loneliness and burnout" (p. 319).

More than one theoretical foundation provided insight into this investigation to assist in determining what the data expressed and to make tangible what the

principal experienced and how they were changed. Together, these provided conceptual grounding and structure for describing and understanding the communication, events, and reactions inherent in the school closure experience.

Jürgen Habermas' (1987) *The Theory of Communicative Action* offered awareness of the communicative processes, the nature of divergent communities and intentions, understanding the emergence and nature of conflicts, and the use of Law in closure decisions. Albert Bandura's (1997) *Self-efficacy: The Exercise of Control* supported interpreting the feelings of principals and how self-efficacy was: affected by a critical event; contributory to related responses; and exhibited resultant negative or positive attitudes.

Habermas' (1987) explanation of the two worlds, the system and lifeworld, was a comprehensible lens for observing the actions and interplay between the affected public and the board of education and the potentially compromised positioning of the school principal. The board of education, being a government-authorized administration, is representative of the system world. The community (students, parents, staff, and municipality) represents the lifeworld.

The Aboriginal phrase "walking in two worlds" aptly connotes the school leader's predicament. The principal operates in both the system and lifeworld. The school leader spends most time in the school community, building relationships, and working independently, separate to the system. The principal is also a legally associated member of the governing authority, the Board, and is obligated to manage the business of the Board.

*Communicative Action Theory* (Habermas, 1987) asserts that when a person's regular expectations are disturbed pathologies can arise (Finlayson, 2005; Habermas, 1987). Habermas and Finlayson (2005) pointed out that disturbances to a person's lifeworld, alterations to the expected, can result in "withdrawal, alienation," "crisis in orientation and education" (Habermas, 1987, p. 143), "demoralization," and "feelings of helplessness" (Finlayson, 2005, p. 57). When a school leader loses his or her school, his or her lifeworld is disturbed. There could be occurrences and degrees of the pathologies described above.

Albert Bandura's (1997) ideas regarding *Self-efficacy* equipped this study with another means for interpreting a school leader's reaction to a school

closure. In his dialogue with Evans (1989), Bandura discussed how "people's self-beliefs in their capabilities enable them to exercise some control over events that affect their lives and how self-belief translates into human accomplishments, motivation, and personal well-being" (p. 53).

Bandura (1997) and Evans (1989) claim that self-efficacy affects (a) choices and actions, (b) motivation, (c) thinking, and (d) vulnerability. When a person believes that he/she can handle a situation, choices are made to be engaged and become active. If a person believes the situation is beyond his or her capability, more avoidance occurs. High efficacy generates higher levels of effort to persevere in difficult situations. With reduced self-efficacy, a person develops a negative situational guide and disengagement. Principals' narrative stories are an opportunity to portray efficacy level as it relates to their approach to the closure environment -- their engagement level, and the positive or negative impressions of how their leadership was altered.

Self-efficacy theory provides a framework to assess actions that display confidence and beliefs, and engagement. A principal's choices, reactions, and attitudes toward (a) him or herself, (b) the school closure process, and (c) the closure environment may be influenced by self-efficacy, and may also reveal the nature of it.

### **Study Design and Methodology**

This study used a bottom-up, narrative inquiry approach. A classic interview or survey study, having more structure, was more suitable for a correlation study. Case study limited the focus and was restrictive for the purpose. Researchers favour narrative analysis for investigating the lived experience and it is particularly useful where there is minimal research to draw upon (Lapan & Quartaroli, 2009, Richards, 2005). In this narrative inquiry the generation and analysis of data followed the sequence of

- i) Selection of participants;
- ii) Principal interviews;
- iii) Coding and organization of evidence;
- iv) Findings generated;
- v) Independent readers and member checking; and
- vi) Superintendent interviews.

The design generated data from events that had already taken place. For gaining understanding of a person's experience it is best to talk to that person (Seidman, 2006) and semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to delve into situations more deeply in order to illuminate similarities and differences (Charmaz, 2006). While guiding questions are used, the interviewer may follow the ideas that the participant brings forward. Field notes about emphasis, character change and key words were conducted. The interview was organized around four layers of inquiry, these being (a) interviewee background, (b) closure process and principal involvement, (c) implications for principal leadership practices, and (d) reflections and suggestions.

All six principal interviews were conducted, and findings generated, prior to interviewing the superintendents. For superintendent interviews, the first three inquiry areas pertained to principal action with the fourth being their own reflections and suggestions. A final important aspect of the superintendent interview; was asking their feedback on initial findings from the principal data.

#### Participant Selection and Demographics

Participant selection was non-random and purposeful in that it sought participants from a specific context to gain understanding of a specific experience, this being school closure. Potential research sites were identified from the public list of closed schools in British Columbia which also assisted in identifying related senior manager contacts. Superintendents were approached to ask if their district's school closure experience could be assessed and their principal(s) interviewed for this purpose. Identified district superintendents and principals were contacted until two superintendents and six principals agreed. The participants had experienced the closing of their schools within a seven-year period and were still employed as principals in the public school system of British Columbia.

Of the six school principals, four were female and two were male (see Table 1). Ages ranged from 40 to 55 years. The two senior managers were male and were aged mid-to-late 50s. The experience of the school principals varied. The stated tenure in the position represents what it was at the time of closure. Five of the participants were in their first placement as principals of

**Table 1.**

#### **Participant Demographics**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Career Stage</b>	<b>Tenure in Position (years)</b>	<b>Principal Placement</b>	<b>School Socioeconomic Status</b>
P1 <sup>1</sup>	F	Middle	2	1	Low
P2	F	Middle	4	1	Low
P3	M	Late	3	1	Mixed/Middle
P4	F	Middle	1	1	Low
P5	F	Late	2	1	Mixed/Middle
P6	M	Late	1	3	Low

elementary schools. This group's tenure at the school ranged from one to four years at the school. The sixth principal (P6)<sup>1</sup> was in his third principalship and in a middle school setting. He had ten years of administrative experience, but only one year at the school being closed. Socioeconomic status information was derived from discussion with the principal.

#### Data Analysis

The guiding question of the investigation was "How is principal leadership affected by the closure of his/her school?" This was addressed through the following sub-questions:

1. In what ways is the principal's professional outlook altered?
2. Was principal leadership changed as a result of the school closure experience?

The data analysis procedures were traditional to the methodological approach--iterative until saturation, comprised of repeated systematic analysis of the information to generate commonalities and concepts. The narratives underwent repetitive coding and interpretation. Interviews were transcribed verbatim immediately following. Coding was conducted with a bottom-up, open-ended approach. Code and category labels were not pre-determined, and were derived from words and phrases from within the narratives. Forty-four labels resulted, comprised of "descriptive", "topic" and "analytical" codes (Richards, 2005, p.128). The data was coded, organized, and compared as categories. Table 2 demonstrates how the assessment of the data progressed to categories. Repeated word and phrase occurrence were searched for within and amongst the narratives. A concept occurrence matrix was used for analysis, as well as concept webbing.

<sup>1</sup> P1 – P stands for Principal and 1 refers to that principal being the first interviewed.

Particular attention was given to the assessment of the analytical evidence to construct understanding. Once initial findings materialized, the data was given to two external researchers for independent reading and assessment, and member checking occurred to support internal validity (Charmaz, 2006; Richards, 2005).

### Findings

Principals experienced changes related to their leadership as a result of experiencing the closure of their school. Principals who experienced school closure, and transitioned to another principal position, experienced increased self-efficacy and enhanced leadership skills. Principals expressed an increased self-confidence in performing their professional duties and felt more professionally engaged. Specific to leadership praxis,

**Table 2.**

**Examples of Key Phrases, Condensed Meaning, and Category**

Key Phrases	Condensed Meaning	Category
If it was this school being closed, my attachment to this community, especially after the number of years that I have been here would be far different from the feeling that I had at (the closed school).	Principal indicates that emotional attachment to the school would increase with time.	Attachment
I don't think you could go through it and not get stronger. Well, you could. It could do you in, because there are so many conflicting emotions and so many conflicting interests that are pulling at you. I think I got better at dealing with conflict, because that had always been an issue for me.	Improved confidence in handling difficult situations.	Efficacy

there were enhanced role awareness and resolution skills.

### Efficacy

Self-confidence, belief in abilities, and resilience are foundations of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Evans, 1989). As emotional and as critical as the closure experience was for principals, they still felt their leadership to have been strengthened as a result of the experience. P2 stated that “I became one of the experts in closing a school . . . my credibility went up because people saw that I was able to navigate the challenging circumstances.” Seventeen total comments from four principals revealed the increased sense of strength and confidence. An example is:

*I think I am more ready to tackle things and as I mentioned before, my ability to step in to conflict, I feel much stronger about that, knowing that I make good decisions, that there is sound reasoning behind it, that I do know my beliefs a lot better than I did before. So, I think I am a lot*

*stronger because of it. I approach things now with an inner confidence that I didn't have before. . . . Now, I think I definitely do have a greater sense of belief in myself and I do think that the closure had a lot to do with that. (P1)*

Both superintendents also confirmed the increase in efficacy for the principals, commenting on it six times. Superintendent S1 explained that “I do not see a lot of issues from the school that fazes these people. . . . It almost instilled a quiet confidence that they can work through anything.”

The reflection on personal capabilities and arriving at an increased self-efficacy was accompanied with moments of uncertainty and self-doubt for most of the principals. Four of the principals discussed how they questioned their ability during difficult stages of the school closure:

*I was feeling really, really good professionally. When the closure came it threw me back into that, “Oh my God, am I really good enough?” kind of thing. And then through it, I felt like, “Yes, I did this and I did it well.” (P1)*  
*And so, I had a few that let their stress come my direction and I thought, “Wow, I don't know if I'll be able to manage this. . . . I was brand new coming in and it came flying at me, and I said, “I don't know if I can do this.” Well, I don't know if I was that worried, but like, “This is tough. This is tough.” (P4)*

### Professional Engagement

Bandura (1997) makes a connection between efficacy and engagement. As efficacy decreases engagement drops; whereas when people gain efficacy their professional pursuits increase. There were no indicators in the principals' narratives that engagement in professional activities declined as a result of experiencing the closure. During the time of, and adjacent to a school closure, however, principals felt that the increased demands reduced their involvement in other educational goals as, “any other things that you might be interested in tended to fall by the wayside because, [school closure] was all encompassing” (P5). Principals were “totally focused on the school and very little outside activities at all” (P1).

Following the closure, principal narratives indicated a similar or improved level of commitment to their profession and the district. P6 commented succinctly regarding this sentiment with, “There were no changes. . . . I didn't feel hurt, or feel that because of this I was going to change my ways.” P2 also pointed out that “it didn't change me on any politically motivated

engagement.” One principal felt more professionally involved as a result of a gained confidence, as expressed:

*But, since then I am on a district committee and I think part of that is feeling that a little bit more confidence and belief in myself and my opinions, because through the closure, when I would talk about stuff, people would listen . . . I think that really helped to me to gain confidence that my views and my opinions have weight, and that they are worthy. (P1)*

#### Leadership Capacities

The changes to leadership that developed as a result of the closure experience are beneficial to carrying out the mandate of a school principal. The increased understanding of the role and improved resolution skills serve to allow the leader to manage more effectively the demands of the position, which has a high incidence of conflict and discipline (Sergiovanni, 2009).

#### Role Awareness and Craft Knowledge

Leadership change also manifested itself in a greater “awareness and understanding of my role as an educational leader” (P2). P4 said that, “it made me broaden my horizons.” P6 expressed an increased awareness “from the money, financial, budget end of things,” and that unique, context-specific meetings had to occur “when this building shut. I know that towards the end I had some rather significant discussions with the Director of Human Resources.” The school closure experience exposed principals to more specific and unique trade knowledge in the area of politics, process, and management details, as explained:

*I think my awareness of how policies, practices and procedure go was heightened and I became more aware of that and a little bit more informed about the workings of the Board and of senior staff and the relationship between senior staff and the Board. . . . I learned about the cost of running a small school, all of those factors that, as a principal of a small school, never really strongly weighed in. (P2)*

*Several instances we had to sort of show initiative in the area of human resources and staffing, in staff movement, and we had to show initiative in terms of the maintenance and just how we are going to close the building. (P6)*

The superintendents as well acknowledged the increased role awareness, commenting on it four times. From a managerial perspective S2 mentioned that “[school closure] is one of those things that really clarify the whole notion of being an agent of the Board.”

#### Conflict Resolution Skills

All respondents revealed improved conflict management. Three principals specifically indicated that their abilities improved for dealing with emotionally tense situations as P3 pointed out, “I never felt those emotions and in some ways that was really a good training for an administrator.” Further representing this growth are the following:

*So, I think I got much better at dealing with those really difficult emotions when it comes to facing conflict situations and I think that really strengthened me as a principal, because I think I can handle situations. (P1)*

*I learned a ton about how to navigate situations and how to conduct yourself in very public, emotional charged situations, or in the press. Some of those I had never experienced before, so I certainly learned a ton going through the process. (P2)*

The improved skills in conflict resolution were recognized by both superintendents, in that “they are very much stronger problem solvers and much more independent in that regard” (S2).

Principals felt their leadership capacity was enriched as a result of living through a school closure. The data confirmed that (a) self-efficacy increased, (b) professional motivation was the same or higher, (c) awareness of the principal’s mandate was broader, (d) craft knowledge in such areas as finances and policy had grown, and (e) conflict resolution skills were enhanced. These findings were confirmed by the superintendents who were interviewed. Superintendent S1 elaborated on this growth in efficacy and leadership with:

*I think it is really interesting to watch the same principals in their work now. It is almost like the process of tempering steel; it really does—I do not see a lot of issues from the school that phases these people, because they have seen the good behaviour and they have seen the extreme bad behaviour in the community and they have figured out how to rise to the top through that, as emotionally challenging as that may be.*

#### Discussion

The investigator, as a past educational leader involved with many school closures, found the improved self-efficacy and personal skills were surprising and reassuring. Amongst the findings on leadership, the most dominant was the improved efficacy and confidence, closely followed by role awareness. Improved conflict resolution skills and positive professional engagement, were also clearly evident. Additional to leadership changes, the data displayed that the closure environment

was filled with anger and emotion. In this charged setting, the principals clearly viewed one of their most important roles to be as a care giver for others. Principals distinguished school closure as a critical event in their lives and felt that it impacted personal well-being. Table 3 indicates the occurrence of the above concepts for participants, in the leadership and affective domains, and the number of comments attributed to each concept.

The principals' level of professional engagement supports theory in that a positive self-efficacy promotes engagement in activities (Bandura, 1997). As emotionally taxing as the situations were, the principals' professional outlook continued to be as positive as it was previous to the closure. If efficacy was negatively affected, it would be expected to perpetuate avoidance behaviour, which was not evident.

The concept receiving the most comments was the angry and emotional environment that encircled the closure consideration. Knowing this, it is easy to understand why there were instances of self-doubt. It might even be expected that a reduced self-confidence could materialize. Thus, the improved leadership confidence was comforting. A strong self-efficacy may have been in place prior to closure which may have assisted principal resiliency as "people need firm confidence in their efficacy to mount and sustain the effort to succeed" (Bandura, 1997, p. 11). Nonetheless, principals reported having an increased level of self-confidence as a result of having experienced school closure.

Bandura (1997) connects a higher level of efficacy to increased pursuit of activities, and "successful adaptation" (p. 32). A higher level of efficacy results in proactive engagement choices. Three principals noted that they felt equally or more engaged after the school closure. If efficacy was negatively affected it would be expected to perpetuate avoidance behavior. This was not evident. Principals have significant freedom to manage and facilitate in their lifeworld and Habermas (1987) would attest that this creative professionalism and autonomy makes self-realization possible.

An enhanced awareness of the principal's role and attaining more knowledge of their craft served to broaden personal leadership capacity. Encountering a school closure resulted in closer and unique working

**Table 3.**

*Concept Occurrence*

Domain	Concept	Principal Occurrence	Confirming Statements	Superintendent Occurrence	Confirming Statements
<b>Leadership</b>	Efficacy	4	17	2	6
	Confidence				
	Role	4	14	2	4
	Awareness				
	Conflict Resolution	3	8	2	5
	Engagement, Pride	3	6	0	0
<b>Affective</b>	Anger, Emotion	5	31	2	7
	Care Giver	6	18	2	6
	Critical Event	3	13	1	2
	Self-Doubt	4	12	2	3

relationships with senior managers and trustees. The principals were exposed to details, policies, and processes regarding their profession that would not normally have been accessible. Specifics on financing, human resources, legalities, and communication protocol were matters that contributed to improved craft knowledge and role awareness.

An improved ability to resolve conflict was a significant change in principal leadership. Interacting with staff, social agencies and resolving disputes are major areas where principals spend most of their time (Sergiovanni, 2009). Feeling more confident with and having higher levels of resolution skills is a considerable benefit for one's leadership capacity.

The increased efficacy and leadership skills displayed the mutual partnership that one would expect. How the principals were different and what they did differently reflected the recursive nature. Principals expressed that they (a) were more sensitive and humanistic in situations, (b) had developed a "thicker" skin, (c) were more able to adapt to changes, and (d) that heightened awareness of policy, structures, and roles improved their leadership capacity.

**Conclusion**

An analysis of six school closures in four BC school districts, in relation to the involvement of the school-based leader, offered the opportunity to generate further understanding into educational leadership. This deeper understanding provides a stage for school districts

to maintain and enhance principal leadership, even in difficult educational circumstances.

Principals want to manage it all. School closure generated a noticeable increase in workload and workplace tensions. This was taxing for the principals. This study involved survivors, principals who made it through the journey and continue to participate as educational leaders. It would be worthy to interview principals who went through a closure experience, but who then took leave, retired early, or went back to teaching. Student achievement after closure, in the short and long term, would be a valuable question to examine. Parent efficacy is an area that would be of interest, as would teacher participation and adjustment.

The study took an original look at the issue of school closure and changes in principal leadership associated with it. While difficult, the closure experience increased principal leadership capacity, improving their self-efficacy, craft knowledge, and conflict management skills. The narratives made visible the difficult circumstances within the school closure event; one that is characterized by anger, emotion, and uncertainty. Yet, at the conclusion, surviving principals stood stronger and more able to lead in the educational community. The paradox is marked. Principals describe the closure as a critical and matchless event in their life. Yet, from this experience develops a more confident and capable educational leader.

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**EDITORIAL OBJECTIVES:** The Journal of Authentic Leadership in Education (JALE) is a refereed journal established in January 2010. This journal is published quarterly, on line and in traditional paper format. JALE is a project operated by the Nipissing University Centre for the Study of Leadership and Ethics (NUCSLE). NUCSLE is part of the Centre for the Study of Leadership and Ethics (CSLE), which was established as a program centre of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) in 1996. JALE is housed in the Schulich School of Education of Nipissing University under the editorship of Dr. Ron Wideman and Dr. Heather Rintoul. Layout by Mark Giddens

**SUBMISSION INFORMATION:** The editors will review all articles to determine their suitability for this publication. In addition, at least two additional reviewers will conduct blind reviews of the article.

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