In 2005, the Manitoba provincial government enacted the first ever legislation regarding the education of students with exceptional needs (McRuer, 2006). The “Appropriate Educational Programming Amendment” (AEPA) (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth (MECY), 2003) to the Public School Act (MECY, 2003) requires school divisions to provide appropriate educational programming for all students within their jurisdiction. While school divisions were named as the body mandated to provide appropriate educational programming, school principals, as agents of the school division, were legally designated within the regulations and accompanying standards as responsible for ensuring compliance. As such, principals across the province are currently experiencing the impact of the legislation to their current leadership situation.

In this qualitative dissertation, I have documented, analyzed and synthesized: i. the perceptions of Northern Manitoba principals regarding their knowledge of the AEPA; ii. the perceptions of principals regarding the mandated changes to their current practices in contrast to the actual changes made; and iii. the supports and challenges principals are currently experiencing in their role as they attempt to comply with the AEPA.

School principals in Northern Manitoba were selected because of their unique contextual issues of isolation (Quarry, 1990). Quarry (1990) wrote of the effect of “diseconomies of scale induced by a thinly distributed population, distance and geography” (p.119) as affecting the education of students with exceptional needs. She noted that rural/urban inequities in service delivery for students with exceptional needs were “disturbingly obvious”, which could be
extrapolated to a disparity between northern and urban service delivery. I chose to study Northern principals because their struggles might be more obvious and observable.

The data were gathered by conducting fifteen indepth open-ended interviews with school principals in four school divisions in Northern Manitoba – Flin Flon, Frontier, Kelsey, and Mystery Lake during the months of May and June 2007. Participants were selected through a random sampling process and solicited through an invitational telephone call and a letter of invitation to participate in the research study. Transcriptions were returned to the participants and they were given an opportunity to assess the accuracy of the data collected and to clarify their responses.

Because of the qualitative nature of the study, it was speculated that the data collected may reveal new insights in the theoretical frameworks of inclusive special education, educational leadership, policy implementation and professional development as experienced by principals. Two relevant bodies of theoretical knowledge which have surfaced with the preliminary analysis of data include distributed leadership models and ethical decision-making. Distributive leadership addresses the locus of control and power in decision-making and suggests that the principal must rely on the collaborative commitment of his/her specialized staff members in order to successfully meet his/her mandated responsibility in accordance with the regulations.

In terms of ethical decision-making, the data suggest a fifth ethical paradigm be added to the three proposed by Starratt (1991) and the supplementary one put forward by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005), namely the “Ethic of Pragmatism”.

References


