Making Sense of the First Nation, Metis, and Inuit Education
Policy Framework

By

Cindy Sawyer

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education
Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

© Copyright by Cindy Sawyer (2013)
Abstract

In 2007 the Ministry of Education in Ontario identified Aboriginal education as one of its key priorities with the release of the First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework (FNMI). Improving educational outcomes and closing the achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is the focus of this policy.

This study examines the policy implementation process in one school board in Ontario by focusing on how teachers in two elementary schools made sense of the policy expectations and how this sense-making impacted their professional practice. In order to examine how implementation was understood and acted upon by these teachers, the sense-making/co-construction model developed by Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan (2002) provides the starting point for analysis. This study seeks to make visible the sense-making cues that teachers
used to notice and select new information and to examine how these cues impacted teacher enactment of the FNMI policy. Sense-making theory supports the examination of change at the micro level of local policy actors; while the co-construction model with its meditational system of individual agency, organizational structure/culture, and environmental messaging contextualizes the individual sense-making of teachers within a larger social environment.

The research methodology included teacher interviews designed to collect evidence of teacher sense-making during the policy implementation process, and school visits to observe evidence of school culture and structure. Interview responses of 15 elementary teachers and 2 principals were analyzed for sense-making cues.

The findings revealed clusters of sense-making cues connected to three main sense-making frameworks or discourses. These discourses included the teacher as professional, equity and inclusion, and leadership and change. These findings support previous research on sense-making and policy implementation and contribute further insight into the micro processes of policy implementation, which could be leveraged to improve policy implementation.

Key Words: policy implementation, teacher sense-making, leadership, co-construction model
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“The dissertation is a marathon, not a sprint.”

These words of advice given to me by my thesis supervisor, Joseph Flessa, were oft repeated in my mind throughout this journey. And a marathon it was! But now that I am approaching the conclusion of this process, I know that I was only sustained on this journey by the encouragement and the support of so many people.

I am grateful to have begun this doctoral marathon as part of the Ed.D. cohort established in 2007. I thoroughly enjoyed the exchange of ideas and the challenge of my thinking in the various course work. My colleagues in this cohort continued to check in with me long after our course work was done knowing that I lived in northern Ontario, far from the action and energy of OISE. I want to especially thank Richard Williamson, Kathy Witherow, Kelly Gallagher-MacKay and Alison MacAuley who kept in touch with me throughout the dissertation process. Their encouragement and advice helped me negotiate the various bumps in the dissertation road and stay the course when the going got tough.

My greatest support throughout the dissertation came from my thesis supervisor, Joseph Flessa. His input and feedback pushed my thinking and deepened and clarified my understanding of my research. His feedback was always supportive and respectful, and by the end of the writing process he
succeeded in having me believe I really was a researcher. I am grateful for his encouragement.

Thank you also to my thesis committee members James Ryan and Nina Bascia. Their feedback and guidance helped me to examine my conceptual framework and strengthen my dissertation. I really appreciated their assertion that I was almost done. This was a light for me.

I want to extend my appreciation to the participants in my study who shared their time and their views with me. Thank you also to the Director for granting me research access and for supporting the release of the teachers for the interview process.

Most importantly I want to thank the constant support of my family and friends. Two of my friends, Frank and Polly, helped me create the graphic models in this dissertation. Their expertise and willingness to give of their time was truly a gift to me. It has been very challenging to continue the doctorate living so far away from Toronto, but the encouragement of my son and daughter and my many friends have sustained me on this journey. I am blessed by their loving support.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................................... ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ...................................................................................................................... iv

TABLE OF CONTENTS ..................................................................................................................... vi

LIST OF TABLES ............................................................................................................................... xi

LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................................................................................ xii

LIST OF APPENDICES ..................................................................................................................... xiii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................. 1

  Statement of the Problem ............................................................................................................... 4

  Primary Research Question .......................................................................................................... 6

  Significance .................................................................................................................................. 7

  Overview of the Chapters ............................................................................................................. 8

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW ...................................................................................... 12

  Colonization ................................................................................................................................. 12

  A Brief History of Aboriginal Education ..................................................................................... 14

  Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework ......................................... 21

  Aboriginal Student Learning Preferences .................................................................................. 25
CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Sense-making Theory........................................................................ 40

Conceptual Framework...................................................................... 45

Concluding Summary........................................................................ 49

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY.............. 51

Introduction...................................................................................... 51

Site Selection..................................................................................... 53

Sample and Sampling........................................................................ 54

The Participants................................................................................ 57

Instruments........................................................................................ 59

Procedures........................................................................................ 61

Treatment of the Data........................................................................ 65

Ethical Considerations....................................................................... 68
Organizational Culture: Norms of Behaviour..........................149

Beliefs.............................. .......................... 152

Knowledge of How Things Work..........155

Summary of Organizational Culture and Teacher Sense-Making

CHAPTER SEVEN: ENVIRONMENTAL MESSAGING AND TEACHER SENSE-MAKING FINDINGS.................................................................163

Macro Level Messages and Teacher Sense-Making.............. 164

Meso Level Messages and Teacher Sense-Making...............183

Micro Level Messages and Teacher Sense-Making............... 190

Summary of Environmental Messaging and Teacher Sense-making................................................................. 195

CHAPTER EIGHT: Discussion.......................................................... 198

Discourse #1: The Teacher as Professional......................... 201

Discourse #2: Equity and Inclusion in Education.................209

Discourse #3: Leadership and Change................................. 214

Conclusion........................................................................... 220

CHAPTER NINE: Implications and Recommendations...........222
Significance of Study..........................222

Implications for Policy Implementation Practices
in School Boards..............................224

Recommendations for Future Research..............228

Implications for My Professional Practice...........231

REFERENCES.............................................233
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Participants ........................................................................................................58

Table 2: Relationship between Research Questions and the Interview Protocol ..............................................................................................................60

Table 3: Summary of Interviews .........................................................................................64
List of Figures

Figure 1: Sense-Making/Co-Construction Conceptual Model.............48
List of Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Interview Questions..........................242
Appendix B: Information Letter for Participants.........................245
Appendix C: Participant Consent Form.................................. 246
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

My Journey

From my perspective as a seasoned secondary school principal, the impact of education policy on classroom practice and student achievement is unclear. Each year both provincial and local education policies are drafted and make their way to the desks of school board directors, superintendents and school administrators who are responsible for their implementation. Some policies are specific to organization and management issues while other policies are broader and more encompassing of the teaching and learning process. It is the implementation of these broader policies intended to improve educational outcomes for students that have become an interest of mine as both a practitioner and a doctoral student. Throughout my career as a school administrator I have been charged with the responsibility of policy implementation, and I have experienced frustration with the complexity of the implementation process. How to successfully support the implementation of policies that could make a difference to the educational outcomes for the students in my school has become a real concern for me.

My academic exploration of policy began in this doctoral program with an assignment that required me to critique a current education policy. The Ministry of Education in Ontario had just released a policy document that was not only of interest to me as an educator but, because I had just learned I was of Métis descent, had personal significance as well. As an administrator in a
small school board in Northern Ontario, I had firsthand experience with the
gap in achievement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. I also had
experienced the impact of this gap on the quality of life of Aboriginal peoples in
my community. Poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, physical abuse and
the loss of a way of life have resulted in a demoralized people. With the release
of the Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy framework I felt
hope that our government was committed to improving the life chances of
Aboriginal people through the mechanism of education policy. From my view,
successful implementation of this policy is a moral, social, and economic
imperative.

**Background**

In 2007 the Ministry of Education in Ontario identified Aboriginal\(^1\)
education as one of its key priorities with the release of the First Nation, Métis
and Inuit Education Policy Framework. Improving educational outcomes and
closing the achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is
the focus of this policy. As stated in the appendix of the document,

> According to the 2001 Census data, there is a significant gap between
> the educational attainment of the Aboriginal population and that of the
> non-Aboriginal population. Many Aboriginal people have few employment
> skills and lack academic/literacy skills needed to upgrade their

\(^1\) The term *Aboriginal* includes First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples.
qualifications in an increasingly knowledge-oriented labour market...The 2005 federal Auditor General’s Report estimated that it would take 28 years for First Nation high school graduation numbers to reach the Canadian average. (pp.24-25)

Frequently cited in the literature (Battiste & Barman, 1995; Castellano, Davis & Lahache, 2000; Haig-Brown, 1988; Kirkness 1992, Silver & Mallet, 2002) is the disconnect between the life experiences and cultural values of Aboriginal students and their experience of the formal education system. The First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework identifies that, “[t]he overriding issues affecting Aboriginal student achievement are a lack of awareness among teachers of the particular learning styles of Aboriginal students, and a lack of understanding with schools and school boards of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit cultures, histories and perspectives” (p. 6).

Two years later, in their publication “Sound Foundations for the Road Ahead” (2009), the Ministry of Education reported that the First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy framework had made “tremendous progress” (p. 21). What was disturbing about this report was the lack of clarity around how “progress” was measured. The policy is intended to close the achievement gap and improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students, yet this report did not include data showing this “progress.” It was clear that the policy had initiated action in several school boards, but how this action was connected to the policy goals was not discernable.
The intent of this dissertation is to look more closely at how the implementation of this policy has unfolded for two schools in one school board in Ontario from the perspective of the teachers in those schools. Policy implementation is a complex and multi-faceted process at the best of times, but what happens when a policy challenges policy actors (teachers and principals) to examine their cultural competence to improve their professional practice? The First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework is a policy that touches on deeply conflicted values, worldviews and histories. This dissertation will examine how the policy implementation process is impacted in this context.

**Statement of the Problem**

Policy is a response to a perceived problem. According to McLaughlin, the policy problem is the most important decision made in the policy process as “[a]ssumptions about the nature of the policy problem determine the policy solutions pursued and the logic of action advanced by a policy” (2006, p. 210). How problems are framed in policy implicate beliefs about root causes. McLaughlin states that in education the “problem of the problem” is prevalent due to the “people-dependent processes, ‘soft’ core technology, and contested terrain of governance, voice, and authority” (p. 210). Designing and implementing education policy that focuses on improving life opportunities for a cultural minority is complicated by the varying perspectives and beliefs about
the underlying causes of underachievement for Aboriginal students. The multiple levels at which the First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy framework is interpreted and enacted further complicate the implementation process.

This study seeks to uncover how some of these multiple and interdependent variables of policy implementation impact classroom practice. Improving outcomes for Aboriginal students is an important social and economic imperative; and ultimately, the classroom teachers, in the social and cultural context of the school and the school board, are key policy actors. Understanding the policy expectations and negotiating their enactment in the school and classroom implicates interrelated cognitive and social processes (Spillane 2000, Coburn 2006). For successful implementation, teachers must understand the policy expectations and know how to implement the desired changes. This construction of meaning is both an individual and social sense-making process that impacts the teacher’s capacity to act during policy implementation. The school’s organizational culture and structure and the environmental messages from multiple external sources supply sense-making cues that influence how teachers understand and enact policy (Datnow & Park, 2009). Identifying these cues and examining how they influence teacher sense-making during policy implementation is the focus of this study.

*Primary Research Question*
This study will examine how teacher sense-making is mediated by organizational culture and structure and environmental messaging, and how this sense-making process influences teacher agency during the implementation of the First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education policy framework (2007) in one school board in Ontario.

**Related Sub-Questions**

The sense-making of teachers during the policy implementation process is foregrounded in this study. These sub-questions will be used to identify sense-making cues that teachers use to notice and select information during the policy implementation process.

1. How does sense-making enable or constrain teachers’ agency during policy implementation?
2. How do organizational cultures and structures impact teacher sense-making during policy implementation?
3. How do environmental messages impact teacher sense-making during policy implementation?

**Significance**

The research findings will contribute to a growing body of literature on education policy implementation in Ontario. This study responds to a gap in research focusing on the implementation of an education policy that identifies a specific cultural minority.
Despite the urgency provided by the greater magnitude of student diversity and persistent if not widening gaps, in academic and socioeconomic success, research on policies directed at educationally “disadvantaged” students has itself been marginalized within larger bodies of school improvement and teacher development literatures. (Bascia & Jacka, 2001, p. 327)

From a social justice perspective, it is vital that we increase our understanding of how education policy can improve social inequity. By focusing on the sense-making of teachers within a co-construction framework, this study will add to the body of research on the micro-processes, both individual and social, involved in making meaning during education policy implementation. As Honig (2006) states,

...Education policy implementation researchers aim to uncover the various factors that combine to produce implementation results and to accumulate enough cases over time to reveal potentially predictable patterns. (p. 21)

It is my hope that the findings in this study will make a contribution to this research goal.

**Overview of Chapters**

*Chapter One: Introduction*
This chapter establishes my interest in this dissertation topic, and its connection to my professional practice. The background to the Ontario First Nation, Metis and Inuit Education policy framework is presented. The primary research question and the related sub-questions are outlined. This chapter concludes with an explanation of the significance of this study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter provides the historical, educational, and research context for this study. Topics covered include the impact of colonization on Aboriginal peoples, the history of Aboriginal education, global and regional policy trends in education, a brief critique of the Ontario First Nation, Metis and Inuit Education Policy framework, and a synopsis of the needs of the Aboriginal learner. Also included are a brief synthesis of the literature on policy implementation and an outline of an education policy implementation process.

Chapter Three: Conceptual Framework

This chapter outlines the framework that guided the collection and analysis of data. The framework uses sense-making theory within a model of co-construction (Datnow, Mehan, & Hubbard, 2002) to aid in distilling the cues that teachers used to make sense during policy implementation. The conceptual model focuses on data gathering within the meditational system of individual agency, organizational structure and culture and environmental messages.
Chapter Four: Research Design and Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design and methodology used for this study. The site selection process, the sample and sampling process, and the interview protocol are explained in detail. In addition, the data collection and analysis process are outlined. The chapter concludes with an overview of the ethical considerations and limitations inherent in this study.

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven: Findings

The findings are presented in separate chapters according to the meditational system of the co-construction conceptual framework. This organization was selected to promote clarity and highlight how each mediator impacted and was impacted by teacher sense-making during policy implementation.

Chapter Five presents findings related to the sense-making mediator of individual agency. Individual agency is defined as the capacity to act. Findings on the sense-making cues related to the prior knowledge and experience of teachers, as well as the world view of equity and inclusion and the role of leadership are presented.

Chapter Six presents findings related to the sense-making mediator of organizational structure and culture. Findings on sense-making cues related to organizational structure included physical plant, student population, partnerships, programming, resources, staffing practices, staffs and leadership.
Findings on sense-making cues related to organizational culture included norms of behavior, beliefs, and knowledge of how things work.

Chapter Seven presents findings related to the sense-making mediator of environmental messaging. Findings on sense-making cues related to environmental messaging were organized according to macro level messaging (provincial education mandates), meso level messaging (school board expectations), and micro level messaging (school based messages).

Chapter Eight: Discussion

In this chapter the interplay of the meditational system in the co-construction conceptual model is examined for its impact on teacher sense-making. Clusters of sense-making cues emerged that were related to three main discourses: teacher professionalism, equity and inclusion, leadership and change. The impact of these discourses on teacher sense-making during policy implementation is explored.

Chapter Nine:

This final chapter begins by restating the significance of this study and is followed by a discussion of the implications of the findings for other school
boards. Recommendations to school boards fostering leadership, professional development and policy alignment during policy implementation are outlined, as well as recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the impact of this study on my professional practice as a secondary school administrator.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of the literature provides the backdrop for the multiple contexts of this study. Topics covered include the impact of colonization on Aboriginal peoples, the history of Aboriginal education, global and regional policy trends in education, a brief critique of the Ontario First Nation, Metis and Inuit Education Policy framework, and a synopsis of the needs of the Aboriginal learner. Also included are a brief synthesis of the literature on policy implementation and an outline of an education policy implementation process. This background is necessary for contextualizing my research.

Colonization
Since First Contact, the Aboriginal people of Canada have been subjected to a process of colonization in which they were dispossessed of their lands, pushed onto reserves and subordinated to European laws and institutions. “Colonialism involved the deliberate attempt to destroy Aboriginal peoples’ economic and political systems and their cultures and religions and to replace them with European institutions and values” (Silver & Mallett, 2002, p. 32). Satzewich and Wotherspoon (1998) state that, ideologies of biological superiority and inferiority emerged to justify the exploitation of Aboriginal people and their resources, to break down their resistance and to deter them from becoming full members of Canadian Society. The Indian Act was a significant legislative instrument of policy, used by the Canadian government to maintain control over indigenous groups and to instill the notion of the “Other.” (cited in Dreidger & Halli, 2000, p. 38)

This characterization of Aboriginals as inferior has become psychologically embedded and has had, and continues to have, a devastating impact on the quality of life of these First Peoples. As Métis scholar Howard Adams puts it, The characteristic form of colonialism then is a racial and economic hierarchy with an ideology that claims the superiority of the race and culture of the colonizer. This national ideology pervades colonial society and its institutions, such as schools, cultural agencies, the church and
the media...the ideology becomes an inseparable part of perceived reality. (1999, p. 6, cited in Silver & Mallet, 2002, p. 32)

In her unpublished dissertation Martha Spence (2010) examines the devastating impact colonialism has had on the will and capacity of First Nations People to implement change in the Euro-centric education system on their reserves. Colonial practices, including residential schooling and Christianity, have made First Nations Communities resistant to changing the status quo. Spence states that, “[a] typical response to unfair practices within the community is, “that’s just the way it is. The will to change circumstances is sadly lacking” (p. 123).

The tentacles of colonialism have reached deeply into the psyche of the Aboriginal people promoting a vicious cycle of racism and self-fulfilling prophesy. Historically, education has been central to this process. The Ontario First Nation, Metis and Inuit Education Policy framework is a response intended to focus on improving educational outcomes for Aboriginals that will result in an improved quality of life.

**A Brief History of Aboriginal Education**

Traditional, pre-contact education occurred within the context of the daily lives of Aboriginal students. Although education was embedded, it was still a deliberate process.
Principles of spiritual, physical and emotional growth, as well as economic and physical survival skills, were developed in each individual to ensure eventual family and village survival. Certain learning specialties in these areas were emphasized, including independence, self-reliance, observation, discovery, empirical practicality, and respect for nature. (Archibald, 1995, p.27)

The newly arrived Europeans did not recognize the subtleties of this approach to education, and because of their belief in the inferiority of Aboriginals, they felt it was their responsibility to “civilize” Aboriginal “savages.”

During this initial period, churches and religious denominations played a significant role in educating Aboriginal people primarily with the purpose of spreading Christianity. After Confederation the government decided to take a more formalized approach to Aboriginal education with the ultimate goal of complete assimilation into the European culture. The residential school system was established and supported by the Indian Act (1870) that gave the federal government complete control of Aboriginal children and their schooling (Antone, 2003).

The residential school systems represent a concerted effort by the government to partner with churches in order to isolate Aboriginal children from the influence of their parents, extended families and community, thus assuming the maximum psychological impact when
imparting the Eurocentric ethos and invalidating Aboriginal ideology (Hill & Redwing-Saunders, 2008, p. 100).

The abuse and exploitation that occurred within the confines of these schools is well documented by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. After the 1951 revision of the Indian Act, the government moved toward a more integrative education strategy that resulted in having Aboriginal students attend public day schools. Although residential schools were declining in use, a new approach to assimilation was implemented by federal social service agencies during the 1960’s. Known as the “sixties scoop”, federal policy allowed Aboriginal children who were living in poverty to be removed from their homes and placed into foster care. Because of the sheer numbers of these Aboriginal children, foster family placements were not closely scrutinized resulting in cases of abuse and neglect (Hill & Redwing-Saunders, 2008, p. 101).

The legacy of residential schools has resulted in a profound distrust for the education system that has been passed on from generation to generation. Constance Deiter in From Our Mothers’ Arms: The Intergenerational Impact of Residential schools in Saskatchewan (1999) emphasizes that the residential school experience “…is an intergenerational experience, one that didn’t stop with one student, but affected every generation and each of us in the Indian community at a profound and personal level” (cited in Silver & Mallett, 2002, p. 34). In 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) acknowledged the tragic consequences of colonization for Aboriginal peoples and called for a “new relationship,”
Past social policy, based on false assumptions about Aboriginal people and aimed at their colonization and assimilation, has left a heritage of dependency, powerlessness and distrust...Establishing a new relationship based on mutual recognition, mutual respect, sharing and mutual responsibility in an era of Aboriginal self government is the challenge of the 21st century. (RCAP, Vol 3, No. 1, pp11-12)

During the time that the RCAP report was being written, the Ministry of Education in Ontario released a policy memorandum entitled *Development and Implementation of School Board Policies on Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity* which acknowledged the role played by the education system in colonizing Aboriginal peoples. The introduction of PPM 119 clearly states that,

There is growing recognition that educational structures, policies, and programs have been mainly European in perspective and have failed to take into account the viewpoints, experiences, and needs of Aboriginal peoples and many racial and ethnocultural minorities. As a result, systemic inequities exist in the school system that limit the opportunities for Aboriginal and other students and staff...Educators therefore need to identify and change institutional policies and procedures and individual behaviour and practices that are racist in their impact, if not in intent. (PPM 119, 1993)

This acknowledgment of responsibility is startling on two counts: firstly, identifying and naming racism as the primary issue facing Aboriginal students
in the education system was unprecedented; and secondly, placing responsibility on educators to change individual and systemic practices, including structures, policies and programs, was sweeping in scope. PPM 119 was certainly evidence of RCAP’s hope for a new relationship based on “recognition” and “responsibility.” Until this point, the denial of racism and the deflection of responsibility was the order of the day in much of Canada (Schick & St. Denis, 2005).

Unfortunately the promise of this policy was not realized as the Ontario discourse around meeting the needs of Aboriginal students became conflated with the national discourse on cultural difference and multiculturalism (Schick & St. Denis, 2005). These discourses had the impact of deflecting attention away from the inequities caused by power relations and directing attention toward celebrating Canada’s pluralism. A multicultural approach to improving education focuses on surface attributes and increasing cultural proficiency but does not address underlying systemic barriers:

> When racism is recast as a problem of ‘cultural difference’ instead of an everyday experience, the solutions take on particular forms that serve to obscure the systemic and structural relations of racial domination. (Schick & St. Denis, 2005, p. 306)

Concurrently, Ontario was undergoing a major educational reform in which curriculum standardization was a cornerstone (Bascia, 2001, p.256). It was felt that if all students were provided with essential knowledge and skills
then the moral imperative for equity was being met (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2003). The focus on standardization shifted attention away from diversity. When Aboriginal students could not meet the standard, “difference” became perceived as “deficit”, thus ascribing blame to the Aboriginal population. Valencia (1997, p.2) describes how minimizing this explanation of failure is.

Given the parsimonious nature of deficit thinking, it is not unexpected that advocates of the model have failed to look for external attributions of school failure. How schools are organized to prevent learning, inequalities in the political economy of education, and the oppressive macro-politics and practices in education are all held exculpatory in understanding school failure. (cited in Portelli et al., 2007, p.9)

On the flip-side of the deficit-thinking coin is the liberal assumption of meritocracy that ascribes failure to a lack of will or a lack of effort. In this view, Aboriginal students (and parents) do not value educational outcomes and therefore put little effort into the educational experience. The fault does not lie with the system, but with the individual. This view fails to recognize that the corollary of racism is white privilege. A member of the dominant white society has access to privileges (social, economic, educational) that are often unavailable to a member of a minority. McIntosh, in her well-known article *White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack* (1988), states that,

I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was
‘meant’ to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks. (p.165)

In 2009 when the Ontario Ministry of Education released its revised PPM 119, it was entitled *Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools* and although broader in scope than the original PPM, its directives are less focused on addressing systemic race issues and more focused on promoting leadership, positive learning environments and accountability and transparency (PPM 119, 2009, p. 4). These goals are similarly reflected in the First Nation, Métis, and Aboriginal Education Policy framework (2007). With only a brief nod to the impact of colonization through the residential schools experience that “has resulted in intergenerational mistrust of the education system” (p. 6), the Ontario Ministry of Education frames the problem of Aboriginal student achievement as a lack of awareness of Aboriginal student learning styles and Aboriginal cultures, histories, and perspectives by teachers and school boards. Neither historic nor current race-related systemic barriers to education for Aboriginal students are mentioned anywhere in this document. According to Flessa & Ketelle (2007) this is a major oversight:

...educational policies that attempt to address racial inequality in schools without addressing the structures and mechanisms of white privilege fail at both theoretical and practical levels; school practitioners might make
an impact on racially stratified educational outcomes only if they focus squarely on race, racism and privilege in school settings. (p.802)

This brief historical overview illustrates the complexity underlying the issue of Aboriginal education. Increasing outcomes for Aboriginal students is enmeshed in a historical, cultural, and institutional web that must be examined. How this context impacts the sense-making of teachers during the implementation of the FNMI education policy framework is important for this study.

**Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework (FNMI)**

The focus of this study is on how teachers make sense of the FNMI education policy framework. An overview of the policy’s expectations and a brief critique will be helpful to the reader.

Released in January, 2007, the FNMI policy identifies a significant gap in achievement between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students. In order to close the gap and improve Aboriginal student achievement, the policy focuses on the areas of literacy and numeracy, the retention of Aboriginal students in school, Aboriginal student graduation rates, and advancement to post-secondary studies. The framework takes a multi-level approach by clearly specifying the roles and responsibilities of the Ministry of Education, the school boards and the schools. The problem of achievement is clearly framed in a statement found on page 6:
The overriding issues affecting Aboriginal student achievement are a lack of awareness among teachers of the particular learning styles of Aboriginal students, and a lack of understanding within schools and school boards of First Nation, Métis and Inuit cultures, histories and perspectives.

These issues are addressed in the framework at multiple levels through specific strategies and activities. The framework begins with a vision statement that expresses the desire that Aboriginal students have “traditional and contemporary knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to be socially contributive, politically active, and economically prosperous citizens of the world” (p. 7). The framework principles include excellence and accountability, equity and respect for diversity, inclusiveness, cooperation and shared responsibility, and respect for constitutional and treaty rights. The goals of this framework are the same goals the Ministry of Education has for all students:

1. High level of student achievement
2. Reduce gaps in student achievement
3. High levels of public confidence

Specifically, the policy seeks to increase the percentage of Aboriginal students meeting the provincial standards; increase the graduation rate of Aboriginal students; and ensure a “significant” improvement in Aboriginal student achievement. In the policy framework each of these goals is followed by two or three strategies. Within each strategy the responsibilities of each level of administration, from the Ministry to the school site, are clearly outlined.
Highlighted directly below each goal are the criteria for measuring performance, emphasizing the focus on accountability for this policy. For each goal, specific quantitative and qualitative performance measures are provided. These ten performance measures are intended to be used to gauge the success of the implementation of the framework.

With a promise of implementation reports every three years, the Ministry has released one progress report on the FNMI education policy implementation (Sound Foundations for the Road Ahead, 2009). The report indicates positive movement forward but does not directly refer to the performance measures; rather, the report summarizes the various projects and initiatives throughout the province related to the policy implementation.

A major challenge with measuring success with this policy is the need for accurate baseline data. When the policy was established, only Census data for 2001 was available which did not provide an inclusive picture of the Aboriginal population. The initial phase of policy implementation required all school boards in Ontario to establish policies and processes for voluntary, confidential Aboriginal student self-identification.

The content and structure of the FNMI policy reveal several prominent social discourses that should be noted. The main discourses can be grouped into two categories:
1. Discourses that promote and support Aboriginals as Indigenous peoples deserving of respect. These discourses include equity, social justice, collaboration and partnership, and cultural identity.

2. Discourses that promote the economic and social value of Aboriginal peoples in Ontario. These discourses include human capital, social cohesion, and accountability.

It is also important to note the power relations established in this policy. The policy lays blame for Aboriginal student underachievement squarely on the shoulders of teachers who do not understand Aboriginal students’ learning needs, culture or history. The top-down flow of policy implementation is reinforced by the organization of responsibilities under each goal beginning with the Ministry of Education, followed by the school board, and then by the school. Noticeably absent in the policy document is the inclusion of Aboriginal peoples’ responsibilities. The structure, organization, and content of the FNMI policy document reinforce existing power relations in the education arena. My study will examine how teachers make sense of the policy document, and how the existing power structure may impact their sense-making during implementation.

**Aboriginal Student Learning Preferences**

Considering the Ministry of Education frames the problem of Aboriginal underachievement as a “lack of awareness among teachers of the particular
learning styles of Aboriginal students”, it is important to include a brief summary of the literature on Aboriginal learning preferences.

The choice of the term “learning preferences” over “learning style” reflects a concern by some scholars that assigning a particular style to all Aboriginal children “is a dangerous and pan-Indian concept” (Hall & Redwing-Saunders, 2008, p. 106). The term “learning preference” is intended to reflect more individuality. According to Irvine and York (1995) aboriginal children tend to

• prefer visual, spatial, and perceptual information rather than verbal
• use mental images to remember and understand words and concepts rather than word associations
• watch and then do rather than employ trial and error
• learn experientially and in natural settings
• prefer small group work
• favour holistic and visual presentations

Although this list is in no way intended to be exhaustive or limiting, these learning preferences do have implications for classroom practice. For example, our Euro-centric classrooms that focus mainly on literacy dependent modes of learning may be problematic for Aboriginal learners. The First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education policy framework directs teachers, principals, and school boards to become aware of Aboriginal learning preferences and to adjust instructional practice to meet these preferences. How teachers make sense of
the policy will impact how they are able to make these instructional adjustments. My study is intended to examine sense-making cues that teachers use to promote or constrain implementation.

**Education Policy’s Global and Provincial Context**

The references to standardization and meritocracy in the Ontario context reflect an ideological confluence at the global level of seemingly conflicting neo-liberal and neo-conservative discourses which have filtered down to national, regional, and local policy design and implementation and have a direct bearing on how equity plays out in educational institutions.

Michael Crossley, quoted in Apple (2001, p. 409), states that, “It is now increasingly difficult to understand education in any context without reference to the global forces that influence policy and practice.” Referencing the shifting power relations in the global context has import for what counts as a good society and a good school. The global discourses that foreground competition, markets and choice on the one hand, while at the same time holding out accountability, performance objectives, and standardization, have practical implications around the purpose of schooling. Neo-liberal values of marketization and performativity are tempered by neo-conservative values of what counts as legitimate knowledge (Apple, 2001, p. 416). One of the purposes of schools is to prepare students to be productive in the global market by inculcating a standard, conservative (middle class) knowledge base. Students must regularly demonstrate performance through standardized tests,
and schools, principals and teachers are held accountable through publicized test scores. Both students and educators are placed within an intensified educational environment that sacrifices instructional variation (to meet all students’ needs) to the god of standardization and high-stakes testing. Within this context, equity is a struggle and often impossible.

These global ideologies have been witnessed in the Ontario education policies implemented between 1990 and 2003. In their analysis of education policy trends across four domains (curriculum, governance, education finances, and teacher professionalism), Anderson and Ben Jaafar (2003) identified four themes that can be connected to the neo-liberal/neo-conservative global discourse: standardization, centralization, accountability, and regulation. Although their study does not include any reference to the impact of these policy trends on student achievement, they do refer to the policy shift regarding equity:

The current ideology is that there are core learning expectations that all students are expected to achieve according to the same standards, and that equity is accomplished by ensuring that that happens. Flexibility and variation in programming and instruction should be based on evidence of student performance against the standards, not on student membership in particular sub-groups defined by gender, racial, cultural, or socio-economic characteristics (p. 41).
Although the intent of the qualifier regarding “flexibility and variation” is to possibly minimize deficit thinking around issues of difference, it is problematic when considering the literature on Aboriginal student learning preferences.

Since 2003, the new Liberal government has had three main education priorities: increasing student achievement, reducing the gaps in student achievement and increasing confidence in publically funded education. These priorities have resulted in a variety of education initiatives related to improving instruction, increasing teacher professional learning, and developing leadership. Because the First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework is just one of many competing education initiatives currently in play in the province of Ontario, when examining its implementation, it is critical to keep the full educational context in mind.

A recently released report on the implementation of the Primary Class Size Reduction Initiative (2010) sponsored by the Canadian Education Association emphasizes the importance of placing the policy being examined within the larger education policy arena. The report refers to the concept of policy coherence:

Policy coherence is the ability to recognize the interactive and interconnected nature of many aspects of educational practice, across settings and levels. Policy coherence requires the understanding that policy initiatives do not occur on the ground as discrete events, but
interact with other initiatives in operation at the same time as well as with policy effects from the past. (p. 23)

Not only is it important that the researcher consider policy coherence when examining policy implementation, but Bascia et al. (2010) found that implementation is impacted also by how policy actors understand and manage policy coherence in their local context (p. 93). The complexity of policy implementation research is highlighted in the concept of policy coherence. My study will examine how teacher sense-making is influenced by policy coherence during policy implementation.

**Research on Policy Implementation**

This review of policy implementation research provides the rationale for the theoretical and conceptual framework selected for this study. According to O’Toole (2000), “implementation research concerns the development of systematic knowledge regarding what emerges, or is induced, as actors deal with a policy problem (p. 266).” Datnow (2006) clusters implementation research into three major perspectives: technical-rational, mutual adaptation, and co-construction.

**Technical-Rational Perspective**

This perspective refers to the first phase of policy implementation research that emerged in the 1960’s. Implementation occurred as a top-down process and it was assumed that there was a relatively direct relationship
between policy inputs and local implementation responses (Honig, 2006). Implementation was measured according to “an objectified standard: fidelity to the policy design” (Datnow, 2006, p. 106). The influence of context was ignored and implementation failures were attributed to “conflicts between policy makers’ and implementers’ interests and to implementers’ overall lack of capacity and will to carry out those instructions” (Honig, 2006, p. 5). Policy design and policy implementation were treated as two distinct processes and the design phase was often left unproblematized (Datnow & Park, 2009, p. 349).

**Mutual Adaptation Perspective**

Local context and an actively engaged implementer distinguish this perspective from the technical-rational perspective. According to Datnow (2006), “the phrase ‘mutual adaptation’ was first coined by Berman and McLaughlin (1978) in the Rand Change Agent Study to characterize this dynamic conception of context” (p. 106). This study identified a process of mutual adaptation between local factors and policy demands in the implementation process. The top-down models’ “command and control” orientation was challenged by scholars who believed that “implementation occurred only when those who were primarily affected were actively involved in the planning and execution of these programs” (DeLeon & DeLeon, 2002, p. 470). The debate between top-down and bottom-up approaches to policy
implementation raged on well into the 1990’s (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1979; Berman, 1980; Elmore, 1980; Hjern, 1982; Linders & Peters, 1987; Goggin et al., 1990, Matland, 1995) until the general acceptance of the pros and cons inherent in both approaches. O’Toole (2000) stated that, “as for implementation research: the top-down/bottom-up debates are ended, superceded by the general recognition of the strengths of each” (p. 283). The mutual adaptation perspective’s strength, according to Datnow & Park (2009), is “an active and dynamic interaction between local educators, the reform policy, and the social, organizational, and political life of the school” (p. 349). Its limitation, however, is that “it does not fully capture the differential relationships amongst multiple actors and agencies in the policy process” (p. 350).

**Co-construction**

The directional flow of policy implementation and the issue of how power relations impact this flow led Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan (2002) to develop a framework that would assist in providing insights into how the linkages across multiple implementation contexts impact policy and policy implementation. Co-construction rests on the premise of multi-directionality: “the causal arrow of change travels in multiple directions among active participants in all domains of the system and over time...thus many actors negotiate with and adjust to one another within and across contexts” (Datnow, 2006, p. 107). This approach to examining the implementation process is dynamic and more encompassing than the previous top-down/bottom-up approaches because it focuses on the
linkages across multiple contexts. Datnow labels this dimension “a relational sense of context.”

By this we mean that people’s actions cannot be understood apart from the setting in which the actions are situated, and reciprocally, the setting cannot be understood without understanding the actions of the people within it. Moreover, because contexts are inevitably interconnected, contexts throughout the social system must be considered. (p. 107)

Datnow and Park (2009) caution that “a relational sense of context does not privilege any one context; rather it highlights the reciprocal relations among the social contexts in the policy chain” as a key focus for analysis” (p. 350). The co-construction framework differs from its implementation research predecessors in two other important ways: firstly, co-construction includes an examination of the impact of power differentials among policy actors across the implementation system; and secondly, co-construction “calls attention to wider social and political dynamics existing outside the policy system” (Datnow & Park, 2009, p. 351, italics in original). The comprehensiveness and the flexibility of the co-construction model is a strength, according to Datnow and Park, for “making sense of the complex and often messy, process of school reform” (p. 352).

Agency, Culture, and Structure

In the co-construction model of implementation, agency, culture, and structure act as a “meditational system” (Datnow, Mehan, & Hubbard, 2002, p.
Agency impacts and is impacted by culture and structure; culture impacts and is impacted by agency and structure; and structure impacts and is impacted by agency and culture. Datnow et al. define agency as “the capacity to change the existing state of affairs – a capacity which all people have regardless of how they choose to exercise it”. They define school culture as “general norms of behaviour, beliefs about authority, habits of deference and resistance, and basic knowledge about how things work” and school structure includes “organizational arrangements...governance structure, the scheduling of time, and rules and regulations” (p. 62). Datnow et al. also acknowledge the importance of structure and culture on a societal level: “We are suggesting that structure and culture at the societal level become translated through educators’ agency and with structure and culture at the school level” (p. 63). This complex dynamic is highlighted in a study by Bascia and Jacka (2001) of the daily work and long-term commitment of ESL teachers in Ontario. They found that because language proficiency is considered a cultural “status marker”, ESL teachers “must contend with ESL’s lower social and professional status relative to what is commonly called ‘regular teaching’” (p. 329). Because the dominant culture values language proficiency, those with linguistic capabilities are given more power than those without. ESL teachers are viewed as working with a student body that is less valued in our society and this impacts their esteem, engagement, and commitment that in turn affects their effectiveness in teaching these students. Bascia and Jacka found that many ESL teachers did not make ESL a career choice but came to this work through
a variety of paths such as low seniority which minimized teaching choices or the need for job security in a shrinking employment market. This study highlights how agency is impacted by culture and in turn impacts culture. Because ESL positions are less valued than “regular” classroom teachers, teachers tend not to select ESL as a career choice. This results in frequent teacher turn-over or unhappy teachers who feel they have been trapped. Ultimately those students who need a high quality educational experience to help them acquire the linguistic competence so valued in our society are underserved, thus preserving the status quo. According to Bascia and Jacka, “Schools as institutions reflect the values of the larger society and participate in socializing individuals to take their expected places in that society” (p. 330). The impact of culture on teacher sense-making and agency during policy implementation will be similarly explored in my study.

How educational reform is impacted by the interplay of agency, culture and structure is also illustrated in a three-year longitudinal case study of ten racially and socioeconomically mixed secondary schools undertaking detracking reforms (Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997). In their analysis Oakes et al. “connect[ed] prevailing norms about race and social class that inform educators’, parents’, and students’ conceptions of intelligence, ability, and giftedness with the local political context of detracking” (p. 482). They found that the resistance to detracking as a reform arose out of the prevailing ideologies around intelligence, equal opportunity, and biological determinism. Seen as “common sense” these ideologies were largely unchallenged. The
conventional view of intelligence as innate and fixed gave credence to the process of ranking and sorting. Detracking which blended students into heterogeneous groups regardless of ability seemed counter-intuitive. Oakes et al. found that educators’ perceptions, reinforced by local politics, ensured the demise of this reform and fueled the cultural politics of racially mixed communities.

We found that teachers holding conventional conceptions of ability pose the greatest threat to the implementation of detracking in part because they resist changes within the schools and in part because they seek political support for their cause among parents who want to maintain their children's place of privilege in school structured around inequality. (p. 502)

This study highlights the complex interaction of agency, culture and structure in reform implementation. Teachers made sense of the reform based on their previous knowledge and values that negatively impacted implementation. How previous knowledge, experience and values impact sense-making of teachers during implementation is explored my study.

In these studies, teacher agency appears to have a central role in the co-construction dynamic, but that is not always the case. There are situations in which culture and structure interact in ways that limit individual agency. Ryan’s study (1989) of an Innut community in Labrador illustrates this point. Ryan’s study was an attempt to understand the phenomenon of Native school
dropouts. He found that “the organization of schooling in Canada follows the conventions of Euro-Canadian society” (p. 397) which had a negative impact on student retention in this Aboriginal community. European-based practices such as perpetual observation, evaluation, documentation and punishment that were put in place to “normalize” the Inuit have the opposite effect of alienating them. Ryan concludes that,

Solutions to the dilemmas faced in Native and minority education cannot be found within the system, for it is the administrative system itself that is the source of many of the central problems associated with Native education. (p. 398)

The strong interplay of structure and culture minimizes the role of educator agency in this study. Most revealing is the study's appendix in which Ryan describes his attempt as a supply teacher in the same school to implement change:

I went into the classroom initially believing I could find alternate ways to teach that would alleviate potential student stress. This was not to be the case. I found myself shackled to those teaching practices that I as a former student and teacher had been immersed in for years. (p. 399)

These studies illustrate the “meditational system” of agency, culture, and structure in the co-construction model of implementation. It is within the interplay of these complexities that the patterns in the implementation process can be identified and studied. My study examines the connections that
teachers make to the policy expectations and how these connections impact and are impacted by their agency, the organizational culture and structure, and the environmental messages. Sense-making is a cognitive process that depends on connecting new information to previous knowledge. Referred to as “cues” (Weick, 1995) or “conceptual hooks” (Coburn, 2006), these variables impact how teachers make sense during policy implementation. My study seeks to identify the sense-making cues used by the teachers to understand and enact the FNMI policy expectations. Identifying the sense-making cues that promote policy implementation could inform future policy implementation processes.

Ultimately education policy implementation requires change. Fullan (2001) defines implementation as “the extent to which teachers and students change their practices, beliefs, use of new materials and corresponding learning outcomes in the direction of some sought-after change” (p. 72). In the implementation cycle (Figure 1), the planning and action phases rely heavily on teachers’ understanding of the policy requirements and their capacity to enact the proposed action steps. At this micro level of implementation variation is not only inevitable, but is also a necessity for meaningful change. As Fullan states, “Educational change depends on what teachers do and think – it’s as simple and as complex as that” (p. 115). My study examines the “thinking and doing” of teachers as they engage in the implementation of the FNMI policy.

**Concluding Summary**
This literature review sets the stage for this study by identifying both the macro and micro level contexts. The variables impacting policy implementation at the macro level are outlined and supported in the literature. The destructive impact of colonization, residential schools and systemic racism on Aboriginal peoples is examined. Other macro level variables impacting policy implementation such as global discourses promoting neo-liberal and neo-conservative values have also been noted. At the other end of the spectrum, micro level variables such as the content and structure of the policy document, the local implementation cycle, and teacher agency and school structure and culture have been discussed. My study seeks to uncover how the interplay of these variables across policy contexts impacts the micro-processes of teacher sense-making during policy implementation. By identifying the cues teachers use to make sense within the meditational system of individual agency, organizational structure and culture, and environmental messages, insight can be gained into how the FNMI policy implementation was promoted and prohibited.

CHAPTER THREE: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
This chapter outlines the framework that will guide the collection and analysis of data. This framework which merges sense-making theory within a model of co-construction will aid in distilling the cues that teachers in this study used to make sense during policy implementation. How teacher sense-making impacts and is impacted by the organizational structure and culture of the school and by the environmental messaging is examined for its influence on individual agency during policy implementation. Teachers connect previous knowledge and experience with new information using environmental, relational, and cognitive cues. Identifying sense-making cues within this social context that promote or prohibit policy implementation may give policy designers and implementers deeper insight into how to create more optimal instances of policy implementation.

**Sense-making Theory**

Sense-making theory has its roots in institutional theory that provides insights into the impact of the institutional environment on school structure and organization through regulative, normative and cognitive means (Scott, 2004).

Studies utilizing sense-making theories have produced crucial insights of how organizational change occurs because it provides a lens to understand how human agency alter environments. (Datnow & Park, 2009, p. 350)
The limitation of institutional theory is that it can be overly deterministic in focusing on how institutional context shapes human agency and falls short of examining how individuals and groups (teachers, principals and board administrators) actively mediate and reinterpret institutional norms, beliefs and practices through dynamic social interactions (Coburn, 2001). Sense-making theory was developed and refined by Karl Weick (1995) as an important approach to studying organizations and organizational change. Weick identified the following properties of sense-making (p. 17):

- Grounded in identity construction
- Retrospective
- Enactive of sensible environments
- Social
- On-going
- Focused on and by extracted cues
- Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy

Datnow and Park (2009) describe the sense-making process as “incremental, fluid, and recursive.” They state that,

[t]he first step in organizing begins with attending to certain cues and then bracketing information from their experiences. This is then followed by a process of labeling and categorizing in an effort to construct meaning. Thus, sensemaking is a process theory in which perceptions, interpretations, and actions build on each other. (p. 351)
Making-sense of the world shapes our perception and experience of reality: “When we make sense of something, we are a force in its creation, maintenance, and modification” (Foldy, 2006). There is growing interest in the field of education in the role of sense-making in policy implementation (Ball, 1994; Coburn, 2001, 2006; Guthrie, 1990; Jennings, 1996). When applied to the implementation process, this cognitive approach focuses on how implementers construct their understanding of the policy message, how they interpret their own practice in light of this message, and how they draw conclusions that affect their practice (Spillane et al., 2002). Porac et al. (1989) referred to this process as “micro-momentary actions.”

But sense-making is not just an individual endeavour. It is “collective in that it is shaped by interaction, signaling, and negotiation” (Coburn, 2006, p. 345). Sense-making “emanates from the interplay of meanings and actions between one’s self and others” (Evans, 2007, p. 161). It is situational and value-laden and embedded in a larger institutional context with its attendant rules, values, and norms of behaviour (Weick, 2005).

Sense-making has been helpful in identifying micro-processes that have been largely overlooked in conventional research. Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002) developed a cognitive framework based on a review of the literature that included an examination of the interconnection among the implementing agents’ existing cognitive structures, their situation, and the policy. According to Spillane et al., implementing agents’ sense-making depends on their unique
knowledge structures or schemas in combination with their social and organizational contexts. They state that their model,

attempts to demystify the ways in which human sense-making or cognition contributes to the evolution of policy proposals in the implementation process. The model makes this possible by identifying categories of variables that help to account for the understandings that implementing agents construct from policy. (p. 412)

In a study of statewide reading policy in California in the late 1990’s, Coburn (2006) also attempted to identify variables impacting sense-making during policy implementation. She used data from one elementary school to provide an up-close look at the processes by which teachers negotiated the meaning of the new reading policy. Coburn used sense-making theory and frame analysis to identify the micro-processes teachers engage in during policy implementation. Her study examined how problem framing by teachers was influenced socially and organizationally and lead to her conclusion that,

problem frames emerge through an interactive process by which individual frames are invoked, countered, and reframed until this negotiation results in a way of framing the problem that allows individuals with diverse worldviews and interests to connect with it.” (p. 373)

Coburn’s work, along with Spillane et al’s. (2002) and Datnow et al’s. (2002) have significantly informed my selection of the conceptual framework for
this study. Examining the process of sense-making within the co-construction conceptual model provides a framework for examining the inter-relations of contexts, interpretive schema, and other policy actors across a policy system to uncover how these elements impact individual agency during implementation. Datnow et al. (2002) believe that sense-making theory is complimentary to the co-construction perspective as it focuses on explicating change at the level of local policy actors. From my perspective as a principal and researcher, this local level focus is critical because it is at this level that education policy implementation directly impacts academic outcomes for students.

Because “constructing meaning – making sense- is fundamentally a social process”, (Ryan, 1999, p. 5), using the co-construction conceptual model addresses the multiple social complexities impacting sense-making and provides a framework that makes possible the identification of sense-making cues that teachers use to connect their social and cognitive experience with the policy expectations. Knowledge of the sense-making cues impacting the implementation process could be used to optimize education policy design and implementation and result in improved educational outcomes for students.

**Conceptual Model of Sense-making and Co-construction**

The conceptual model that will be used to guide this study combines the co-construction framework and sense-making theory within the policy implementation cycle. In their analysis of education reforms going to scale in 2002, Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan identified the limitations of the technical-
rational and organizational development models of school improvement. They stated that these models “do not fully capture how educational innovations play out as social, negotiated features of school life” (p. 11). They proposed a co-construction framework that would be inclusive of multiple contexts throughout the social system, supporting the analysis of the interconnections among these contexts. Within this dynamic, Datnow et al. identified the importance of the relational sense of context “in which part and whole shape each other” (12). A final feature of the co-construction framework that was missing in previous models was the inclusion of perspective and power. Datnow et al. believed that where people were situated socially and organizationally affected how they made meaning of change initiatives.

The co-construction framework focuses on the interplay of organizational structure, culture and individual agency as a meditational system. To these mediators, I have added environmental messaging which Coburn (2001) found to be significant in the sense-making process during policy implementation. In her analysis of the reading policy implementation in California, she chose to focus “not on the state-level policy but all the heterogeneous messages that actually came into the school from all sources during the 1998-99 school year” (p. 150), as these messages impacted how policy was interpreted and enacted. Adding environmental messaging to the co-construction framework proposed by Datnow et al. promotes the connectivity of the various contexts in the policy implementation process.
At each phase of implementation, individual agency, organizational culture/structure and environmental messaging interact and impact the sense-making of teachers during the FNMI policy implementation process. For example, at the gap analysis or needs assessment phase of the implementation process, how the problem of Aboriginal underachievement is framed impacts the selection of recommended policy strategies. This problem framing depends on the individual and collective sense-making processes of teachers and administrators and is impacted by their institutional, cultural and historical contexts. The sense-making of teachers is also impacted by their willingness and capacity to implement the recommended policy changes. To complicate the sense-making process further, environmental messages around Aboriginal history, rights, and economic and education needs, as well as the larger discourses on social cohesion, equity, partnership, accountability, human capital, and the purpose of schools, all serve to create a complex sense-making context for policy actors at all levels. Individual agency, organizational culture/structure, and environmental messaging impact the sense-making processes of teachers at all phases of the FNMI policy implementation.

To make-sense, teachers use extracted cues or conceptual hooks embedded in the mediators of culture, structure, messaging, and agency to connect their prior knowledge and understandings with the new information being introduced in the policy (Figure 2). The process of implementation is not unidirectional and the implementation phases are not discrete. The sense-making/co-construction model attempts to explore this complexity by making
the linkages across these dimensions more explicit. It is in this exploration that the subtleties and intricacies of the implementation process can be better understood.

...reform involves a dynamic relationship, not just among structures but also among cultures and people’s actions in many interlocking settings. It is this intersection of culture, structure, and individual agency across contexts that helps us better understand how to build positive instances of educational reform. (Datnow & Park, 2009, p. 3)

**Figure 1: Sense-Making/Co-construction Conceptual Model**
Figure 2 highlights the role that the mediators of individual agency, organizational structure/culture, and environmental messages have in the co-construction of sense-making during policy implementation. The teacher’s prior knowledge, experiences and social position will influence the sense-making cues extracted from the meditational system. This conceptual model illustrates the multi-directionality of the mediators (indicated by the dotted line separating them) and the back and forth impact of the sense-making process on the mediators and the policy implementation. The new information presented by the FNMI policy is made sense of within this co-construction system and impacts its enactment. This conceptual model supports the identification of sense-making cues influencing the teacher agency during policy implementation.

**Concluding Summary**

This chapter has established the framework guiding this research study. At the heart of the conceptual model is the process of teacher sense-making during policy implementation. Teacher sense-making involves the micro-process of selecting information from the environment, filtering the information based on prior knowledge, experience, and social position, and then interpreting meaning and acting on these interpretations. This sense-making is influenced by a meditational system consisting of the teacher’s agency or capacity to act; the organizational norms, values, procedures and structures of which the teacher is a member; and the external messages the teacher hears
from his/her colleagues, personal and professional community, and the regional and global context.

This conceptual model makes possible the examination of the impact of multiple variables and contexts impacting policy implementation while at the same time zooming into the micro-processes of how teachers accept or reject the policy mandates. The sense-making/co-construction conceptual model (Figure 2) will guide the collection and analysis of data for this study as it acknowledges the complex macro policy environment while at the same time supports the analysis of the micro level sense-making of teachers during policy implementation. Identifying sense-making cues that teachers use during policy implementation is made possible within this fluid and encompassing conceptual model. Teachers are frontline education policy implementers who have the greatest influence on academic outcomes for students. It is critical that we gain more knowledge about what impacts their understanding and enactment of education policy.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter will provide a detailed outline of the research design and methodology used in my study. Central to my study is the process of making meaning. Underlying this focus is an ontological and epistemological perspective that the social world is constructivist and interpretive:

Research begins from the presupposition that social reality is multifold, that its interpretation is shaped by one’s experience with that reality, and that experiences are lived in the context of intersubjective meaning making…In this view, all knowledge is interpretive, and interpretation (of acts, language, and objects) is the only method appropriate to the human, social world when the research question concerns matters of human meaning. (Yanow, 2006, p. 23)

Because my research question seeks to identify how individual agency, organizational culture and structure, and environmental messaging mediate teacher sense-making during the policy implementation process, I selected a case study as the methodology for my study. Merriam (1998) states that,
Because of its strengths, case study is a particularly appealing design for applied fields of study such as education...Case study has proven particularly useful for studying educational innovations, for evaluating programs, and for informing policy.  (p. 41)

A case study allows the investigation of complex social phenomena and the retention of the holistic qualities of real life events (Yin, 2009). Yin recommends the case study design when it is difficult to separate a phenomenon’s variables from the context. In my study, the phenomenon of sense-making is impossible to separate from the school, community and policy contexts. Merriam (1998) emphasizes the boundedness of the unit of study in a case study (p. 27). The research design of a case study is intrinsically limited in data selection and collection processes. As a case study, my research will focus on the phenomenon of meaning-making in the policy implementation process drawing on data from the finite teaching staffs within the bounded cultural context of two schools within one school board in Ontario. Coburn (2001) found that using the case study method in her research on policy implementation and teacher sense-making, “allow[ed] for depth of observation necessary to capture the subtle and iterative process by which teachers construct and reconstruct messages in the environment through social interactions” (p. 147).
Site Selection

In selecting a research site I wanted to ensure that the teachers at this site would have had exposure to the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy framework. It was my hope that I would be able to conduct my research with a school board that had been involved in a special project arising out of the FNMI education policy framework. The teaching staff in this board had been actively implementing the FNMI policy framework as a result of this special project, giving them a level of familiarity with the policy that would be beneficial to my study.

After access to research was denied by this school board, I sought an alternate site that I had familiarity with in my role as principal. Although I am not professionally connected to this research site, I was aware of their focus on implementing the FNMI policy framework. I sought approval to conduct research at two schools within this school board. The selected sites were appropriate for my study as each school had a concentration of Aboriginal students. The school board did not have a formal research application process so I communicated with the Director of Education electronically, and the Director gave approval for my study to proceed. The Director approved the two recommended school sites and gave me consent to contact the principals.

After contacting the principals by phone, a package including a summary of the research proposal and letters of information and consent forms for the participants was sent electronically to both principals. Both principals
consented to the school’s participation in the study. The principals distributed the letters of information (Appendix B) and the consent forms (Appendix C) to their teaching staff for consideration. Shortly after the phone conversation, I travelled to the schools, a driving distance of three hours, to meet with the principals to ensure their understanding of the research proposal, clarify any questions, and attain their signed consent for the participation of their school.

**Sample and Sampling**

In order to examine the sense-making of teachers during policy implementation, it was important that I have a sample size large enough to be reflective of that school community. I hoped to have 10 participants from each school site but due to the size of the schools and the short time frame for the data collection, summer vacation was imminent, 8 participants consented at one school site and 7 participants at the other site for a total of 15 teacher participants. Both principals also consented to participate in the study. The teacher participants at both schools varied across grade levels and subject specialties. I met all teaching staff at both sites during an observation period (one week in length divided between both sites) prior to the interview process. The principals at both schools set up an interview schedule for me. Release time was provided for the teacher participants to avoid additional work load and facilitate the interview process over a short time period. Supply teacher coverage was generously provided by the school board.

**The School District**
My study focuses on two schools in one school district. The school district in this study is Catholic and is geographically located in Northern Ontario. The school district, Maple Leaf Catholic, enrolls students living in one large urban centre and several surrounding towns, as well as two First Nation reserves. The school district is comprised of 20 elementary schools and 4 secondary schools. The names of the schools and school district were changed to pseudonyms to ensure anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality.

*St. Timothy Elementary School.*

St. Timothy is situated near the downtown core of the major urban centre and is a JK-8 school. It serves a student population of 210, including 80 Aboriginal students. St. Timothy has 9 teaching staff, 4 support staff, and 3 EA’s. All staff is female. The socio-economic status of the families at this school is mostly low income and single parent. Several programs including a Best Start Hub, a breakfast and snack program and an after school program provide support for the families at this school.

The school building is old and has been identified by the Ministry of Education as “prohibitive to repair.” As I was conducting my research it was announced that this school would be replaced by a new building in the next few years. The playground outside the school is comprised of cracked pavement and no greenery. Minimal parking space is available and school windows are screened to prohibit vandalism. Inside the school, framed pictures of the students and welcoming bulletin boards greet visitors. Unique
to this school are huge painted murals on the walls and stairwells that depict scenes of Canada’s confederation.

St. Mary Elementary School.

St. Mary is situated in a small town approximately a ten minute drive from the major urban centre. There is a First Nation reserve located in this area. In 2004, St. Mary and Holy Family elementary schools were amalgamated. Prior to this amalgamation, students from the First Nation reserve attended Holy Family. Several teaching staff were transferred from Holy Family to St. Mary after the amalgamation. Prior to the amalgamation there were very few Aboriginal students at St. Mary’s. St. Mary is also a dual track French Immersion school. There are approximately 350 students from JK to grade 8 with an Aboriginal student population of about 70 students. St. Mary has 25 staff members (6 male and 19 female). Many of the staff reside in the catchment area of the school and have had their own children attend St. Mary. Many families at St. Mary are dual parent families with a mid-level income. Several parents are professionals working in the urban centre.

In 2011, St. Mary was recognized by the Ministry of Education as a School on the Move and awarded the Dr. Bette Stephenson Recognition of Achievement Award for making effective use of EQAO data to support student achievement.

The school building is large, bright and airy with a huge grassy playground that backs onto farmland. The entry way is large and welcoming with three benches inscribed with welcoming signs in the three languages
represented in the school: English, French, and Ojibway. Bulletin boards in the entry way include pictures of students and activities as well as posters of the 7 Grandfather teachings and a dream catcher.

**The Participants**

Fifteen elementary teachers and two principals volunteered to participate in the study. Participants ranged in years of experience and teaching position currently held. Only two of the teachers, the Native Language teachers at each school, are Aboriginal.

Table 1 organizes the participants according to their school site.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>St. Mary Elementary</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Years of experience is not directly relating to the current positions. It is an approximation of the total teaching experience of the participants based on their responses.

Each participant is presented using a pseudonym for the purposes of anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality. These pseudonyms will be used throughout this report.

**Instruments**
The research instrument to collect data in this study was a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A) used for one-on-one interviews with the researcher (Merriam, 1998; Cresswell, 2007; Yin 2009). An interview protocol was selected as the main data collecting tool as the focus of my study was on examining how teachers make sense of policy implementation. Gathering data to understand this cognitive process requires participants to reflect on and articulate their thinking and actions related to the policy implementation process. Semi-structured, focused interviews are the most effective way to collect this data (Yin, 2009). The interview protocol consisted of twenty questions. The interview questions (Appendix A) supported and aligned with the primary research question and the sub-questions described in Chapter One. The relationship between the research questions and the interview questions may be viewed as providing content validity to the instrument in that the questions related directly to all of the possible responses to the research questions. Table 2 illustrates these relationships.

**Table 2: Relationship between Research Questions and the Interview Protocol**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Interview Protocol (Appendix A)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-question 1:</strong></td>
<td>• Prior knowledge</td>
<td>• 1, 3, 4, 5, 6b, 9, 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does sense-making enable or</td>
<td>• Problem framing</td>
<td>• 2, 5, 6b, 6c, 8, 15, 17, 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Values/choices</td>
<td>References</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do organizational cultures and structures impact sense-making of teachers during policy implementation?</td>
<td>- Structure&lt;br&gt;- Culture&lt;br&gt;- Professional practice</td>
<td>6a, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14&lt;br&gt;6a, 8, 9, 10, 12, 17, 18, 19, 20&lt;br&gt;6a, 8, 9, 11, 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do environmental messages impact the sense-making of teachers during policy implementation?</td>
<td>- Policy signals&lt;br&gt;- Messaging</td>
<td>6c, 15&lt;br&gt;17, 18, 19, 20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Procedures

After gaining consent from the Director of Education and the principals of the selected school sites, I visited both sites for a period of one week to observe school procedures and daily routines, and establish a rapport with staff members. I observed and interacted with staff in the staff room, on the playground and in the halls. I did not enter classrooms during instruction. During this period, the principal at each site designed an interview schedule that would accommodate the varying teaching schedules of the teachers who had volunteered to participate in the study. Since supply teacher coverage was being organized, an efficient schedule needed to be created. Each principal designed the interview schedule to allow 2 interviews to occur in the morning and 2 interviews to occur in the afternoon. This gave sufficient time for interviews lasting one to one and a half hours. A total of 4 full days was required for the 15 interviews.

Prior to each interview, I provided each participant with an information letter (Appendix B) and a Letter of Informed Consent (Appendix C) to obtain agreement to participate in the research. During the interviews I strove to maintain a comfortable environment. A private interview space (an office and an unused classroom) had been provided for the interviews at each school. At the beginning of each interview I asked if the participant had any questions before beginning the interview. I also ensured participants that a copy of the interview transcript would be sent electronically to them for any alterations or feedback before analysis would begin. They were reminded that they were free
to not respond to any questions they did not want to. The interviews ranged in length from 60 to 90 minutes.

After the preliminary instructions, I showed each participant a copy of the Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework document and indicated that if they were not familiar with the text document specifically, their responses to the questions were still valid as each of them had some experience with how the policy had been implemented in their school board. Each interview began with the participant outlining his/her professional experience to date, after which the interview protocol (Appendix A) was followed.

The interview questions were grouped into three sections that connected to the meditational system of the co-construction/sense-making conceptual framework. The first group of 8 questions related to individual agency. These questions were designed to elicit teacher responses that would reveal their understanding of the policy, their perception of the need for the policy and their view of how the policy had impacted their instructional practice and Aboriginal student outcomes. The next set of 6 questions related to organizational culture and structure. These questions were designed to gather data on how teacher participants viewed the culture and structure in their school and how, in their view, this culture and structure supported or inhibited the implementation of the FNMI policy. Questions related to resource support, leadership, and working conditions were also included in this section. The last set of 6 questions was designed to elicit teacher responses that would reveal
how environmental messaging impacted their understanding of the policy. Teachers were asked to share why they felt the policy was created and how they thought their colleagues and school community partners perceived the policy. Teachers were also asked to identify any attitudes that supported or prohibited policy implementation.

Each participant willingly shared his or her experience and insights and appeared at ease throughout the interview. No difficulties were encountered during the sessions. All interviews ended on a very positive note. An interview summary has been provided in Table 3. Interviews are listed in the order in which they occurred.

**Table 3: Summary of Interviews**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Date of Interview</th>
<th>Length of Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.Wanda</td>
<td>St. Timothy</td>
<td>13/6/11</td>
<td>62 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.Jane</td>
<td>St. Timothy</td>
<td>13/6/11</td>
<td>67 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.Chris</td>
<td>St. Timothy</td>
<td>13/6/11</td>
<td>65 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.Janet</td>
<td>St. Timothy</td>
<td>13/6/11</td>
<td>87 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.Tammy</td>
<td>St. Timothy</td>
<td>13/6/11</td>
<td>82 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.Derek</td>
<td>St. Mary</td>
<td>14/6/11</td>
<td>76 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Church</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>St. Mary</td>
<td>14/6/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>St. Mary</td>
<td>14/6/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Rob</td>
<td>St. Mary</td>
<td>14/6/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>St. Mary</td>
<td>15/6/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>St. Mary</td>
<td>15/6/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>St. Timothy</td>
<td>21/6/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>St. Timothy</td>
<td>21/6/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Iris</td>
<td>St. Timothy</td>
<td>21/6/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>St. Timothy</td>
<td>21/6/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>St. Mary</td>
<td>4/10/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>St. Mary</td>
<td>4/10/11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were provided with verbatim transcripts of their interviews electronically to confirm the contents and make any revisions. None of the participants requested any changes to the transcript of their interview.

**Treatment of the Data**
The data in this study were collected and analyzed according to currently accepted processes for analyzing and interpreting qualitative data (Merriam, 1998; Cresswell, 2007, Yin 2009). Each interview was transcribed verbatim into full text documents and electronically sent to each participant for confirmation of contents or revisions. No revisions were requested for any transcription.

Software was not used to analyze the data. I employed the ‘constant comparative’ method of data analysis for this study as it is a recognized form of analysis (Merriam, 1998; Cresswell, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 2008), it is compatible with inductive research, and it can be used without building grounded theory (Merriam, 1998). This method of data analysis supported the purpose of this study which was to explore the sense-making of teachers during policy implementation. It is important to note that the purpose of this study is not to make generalizations as the findings are unique to the participants at the time of the research. The focus of qualitative research is not on generating generalities but in creating a detailed description of a specific phenomenon in a particular context (Merriam, 1998).

The conceptual framework introduced in Figure 2 was used as a guide for the initial organization and examination of the data (Cresswell, 2008). The conceptual framework was not imposed on the data. It was supportive in that it sustained a focus on the research questions and established parameters to ensure that the data analysis was connected to the research questions throughout the process. The data analysis was not limited by the framework
because I was open to new categories emerging from the data. Using the conceptual framework did not restrict or limit the analysis. The data in the transcripts was reviewed repeatedly to ensure a deep understanding of the participants’ responses and to build initial categories of data related to the meditational variables in the conceptual framework.

After gaining a thorough understanding of the responses in all of the transcripts, I assigned a number code to each transcript that indicated the school and the teacher participant. Next I began to categorize responses according to their relatedness to the concepts of individual agency, institutional organization and structure, and environmental messaging ensuring that I included the number code of the transcript. I clustered all responses into these initial categories. Several of the responses were assigned to more than one concept as they revealed multiple relationships.

The next step was to examine the category of responses according to the process of sense-making. I reorganized the data within each category according to sense-making variables identified in Coburn’s (2001) research on teacher sense-making and reading policy implementation and Weick’s (2005) research on sense-making in organizations. I used the following sub-themes to further distill the data: Understanding of New Information, Worldview, Technical and Practical Details. After reorganizing the data into these categories, I looked for possible sense-making cues that the teacher participants were accessing leading to their responses. This analysis into sub-
themes was repeated for the data within each mediator (individual agency, organizational culture and structure and environmental messaging).

I then began to look at similarities and differences in teacher responses across the two school sites again with a focus on the sense-making cues teachers may be using during policy implementation. Within each sub-theme I identified factors or variables referred to as “cues” that promoted or inhibited how teachers made sense of the policy implementation. My final step in the analysis was to look for patterns of sense-making cues across the original meditational system. This analysis led to the emergence of clusters of cues connecting to three main sense-making frameworks that appeared to impact how many of the teachers in this study understood and enacted the policy implementation.

**Ethical Considerations**

The ethical process required by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) was observed with diligence. Participation was voluntary and there was no coercion or penalty for non-participation. There was no perceived risk on the part of the subjects. No mental, physiological, or social harm was likely to result from this research.

No aspect of the study was expected to cause physical harm to the participants’ health such as physical exertion. The study did not infringe on the rights of the participants. The research did not involve a topic that would cause the participants emotional stress and the participants were informed that they did
not have to answer questions they did not feel comfortable answering. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time during the study. All participants were assured that they would be provided access to results upon completion of the study. Participants were also assured that there would be no evaluation of participant performance or of them as individuals. This information was provided in the Participant Consent Form (Appendix C) that each participant signed prior to the interview.

Data and documents are stored securely on a password-protected computer that I own and will be destroyed upon my successful completion of the doctoral program. The data collection process and data storage process ensured the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Numerical codes were assigned to each participant. The data will not be viewed by anyone other than me or my supervisor of studies. Names of individuals and school districts were changed to pseudonyms in this report to ensure complete anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality.

**Scope of Study and Limitations**

This study seeks to examine the sense-making of teachers during the policy implementation process. Because sense-making is dependent upon the subject’s prior knowledge and experience and his/her attention to new information, the observation skills and the interview skills of the researcher are critical. In addition, as researcher, I need to be aware of how my own sense-making process impacts the collection and analysis of the data.
A challenge to the case study method involves the issues of reliability, validity and generalizability. “Ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research involves conducting the investigation in an ethical manner” (Merriam, 1998, p. 198). Traditional definitions of validity (do findings match reality?) and reliability (can findings be replicated?) do not fit the nature of qualitative research that is “holistic, multi-dimensional, and every-changing” (Merriam, 1998, p. 201). According to Firestone (1987, p. 19), “the qualitative study provides the reader with a depiction in enough detail to show that the author’s conclusion ‘makes sense’” (in Merriam, 1998, p. 199). This is a measure of its trustworthiness. To counter these perceived limitations, this study will use “rich, thick description” (p. 211).

A further challenge faced in this research study was the lack of familiarity that some participants had with the policy document and the implementation process. In these cases I provided specific prompts derived from my understanding of the policy implementation process in this school board.

Despite these limitations, this study is able to make a contribution to the growing body of research focusing on sense-making and change initiatives in education. Because this study focuses on an education policy aimed at improving outcomes for a marginalized population, it is important to examine the variables that may impact its successful implementation. Teachers are the frontline implementers of policy related to improving student achievement. The more we understand about what impacts teachers’ capacity and will to
implement education policy, the more we will be able to mediate this
understanding to support improvement in academic outcomes for our
students. Despite this study’s limitations, this research can make a
contribution to the body of knowledge related to the policy implementation
process.

**Concluding Summary**

This chapter outlines the research design and methodology used for this
study. The site selection process, the sample and sampling process, and the
interview protocol were explained in detail. In addition, the data collection and
analysis process were outlined. The chapter concluded with an overview of the
ethical considerations and the scope and limitations of this study.

**CHAPTER FIVE: SENSE-MAKING AND INDIVIDUAL AGENCY FINDINGS**
The teacher is the primary person who has a huge impact, as far as I'm concerned.

Rob

**Introduction**

This chapter will present data related to the study’s first sub-question: How does sense-making enable or constrain teachers’ agency during policy implementation? Individual agency is defined as “the capacity to change the existing state of affairs – a capacity which all people have regardless of how they choose to exercise it” (Datnow et al., 2002). The findings in this chapter highlight how the sense-making process of teachers impacts and is impacted by their capacity to act during policy implementation. The sense-making process involves the mapping of new information onto existing information. The information that teachers notice and select significantly impacts their sense-
making. Identifying the cues that cause teachers to notice and select information will contribute to understanding how sense-making influences individual agency during policy implementation.

The chapter begins with an outline of the implementation process of the First Nation, Métis and Inuit education policy framework by the school board in this study. This outline provides the reader with an overview of the FNMI implementation for this school board within which the teacher sense-making occurred. It is important to note that, although the school board enacted an implementation plan, most teachers in this study were aware of only some of the activities related to the plan. In addition, most teachers had not even seen the policy document. Despite this lack of detailed understanding of the policy and the implementation plan, the teachers connected the changes related to improving Aboriginal student achievement that they had noticed to the implementation of the FNMI policy. Policy implementation, therefore, in this study references more than the policy document and the school board’s implementation plan; policy implementation is more broadly conceptualized to include all activities related to improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students since the release of the FNMI policy document. This broader definition of policy is supported in the literature. Joshee (2007) defined policy as “the ensemble of statements, actions, and inactions related to a particular ‘problem.’”

The presentation of findings will begin with data related to the role of prior knowledge and experience in sense-making and its impact on teacher
agency and policy implementation. The findings will be further categorized to highlight two significant cues that emerged from the analysis of data impacting teacher sense-making and individual agency during the implementation of the FNMI policy. These sense-making cues are the belief in equity and inclusion and the impact of leadership. The data will demonstrate how these cues both promoted teacher agency and prohibited teacher agency in this policy implementation.

It should be noted that these findings are specific to the 15 teachers and 2 principals in the study at the time of the research. It is not intended for these findings to be generalized to a broader population.

**Policy Implementation Process**

After the FNMI education policy framework was released in 2007, the Maple Leaf Catholic District School Board appointed a principal of Aboriginal Education to lead the implementation process. An Aboriginal Education Steering Committee was established including Aboriginal partners, teachers and administrators. The implementation process began with establishing a process for voluntary self-identification for Aboriginal students in the school board. Promotional materials were created and distributed, and school presentations led by the principal of Aboriginal Education were made to bring awareness to all staff, students and parents of the purpose and process of voluntary self-identification. The policy was presented to the principals in the school board and the principal of Aboriginal Education was available to provide
support for its implementation at the school level. Not all principals accessed this support. The principal of Aboriginal Education stated that this was probably a result of the lack of Aboriginal students in these schools or a result of the perceived lack of need for support.

In the fall of 2007, the Ministry of Education sponsored a provincial symposium, Circle of Light, intended to unveil the FNMI education policy framework province-wide. School boards were asked to send teachers, administrators and parents to this symposium. Over 800 participants attended the three day symposium in Toronto. Maple Leaf DSB had 8 attendees who were selected based on the concentration of Aboriginal students in their school. St. Timothy had several teachers attend.

That fall, the Maple Leaf Catholic DSB also gave permission to the principal of Aboriginal Education to use the annual Faith professional development day as the starting point for the formal implementation of the FNMI policy in their school board. The Faith day centred on a liturgical celebration but included many Aboriginal cultural elements and Aboriginal speakers. The principal reported that feedback from participants that included teachers, administrators, community members and parents was positive.

In the spring of 2008, the principal of Aboriginal education hosted an Aboriginal education symposium for teachers in the school board. Teachers were selected by the principal to attend. The symposium included sessions on the Aboriginal learner, Aboriginal culture, and integrating Aboriginal history
and culture into the curriculum. In the fall of 2009 the province hosted the second Circle of Light symposium and several teachers from Maple Leaf Catholic DSB attended. The principal of Aboriginal education continued to provide school support and to promote connections among Aboriginal and community partners throughout this school year to assist in the implementation of the FNMI policy. A second board-wide workshop focusing on the goals of the FNMI policy was organized by the Aboriginal Education principal in 2009 and included teacher presenters sharing best practices from the school board. Selected teachers were invited to attend.

The role of principal of Aboriginal Education was challenged by the Teacher federation and at the end of the 2010 school year the position was assumed by a teacher in the board and the original Aboriginal education principal was appointed principal of St. Timothy’s. The new Aboriginal Lead is an Aboriginal teacher who lives on a nearby reserve. She has continued to support the FNMI policy implementation at the school level by providing resources and fostering partnerships with the Aboriginal communities and the school board.

This summary of the FNMI policy implementation process for the Maple Leaf DSB provides the reader with a context for the teacher responses shared in chapters 5-7. It is important to note that teachers varied significantly in their awareness of the school board’s implementation of the FNMI policy. Teachers in this study tended to view the FNMI policy implementation more
loosely by relating any change intended to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students to the implementation of the FNMI policy.

**The Role of Prior Knowledge and Experience**

Prior knowledge and experience play an important role in the process of sense-making. Research on cognition highlights the mediating role prior knowledge and experience play in the interpretation of new information. In the co-construction model of implementation developed by Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan (2002) sense-making involves the complex interplay of the implementer’s agency, defined as “the capacity to change the existing state of affairs” (p. 62) with the structural and cultural features in the micro and macro environment. Datnow et al., state that,

> [t]he agency of principals and teachers can take various forms: some push or sustain reform efforts, whereas others resist or actively subvert these efforts. Additionally, teacher or principal agency may be passive or active. Therefore, we believe that all forms of teacher agency must be recognized as shaping forces of reform efforts. (p. 62)

Agency impacts how teachers notice and select information and how this information is interpreted and enacted. Noticing and selecting is affected by cues linked to cognition or to the environment. These cues or conceptual hooks link the teacher’s prior knowledge, experience, and beliefs to the new information resulting in the assimilation, accommodation or the rejection of the new information (Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer, 2002).
In this study, teacher responses revealed that prior knowledge of Aboriginal culture and history promoted teacher comfort during policy implementation. Some teachers gained this knowledge during their formal education:

I went to Northern University and it centred on Aboriginal education so I have seen the policy document but I don’t remember it word for word...But we had very positive experiences on how to incorporate Aboriginal culture into classrooms.

Nancy

When I did my special education courses one of my teachers was married to an Aboriginal and was always bringing up the differences and it was good awareness.

Mike

One of the courses that I took in my social work degree was Native studies so I remember learning about the government policies and how they were placed on reserves and how their whole way of life was smushed down into certain parcels of land. I think it has a lot to do with the government and what the government did all those years ago...and it just keeps going.

Leslie
Other teachers gained this knowledge by attending workshops hosted by the school board during the policy implementation process:

We had a symposium and you chose what you wanted to go to. So for my first one I went to culture. Even though we were forty percent Aboriginal population when I first came here, I knew very little. We would do circles, drumming with our Aboriginal language teacher but I really didn’t get it. So I focused on the culture and the background and getting an idea. For the next symposium I went to more teaching strategies. I went to math. They were saying that technology was a great way of getting students involved...I found that for me knowing more about their culture was a way to connect and therefore be able to meet their needs.

Kate

Whether knowledge was gained through formal education or through board sponsored workshops, these teachers revealed that this knowledge and awareness gave them more ability to support the Aboriginal learners in their classroom. These responses revealed a level of comfort with integrating the expectations of the FNMI policy. When teachers lacked this prior knowledge about Aboriginal history, culture and student learning needs, their classroom practice was impacted and their anxiety increased. Donna and Kate’s responses reveal the discomfort some staff had with implementing the policy expectations:
If the teacher is not aware of the cultural background and how to implement it in the classroom, I think they may feel a little apprehensive about, “How do I introduce this to students without causing conflict or offense?” How do we incorporate this positively as another way to raise awareness?

Donna

I tried doing a theme for a year a few years ago and I found this thing from BC that had an Aboriginal focus for the year...the seasons, like blueberry picking...but because I didn’t have the background knowledge for that, it was a flop, and I thought the kids would be able to help me but they weren’t knowledgeable.

Kate

For these teachers, a lack of prior knowledge impacted their effectiveness and their confidence. Wanda, an Aboriginal teacher, shared that her knowledge of Aboriginal culture helped her to adjust her assessment practices to meet the needs of her Aboriginal learners:

But I know they are listening because I can tell by just how I test them in different ways and just because they are quiet doesn’t mean they are not listening. It is just how First Nation people are. They would just rather sit there and be quiet and it’s as if they are invisible. But they are actually there, but listening.
Wanda cautioned that this learning style can be misinterpreted by teachers who lack this knowledge. This can have very negative consequences for the student:

They would think that they are not participating in class at all. They may think they are not trying. And once the students get labeled that way they are going to be that way. It’s like, “They think I don’t know anyway so I’m not going to try.”

Another teacher shared that a lack of knowledge about Aboriginal learning styles could result in other misinterpretations that negatively impact the student:

Sometimes it seems with Aboriginal kids the length of time they take to complete something is really long and some teachers interpret that as defiance...

Sandra

The teachers in this study, when asked to share their understanding of Aboriginal learning styles, identified characteristics consistent with the literature (Irvine & York, 1995). Several identified the Aboriginal preference for “hands-on” experiential learning and the oral tradition. It is unclear from the data to what extent this knowledge impacted their classroom practice.
It is also important to examine teachers’ prior knowledge of the FNMI policy document in this section, as their understanding of the policy’s expectations impacted their sense-making processes during implementation. The data revealed that 13 out of 17 of the participants interviewed were unfamiliar with the text version of the policy document. Donna’s and Iris’ responses were typical:

To be honest I am not familiar with it at all. I had heard of the document coming out a few years ago and just as with other documents, we were each expecting to get our own copy, but that didn’t happen.

Donna

In all honesty, not at all. I have never seen the document. I’ve never read it. I’ve noticed the changes going on but I never saw the document.

Iris

Even though few teachers were familiar with the text of the policy document, they all were aware that a document had been released and that they were expected to implement it in their classrooms. A few teacher responses revealed frustration with how they perceived the policy implementation process:

I often feel frustrated by some of the Ministry documents that come out and say you need to do this, now figure out how to do it. That’s frustrating because we are already doing our best.
Debbie

It all takes time and I think that’s what the board and the Ministry doesn’t understand. You can’t just put it on your list and check it off. People have to live it and then when they feel comfortable, then you are okay and you can move on.

Tammy

The lack of specific knowledge of the policy document combined with the frustration with the perceived policy implementation process impacted teacher sense-making and agency during implementation. Tammy’s response illustrates this impact:

Okay, let’s put it this way, as a teacher the principal says to me, we want to implement this policy. You are going in your head, “Another freak’n policy? Are you kidding me??”

In addition to prior knowledge, teacher experience played an important role in sense-making influencing agency during the policy implementation process. Some teacher responses indicated a positive role played by experience in the sense-making process and changing classroom practice. Sandra’s experience illustrates her sense-making process around improving outcomes for her Aboriginal students.

I also find it interesting to consider the use of voice. Because Native students, by and large, are not loud and they are not used to being...
think that they sometimes interpret the volume of a teacher’s voice with negativity, like they are yelling at them. I made a student cry before by loudly saying, “Okay, let’s go! Line up!” And this poor little student started to cry because she thought I was yelling at her. I actually changed my style with that group so that instead of using my voice to signal them to line up or sit on the carpet, I used music...We don’t realize how they are interpreting our actions. It’s a cultural thing and we need to be more sensitive to that.

Sandra

Through this experience Sandra realized that her style of classroom management was not working for all of her students, particularly the Aboriginal student who was sensitive to the volume of voices. This experience resulted in her changing her classroom practices. For Iris, her understanding of the needs of Aboriginal students was directly a result of her experience as a teacher at St. Timothy’s:

But I think I understand the children better especially working in this school. You know it’s a large community with quite a few Aboriginal students and you see what goes on. Because before sometimes I’d be like, “I just don’t get it. Why don’t they understand or why are they so low in school?” You come here and you see what goes on and you kind of understand them from that sense.

Iris
Teacher agency was impacted by these experiences. Some teachers realized that their knowledge base was not meeting the needs of Aboriginal students and they actively sought the knowledge they needed to improve instruction:

I’m getting there. At first a girlfriend of mine who teaches at another school with a high number of Aboriginal students, we agreed that we needed to educate ourselves because of our student population because that’s not my background. We needed to really engage these students and we didn’t want to be teaching misconceptions or be insulting.

Chris

Another teacher recognized that her preferred teaching style was not meeting the needs of her Aboriginal students and this insight helped her to move out of her comfort zone:

Well I could talk about my own practice. My teaching has changed so that I look at those learners differently now. And I try to realize what I do is I fall back on what’s most comfortable for me and that’s not most comfortable for everybody in the class. So I try to take that into consideration when I am planning.

Jane

These examples demonstrate how particular teacher experiences when mapped on to prior knowledge during the sense-making process can support
teacher agency to change practice. Collective experiences can also result in increasing teacher agency during the implementation process. The teachers at St. Timothy’s found that their Aboriginal parents frequently attended school celebrations and events but the attendance at parent-teacher interviews was sparse. In an attempt to increase parent involvement in their child’s academics, the teachers in the junior division decided to implement student-led conferences. This experience not only impacted the teachers involved but had an impact on other teachers in the school:

Well that student conferencing was a big thing around here because it wasn’t done before. This was a major change. It just opened up everyone’s eyes about how to get a parent involved in their child’s education.

Donna

The teachers at St. Mary’s had a similar collective experience when they hosted a Cultural Evening on the First Nation reserve. Teacher feedback on the event was very positive. This experience increased teacher comfort with the Aboriginal culture. There was widespread support for hosting this event in the future. This collective experience influenced teacher sense-making and positively impacted teacher agency during policy implementation.

For a few teachers knowledge and experience were not sufficient cues to change practice. In some cases the teachers’ beliefs impacted their willingness to incorporate Aboriginal culture into their classroom practices. For Iris, her
belief as a Catholic inhibited her ability to connect to the Aboriginal cultural teachings that in her view affected her credibility with some of the policy expectations.

Not everybody believes in the teachings so I find it’s difficult for a teacher who is a strong practicing Catholic to teach the teachings so that the children fully understand it because you also have to be into it. It’s just like any other religion or belief, if you don’t really believe in something, you can’t pass it on.

Iris

Like Iris, Nancy viewed a lack of belief in the Aboriginal culture and rituals as detrimental to achieving the FNMI policy goals.

The teacher has a big impact on how the kids view the culture so if you are not comfortable as a teacher going into a circle for example, because you don’t know what to do or you don’t believe in it, I don’t think that’s very positive for the kids. They pick up on it.

Nancy

Weick (1995, p. 15) states that, “People make sense of things by seeing a world on which they have already imposed what they believe.” Prior knowledge and experience are thereby impacted by beliefs and values during sense making. This is evidenced in this study in the emergence in the findings of a belief system or worldview that strongly impacted teacher agency during the
implementation process of the FNMI policy in these schools. The worldview that emerged in the data was the belief in equity and inclusion. The next section will explore in detail how this belief system impacted teacher agency and policy implementation in this study.

**A Belief in Equity and Inclusion**

An individual’s prior knowledge and experience, *including tacitly held expectation and beliefs about how the world works*, serve as a lens influencing what the individual notices in the environment and how the stimuli that are noticed are processed, encoded, organized, and subsequently interpreted (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002, p. 394, italics added).

Many teacher responses in this study revealed that a tacitly held belief that the education system should support and promote equity and inclusion impacted their sense-making during policy implementation. Because the FNMI policy is focused on a cultural minority and closing the achievement gap, it is not surprising that a belief in equity and inclusion shaped how teachers enacted the policy. The data in this section is organized according to commonalities and differences between the two school sites in how this sense-making cue impacted individual agency during policy implementation.
**Commonalities:**

The similarities in teacher responses between the two school sites evidenced a strong belief in the value of equity and inclusion in the education system. These values are strongly supported by the Ministry of Education. In 2009 the Ministry released *Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* that stated the following vision:

**We envision an inclusive education system in Ontario**

**in which:**

- all students, parents, and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected;

- every student is supported and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning.

To achieve an equitable and inclusive school climate, school boards and schools will strive to ensure that all members of the school community feel safe, comfortable, and accepted. We want all staff and students to value diversity and to demonstrate respect for others and a commitment to establishing a just, caring society.
As the document states, a belief in equity and inclusion promotes a welcoming and respectful environment that supports opportunities for all.

The teacher references in this study clustered into three sub-categories related to the enactment of equity and inclusion: a warm and welcoming environment, parental involvement, and partnerships.

Teachers at both school sites identified the school entrance as an enactment of their belief in a warm and welcoming environment. The staff at St. Timothy’s identified the physical improvement of their school entrance as their first action step for the FNMI policy implementation. The principal at St. Timothy stated,

Our first goal was to change the entrance to the school. Financially we don’t have the money but how do we do it on a shoe string? And little, little changes go a long way. Smiling...Smile and say hello and teaching our kids to say hello.

Janet

These changes impacted how several teachers at St. Timothy’s viewed their ability to support Aboriginal learners. Donna’s reference is representative:

As soon as you walk into our school it’s very prevalent throughout with the bulletin boards, the huge icons that you see everywhere with the dream catchers and the eagle. When you see the bulletin board by the office your attention goes to the students right away. You notice that we
do have a larger Aboriginal population in our school and what you notice is that they are smiling. They look positive in the pictures. They are having fun at school. I like that. It shows that they have a positive connection and comfort level with the school.

Donna

Like several other teachers, Donna connected the visibly welcoming environment to improving the comfort and inclusion of the Aboriginal population at her school, which is one of the expectations of the FNMI policy.

The run down condition of the school building and site of St. Timothy’s presented a challenge to establishing a warm and welcoming environment, but this was not the case at St. Mary’s elementary as the building already had a large, airy foyer.

We have benches that we’ve ordered and they will say welcome in all three languages...and the bulletin board with our Catholic virtues, we have pictures that our Aboriginal Lead took of the teachings transforming them into grandmother teachings. The pictures are actually of one of our families: the grandmother, mother, and daughter.

Mike

St. Mary’s had a different challenge in enacting their belief in a warm and welcoming environment. Similar to St. Timothy’s, attention was given to the entry way, but the history of the school’s amalgamation in 2004 presented
unique challenges to enacting a warm and welcoming environment. Rob and Debbie both noted that acceptance and inclusion of Aboriginal students and families had increased since the early days of amalgamation.

I think it is the little things that everybody in this school does that says to the kids “you are valued”. That’s why they feel more comfortable. Even when I first started here, I think back to four years ago and you could see the girls get off the bus and they wouldn’t hang around with the non-native girls, but now I see a mixing and a real acceptance from the school.

Rob

I think that the change I’ve seen in this school, especially since I’ve been here, I’ve seen a lot of inclusion. When I first arrived here they had amalgamated two schools and there was some tension because much of the Aboriginal population was coming from reserve and the other school and we wanted them to feel included and part of this school.

Debbie

Although Rob and Debbie do not directly connect these changes to the policy implementation, their belief in the importance of equity and inclusion influences how they made sense of the policy expectations.

Although St. Timothy’s and St. Mary’s had unique challenges due to structural and historical realities, the belief in the importance of a warm and
welcoming environment in the school setting established first in the tone and setting of the entry way and moving on into relationships within the school was evidenced in the teacher responses. Teacher agency in changing the physical environment and supporting amalgamation was fostered by their belief in equity and inclusion.

Another value related to equity and inclusion evidenced at the two school sites was the belief in parental involvement as an important factor in student success. One teacher connected this belief to the value of a warm and welcoming environment.

How do we get the parent into the school? That’s where we talk about a welcoming and warm environment. What do we have to offer the parent? How do we treat the parent when they come in? Let’s make them feel good.

Tammy

At St. Timothy’s, from perspective of several teachers, the challenge involved in promoting Aboriginal parental involvement was related to the negative experience that some of their parents have had with the education system. Chris and Tammy’s responses reflect those of their colleagues who believe that parents are key partners in student success and a strong focus must be on their inclusion.
Number one is engaging parents: the Hub, feasts, Eagle staff ceremony. I think that’s the key. You have to get parents on board first and demystify all the negativity about school. Once you have that you can start changing how people view the institution. It’s not a bad place.

Chris

These kids have parents who have gone through a very bad experience of school. So your first goal is not getting the student through the doors. Your first goal is getting the parent through the door and it’s not even about the child now.

Tammy

At St. Timothy’s, the teacher’s responses revealed a belief in the importance of parental involvement for student success, but also referenced the challenges they have faced in bringing parents meaningfully into the educational process. Past negative experiences with schooling and lower levels of education have impacted the process of inclusion. The teachers at St. Timothy made sense of this challenge and sought ways to promote parental involvement. Establishing the student-lead conferences was an example of how their belief system impacted their sense-making and their agency during policy implementation.

At St. Mary’s elementary the parent population differed in two major ways from the student population at St. Timothy’s. The socio-economic status of the parents at St. Mary’s tended to be higher as most families were dual
income, whereas single parent families with lower income predominated at St. Timothy’s. In addition, the Aboriginal parents lived on reserve that provided educational and financial supports for parents and students at St. Mary’s. From several teacher reports, parental involvement in non-academic activities was strong at St. Mary’s:

When we put effort into something the parents are always really supportive. When we have sports activities, they are there. When we have assemblies, masses or special events, the Aboriginal parents are there just as much as the other parents are.

Sandra

Similar to St. Timothy’s, a focus for promoting parental involvement at St. Mary’s was on the parent-teacher interviews. In making sense of the lack of Aboriginal parental attendance at these interviews, the teachers decided to host the interviews at the community centre on the reserve. As Debbie explains,

Some of the parents and grandparents may have judgments based on the traditional school system that we have here. I really feel that’s important. So one of the things that we first did that I can remember is changing the location of the parent-teacher interviews from the school to the community centre on reserve and we moved there.

Debbie
Kelly viewed this as a positive step in the right direction, although the initiative was not sustained.

I think there has been some building of relationships over the years. Attendance at parent-teacher interviews was low from parents on reserve so we decided to do parent-teacher interviews on reserve. I think we did it twice and then we didn’t continue with that. But just making that initial move, we saw more engagement with parents. Again, all these little steps turn into huge steps and has narrowed the gap.

Kelly

At St. Mary’s, the resources available on the reserve provided support for parents negotiating the educational process and assisting their children. The connection with the education officer on reserve and the financial supports such as tutoring or the provision of equipment was helpful to the parents. The learning resource teacher at St. Mary’s assisted the school in making these connections. He spoke of how his role supported parents:

As a resource teacher I build that relationship with the teacher and the parents. I do a lot of the phone calls and a lot of the parents on reserve call me before they call the classroom teacher. So it always means building that rapport... Three years ago I found out that there is a trust set up and students can apply through this trust for a tutor. So in my first year I got all the forms and I photocopied them and gave them to
each parent. And they also had a tutoring night at that time so I put that awareness out there.

Mike’s responses revealed his agency around improving outcomes for Aboriginal students in his school. He used the education supports provided by the reserve to promote parental involvement.

The teacher responses at both St. Timothy’s and St. Mary’s revealed a belief in the importance of parental involvement in promoting student achievement. Common challenges faced at both school sites included a parental distrust of the education system and a feeling of inefficacy in supporting their children academically. St. Timothy was further disadvantaged by the socio-economic status of their parents and the lack of connection to a reserve. Within these contexts, teachers made sense of how to enact their belief in the importance of including parents in the educational process, a clearly stated expectation of the FNMI policy.

The third sub-category related to the value of equity and inclusion apparent in the teacher responses was the belief in school partnerships. At St. Mary’s elementary the major partnership was with the nearby reserve as their school community is located in more of a rural setting making access to other agency involvement more challenging. Cathy shared how her NSL teacher provided language instruction on reserve free of charge that promoted a positive partnership.
Our Native as a Second Language teacher will take time once a week and go through some of the curriculum he is teaching to students with parents on reserve. He might get a handful of parents but I think there is a recognition that we are trying to build partnerships. I really believe that. We had an Aboriginal night on reserve at the community centre...We have a pretty good relationship with the education officer on reserve.

Cathy

Rob also noted the supportive partnership with the education officer on reserve in encouraging attendance at school.

We have worked for years with the education officer on reserve and the community recognizes the students that have good attendance rates. So we are working together to recognize that if you come to school, it’s a good thing.

Rob

Mike felt that the current partnership with the reserve was not as strong as it has been in the past when one of the teachers on staff at St. Mary’s lived on the reserve. He felt that this impacted how teachers supported Aboriginal learners in his school, particularly with respect to the cultural component of the policy expectations. Mike’s views were shared by several of his colleagues.
I feel like we are trying to come back and build more relationships with the reserve again. The girl whom I replaced was actually an Aboriginal who lived on the reserve and so what was really nice when I first came here was that any time we had an assembly or mass, the drummers were always there and we really did have more of a presence. Now we don’t know who to call...

Mike

The teacher responses revealed their belief that a strong partnership with the reserve was beneficial for their school community, but as Cathy’s response revealed, this partnership is connected to a political arrangement that can introduce tension into the relationship.

Students on reserve pay tuition fees. So sometimes there’s a feeling that I sense, whether it’s real or imagined, that because we are paying, there should be a certain level of service...so it’s always a delicate situation. I don’t get a lot of this kind of thinking. It’s just been something that has just sort of been with one or two parents.

Cathy

Although Cathy admitted this tension was not wide-spread, she did acknowledge that it impacted her sense-making around the partnership with the reserve. She acknowledged the underlying political reality of these relationships.
St. Timothy’s, because of its urban setting, had more partnerships with local agencies than St. Mary’s. Several teachers were able to easily identify a variety of partnerships their school had with the community.

Partnerships? Oh my gosh, we have tons. We can go on and on and on and on: from the Diabetes Association to the Aboriginal Best Start Hub in our school, to Better Beginnings Better Futures, to Police Services, to White Buffalo Healing, to the hospital, Children’s Aid, the Child and Family Centre...

Tammy

Well we have the introduction of the Hub at this school and next year we are getting an Adult Education class and we now have the breakfast program and the after school program. But we didn’t have anything before. We had a partnership with our church. The church ran our breakfast program before.

Kate

Several teacher responses revealed their enthusiasm and support for these partnerships many of which, as Kate revealed, were recently initiated. The teachers’ awareness of the importance of these partnerships was evidence of their belief in inclusion. These supports, like the supports provided by the reserve to the teachers at St. Mary’s, increased their sense of efficacy to improve outcomes for their students.
A belief in equity and inclusion impacted the sense making of the teachers during the implementation of the FNMI policy. This was evidenced in their agency in promoting a warm and welcoming educational environment, promoting parental involvement, and promoting community partnerships.

**Differences**

A noteworthy difference between the two schools related to the belief in equity and inclusion and the implementation of the FNMI policy centred on the enactment of the term “equity”. Although there were similarities in how equity was defined at both schools, the main difference was in how the teachers at St. Timothy’s believed the focus of the FNMI document impacted their agency in meeting the needs of the non-Aboriginal students at their school. This concern was not evidenced in the responses of the teachers at St. Mary’s.

At St. Mary’s, two out of the seven teachers interviewed commented on the concept of equity as treating students equally or the same.

I don’t think any children or maybe even any non-teaching adult would notice a difference in the way I treat the children because I treat the children pretty much the same.

Leslie

Later in the interview Leslie stated,

We are really focused on the success of the individual student...we really try to promote for each individual.
It was not clear from these two responses how Leslie viewed equity. It is possible that what she meant by “treating children pretty much the same” meant focusing on the individual needs of all children. The only other teacher at St. Mary’s to elaborate on the meaning of equity was Sandra who stated,

They hardly say its Aboriginal this...no you are addressing the needs of all of your students. It does benefit the needs of the Aboriginal student but it is for the good of all students.

Sandra

The definition of equity was more broadly explored by five out of eight teachers interviewed at St. Timothy’s. Nancy made a statement similar to Leslie’s:

I treat them as I do every other child in the classroom but I approach them as an individual with their individual needs.

Nancy

Kate echoed Sandra’s view of equity above,

For me, with special education, I just find that what works for some usually works for all.

But later on in the interview she made a statement similar to that of Leslie’s about treating students individually:

We are really kid by kid here.
Near the end of the interview Kate revealed her perception of how the push for equity and inclusion of Aboriginal student needs at St. Timothy’s had affected the teachers she worked with.

It is something that we focused on so much this year that I think teachers are kind of like...“Let’s get on with it...we have other kids we have to help too”...and I think that we’ve always done it before but it hasn’t been talked about so...and this year it seems to be a number one expectation...and that is not necessarily what our school goal is. That would be an administration goal.

Kate

Iris agreed with Kate’s comments:

It seems like in the past year Aboriginal is the only word you hear and the teachers are saying, “What about my other students?” I know it had to be done for other reasons in this school...to keep it open...to get funding for another school...but yes, everybody is getting a little bit frustrated.

Iris

When asked whether she felt “What’s good for some is good for all” was a belief held by her colleagues, Jane agreed and gave this explanation to the researcher:

Researcher: Is that a good thing?
Jane: I think it’s an *easier* thing.

Researcher: Easier to get more people on board?

Jane: Yes, especially for teachers who feel overwhelmed with the amount of data and assessment that they are required to do now. I think that asking them to make a real shift in the way that they teach is overwhelming. So I think that the “good for one; good for all” is a good way of broadening the spectrum.

Chris agreed that the belief in what’s good for one is good for all was held by several of her colleagues. She acknowledged the tension on staff regarding the focus on Aboriginal students and felt that the underlying cause was a result of decisions around resource allocation:

Sometimes, you know, it’s “all that money for this?” That’s just about the extent of it and what I am hearing.

Chris

Although there were teachers at both St. Timothy’s and St. Mary’s whose responses gave evidence of confusion around the definition and enactment of equity, more than half the teachers interviewed at St. Timothy’s made reference to this value. For several teachers, equity was articulated as “What’s good for some is good for all.” A frustration surfaced with what was perceived as a focus on Aboriginal students at the expense of other students. Reasons given for this tension included inequitable resource allocation and school survival. Also
referenced by the teachers at St. Timothy’s was the impact their principal had on their understanding of and enactment of equity as it related to the FNMI policy implementation. Leadership and its impact on teacher sense-making and agency will be explored in the next section.

**Leadership**

In her 2006 study using problem framing to analyze the micro-processes of policy implementation, Coburn identified leadership as an important variable in the sense-making process during education policy implementation:

School leaders with greater authority…and greater access to resources have more influence in efforts to define problems in a particular manner. These problem frames, in turn create powerful frameworks within which teachers and others make sense of new policy initiatives and practices.

Leadership was acknowledged by teachers at both schools in this study as having impacted their sense-making around the implementation of the FNMI policy. Several teachers perceived the Director of Education in this school board as fully supportive of the policy implementation:

I believe that our director’s vision is for this to be a community centre in our school where we have different agencies, counseling agencies, daycare centres, and working in close partnership with a lot of the First Nation partners...I think it begins at the top. I know that with our
director, it’s something that she has embraced wholeheartedly and of course, when the boss is on board, you are on board. But she puts her money where her mouth is and she’s made it very easy for teachers to get resources to implement this in your class.

Chris

The director’s vision was clearly communicated to the principal of St. Timothy’s when she was appointed to the school, and Janet knew that she was fully supported as she moved forward on this vision:

When I came into the school I was told specifically that your job is to engage community and to create a different model of education. I was put there for a very specific reason. And we did it. I know when we take these risk-taking moves, the director’s got my back. If something happens I can pick up the phone and say okay this is the situation…and I know she’s got my back.

Janet

Janet believed that the Director’s clarity of focus and purpose came directly from the policy mandate:

But without that policy she wouldn’t have put any of it in place. We wouldn’t have gone in this direction. So I think it was the policy that brought about the changes. I don’t mean what’s in the policy; I mean the
fact that there is a policy. Do you get what I am saying? Our director did what she did because there’s a policy and that’s it.

Because of Janet’s previous experience as the principal of Aboriginal Education and her familiarity with the policy document and the implementation process in her school board, she was able to guide the policy implementation at the school level. Teachers recognized the change in focus that Janet’s leadership made:

I think when our current principal came in here, that’s really when the focus had changed in the school. I think we were kind of designated an Aboriginal community school the year before but we really didn’t know how to implement that or begin that process. So until this principal came, nothing really happened. So in her first month here our principal had the director of education come here and share her vision with the staff.

Jane

Most teachers at St. Timothy’s reported a clarity of purpose with the policy implementation process and a trust in Janet’s leadership:

With Janet and her expertise, I’ve noticed this year more than others...even teaching the teachers...what we need to do based on the document, based on the board initiatives, based on what she started as an Aboriginal lead...
Chris

When you have a leader who is comfortable then you give it a shot. You have teachers who step outside of their comfort zone.

Tammy

Tammy’s comment speaks to the powerful sense-making cue leadership can be in promoting teacher agency during policy implementation. Teachers trusted that Janet knew what she was doing and were willing to take risks to implement policy changes. There was a drawback to Janet’s leadership that she admitted could impact teacher agency:

Sometimes I think I’m overwhelming for my teachers. Yes, I’m pretty pushy...I do think they have a lot on their plates and sometimes I’m focused on Aboriginal because that’s who I am so it changes things.

Janet’s focus and passion as a leader in her school could explain some of the tension reported by some teachers regarding the perception of equity and inclusion discussed previously. One teacher shared her frustration with the over-emphasis on Aboriginal students:

What I’ve been hearing a lot of is that a lot of teachers seem to be getting frustrated because they feel there’s too much focus on that. You hear comments that it’s too much focus on Aboriginals and Aboriginal activities. Some even think sometimes that we work in an Aboriginal
school. You hear that comment quite a bit. You do have people saying that...oh man, why them? Look at everybody else.

Iris

The strong leadership at St. Timothy’s impacted sense-making during policy implementation and influenced teacher agency. When the teachers’ sense-making was aligned with the goals and actions of the principal, teachers felt supported and comfortable with implementing the policy changes:

I think that if you have a leader who shares her vision with you and lets you know what the expectations are, then I think that most teachers are willing to accept the challenge and try.

Jane

When the teacher sense-making did not align with the goals and actions of the principal, teacher agency was constrained. Iris felt that teachers could not openly share their frustrations with the policy implementation process for fear of being considered racist.

Everybody hesitates to talk about it because I find that if you bring it up there’s an assumption that you are prejudiced or you have something against it...but it’s not that. But when you voice your opinion sometimes some people take it the wrong way so you are either quiet or you talk in little groups and that doesn’t solve the problem. It just makes it worse.

Iris
Janet’s strong leadership may suppress the ability of some teachers to act on their concerns about the direction of the policy implementation.

The leadership at St. Mary’s, although perceived as supportive, was referenced less frequently by the teachers interviewed.

Well I can’t say enough good things about the principal. I hardly talk to her but if I have something to deal with I’ll speak to her and the vice principal is of course a hundred and ten percent behind it. So when you work with a team like that...

Derek

References to leadership at St.Mary’s tended to focus on Cathy’s support of the policy implementation through the purchase of resources.

Our principal has had a big push and put a lot of monetary resources towards buying literacy materials with an Aboriginal component. She really made sure she bought good quality resources. So if you don’t have the school admin guiding you with the resources and aligning the resources with your direction. You can have the staff working, but if you don’t have the resources and vice versa. Again we are fortunate that the awareness is here and that admin takes the framework seriously.

Kelly

The leadership style preferred by the principal at St. Mary’s was directed at building the leadership capacity of others on her staff:
As principals we get the documents but until you try to give it to teachers and try to give them the techniques and the tools, give them the training. Teachers teaching teachers I think is the way to go. I really do because they know their class. They know how to fit it into their curriculum. They know what other teachers will like and what they won’t like.

Cathy

Cathy’s leadership style promoted teacher agency in the implementation process. To help her teachers make sense of the policy initiatives, she believed it was important to show teachers how policies align. She believed that this sense-making process would reduce the stress teachers may be feeling when faced with multiple initiatives.

So I am trying to fit it all in so it makes sense. So it doesn’t always feel like you are doing something extra. What do we do that we naturally do where we can fit in these different expectations of culture? Kids need to see themselves in the literature and they need to see their culture. So that’s one approach that I took and I was explicit with staff about that. This was one way to exposing the culture to all our students. That’s one example of how I take the framework and make it doable for staff.

Cathy

Although Cathy did not have the extensive experience that Janet had with the FNMI policy implementation, her leadership did help her teachers to make
sense of the expectations by aligning with other initiatives such as the *Education for All* document. This helped reduce the perception of overload and positively impacted teacher agency. The tension evidenced at St. Timothy’s regarding the principal’s focus on Aboriginal students was not an issue at St. Mary’s. One teacher did mention that sometimes a reminder that they are also a dual track French Immersion school needed to be made; but otherwise, teachers did not report that they felt constrained to voice their concerns:

There’s a little bit of an undercurrent. You will hear people say, we have to promote our French Immersion program as well. When we do our school promotions in February we are splashing our Aboriginal culture on the posters and flyers and people are saying, “Hey we are a dual track school, so let’s not forget the Immersion.” So that has cropped up.

Kelly

Cathy’s leadership approach of aligning policy initiatives to help teachers make connections and to reduce the perception of overload could have a detrimental impact on policy implementation. As Spillane et al. (2006) cautions:

Ideas may be seen as more familiar than they actually are. Thus, when implementing agents perceive an instructional idea in policy, the idea may be over interpreted as essentially the same as the belief or practice that the teachers already hold. (p. 53)
This over simplification was evidenced in how the leaders at both school sites framed the FNMI policy message. The principal at St. Timothy’s framed the policy message in this way:

No I think if you are a smart person you take that policy and you see that it means, “Be a good person and a good teacher to everybody in front of you.” It doesn’t mean, “Do something special for these guys.” It means that if this is what they need to be successful then it’s good for everybody.

Janet

The following response was from the previous vice principal at St. Mary’s:

When you look at the policy there is no expectation of extra work. And I think that is one of the things that teachers tend to say about new policies. I mean, “Another initiative means more work.” But in this policy, when you look at it, it is all about changing perceptions and relationships. Most of this document is about making things comfortable for kids and that’s not something we don’t do for every other kid in the school.

Rob

What is noteworthy about these responses is not only their similar conclusions that the policy was good for every student; rather, the fact that both respondents, as a result of their previous roles, had a thorough knowledge of
the policy document. Janet was the Aboriginal Lead for the school board for three years, and Rob worked for three months the previous year with the Aboriginal Education Office in Toronto. In addition, both Janet and Rob held leadership positions in their current school. Their oversimplification of the expectations of the policy could impact teacher sense-making and implementation. At St. Timothy’s, one teacher’s sense-making may have been impacted by the principal’s framing of the policy as she considered the policy redundant. In her opinion they were already doing a good job of helping all of their students:

I mean we have been a successful school before this year and we have always done a really good job of trying to help all of our students and recognizing their differences and we all really try to do our best and we are all really professional and it can be a little much [referring to the policy].

Kate

Leadership can have a powerful impact on teacher sense-making and individual agency during policy implementation. The leader has the responsibility of making sense of the policy document and communicating the policy messages clearly to the teachers. In addition, leaders provide the emotional and resource support to promote teacher agency during implementation. As the data in this study showed, leadership may also be detrimental to sense-making and individual agency if the leader does not
understand the policy and is not able to clearly communicate the messages to the teachers. Misinterpretation of the policy expectations could result. Leadership may also be detrimental to implementation when teachers do not feel comfortable voicing concerns and fears during implementation. Surface compliance and feelings of frustration may result.

**Summary of Findings on Sense-making and Individual Agency**

This chapter presented findings related to how sense-making enabled or constrained individual agency of teachers during policy implementation. Making sense requires the noticing and selecting of new information and the mapping of this new information onto existing knowledge structures and beliefs with the purpose of assimilating, accommodating or rejecting the new information. Not surprisingly, the findings revealed that teachers who had prior knowledge and experience with the culture, history and learning styles of Aboriginal students were more comfortable with making changes in their instructional practices. It also revealed that new experiences combined with reflective professional practice could promote teacher agency in incorporating policy expectations. Most teachers in this study were unfamiliar with the FNMI education policy document, although many were aware of implementation actions related to the policy. This lack of knowledge of the specifics of the document could impact sense-making and individual agency as the teachers needed to rely on the policy interpretation of others. In this study the principals at each school were relied on to interpret and communicate the policy messages. Their framing of the message may have oversimplified the
intent of the policy expectations; however, their direction and support was viewed by the teachers as promoting their agency during implementation. At St. Timothy’s the strong leadership may have constrained agency as some teachers were frustrated with the direction of the implementation and were uncomfortable voicing their concerns for fear of being perceived as racist. A belief in promoting equity and inclusion in the education system impacted teacher sense-making and promoted teacher agency in three ways: creating welcoming environments, increasing parental involvement, and promoting community partnerships.

Enacting equity and inclusion in these domains was not only a result of sense-making influencing individual agency, but also sense-making connected to the mediator of organizational culture and structure. Chapter 6 will explore the impact of organizational structure and culture on teacher sense-making during policy implementation.
CHAPTER SIX: SENSE-MAKING AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND CULTURE

I find once the policy came in like you said four years ago, and its going into classrooms and its more exposed in the hallways, or the principal encourages everybody to recognize the First Nation...before I felt like I was the only one in the pod. Wanda
Explored in chapter five, the findings revealed that policy implementation was impacted by teacher agency or capacity to act. These actions occurred within a particular context that shaped the teacher’s sense-making. The context pertinent to this study is the structure and culture of the two school sites within one school board. Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan (2002) state that, 

...agency must be understood in terms of its interplay with the larger context in which it is embedded. The agency of teachers is part of a complex dynamic, interwoven with the structural and cultural features of their school environment and the larger societal structure and culture of which they are a part. (p. 62)

Datnow et al. define structure as “the organizational arrangements..., governance structure, scheduling of time, and rules and regulations. Culture is
defined as including “general norms of behaviour, beliefs... and basic knowledge about how things work” (p. 62).

The evidence in this section relates to how structure and culture mediate the sense-making of teachers and influence policy implementation. The sense-making cues that teachers extracted related to organizational structure and culture will be examined. The first part of this chapter will focus on the how structure influences teacher sense-making and policy implementation and will examine teacher references to these structural features: physical plant, student population, partnerships, principal leadership, programming, resources, staffing practices, and staff. The second part of this chapter will examine teacher references to the school culture including norms of behaviour, beliefs, and knowledge of how things work and how these aspects of culture influenced their sense-making during policy implementation. Both structural features and cultural norms have embedded sense-making cues that either promote or constrain implementation. Although there were many commonalities between the two school sites regarding how these cues impacted teacher sense-making, site-specific differences were evident in the teacher responses related to the physical plant, the student populations, partnerships and leadership. These findings are presented first.

**Structural Features: The Physical Plant**

As was indicated, the two schools in this study differ in appearance and in geographic location. St. Timothy’s is located in downtown urban site, while
St. Mary’s is located in a rural community about ten minutes from the city. St. Timothy’s school building is old and under review for closure. St. Mary’s school building, while not new, is esthetically appealing and well maintained. The teacher responses in this section were mainly from the teachers at St. Timothy’s and revealed how they mediated what they considered to be a constraint to policy implementation. The following reference is representative of the way in which the teachers at St. Timothy’s viewed the physical appearance of their school.

The structure is not warm and fuzzy and inviting. There’s not a big entrance. There is not “Welcome, come in!” There’s not that feeling on the outside of the building that this is the place you want to be. You can’t even park your car. There are big clumps of pavement everywhere. I mean it doesn’t even look like a safe building, but when you go inside it’s the human beings that make the difference and that’s the truth of it.

Tammy

The teachers at St. Timothy’s made sense of the negative appearance of their school and acted on this sense-making by making improvements. This in turn impacted how they perceived the inclusion of the Aboriginal culture in their school.

I think when you walk in the door you see right away that the culture is accepted, that it’s celebrated and that they are welcome here...You can
see when you walk in the door that our school looks different than other schools.

Jane

When you see the bulletin board by the office your attention goes to the students right away. You notice that we do have a larger Aboriginal population in our school and what you notice is that they are smiling. They look positive in the pictures. They are having fun at school. I like that. It shows that they have a positive connection and comfort level with the school.

Donna

These teachers’ responses reveal the positive effect these structural changes to the physical plant, even though they were small changes, had on how they perceived their Aboriginal students and their agency to implement the policy’s mandate of inclusion.

The physical changes the staff made in response to the FNMI policy extended to their classroom environments as well. Several teachers at St. Timothy’s mentioned the inclusion of Aboriginal culture in the form of symbols at prayer tables in their classrooms. Chris shares that these symbols reveal that the Aboriginal culture is accepted and “embedded” in their school and credits her principal with making this physical change.
[Even in] the room where we are sitting we have the symbols, and the sacred parts of the First Nation culture are very evident throughout the school. I know with our principal, especially this year, every classroom has a prayer centre and we incorporate First Nations spirituality with Catholic teachings. We have the medicine wheel in every classroom. We have greetings at the door in English, French and Ojibway. It’s just that inclusion where we are all together and my non-Aboriginal students are just as versed now in the Ojibway teachings and culture from this area as my First Nations students. So it’s just become very embedded within the whole school setting.

Chris

The visual symbols of the Aboriginal culture in the classroom and throughout the school acted as cues for teacher sense-making. Teachers perceived the Aboriginal culture as “embedded.” This could impact policy implementation in two ways. Because of their exposure, the teachers may feel more ready to embrace the policy expectations or, conversely, they may feel like they have already incorporated the policy into their practice because of the evidence around them. The principal at St. Timothy believed that these small changes did result in teacher sense-making that led to more enduring changes:

I think we’ve changed classroom practice in our school a lot and that is in creating a welcoming environment. For example, simple changes. They have medicine wheels in their classrooms at their prayer centre.
That’s the practice. And when it’s visible in the classroom, they slowly start to change what they are doing. Until it’s in your face every day, you don’t make those changes. And even the way they talk to each other. When people walk into Wanda’s room, “Aanni, aanni”; when you go to the Hub, “Aanni, aanni” and that’s a practice that has changed too. Having the [Aboriginal] Hub in the school changes the practice of the whole school. That wasn’t an easy adjustment for teachers. That was a classroom that they had to give up. We had to move people so they could have that room. So that was a shift right there.

Janet

At St. Timothy’s the physical changes, including visible cultural symbols, appear to have impacted teacher sense-making of the policy implementation in a positive way. At St. Mary’s only one teacher made reference to the importance of these visible cultural symbols, but his comment also highlighted a significant structural difference between St. Timothy’s and St. Mary’s. St. Mary’s has French immersion programming.

We are a school with three languages and we need to build on that. We do have the students come up and sing O’ Canada. But I keep on saying, and I’ve been saying it for three years now that you also need to be doing it in the newsletters. We are unique in that sense because we have three languages. We are not selling it enough. Now I have $500 and so we have that quiet centre so we will probably build in a bit more of an
influence with borders and posters. We have benches that we’ve ordered and they will say welcome in all three languages. I am probably going to get more borders and posters...because one student said to us two years ago, “Well I don’t see anything in my room that’s Aboriginal.”

Mike

Like the principal at St. Timothy’s, Mike did not feel that these changes needed to be big.

We don’t have to go into overkill with it. Maybe it’s just the medicine wheel. You know what I mean? Maybe everybody has that in their classroom. It’s just something that everybody has that’s there. It doesn’t have to be overkill. Just something simple like these borders makes a huge difference.

Mike

The teacher references to the changes to the physical plant that promoted the Aboriginal culture were much more prevalent at St. Timothy’s and appeared to have made an impact on how teachers viewed their agency during policy implementation. These physical changes impacted teacher awareness of the Aboriginal culture in their school. Promoting awareness of Aboriginal culture is one of the main goals of the FNMI education policy document. At St. Mary’s, although some Aboriginal cultural symbols were
evident in the school, teachers did not reference in the interviews the impact of these symbols on their sense-making during policy implementation.

**Structural Features: Student Population**

Both schools had large Aboriginal populations relative to other schools in this school board. The Aboriginal population at St. Timothy’s was estimated to be approximately 40 percent, mainly urban Aboriginals; and the Aboriginal population at St. Mary’s was approximately 20 percent, mainly from the First Nation reserve nearby. Another important difference to acknowledge was the socio-economic status of the families at both school sites. At St. Timothy’s most of the students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, had family incomes at or below the poverty line. At St. Timothy’s most students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, had families earning mid-level incomes. Dealing with the issues related to poverty impacted the sense-making of teachers at St. Timothy’s around the FNMI policy implementation. For a few teachers the additional funding available for Aboriginal students and a focus on their needs was a concern:

I mean we are good at helping whoever does not have a lunch but it seems with the Aboriginal there’s always more help. The non-Aboriginal kids are questioned, “How come you don’t have a lunch?” and a lot of questions...but the Aboriginal...but I know the problem is the funding...but I find that myself and a lot of teachers find that there’s a lot more focus on Aboriginal students now.
Although there were not many comments like Iris’, it is important to note this sense-making of a few teachers at St. Timothy’s as it could constrain policy implementation.

The composition of the student population at St. Timothy’s impacted how some teachers perceived the enactment of the FNMI policy. Their worldview of the importance of equity and inclusion created some tension for the teachers as they felt that by focusing on the needs of Aboriginal students, the other students whom they perceived also as needy were being disadvantaged. The composition of the students at St. Mary’s did not appear to impact the sense-making of those teachers in the same way, although a few teachers mentioned the need to also focus on the students in the French Immersion programming. Their concern was more related to programming differences, rather than student population differences.

**Structural Features: Partnerships**

The geographic location of each school site influenced the nature of the partnerships each school had developed. The rural location of St. Mary’s with its close proximity to the First Nations reserve influenced teacher sense-making in meeting the needs of Aboriginal students. The partnership with the reserve provided many teachers with cultural awareness and support for their Aboriginal students. Mike and Kelly’s comments are representative of comments made by several other staff at St. Mary’s.
I just feel like we are becoming more aware. I don’t know if I’m being naive but I feel like especially having the relationships ...maybe because we are unique and we do have the reserve and that relationship that I’ve kind of created with them. I feel like we are more aware and it’s kind of like always in the back of my mind when we are planning things.

Mike

When I put the phone call in to the education officer on reserve and she actually did a home visit and the child started to come to school. So you have that other support system for attendance which is huge.

Kelly

Their proximity to the reserve was perceived as a positive structural feature by the teachers. Their relationship with the reserve and the education officer was viewed as supportive of the implementation of the FNMI policy.

In contrast, the partnerships that St. Timothy’s had developed were with local agencies and community groups. These partnerships provided financial and counseling support for the students but also increased the visibility of the Aboriginal culture and increased teacher awareness and comfort. All of the teachers interviewed referenced the support these agencies gave to their school. Chris and Jane’s references show the effect these agencies have had on their sense-making during policy implementation.
We now have the Aboriginal Hub downstairs. We have Isaiah’s program in the school. We had a smudging ceremony for the teachers and a circle discussion just because we had some major issues going on with the students that were really upsetting.

Chris

We have developed community partnerships. So we have partnerships with Native elders like Isaiah who has been in to many of the classrooms and shared teachings. We have the Eagle staff celebration in the gym. Drumming is...you hear drumming our school all the time...The Aboriginal culture is just way more visible in this school.

Jane

Although the teachers saw these community and agency partnerships as supportive and beneficial to policy implementation, at least one teacher at St. Timothy’s felt that their students and parents were disadvantaged because they did not have a partnership with a First Nation reserve like St. Mary’s did:

We don’t have the extra funds. The reserves have a lot of money for the school. You also have the parents who are in need. The reserve has resources specifically for the parents. We don’t have any of that. We have the Friendship Centre but...

Tammy
Tammy’s sense-making around her school’s lack of a partnership with a reserve reveals her perception of a disadvantage her school faces with the implementation of the FNMI policy expectations.

Similar to St. Mary’s, the multiple community partnerships were viewed by the teachers at St. Timothy’s as supportive of efforts to meet the needs of their Aboriginal students. Connection to supports from a reserve, however, was viewed by one teacher as a more ideal partnership in meeting Aboriginal student and parent needs. These partnerships were a structural feature that supported teacher sense-making of the enactment of the FNMI policy expectations.

**Structural Features: Leadership**

The impact of leadership on teacher agency was explored in Chapter Five (pp. 107-117). In this section on organizational structure, leadership is looked at from the perspective of how the principal created or promoted structures that influenced teacher sense-making during policy implementation.

At St. Timothy’s the principal who was the first Aboriginal Lead for the school board promoted leadership structures that were consistent with Aboriginal values. One of her staff members described her in this way:

You value and you build relationships and nothing is hierarchy. Janet is a circle. We are all equal.

Tammy
Janet moved from a traditional office, which had only enough space for a desk and a chair, to a classroom that was structured like a comfortable meeting area with a round table and plenty of chairs. Janet promoted her school’s mission in this way:

    We are going to love your kids like we are their parents. So we don’t mention academics whatsoever. It’s about “we are going to care for your child so you don’t have to worry. When they are in our building, don’t worry about them”…it’s all about subtle messaging... “Everybody relax. It’s like home. Come on in. Feel comfortable. Don’t feel intimidated.”

Her subtle messaging extended to her choice of clothing:

    Also we don’t wear suits to work. Every once in a while we dress up but we don’t do it on a regular basis because then we are fitting into that hierarchy again.

She supported her staff through challenging times using traditional Aboriginal ways like Healing circles and smudging ceremonies.

    We had an elder here and our principal set up a healing circle. She did internal release so she was responsible and took all the students and teachers were more than welcome to participate but they were not forced to.

Tammy
Most of the teachers at St. Timothy’s made sense of Janet’s leadership structures as supporting the implementation of the FNMI policy expectations through her modeling of Aboriginal values.

When you have someone in the school who is a leader and who is very open and wants you to learn about the culture, that’s where it’s open. That’s what makes everyone open. That’s a very positive thing.

Nancy

Janet also promoted leadership in her staff by giving them opportunities to lead:

But again, I allow them leadership opportunities. I could say, no, no, I’ll do it. But that would be the wrong move. They also know that next year there is no vice principal. So I’ve already had a lot of people come up to me and say, “Okay, next year I will do this, and this, and this.”...It’s that whole circle right? They are amazing people.

Janet viewed the leadership contributions of her staff using an Aboriginal model. The circle has no hierarchy. This leadership structure is inclusive and supports the agency of teachers during policy implementation.

Cathy, the principal at St. Mary’s, had a similar belief in promoting teacher leadership. Part of the FNMI education policy framework implementation included teacher in-service on an Aboriginal Tool Kit. Cathy stated that,
If I had gone to the training instead of the teacher it wouldn’t have been the same. I know that teacher is going to highlight points for the teachers on what will be useful in the classroom. I think that because she is a teacher and works with the curriculum and the students, frontline, it’s going to make a huge difference because she is going to share this with her colleagues in a way much different from me.

Cathy’s leadership during policy implementation focused on assisting her teachers in making connections among all the different education initiatives and expectations:

So I am trying to fit it all in so it makes sense. So it doesn’t always feel like you are doing something extra.

Cathy also saw her role as supporting her staff with Aboriginal resources. She wrote a grant proposal for funding from the Rotary Club for literacy resources to support Aboriginal students.

I got almost $5000 and so I made sure that I had books where the Aboriginal students could see themselves and they are all leveled.

Cathy

Leaders create structures in their school community that can impact how teachers make sense during policy implementation. In this study, by engaging in the modeling of Aboriginal values, the supporting of teacher leadership and the aligning and connecting of the multiple demands of
teacher’s work, the principals created structures that influenced the sense-making of teachers in ways that supported the FNMI policy implementation.

**Structural Features: Programming**

Curricular programming and new initiatives are consistent across school boards as mandated by the Ministry of Education. The school board in this study, for example, encouraged teachers to engage in differentiated instruction, an initiative promoted province-wide in the Ministry document *Education For All* (2006). Several teachers in this study referenced their realization that differentiated instruction was an instructional strategy that supported the needs of their Aboriginal learners. Like her colleagues, Donna saw a strong connection between the use of differentiated instruction and meeting the needs of Aboriginal students.

Differentiated instruction works beautifully. The first time I heard about it and it was through workshops at the board, I’ll be honest, I thought it was a notion. I didn’t think it was explained very thoroughly. Then last year we had one workshop that really clicked for me...I have been able to use differentiated instruction with more confidence to make sure everybody achieves some success.

Donna
The focus on literacy blocks was another initiative that some of the teachers referenced as valuable in promoting the FNMI policy mandates to improve literacy rates for Aboriginal students:

I don’t think I know enough about the policy but most of the school routines are organized around successful learning strategies for students. When I speak about this I am looking at the language arts and it’s good to have a huge block of time for literacy for uninterrupted guided reading and so on…I’ve seen more change as a result of that focus than with anything else.

Debbie

Although not intended specifically for Aboriginal students, some teachers in this study used their understanding of these initiatives to connect to their perception of the FNMI policy goals. These teachers viewed literacy blocks as a successful strategy for all of their students, including Aboriginal students. This sense-making promoted their sense of efficacy during the FNMI policy implementation.

Another Ministry-sponsored program that teachers at both schools found helpful in supporting them in making sense of the FNMI policy was the Native as a Second Language program. Kelly and Jane’s comments are representative of the sense-making of the teachers around the impact of the NSL program for meeting the expectations of the FNMI policy.
At the school that was closed, the NSL program first started there and the reserve had an influence on that to get it started. I think we became more aware of Native traditions earlier on because of the NSL instructor’s influence.

Kelly

Well I think when they brought a teacher into the school and offered a Native language program that really changed things because before it was just non-existent. Even just having our Native Language teacher in her own classroom, having a space that can be decorated. She also does a really good job of encouraging.

Jane

The Native as a Second language program promoted teacher awareness of the culture and language of Aboriginals. In addition, because the teacher in this program was of Aboriginal descent, this teacher acted as an in-school resource for the teachers. Any questions or uncertainty these teachers had about the Aboriginal culture or learning styles, they could ask their colleague. Inclusion of the NSL programming in the school was made sense of as promoting the implementation of the FNMI policy as it increased cultural awareness and provided colleague support.

Along with the Ministry mandated programming and initiatives, schools develop or seek out programming to meet their unique local needs. This was
evidenced at St. Mary’s when teachers planned and implemented a celebration night on the reserve and at St.Timothy’s when teachers organized student-led conferencing. Both initiatives arose out of a need identified by teachers and both initiatives were planned and organized by teachers.

What was important in our school was our first annual event of going to the reserve last spring. That was really important because the feedback was very positive.

Kelly

I know that the junior division has tried just recently and it was a success. It was the parent-child conferencing and that was a beauty that worked.

Donna

These school level initiatives were a result of teacher sense-making around meeting Aboriginal student needs. Their sense-making promoted their agency to implement these new approaches that in turn reinforced their sense of efficacy during policy implementation.

Programming from the Ministry, the school board and the school impacted how teachers made sense of implementation. In some cases the programming informed their knowledge of how to meet Aboriginal student needs, and in other cases the programming provided direct cultural and colleague support during policy implementation.
The availability of resources to support policy implementation had a positive impact on how teachers made sense of the changes they were being asked to implement. Funding was available to school boards in Ontario to assist in the FNMI policy implementation. Several teachers in this study referenced literacy resources as an important support in their focus on meeting Aboriginal student needs.

There’s a book room that’s full of resources and books that have Aboriginal everything in them...history...teachings...all about Elders...

Nancy

I know in the classroom library, the board has been really great. We have stories of First Nations people, biographies, and legends and we have whole book baskets dedicated to Aboriginal learners and we have about five or six bins in each class...And you can just see all of a sudden that there are connections being made. And they feel proud. A lot of times it’s their stories, their culture being promoted and its pride, absolute pride.

Chris

These culturally inclusive literacy resources were important for reducing the achievement gap, one of the goals of the FNMI policy. It is clear from several references that teachers found these resources valuable. One final teacher
reference is important to note in this section. This teacher identified a resource that not only promoted Aboriginal culture, but also promoted an Aboriginal historical perspective of first contact.

We have a wonderful reading kit where you see the First Nation’s culture is embedded in the reading selections and they actually teach the settlement of Canada not just from the explorer’s point of view but from the First Nation’s point of view as well.

Chris

Access to more resources like this could increase teacher knowledge and understanding of the devastating impact of colonization on the Aboriginal peoples and promote their engagement in policy actions.

The primary resource referenced by the teachers in this study was focused on improving the literacy rate of Aboriginal students. Given the provincial focus on literacy in the past several years, it was not surprising that teachers made sense of these literacy-based resources as important in helping them reduce the achievement gap. Some teachers also perceived these resources as important for increasing their cultural and historical awareness. Increased cultural awareness impacted teacher confidence and efficacy during policy implementation.

**Structural Features: Staffing Practices**
Teacher responses revealed their support for appropriate staffing to meet the needs of their Aboriginal students. Two teachers at St. Mary’s commented on the effectiveness of an Aboriginal teacher at their school who lived on reserve:

We had a teacher who lived on reserve. She’s now at the high school. The beauty of having her here was she had the contacts on reserve. They were her neighbours. They were her family. So she was able to get people in and set that up.

Kelly

We had an Aboriginal teacher from reserve who was here before. She is now at the high school teaching art. She was amazing. She did all kinds of art with our kids. Her style of discipline...her relaxed attitude was amazing for me to see. Her class was so calm. You don’t have to use the same discipline style.

Debbie

Not only was her presence viewed as supportive of Aboriginal learners, but she also helped other teachers understand how to meet the needs of Aboriginal students and strengthened the relationship the school had with the reserve.

Some teachers also acknowledged what they saw as a change in recent years in the strategic placement of staff that supported Aboriginal students. Mike’s comment is echoed by several teachers at his school:
I think they do make an effort to staff administration according to the needs of the school. Like we have a returning vice principal who has a strong Aboriginal background. I think they do try to place staff appropriately in schools with high Aboriginal population. Who is the best fit and who can communicate openly with these parents and understand where these kids are coming from?

Mike

Appropriate staff support for Aboriginal students was still viewed by teachers in this study as inadequate. Hiring practices were identified as problematic:

We have to look at hiring practices and working with unions, not only board policy. But if you are going to effectively use your human resources and you have a new teacher who has some Aboriginal background or expertise, we can’t get her here because we are forced to follow the hiring protocol that is in our collective agreement. So there may have to be some room in that collective agreement to allow you to effectively place staff if need be.

Rob

Rob, along with several of his colleagues, perceived strategic hiring of Aboriginal teaching staff as beneficial to policy implementation but acknowledged that current hiring practices were prohibitive.
One teacher at St. Timothy’s mentioned the importance that consistency in administration had for building trust with Aboriginal parents:

We seem to change administration every two years. I would say that our current principal has done a really good job at making the physical building more welcoming but because she has been here only one year, I don’t think she has been able to...I mean when parents see how quickly we change principals here, they don’t really try to bond with them. I can see that with kids too.

Kate

Teachers made sense of staffing as an important structural feature in promoting the implementation of the FNMI policy. The presence of Aboriginal teachers on staff was viewed by teachers as supportive of the policy implementation by building cultural awareness, by making connections with Aboriginal communities, and by providing teachers with colleague support. It was noted that current hiring practices in this board constrained the hiring of Aboriginal teachers. Consistency in administration was also viewed by one teacher as beneficial in implementing the goals of the policy through building trusting relationships with Aboriginal parents.

**Structural Features: Staffs**

Consistency in administration was seen as desirable for the FNMI policy implementation and so too was consistency in teaching staffs. Both St.
Timothy’s and St. Mary’s viewed their staff positively because they had been together for a while and were committed to their school communities. Several teachers at both schools referenced the importance staff consistency in supporting student outcomes. Jane and Leslie’s references are representative of this viewpoint:

So the staff that are here are committed to staying here and are committed to the students that are here.

Jane

I think that’s because a good number of us either have our children going here or have had our children here at this school. In other words, we are from this community.

Leslie

The Aboriginal support staff was viewed by all teachers at St. Timothy’s as very valuable in meeting the needs of Aboriginal students.

Mona came into my classroom after the EQAO testing and the kids were fried and she said, “We need to do something to decompress. So she’s having them make key chains with the four colours. You don’t get that at every school. We are really lucky here.

Chris
We have Isaiah who comes in to the grade 6 class and we have Mona who comes in and does beading and talks to the girls about self-esteem.

Tammy

The presence of Aboriginal support staff was more visible at St. Timothy’s because of their community connections with the Aboriginal Best Start Hub. Teachers saw the support staff directly supporting their Aboriginal students. This promoted cultural awareness for the teachers and increased their knowledge of the needs of Aboriginal learners.

The Native language teacher at each school was also viewed as valuable for supporting teachers and students and bringing their individual gifts to the school community:

Our previous Aboriginal language teacher here was very much into the drumming and a lot of exposure to the cultural activities. Our present Aboriginal teacher is very much into the language and the technology and he gets kids involved in very different ways.

Cathy

She’ll share her teachings and her understanding. She doesn’t share a lot of her own personal story with the staff but just her being in the school changes the feel of the school. And there will be times I know when she has gone into a teacher’s room under a lot of stress and she says, “Ok I’m going to come in and I’m going to smudge your room.”
Whether or not they are familiar with how that is significant but that’s her way of saying I see that you are under stress and this is how I am going to help.

Janet

Staffing was another important structural feature for promoting teacher sense-making during policy implementation. Commitment, consistency, and credibility were qualities in a staff that teachers cited as important for supporting them during policy implementation.

**Summary of Structural features and Teacher sense-making**

The structures that impacted teacher sense-making in this study included the physical plant, the student population, partnerships, programming, resources, staffing practices, staffs, and leadership. These structures impacted teacher sense-making during policy implementation by providing conceptual hooks or cues for understanding the policy implementation. The visible cultural signs in each school promoted awareness and acceptance of the Aboriginal culture in the school environment. Programming such as literacy blocks and differentiated instruction gave teachers opportunities to meet the needs of Aboriginal students. All partnerships were seen by teachers as supportive of their efforts to assist Aboriginal learners. The partnership with the First Nation reserve was viewed as particularly beneficial in the implementation of the policy goals. The purchase of books which were inclusive of Aboriginal culture and history gave
teachers needed resources to meet the expectations of the FNMI policy. Teacher responses also revealed their support of hiring more Aboriginal teachers and acknowledged that current hiring practices constrain this process. Teachers at both schools referenced the consistency and commitment of their staff as keys to policy implementation success. Lastly, the school principal was viewed as supportive in promoting structures that enable policy implementation.

In the next section the impact of organizational culture on teacher sense-making during policy implementation is examined. The evidence is organized according to norms of behaviour, beliefs, and knowledge of how things work.

**Organizational Culture: Norms of Behaviour**

The organizational structures described above are strongly connected to organizational culture. Culture includes what teachers believe, how they behave, and how day-to-day life unfolds in the school. Culture impacts and is impacted by structure, agency, and messaging. This section will explore how norms of behavior, beliefs, and knowledge of how things work acted as sense-making cues for teachers that either promoted or constrained policy implementation.

Teachers referenced three main norms that they considered supportive of the policy implementation: collaboration, collegial support, and openness.

Several teachers at both St. Timothy and St. Mary’s highlighted the collaborative culture at their schools in ways similar to Kelly and Kate:
You know this staff, and it’s going to sound like a fairytale but it’s the honest to goodness truth, works divisionally in planning. So the implementation of this document will work on our staff because the collaboration is already here.

Kelly

We want to collaborate and it can be intimidating especially a new principal when they come in and we are doing a PLC and we are running it. We know what direction we need to go in. We are very dynamic...a fantastic team.

Kate

Closely linked to collaboration is collegial support which Jane and Wanda, teachers at St. Timothy’s, referenced as promoting risk taking and respect for the Aboriginal culture.

I think we are a very cohesive staff and supportive of each other. If anybody is willing to try something, others will support in whatever way they can.

Jane

The teachers are very supportive. I don’t know how they react with me drumming with the students sometimes because the drums do get loud and the singing does get loud sometimes, but they respect it and they don’t complain.
The cultural norm referenced most frequently as supportive of policy implementation by several teachers at both schools was openness and acceptance.

People are very open about having the culture here. I’ve never seen it as open as it is here.

We have always been pretty open. There’s a lot less negative talk with staff. When I first came here it was, “Well that’s the way it is.”... A few of the staff have left the school and now the staff is much more open and accepting.

Although many teachers felt that they were open and accepting of the culture, there was one reference by the Native language teacher that revealed a discomfort for some teachers with hearing about the history of residential schools:

Sometimes I find they don’t want to hear it, especially residential schools. You know...what the priests did...especially when you work with the Catholic board. They don’t want to hear what the priests did or the nuns. I find that sometimes they say how come this is going on and I'll
try and explain it to them but then they veer off and you know that they
don’t want to hear it. That’s where they close the door.

Wanda

Collaboration, supportive colleagues and openness and acceptance were viewed as norms that impacted teacher sense-making of the implementation of the FNMI policy. These norms fostered an implementation environment in which teachers felt safe to take risks. Wanda’s comment revealed that some teachers may have difficulty being open to some of the darker aspects of Aboriginal history that could impact the depth of the connections they make to the policy.

Organizational Culture: Beliefs

This section highlights the beliefs that teachers referenced that influenced their sense-making of the FNMI policy implementation process. One major organizational belief emerged from the findings: equity and inclusion. This belief was explored at length in Chapter Five (pp. 89-106) by examining the sub-categories of teacher references to creating a warm and welcoming environment, promoting parental involvement and building partnerships. This cultural value of promoting equity and inclusion was revealed as both supportive of and detrimental to policy implementation. All teachers believed that inclusion of Aboriginal culture and meeting the needs of Aboriginal students was important but teacher references, particularly at St. Timothy’s, to “what’s good for one is good for all” could be problematic to policy
implementation. Teachers may have established this interpretation of equity as a result of their in-service on the *Education for All* document (2005) that described instructional practices which are not only effective for students with special needs, but “enhance the learning of all students” (p. 10). One teacher at St. Timothy’s made a strong connection to this document:

> There are a lot of practices and expectations that are really consistent with this policy: for example, differentiated instruction and *Education for All*. They are all converging.

Debbie

This tendency during sense-making to interpret new information as similar to previous knowledge was cited by Spillane et al. (2002):

> When implementing agents perceive an instructional idea in policy, the idea may be overinterpreted as essentially the same as the belief or practice the teachers already hold. (p. 398)

The organizational belief evidenced by teacher responses in this study that interpreted equity as “what’s good for one is good for all” may constrain the implementation of strategies specific to meeting the needs of Aboriginal learners (outlined on page 25).

One other explanation for the tendency to interpret equity as “good for all” was hinted at by the principals at both schools:
We are trying to have a culture where we are all in this together...We are students at this school and it doesn’t matter if you are French, English, or Aboriginal. It doesn’t matter. So we do try to make it one and I think we are hesitant...Even for me there is hesitation to make one group so much different.

Cathy

So how honest are your discussions in your schools about Aboriginal students? Who would be comfortable taking the data of suspensions and pulling out all the Aboriginal students and saying, “Why are they getting suspended?” Not a lot of schools would be comfortable to even think to manipulate data this way. Some people might call you a racist, wouldn’t they?

Janet

The over interpretation of equity as “good for one is good for all” may be the result of a discomfort teachers have with acknowledging specific learning needs related to race. Labeling according to race is socially unacceptable which makes the process of FNMI policy implementation more complex. Teachers have to make sense of Aboriginal student under-achievement and what to do about it within this political minefield.

The evidence reveals that a belief in equity and inclusion shaped how teachers interpreted the FNMI policy message. The teachers saw the over-
arching message of the FNMI policy through the lens of “what’s good for some is good for all.” This belief promoted policy implementation as it created a familiar frame that connected the teachers’ prior knowledge and beliefs to the new knowledge of the policy. It may have constrained policy implementation as well, because this framing of the policy through an equity lens could result in sense-making that connects superficially with the policy expectations, preventing a deeper understanding of how to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal learners who have unique learning needs and cultural, historical, and social realities.

Organizational Culture: Knowledge of How Things Work

Teacher knowledge of the authority structure and the decision making protocol in their school and school board impacted their sense-making during policy implementation. As referenced earlier, the teachers recognized that the director was fully supportive of the FNMI policy implementation. This support gave this policy prominence particularly for the teachers at St.Timothy. The fact that this document is an education policy mandated by the Ministry of Education affected the sense-making of at least one teacher:

Some people might be tired and look at the policy and say I don’t even want to go there. But it’s a document. Don’t you have to follow documents? It’s from the Ministry of Education. So you need to take it and embrace it and that’s what you are supposed to follow.

Nancy
Unlike Nancy, Jane did not see authority as an entity that could not be challenged. She shared a situation in which she challenged authority around a decision on resource allocation related to the implementation of the FNMI policy:

At the time, she was not my principal; she was at the board. I was one of the vocal people. I wasn’t bitter that our NSL teacher was receiving [funding]. I said I understand what the policy is. I know why you want the Aboriginal learner to have a SMART board...I said, “Don’t you think it would be better in a regular classroom where I teach them for 85% of the day and they have that tool in subjects where they struggle?...She said, “Okay, I got the money for this reason so I have to follow it.” But because of my argument I got a SMART board. She purchased one from the Aboriginal money.

What Jane demonstrated in this example was her understanding of how things worked in the organizational culture of the school board. Her argument focused on meeting the needs of the Aboriginal learner, and she was able to get additional resources that would not have otherwise been purchased for her. Knowing how things work within the school and school board gives teachers the ability to challenge the system. Making sense of how the system operates can influence how teachers implement policy.
It is not only knowledge of how the system works that was revealed as being important in teacher sense-making. Knowledge of how the Aboriginal culture works was also important to their sense-making.

The teacher responses revealed that the more they were aware of how things worked in the Aboriginal culture, the more they were able to make sense of the policy and its implementation. The Native language teacher shared how awareness of the culture had increased:

When I started, when I first introduced the culture part by smudging with the kids for prayer, I’m in my classroom and the door’s closed and we are sitting in a circle and I introduced the sage and we smudged and the aroma lingered into the hallway. The principal suddenly comes into my classrooms and he says, “What’s going on here?” and I said, “We are praying” and he said, “Ok”. But now it’s kind of an understanding. As soon as they smell it, they know what it is. Even the students know what it is and the teachers. Now the awareness is there. Before it wasn’t.

Wanda

A teacher at St. Mary’s indicated that familiarity with Aboriginal culture had improved Aboriginal student achievement at their school.

I think we became aware of Native traditions earlier on because of the NSL instructor’s influence. So as far as the achievement gap and its narrowing, we’ve had that process in gear for awhile now.
Awareness of Aboriginal learning styles was referenced by several teachers in this study. Teachers who evidenced stronger knowledge of the Aboriginal learner were incorporating instructional strategies from the FNMI policy.

Absent from all but four interviews was evidence of an understanding of the history of the Aboriginal peoples and how the implementation of the policy is connected to this history. When asked about what she believed caused the achievement gap for Aboriginal students, Leslie responded,

I think it comes from probably just going back in history and that whole fact of how the Aboriginal population came to live on reserves and how reserves were set up. It was certainly shocking to me as a 21 year old when I worked at the CAS to step on reserve and to realize that nobody owned their own home and that anything they did in their homes to upgrade their homes in any way would never come back in value to them because the homes were not owned by them. They were owned by the government. So that piece of property was never theirs…So that was surprising to me and you can see how that sets up somebody for difficulties.

Both Native language teachers referenced the impact residential schools had on Aboriginal peoples. Wanda’s comment about teachers not wanting to hear
about residential schools was referenced on page 151. Derek felt that awareness of the damaging impact of residential schools has helped to improve how Aboriginal peoples are being treated.

The problems that we’ve encountered with residential schools have done a lot of damage and it’s also changed the public psyche towards Natives. So they are starting to be more welcomed. I’m not hearing as many derogatory statements about Natives anymore...So you are getting more of an acceptance of drumming, of rituals.

Derek

When asked why he thought the policy was created, Rob responded,

It’s well overdue. I think the difference is that it [Aboriginal] is the fastest growing population in Canada and we know there is a gap so we need to focus on and target our instructional strategies to meet the needs of the fastest growing student body. I think the other thing is the Aboriginal culture is constitutionally recognized in our country. I mean when you are in an area such as Ottawa where there is multiculturalism you get some people saying, “What about us?” But there is a difference and I am not demeaning the 52 other languages, but I am just saying that we need to put in some supports for constitutionally recognized groups.

Rob
Knowing how things have worked in the past for Aboriginal peoples contributed to the teacher’s sense-making about the policy implementation. Lack of knowledge or discomfort with hearing the details of the impact of colonialism could impact policy implementation negatively. If teachers are not aware of the unique rights Aboriginal peoples have within our constitution and the tragic history of attempted annihilation, they do not see any reason for a policy that focuses on the needs of this marginalized group. One teacher’s response to the cultural focus of the policy, “Why them?” reveals the possible negative impact a lack of historical knowledge could have on the FNMI policy implementation.

**Summary of Organizational Culture and Teacher Sense-making**

The evidence in this section revealed data related to the norms of behaviour, beliefs, and knowledge of how things work as dimensions of culture that impacted teacher sense-making during policy implementation. Teachers used organizational norms, beliefs, and knowledge as sense-making cues to connect their prior knowledge and experience with the policy mandates. The norms of behaviour cited at both schools as promoting policy implementation included collaboration, collegial support and openness and acceptance. These norms may provide teachers with a measure of security as policy changes are introduced. It was revealed that teacher openness did have some limits as it was stated that some teachers were not open to hearing about how Aboriginal peoples were treated historically. The main belief highlighted in the teacher responses was equity and inclusion. The numerous references to ensuring a warm and welcoming environment, to promoting parent involvement and to
building partnerships may be a result of the nature of the expectations of the FNMI policy. The interpretation of equity by some teachers as “good for one; good for all” may be the result of making connections to other documents such as *Education for All* or it could be a result of a discomfort with labeling a particular group of students according to race. Knowing how things work affected teacher sense-making by bringing awareness of Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal learning needs to the teacher’s attention and promoting policy implementation. Also referenced by teachers was their knowledge of the authority structure and decision making protocols and how this knowledge affected teacher sense-making and impacted policy implementation.

The next chapter will examine how environmental messaging related to the FNMI policy implementation acted as cues for teacher sense-making in this study. The evidence will be clustered according to messages from the macro environment of the larger provincial context, the meso environment of the school board context, and the micro environment of the school site context.
CHAPTER SEVEN: ENVIRONMENTAL MESSAGING AND TEACHER SENSE-MAKING FINDINGS

I think that by having a separate [policy] framework, in my mind...whenever you have something that is separate, it shows that there is a commitment and it shows that there is a priority there. Kelly
New information is the catalyst of the sense-making process. Teacher agency and organizational culture and structure impact and are impacted by information or messages from the environment. Coburn (2001) states that,

The meaning of information...is not given, but is inherently problematic; individuals and groups must actively construct understandings and interpretations...People make sense of messages in the environment in conversation and interaction with their colleagues. (p.147)

The evidence in this chapter seeks to answer the research sub-question: How do environmental messages impact the sense-making of teachers during policy implementation? The messages teachers referenced as impacting their sense-making during policy implementation were examined. The references clustered into three levels: macro, meso, and micro. The macro level messages teachers referenced included provincial education initiatives, policy messages, and the
historical and political context of the creation of the FNMI policy document. The meso level messages included the policy implementation messages from the school board, and the micro-level messages included messaging from colleagues, parents and principals. Examining how the teachers understood and interpreted these multi-level messages provides insight into how they made sense during policy implementation. What information did the teachers notice and select from these environmental messages to help them make sense of the policy implementation and how did these sense-making cues impact the implementation process?

*Teacher sense-making and Macro Level Environmental Messages*

Teacher references to provincial education initiatives in this study included differentiated instruction, the *Education for All* document, literacy blocks, EQAO testing, curriculum documents, report cards, and the *Equity and Inclusive Education* document.

Several teachers made reference to *Education for All*, a document released in 2005, as an initiative that assisted them in supporting Aboriginal student achievement. Mike and Debbie’s comments were echoed by several staff at both St. Timothy’s and St. Mary’s.

There’s a huge piece in *Education for All*. I guess I look at it as the resource piece about documenting and showing what kind of strategies and how you are trying to help that child. I see that for all students.
Mike

I see *Education for All* as affecting it more. This document says we want to reach every child regardless of their cultural background. We have had more in-service on this document and I am more comfortable with it. We are not as familiar with this [FNMI] policy.

Debbie

The centre piece of the *Education for All* document is the concept of Universal Design. Universal design is described on page 9 of the document as impacting teacher practice in the following way:

Educators have begun to realize that a teaching strategy or pedagogical materials that respond to the special needs of a specific student or group of students can also be useful for all students.

A few of the teachers referenced universal design as impacting their sense-making around the policy:

I look at it as universal design and if it’s going to benefit one it’s going to benefit all.

Tammy

Tammy’s principal agreed:
That’s very cultural but not just Aboriginal, that’s Italian...so just being open to that. So it’s also like universal design. If it’s good for one, it’s good for all.

Janet

Even though teachers felt that the *Education for All* document aligned with the intentions of the FNMI policy and assisted them in meeting the needs of Aboriginal students, one teacher commented that because of this alignment, the FNMI policy was not necessary and was a waste of money.

Why do we need this? We already have the *Education for All* document so why is this necessary? Why did they spend money on this when it’s the same as everything else?

Debbie

The *Education for All* document was also responsible for promoting the concept of differentiated instruction as way of meeting the needs of a diverse student population and was referenced by several teachers in this study as a way of meeting the needs of Aboriginal students. Chris and Debbie’s comments are reflective of the connections the teachers were making during policy implementation.

I think it goes hand in hand with differentiated instruction as well.

Trying to engage my learners, and like I said, a lot of my First Nation
learners with a visual or oral tradition. Instead of the traditional, let’s use the SMART board, give them pictures, give them stories.

Chris

I am hoping to see some changes in [Aboriginal student] achievement because now we are doing more differentiated learning.

Debbie

The messages in the Education for All document influenced teachers’ sense-making during the implementation of the FNMI document. Their connection to the concept of universal design and the strategy of differentiated instruction led some teachers to conclude that the main message in the FNMI policy document was similar: “What’s good for some is good for all.” The perceived similarity of messaging made the FNMI policy appear to be redundant for at least one teacher. The Education For All policy acted as a sense-making cue for most teachers in this study as they interpreted the expectations of the FNMI policy, likely due to the extensive in-service they had received on this document and its high-profile in the school board.

Another Ministry of Education initiative perceived as impacting policy implementation is the focus on literacy. A few teachers in this study viewed this initiative as supportive of the FNMI policy goals:

I don’t think I know enough about the policy but most of the school routines are organized around successful learning strategies for
students. When I speak about this I am looking at the language arts and it’s good to have a huge block of time for literacy for uninterrupted guided reading and so on. I’ve seen more change as a result of that focus than with anything else.

Debbie

Debbie linked the effectiveness of the literacy block as a sense-making cue for meeting the FNMI policy goal of increasing academic outcomes for Aboriginal students.

Related to the literacy focus of the Ministry is EQAO testing. This testing was viewed as problematic for Aboriginal student success by the principal of St. Timothy’s:

EQAO is another thing. The test is not appropriate not only to the culture but also to the socio-economic situation of these kids. We did everything under the sun to get the kids to school for the test. It’s a huge issue

Janet

Janet and some of her staff saw a disconnect between the format and purpose of this standardized test and the needs of the Aboriginal students they served. Because there was so much emphasis on the outcomes of standardized test, the grade 6 teacher and learning resource teacher at St. Timothy’s were frustrated with how to achieve the government standards and, at the same
time, successfully implement the FNMI policy which focuses on the unique learning styles of Aboriginal students.

A few teachers referenced other Ministry initiatives such as curriculum documents and provincial report cards that they felt were supportive of the FNMI policy goals:

The curriculum documents have specific examples that deal with Aboriginal students that say you can do this or this and I’ve looked at them and they have been helpful. That’s in the grades 2 and 3 curriculum documents.

Nancy

Even the report cards have changed. It’s a lot easier now because they understand that it’s not really that important to have the writing. That will come in time. Right now it’s speaking.

Wanda

Wanda and Nancy perceived some Ministry level initiatives to be beneficial to the policy implementation. Curriculum documents that included specific suggestions for instructional strategies to use with Aboriginal students and a report card that had been revised to emphasize ability in oral communication helped these teachers to make sense of the FNMI policy expectations.

One other document that was referenced as supportive of the FNMI policy mandate is *Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (2009). One
teacher referenced this strategy, and during the interview made sense of its connection to differentiated instruction. Her previous sense-making had not connected the intent of these initiatives:

Sometimes they [Aboriginal students] can’t find their place and now we are really pushing inclusive and equitable schools and inclusiveness. And we are hoping that we make them feel a welcome part of the school environment...

But I think it’s separated. Here’s DI and here’s Inclusive and Equitable. But I just had a light bulb moment…it’s never connected...so when we went to a DI workshop, they never used the word inclusive.

Tammy

This example illustrates how teachers make sense of multiple environmental messages. Tammy realized during the interview that there was a significant commonality between the two initiatives, and this “light bulb” moment may impact how she moves forward in the implementation process.

The most significant set of macro level messages for the purposes of this study are the messages in the FNMI policy document. Of the seventeen participants interviewed only four participants indicated they had a working knowledge of the FNMI policy. Many teachers revealed that they had very little knowledge of the actual policy document. Sandra and Kelly’s comments are representative of the exposure most staff had to the text of the policy.
I’ve never read it…never seen it. I know when it came out. I know that there were things through our school board that were part of this but I didn’t personally read it.

Sandra

I am going to be totally honest because I could probably tell you very little about the document.

Kelly

Despite the lack of specific knowledge of the policy document, all teachers in the study indicated that they were aware of the potential of this document for raising awareness at all levels of the needs of Aboriginal students. Derek and Mike, like their colleagues, made sense of the main purpose of the policy as raising awareness about the gaps in achievement and saw it as successful:

The document is a very good first step. First of all the Ministry is better educated now which is really good. The boards are becoming educated which is really important. Once the board is comfortable with this then imparting to the teacher and making this part of school policy is a wonderful thing…and you will see a huge change…and you will see a lot of these problems about gaps in student achievement.

Derek
I think that with this policy and the extra money and with the Aboriginal lead, the awareness has really built and I think we are certainly more aware.

Mike

The lack of specific knowledge around the policy document, combined with an increased awareness of Aboriginal student needs because of additional funding and cultural activities, resulted in some teachers interpreting the policy message in a way that was consistent with their current practice. As the Learning Resource teacher, Kate connected the FNMI policy to the special education policy with which she was very familiar.

No I would say they go hand in hand. Even though I don’t know the policy, I would say that it probably goes hand in hand with the special education policy and making kids feel included.

Kate

Donna made sense of the FNMI policy expectations as increasing cultural awareness that she states will be very easy to integrate into what she is already doing.

I can’t speak to the policy but drawing in the cultural piece into our lessons, for me I don’t think it raises my workload. It’s just another thing for me to integrate, and sometimes very easily, with whatever I’m working on in class.
To make sense of what they perceived as the expectations of the FNMI policy these teachers looked at their own practice and sought alignment. This sense-making process helps teachers cope with the potential stress a new initiative could bring, but this sense-making could result in a superficial implementation as teachers seek out only familiar features of the policy and reject the unfamiliar.

The principal at St. Mary’s expressed that, even though the staff at her school may not have been aware of the policy, she believed that what they were doing was probably consistent with the policy. She acknowledged that more knowledge of how their actions explicitly matched policy would help them to deepen the policy implementation in their school:

First of all I don’t think that we are as aware of the policy as we should be. I think we are probably just doing what we think we should be doing but I bet if we took that policy out more and we tried to attach things that we are doing, we would be able to fit into that. I don’t think we are as explicit as we should be in terms of the knowledge around this policy and our actions matching it. And it would be interesting to see how much farther we could take it.
Cathy realized that her staff may have been oversimplifying some of the messages of the policy and that explicit work matching the policy expectations with current practice would be a good next step for the implementation process at their school.

The principal at St. Timothy’s had a different view of the impact this policy has had on the changes promoting Aboriginal student achievement. She viewed policy as a major catalyst in the change process.

My opinion is that if the policy didn’t come into place we wouldn’t have any of the changes because that forces us to change.

Janet

Notably she went on to state that she believed that it was the power of policy that was instrumental in shaping the actions of her director, not necessarily the content of the policy:

But without that policy she [the director] wouldn’t have put any of it in place. We wouldn’t have gone in this direction. So I think it was the policy that brought about the changes. I don’t mean what’s in the policy. I mean the fact that there is a policy. Do you get what I am saying? Our director did what she did because there’s a policy and that’s it.

Janet

Rob’s view of the power of policy to bring about change differed from Janet’s. Rob felt that policy must be translatable into practice otherwise it is worthless:
I’ve got a cynical approach to this because after being at the Ministry for seven months I met a lot of policy makers that were not teachers, including my own office, which was problematic to me because policy is nice but if it doesn’t transfer or transform into practice then there is no point in having a policy.

Rob

For Janet, the power for change began with the policy. Her top-down, hierarchical belief in the policy implementation process was interesting in view of her expression of her authority in the school utilized the traditional Aboriginal circle organization. Rob, on the other hand, saw effective implementation as ground-up process. He believed that teachers must be able to transform policy into practice; otherwise, policy has no effect.

When asked why they thought the FNMI policy was created, Kate and Jane responded that it was overdue, citing the gap in achievement as a primary reason for its implementation:

Well I think they saw a gap in performance so they are trying to bridge that gap.

Kate

Well I found the dropout rates alarming. When you look at high school and you see the difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal graduation rates, it’s astounding and you can’t let that go on.
Donna and Nancy felt that the main reason for creating this policy was to promote awareness and increase comfort:

I think to raise cultural awareness of a specific group that didn’t have much visible opportunity to voice their presence. That’s what I infer from this...to raise everybody’s awareness.

Donna

Because there was a lack of understanding, open-mindedness and they probably developed the policy so that people could feel a little more comfortable with it.

Nancy

Other teachers felt that the creation of the policy was politically motivated. Wanda, Chris, and Derek connected the tragic consequences of the historical treatment of Aboriginal peoples and the recognition of wrong doing by the government as the driving force behind the creation of this policy.

The government. That apology really put an impact on everything...finally recognizing the mistake they had made.

Wanda

I think it’s just because we were missing the boat as far as our teaching. The history of how the First Nations people were treated in this country.
We need to know we have not a real proud part of our history. I think we need to know that. There’s still a lot of hurt, anger and it’s time we start. These were the people that were in this country first. Our history isn’t pleasant. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t nice. I think we need to get the truth out there and do the right thing.

Chris

Because of the shortcomings. It’s kind of a version of reparation. It’s kind of like saying. “You know what? We did give you guys a raw deal. Your kids aren’t doing well in school. We have massive dropouts.” And that leads to other social and economic issues down the road because ultimately education pays back somehow. We need to fix this up. It will help the province of Ontario out...It’s a huge step forward that they’ve actually got an Aboriginal Education Office.

Derek

By situating the creation of this policy within the broader historical and social context, these teachers were able to make sense of its unique position in the education policy environment. Unfortunately only a few teachers made this connection. One teacher when asked why she thought this policy was created responded with frustration:
I have no idea...It seems like nobody explains anything. It seems like in the past year Aboriginal is the only word you hear and the teachers are saying, “What about my other students?”

Iris

Without the historical and social context, Iris was unable to make sense of why this policy that focuses on improving outcomes for Aboriginal students is important. She made sense of the policy as unfair as it was taking away from the other needy students in her school.

The references to the political pressures driving the creation and implementation of this policy were echoed by teachers when speaking about the larger political and historical context of this policy. Some teachers identified messages from this context that impacted their sense-making around the implementation of this policy. Both Native language teachers referenced the impact of history on the Aboriginal peoples. The NSL teacher at St. Mary’s has Aboriginal lineage but he did not practice the culture. He was very knowledgeable about the history of Aboriginal peoples and this impacted his sense-making about the policy:

It’s an ancient culture. It’s a rich culture. It’s a very important part of our history and there’s a huge change everywhere. As I work with these people and I work with a lot of residential school survivors and there are some horror stories there. And of course the government has not been nice to the Natives over the last 150 years. There’s a lot of nasty...I’m
just finishing a book right now called Terra Nullus written by a non-native person and he has documented all that and you can’t believe it. So what happens is when you lose your identity, you lose you language and you lose a big part of your culture. And your culture being also the fact that you are put on this dot of land and you were used to living on land a thousand times bigger and you could hunt and you could fish. You can’t anymore because you are on this little dot and you are being told by the government in many respects that you can’t leave this dot. So these people are in limbo. It’s a tough, tough life and they are trying to make the best of it, but there’s going to be a lot of social issues that erupt as a result.

Derek

The NSL teacher at St. Timothy’s is an Aboriginal who practiced traditional ways. Her sense-making of the importance of the FNMI policy for changing outcomes for Aboriginal students was shaped by personal experience:

My mom had fears of any government coming to our place because the government came and took the children. I’m from a large family. I have 8 sisters and 3 brothers and to live in that fear...my mom never said anything but kids pickup this fear. Even though I was brought up on reserve and I went to school on a reserve, but that reserve school was run like a residential school. We couldn’t speak our language in our school ground. We were punished if we did.
This historical and political context impacts the sense-making of teachers during policy implementation. Both principals and two teachers referenced strong emotions related to the political realities of implementing this policy:

But it’s still a very political thing and people are very scared of it. What principal would be comfortable in a mixed crowd, Native and non-Native, to stand up and confidently talk about Aboriginal underachievement? It’s a big deal and Aboriginal stuff is scary for people who do not know.

There was a real political piece and there is obviously some real bitterness. I can’t be totally oblivious to the fact that it doesn’t exist here. There very well may be some bitterness here. Who knows?

Yes it’s a political statement. So even with the self-identification, people are paranoid with this because they want to know how the data is going to be used. Is it used as a weapon?

Yes, but on the flip side of the finger pointing is that they have to stop blaming us for everything too. We have to come to some point where we can just let that go and address the problem. You know what I mean?
Stop saying I took your land or I pay tuition. Put that aside and let’s look at the issue.

Mike

These references are significant for the emotion-laden language used by the principals and teachers connecting the policy to political and historical realities. Words like “scared”, “bitterness”, “weapon” and “blaming” reveal the underlying tension connected with this policy. These emotions impacted the sense-making of teachers. Guilt, shame, sorrow, anger, fear, among other emotions, permeate the FNMI policy environment whether teachers acknowledge them or not.

The macro messages referenced as impacting the sense-making of teachers show teachers attempting to align their understanding of the FNMI policy with other provincial messages and initiatives. In cases where this alignment was perceived as challenging, for instance with EQAO testing, teachers experienced frustration. In cases where alignment was perceived as clear, for example the Education for All document, teacher stress was reduced. Although several teachers did not have explicit knowledge of the messages in the FNMI policy, the policy was viewed as important for changing outcomes for Aboriginal students. Teacher references to the political and historical context of the policy document revealed powerful emotions possibly affecting the sense-making of teachers during policy implementation.

**Teacher Sense-Making and Meso-Level Environmental Messages**
The meso-level messages that teachers referenced promoting their sense-making revolved around the policy implementation process at the board level. Several teachers remarked on the director’s visible support of the implementation process.

I think it begins at the top. I know that with our director it’s something she has embraced wholeheartedly...

Chris

Our director is definitely a promoter of this policy...

Jane

The Director’s support of the policy sent a clear message to the teachers about the level of priority of this policy in their school board. This priority status impacted how the teachers noticed and selected information related to the policy implementation.

Teachers also perceived the appointment of an Aboriginal lead as an indicator of the high level of support the school board had for the FNMI policy. The chosen lead had an Aboriginal heritage and was a principal.

Having an Aboriginal Lead was a huge eye-opener for many of us. I’ve been to two Aboriginal symposiums which I would never have been invited to go to if we didn’t have an Aboriginal lead.

Jane
The Aboriginal lead was given the responsibility of implementing the FNMI policy and began with raising awareness about Aboriginal voluntary self-identification. She related that the self–ID brochure template was put forward by a local advertising firm and was not culturally appropriate. She was directed by her committee, which included Aboriginal community partners, to inform the board that a new design was necessary:

Okay so my first job was to go to the senior admin team and tell them that their idea was not a good idea. That was scary because I was new and I didn’t know people. But it was okay. I did it and they were actually quite nice and said, “Well that’s your job so take it and make it into something.”

Janet

The Aboriginal partners on the Aboriginal Education committee messaged strongly to Janet about the need for cultural appropriateness in the implementation of the voluntary self ID program. Janet brought this message forward to the senior administration, who were fully supportive.

After the process of self-ID was in place, Janet planned a Faith day as the initial policy awareness raising activity for the board. She described how she put a lot of effort into creating an environment that would send a positive cultural message to the attendees:
The atmosphere...that’s what we did differently. So when they walked into the gym, these people who know nothing about the culture, already they are inundated with the beauty of the culture. It was not political. It was all about culture and understanding.

Janet

The messaging at the professional development day may have been too subtle for some teachers. Rob’s comment reveals the sense-making that he perceived the Faith day activity had on the policy implementation process.

When the document first came out we did our Faith day and Pow Wow and people were saying why the heck are we doing this? What does this have to do with anything? The intent was never communicated. If you don’t communicate why you are doing things then people don’t get it.

Rob

This example illustrates the sense-making challenges during implementation. Janet believed the policy messages communicated at the Faith day were made sense of in a way that would promote implementation. Rob felt that the Faith day was ineffective in communicating the policy messages. These references reveal the vulnerability of the implementation process and the importance of gaining greater understanding into how teachers make sense during policy implementation.
Another concern mentioned by a few teachers during the early implementation phase was the absence of the policy document:

When it was presented we didn’t really have the document and so it hasn’t really sold very well.

Mike

The absence of the policy document impacted teacher sense-making during policy implementation. Most teachers relied on messages from their principal, other colleagues, and other ministry initiatives to make sense of how the FNMI policy affected them.

Implementation continued with opportunities for teachers to attend symposiums and workshops as well as be provided with resources. Teachers like Kate and Chris who were able to attend in-service sessions found these opportunities to be beneficial for the sense-making during implementation.

Getting in-service is really important. For me it was going to the Aboriginal symposium which I guess was probably a result of the policy document.

Kate

It started at the board office and really we’ve had PD days where we have had workshops on instruction on how to incorporate the document into your everyday teaching. We have personnel to ask questions of at the
board office... We’ve had kits made for us...no, it’s seamless and painless to be quite honest.

Chris

Not all teachers agreed that there had been sufficient or effective in-service on the policy document:

I don’t think there has been a board initiative that said that this is what Aboriginal students need to know and these are the strategies that we would like you to implement and chart their progress. So I know specific teachers that have done that and had professional development on their own and then implement them on their own. But it is not a board wide practice.

Jane

With these big workshops we have, half of them are yawning. You’re texting. Nobody’s paying attention.

Iris

The board level policy implementation messages were not being understood by all teachers. The explanation for this could be that the two symposiums offered by the board were attended only by selected teachers. These teachers cited that these opportunities had promoted their sense-making and agency in the policy implementation process. Teachers not in attendance at these symposiums appeared unaware that any in-service had been provided by the
board to promote implementation. Large-scale workshops were perceived as ineffective for promoting implementation messages. Another gap in the messaging process during policy implementation was a result of the perception that since the school population had no Aboriginal students, the FNMI policy did not apply:

I think that with all the information that comes down from the board unless you are sitting in a high Aboriginal school, the last thing on your plate is Aboriginal education...unless you have a personal interest.

Janet

In these schools “initiative overload” was perceived as responsible for the lack of attention to the FNMI policy messages.

The meso level environmental messages cited in the findings focused on the process of policy implementation at the board level. Teachers received supportive messaging from their director and their school board with the appointment of an administrator dedicated to the FNMI policy implementation. The absence of a policy document at the beginning of the policy implementation cycle was viewed as problematic for clear messaging. The policy implementation process involving professional development through workshops and symposiums provided supportive messages to those teachers selected to attend. Gaps in implementation were perceived in schools with few Aboriginal students and initiative overload. The messaging during implementation was not made sense of consistently by teachers for various
reasons including lack of message clarity, lack of exposure, the absence of a document, and a perceived lack of need.

**Teacher sense-making and Micro-Level Environmental Messages**

At the school level, teachers referenced messages from their colleagues, from Aboriginal parents, and from school principals as impacting their sense-making during the policy implementation process.

As cited in Chapter Six in the section describing the impact of cultural norms on sense-making (pp. 149-152), teachers appreciated the supportive and collaborative messages they received from their colleagues. Openness and acceptance from colleagues was referenced as promoting sense-making during policy implementation. Teachers felt supported as they took risks to implement new ideas and new strategies. Messages from their colleagues that caused tension for teachers included questioning a policy focused on Aboriginal students, and the specific allocation of resources when needs were perceived equally as great for other students. When asked how this tension was being dealt with, Chris at St. Timothy’s responded that,

“I don’t know that it has been dealt with because it’s always sort of said under the radar.”

Teacher references to supportive messages from colleagues illustrated the importance of a safe and accepting environment for teacher sense-making during policy implementation. The below-the-surface messages, however,
cannot be ignored. Some teachers cited frustration with not being able to voice their concerns during the implementation process for fear of being called racist. The impact of the emotions connected to macro level historical and political realities play out in the school context. These unacknowledged emotional by-products of the FNMI policy implementation may impact policy implementation.

In addition to micro messages from colleagues, teachers referenced messages from Aboriginal parents that impacted how they made sense of the policy implementation. A few teachers noted that Aboriginal parents were more concerned with the well being of their children rather than marks:

Is my child happy? Is my child participating? Does my child have the same learning opportunities as other children in the class?

Debbie

Some teachers cited that Aboriginal parents did not seem as interested in the academic success of their children as non-Aboriginal parents were. A few teachers interpreted this as their lack of interest in the education system; while other teachers interpreted this as a cultural focus on the well-being of the whole child. A few teachers also cited the distrust that many Aboriginal parents have of the education system which may inhibit the teacher’s ability to meet their child’s needs:
We were trying to help a student get into a program in our school which is a preservation program and we pushed the mom to make the call so that we could get the student in and she refused thinking that they were going to take...that it was something negative instead.

Because of this distrust, these teachers realized that they needed to create a welcoming environment for Aboriginal parents and break down barriers.

How do we get the parent into the school? And that’s where we talk about a welcoming and warm environment. What do we have to offer the parent? How do we treat the parent when they come in? Let’s make them feel good, cause if they feel good, they are going to say, “Here’s my child.”

Tammy

Messaging from Aboriginal parents differed from non-Aboriginal parents. Most teachers felt that Aboriginal parents cared just as much about their children as non-Aboriginal parents. Because of the negative experience Aboriginals have had with the education system and because they measure academic success differently, teachers’ sense-making resulted in actions that explicitly included Aboriginal parents. Teachers in this study created welcoming school environments and introduced new initiatives such as student-led conferencing that honoured Aboriginal parents’ focus on the whole child.
The last set of school level messages that emerged from the data was from the principal. Principals, by virtue of their positional authority, can privilege certain messages and minimize others (Coburn, 2001). Chris and Tammy revealed the critical role their principal has had on framing the policy for teachers during implementation:

Our principal has been instrumental because previous to being principal, she was the Aboriginal lead and she has been so proactive...I think our principal has basically taken that document and she’s put it in layman’s terms and given us practical approaches on how we can use it in our classrooms...

Chris

But yet she does everything in such a subtle way. You see changes and why you make the changes. But it’s not forced down your throat.

Tammy

These teachers trusted their principal to interpret the policy document and manage the change process. By having the authority to privilege certain messages, the principal plays a significant role in framing the policy problem for teachers (Coburn, 2006). Tammy and Jane referenced their principal’s authority in framing the policy problem and its impact on the policy implementation process:
You are going in your head, “Another freak’n policy...Are you kidding me?” But the principal said, “Let’s make this school really welcoming. A high population of Aboriginal parents, how are we going to get them into our school?” That’s building relationships and developing people.

Tammy

I think we were kind of designated an Aboriginal community school the year before but we really didn’t know how to implement that or begin that process. So until this principal came, nothing really happened.

Jane

The principal at St. Timothy’s was privileging the policy message of creating welcoming environments and creating an Aboriginal community school. This messaging impacted the sense-making of her teachers.

Principals can also message to teachers during implementation through resource allocation:

Our principal has had a big push and put a lot of monetary resources towards buying literacy materials with an Aboriginal component. She really made sure she bought good quality resources. So if you don’t have the school admin guiding you with the resources and aligning the resources with the direction...You can have staff working, but if you don’t have the resources and vice versa.

Kelly
The principal at St. Mary’s focused on the allocation of resources to purchase high quality leveled books for the classroom. As discussed in Chapter Six (pp. 144-146), these resources impacted the sense-making of teachers during policy implementation by raising their cultural awareness and supporting literacy skill development in Aboriginal students.

Teacher references highlighted the impact that messaging from principals had on teacher sense-making during policy implementation. Principals acted as filters for policy messages and shaped how the policy problem was framed. Principals managed resources and built relationships that also impacted how teachers made sense of policy during implementation.

**Summary of Teacher Sense-making and Environmental Messages**

The evidence highlighted in this section revealed how environmental messages impacted teachers’ sense-making during policy implementation. Teachers received messages from multiple sources and contexts. The messages clustered into three levels: macro, meso, and micro. The messages impacting teacher sense-making at the macro level included the alignment of other education initiatives with the policy, knowledge of the policy document and the perception of its role in the change process, and the emotional messages pertaining to the historical and political context of the policy. Messages at the meso level impacting teacher sense-making highlighted issues of policy implementation at the school board level. Messages from the director and the Aboriginal lead during implementation promoted teacher sense-making that
enabled implementation, but a perceived lack of clear communication and the absence of the policy document were identified as problematic for the implementation process. Micro messages impacting teacher sense-making came from other colleagues, Aboriginal parents, and the school principal. Collaborative and supportive messages from other colleagues impacted teacher sense making in ways that promoted policy implementation, although some teachers referenced the frustration some colleagues felt with the continual focus on Aboriginal students. The messages from Aboriginal parents informed teachers of the distrust they have of the education system and that their priority is for their child’s overall well-being, not for high grades. This impacted teacher sense-making of the policy implementation and resulted in actions aimed at increasing Aboriginal parent comfort and shifting emphasis away from academics as the only measure of success. Principals played a significant role in messaging to teachers during policy implementation. Their positional authority impacted the sense-making of teachers by privileging certain policy messages, filtering information, and aligning resources and structures to support implementation activities. The evidence in this chapter revealed the multiple levels of messaging impacting teacher sense-making during policy implementation.
CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The essential implementation question then becomes not simply “what’s implementable and works,” but what is implementable and works for whom, when, and why? (Honig, p. 2, 2006)

This view of policy implementation as a “highly contingent and situated process” (Honig, p. 19) informed my selection of the sense-making/co-
construction conceptual model to guide the gathering and analysis of the data in my study. In my experience as a school administrator, I found to my dismay that policy implementation was highly variable. I believed, and still do believe, that teachers are the key implementers of education policy, but I did not take into consideration the variables impacting their sense-making in the enactment of a policy document. Making-sense is the primary cognitive process leading to action or inaction that, on the surface, can appear to be situated in the individual. This view is limiting and does not capture how the social context of that individual impacts his or her sense-making. The addition of the co-construction conceptual model to sense-making theory brings into play the multiple contextual variables impacting individual sense-making. This model supports the examination of how complex social environments impact individual sense-making during policy implementation through the meditational system of individual agency, organizational structure and culture and environmental messaging. I used this meditational system as a framework for gathering and organizing interview data intended to reveal how teachers in two schools in one school board in Northern Ontario made sense of the First Nation, Metis and Inuit Education Policy Framework. In particular I was looking for the sense-making cues that teachers used to link their current knowledge with the new policy information, and how these cues promoted or constrained policy implementation. I wondered whether there would be any patterns to these cues that could better inform future policy design and implementation.
The findings in chapters five through seven reveal a variety of sense-making cues used by the teachers in this study to make sense during the FNMI policy implementation. These chapters were intentionally written separately in order to highlight the specific sense-making cues impacting and impacted by each mediator of the co-construction conceptual model. This format was used to improve the clarity of the findings; however, this format did not address the interplay of these mediators during the sense-making process. Individual agency, organizational culture and structure, and environmental messaging are interconnected and simultaneously impact and are impacted by teacher sense-making. Individual agency of teachers impacts and is impacted by school culture and structure; school culture impacts and is impacted by individual agency and school structure; and school structure impacts and is impacted by teacher agency and school culture. This interplay was not adequately captured in the separate findings chapters but is a key dimension in the co-construction model that Datnow et al. (2002) called “a relational sense of context.” With this inter-relatedness in mind I re-examined the data to identify sense-making cues that crossed the meditational system. Making sense requires individuals to make connections and the cues are the “connectors”. According to Mills (2003), “Cues are linked to a broader context of ideas and actions which affects not only what is extracted as a cue but also how that cue is interpreted” (p.60). What emerged from this re-examination of the sense-making cues across the meditational system was a clustering around three main sense-making frameworks or discourses. Ryan (1999) states that, “Men, women and children make sense of life by placing their experiences into socially generated sense-
making frameworks or discourse” (p. 12). The sense-making cues used by teachers in this study reveal a strong connection to three main discourses. The first is the discourse around the teacher as professional; the second is the discourse of equity and inclusion in education; and the third is the discourse about leadership and change. This chapter will explore how these discourses affected the cues teachers used to make sense during the implementation of the FNMI policy.

**Discourse #1: The Teacher as Professional**

Sense-making during policy implementation was influenced by cognitive and environmental cues that caused the teachers in this study to notice and select certain information to integrate into pre-existing knowledge. A major sense-making cue that emerged from the analysis of the data across the meditational system was connected to how the teachers viewed themselves as professionals. Weick (1995) identified this cue as the first sense-making property in his work. He states that sense-making is “grounded in identity construction (p. 17), and he quotes Ring and Van de Ven (1989, p. 180) describing the primacy of identity construction in the sense-making process for the individual and the organization:
Sense-making processes derive from...the need within individuals to have a sense of identity -that is, a general orientation to situations that maintain esteem and consistency of one’s self-conceptions. Sense-making processes have a strong influence on the manner by which individuals within organizations begin processes of transacting with others. If confirmation of one’s own enacted “self” isn’t realized, however, sense-making processes recur and a reenactment and representation of self follows...(p.22)

Weick adds that in the transacting with others, individuals not only “take the cue for their identity from the conduct of others, but they make an active effort to influence this conduct to begin with” (p.23). This reciprocal interplay is ongoing as the individual strives to maintain “a consistent, positive self-conception” (p.23). The findings in this study illustrate how the discourse of the teacher as professional influenced the identity construction of teachers and influenced the cues the teachers extracted to make sense during policy implementation.

The teaching profession in Ontario is guided by The Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession (2011), a framework issued by the Ontario College of Teachers. The Standards of Practice includes the following categories of expectations: commitment to students and student learning, professional knowledge, professional practice, leadership in learning communities and ongoing professional learning. Teachers are required to maintain these standards as members of the teaching profession. The
discourse on professionalism impacted the cues teachers in this study extracted from the co-construction meditational system to make sense during policy implementation. Teacher agency, organizational culture and structure, and environmental messaging influenced how teachers viewed themselves and were, in turn, influenced by their self-perception.

As professionals teachers are required to keep current with their professional knowledge and apply this knowledge to improve student learning. Some teachers, like Jane and Chris at St. Timothy’s, embraced the FNMI policy expectations and sought ways to increase their knowledge and expertise, thereby enhancing their perception of their agency. Both teachers attended conferences and workshops related to the policy and applied their new learning to their classroom. Jane experimented with the impact of using the SMART board technology on the achievement of her Aboriginal students, while Chris organized a day field trip to an outdoor education facility to provide her students with an opportunity to develop their artistic abilities, a culturally appropriate teaching strategy for Aboriginal students. Their individual agency, which motivated this self-directed professional development and their enactment of the policy expectations in their classrooms, impacted their positive identity maintenance as teaching professionals. Both teachers spoke positively about the changes they had made as teachers to meet the needs of their Aboriginal students. These teachers had extracted sense-making cues from the discourse on teacher professionalism that led them to seek knowledge and skills to implement the policy expectations.
Other teachers sought to maintain their identity as professionals by questioning the policy expectations. Debbie and Kate questioned why the focus was only on Aboriginal students, feeling that this focus minimized their ability to support their other students. Debbie was concerned that the French Immersion programming at St. Mary’s was getting short changed because of the focus on the FNMI policy implementation, and Kate was concerned that all of their students at St. Timothy’s, not just Aboriginal students, needed significant support due to their impoverished life circumstances. Both Debbie and Kate believed the policy impacted their effectiveness and this interpretation had a negative effect on their identity construction as teaching professionals. Their sense-making of the policy expectations within the discourse of the teacher as professional led them to question the policy and constrained implementation.

There was also evidence that individual agency or the capacity to act was negatively impacted as some teachers sought to maintain their identity as professionals. One noteworthy example is found in Iris’ responses. Iris, a French teacher at St. Timothy’s, felt constrained to voice her concerns regarding the policy’s exclusive focus on Aboriginal students for fear of being perceived as racist by others. Maintaining a positive identity in the eyes of her colleagues prevented her from formally speaking out against the policy, although there were indications she had been speaking to some of her colleagues privately. Iris’ agency to act in a way consistent with her beliefs by voicing her opposition was constrained. Being considered racist by her
colleagues was a negative identity construction that she could not contemplate. This sense-making cue linked to maintaining her professionalism constrained Iris’ agency during policy implementation.

The discourse on teacher professionalism also impacted the sense-making cues teachers extracted from the mediator of organizational culture and structure. The open and collaborative culture referenced by several teachers at both schools was viewed as supportive of their professionalism. Teachers felt accepted and included by their colleagues. This collaborative professional culture promoted the agency of teachers during the policy implementation process at both schools. The Aboriginal night at St. Mary’s and the student-led conferencing at St. Timothy’s were examples of the impact of a collaborative culture on individual agency and sense-making of teachers during policy implementation. The success of both events affirmed their sense of efficacy as professionals and positively impacted policy implementation as teachers spoke of continuation and possible expansion of these initiatives in the future. The satisfaction and pride in these endeavours, evidenced in the teacher responses, supported their perception of their identity as caring and inclusive teachers and positively impacted policy implementation. The sense-making cue connecting the professional culture of collaboration to the implementation of the policy supported teacher agency and promoted implementation.

The sense-making cues extracted from the professional culture of collaboration did not positively impact implementation in all cases. As was
already discussed, Iris was constrained to speak her opposition to the policy, as she was concerned with how she would be perceived by her colleagues. In addition teachers of specialty programs, such as French Immersion at St. Mary’s, felt constrained to voice their concern about the lack of focus on and resources for their programs. These teachers did not feel comfortable challenging their colleagues’ support of the FNMI policy implementation and remained officially silent. The focus on the policy implementation was perceived as a detriment to their programming. Their perception of their inability to be effective teachers within the mandates of the FNMI policy impacted their sense-making of the implementation. A further issue for at least one teacher in this study, Iris, was the challenge she saw to her identity as a Catholic teacher. She shared that because of her Catholic beliefs, she was not comfortable learning about and teaching the Aboriginal culture. Her sense-making of the policy was impacted, as she did not find the professional development sessions on Aboriginal culture helpful. Her perception of her ability to effectively implement the policy, given her primary identity as a Catholic teacher, challenged her maintenance of a positive identity construction as a teaching professional and negatively impacted the policy implementation process.

The discourse on teacher professionalism was also evidenced as impacting the sense-making cues that teachers extracted from environmental messaging, the third mediator in the co-construction model. The teachers had had in-service on differentiated instruction outlined in the special education document *Education for All*. Some teachers, like Donna and Debbie, referenced
their understanding of the expectations and strategies of this document, and this informed their understanding of the expectations of the FNMI policy. In their view, the philosophy of universal design and the strategy of differentiated instruction, centre pieces of the *Education for All* document, were consistent with the expectations of the FNMI policy. Their perception of the alignment of messages promoted their confidence and their positive identity as capable teachers during policy implementation. In addition to the messages in the Ministry documents, messages from the director and the principals at both schools also promoted the teachers’ perceptions of their efficacy during implementation. The director’s vision and placement of a principal with prior experience as the Aboriginal lead at St. Timothy’s gave many teachers confidence in the implementation process. Both principals also promoted teacher leadership as facilitators of policy implementation that affirmed their professionalism. In making sense of these environmental messages within the discourse of professionalism, these teachers reinforced their agency and promoted policy implementation.

Some teachers, though, made sense of the connection between the environmental messages and their role as professionals in ways that may constrain policy implementation. Kate and Tammy, teachers at St. Timothy’s, felt that the multiple messages coming from the province and the school board regarding teaching expectations could be overwhelming for some teachers and affect how they viewed their ability to be effective in the classroom. The message overload impacted how some teachers, like Donna, viewed their ability
to be effective in the classroom. Donna had struggled with understanding how to implement differentiated instruction, which impacted her sense-making of the FNMI policy implementation. In order to maintain a positive identity as an effective teacher Donna transferred her understanding of the messages in *Education for All* document to the FNMI policy. This sense-making could have a negative impact on policy implementation, as Donna’s understanding of the policy expectations may remain superficial.

The discourse around the teacher as professional had both a positive and a negative impact on the FNMI policy implementation in this study. Most teachers used sense-making cues that connected their professionalism in ways that supported the implementation of the policy. Professional development, collaborative cultures, and supportive leadership were viewed as enhancing teacher efficacy during policy implementation. For a few teachers, the sense-making cues they extracted related to the discourse on professionalism did not promote implementation. For them, their understanding of the policy implementation did not align with their perception of their professional duties as teachers, thereby constraining implementation.

The discourse on the teacher as professional provided a sense-making framework for the teachers in this study during policy implementation. The teachers extracted sense-making cues from the meditational system of individual agency, organizational structure and culture and environmental messaging during policy implementation and connected these cues to the language and actions related to the discourse of the teacher as professional.
This study revealed that these sense-making connections in many instances promoted policy implementation; however, in a few cases these connections constrained implementation.

**Discourse #2: Equity and Inclusion in Education**

The second major discourse that influenced the sense-making cues teachers extracted from the co-construction meditational system to make sense of the FNMI policy implementation was the discourse on equity and inclusion in education. In the Catholic education system this discourse is particularly evident as it is embedded in the culture of the Catholic tradition. As a Catholic school community, equity and inclusion are values that are fundamental to the Gospel teachings. Although not specifically referenced by the teachers in this study, this discourse is threaded throughout the teachings of the Catholic Church. The mission statement of the school board in this study references equity and inclusion in the following statements:

- Protect the dignity of the human person through justice and charity.
- Create and nurture a safe, caring and inclusive Catholic community.

The organizational culture of the Catholic education system values equity and inclusion, and because of the embeddedness of this discourse in the Catholic education system, teachers in this school system may be more likely to extract sense-making cues that link to this discourse to the implementation of the FNMI policy.
The discourse of equity and inclusion was strengthened by other environmental messages the teachers received. The recently released Ministry of Education documents *Education for All* and *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* were viewed by several teachers as documents that connected to the expectations of the FNMI policy. Debbie specifically stated that she was more comfortable with the expectations of the *Education for All* document than the FNMI policy. The alignment of the environmental messages with the culture of the Catholic education system impacted the teachers’ interpretation of the FNMI policy. Even though, as the findings show, few teachers had specific experience with the policy document, they interpreted the main message of the document as consistent with the other documents they were more familiar with. Several teachers cited the main message of the FNMI policy as “What’s good for some is good for all”, a prominent message in the *Education for All* document. This interpretation impacted the policy implementation as teacher agency was supported by their belief that they were already familiar with the FNMI policy expectations. Their perceived familiarity with the content of the policy lessened teacher anxiety and promoted efficacy during implementation. Teachers revealed that they believed their classroom practice was consistent with the expectation of equity and inclusion. Several teachers referenced the instructional strategy of differentiated instruction, promoted in the *Education for All* document, as helpful for Aboriginal learners. Teachers extracted sense-making cues connected with the discourse of equity and inclusion that promoted their sense of efficacy and positively impacted policy implementation.
The sense-making cues related to the discourse on equity and inclusion also supported a change in how teachers at both school sites included their Aboriginal parents. Prior to the FNMI policy, lack of Aboriginal parent involvement was a significant issue. At St. Timothy’s, teachers experimented with student-led conferencing instead of parent-teacher interviews because they felt this reduced the discomfort experienced by Aboriginal parents and increased parental involvement. Their experiment was a success as measured by the dramatic increase in Aboriginal parent attendance and the positive feedback from Aboriginal parents citing their increased comfort level. As a result, there was strong teacher support for the expansion of the project. At St. Mary’s, the teachers decided to host an Aboriginal night on reserve and, like the experiment at St. Timothy’s, had very positive results. The Aboriginal community was appreciative of the efforts these teachers made to honour their culture and support the well-being of their children. These examples illustrate how the discourse on equity and inclusion supported the sense-making of teachers and promoted the policy implementation process, as increased Aboriginal parent involvement is one of the expectations of the policy.

The sense-making cues extracted from the discourse on equity and inclusion positively impacted policy implementation by focusing teacher agency on building partnerships. At St. Mary’s the teachers viewed the inclusion of the reserve’s education officer as very supportive of their efforts to improve Aboriginal student achievement through financial and educational supports. Teachers were able to access funding for technology and tutors through the
reserve, which they felt had a positive impact on Aboriginal student achievement. At St. Timothy’s, the inclusion of the variety of agencies and community partners and the promotion of the school as a community hub was viewed positively in their efforts to support their Aboriginal students. The Aboriginal Best Start Hub, which supported Aboriginal parents of pre-school age children, was a prime example for the teachers of their support of equity and inclusion. Inclusive partnerships, an important expectation of the FNMI policy, were actively supported by teachers at both schools. The teachers connected their sense-making of the policy implementation to the discourse on equity and inclusion by building partnerships to support the needs of their Aboriginal students.

These examples illustrate how the discourse on equity and inclusion positively impacted implementation; however, this discourse may also constrain implementation. Spillane et al. (2005) suggests that “seeing new ideas as familiar is indeed an obstacle to implementation” (p.54) as implementers may focus on only the superficial familiar features and miss deeper relationships. This was evidenced in this study when teachers, using the sense-making framework of equity and inclusion, reduced their understanding of the FNMI policy expectations to the instructional approach of “what’s good for some is good for all”, possibly minimizing the unique learning needs of Aboriginal students and their historical and social challenges. This interpretation of the discourse on equity as treating everyone the same may constrain the full implementation of the FNMI policy as teachers make sense of
the main policy message in ways consistent with their current practice. More extensive change in professional practice is less likely, and policy implementation could remain superficial.

Teachers in this study used the discourse of equity and inclusion as a sense-making frame to make meaning during the implementation of the FNMI policy. The organizational culture of the Catholic school system and the environmental messaging in Ministry of Education documents and professional development sessions reinforced the connections teachers made with this discourse and the implementation process. Policy implementation was promoted as teachers were able to link their current practice with their interpretation of the expectations of the policy document arising out of the discourse on equity and inclusion. Policy actions related to including parents and increasing partnerships were embraced by the teachers. Implementation could be constrained by this discourse if teachers extract sense-making cues that connect only the familiar features of the policy to their instructional practice. Many teachers in this study interpreted the main message of the FNMI policy as “What is good for some, is good for all.” This understanding of the message could minimize the policy features that are unique to meeting Aboriginal student needs.

Leadership plays an important role in framing the message of the policy document. The data revealed that teacher sense-making in this study was strongly impacted by the discourse on leadership and change. The impact of
this discourse on how teachers made sense of the FNMI policy will be explored in the next section.

**Discourse #3: Leadership and Change**

One of the strengths in combining sense-making theory with the co-construction model of implementation as a conceptual framework for this study is that it acknowledges the role of power.

Differentials of power and influence—between teachers and administrators, among teachers, or among groups of teachers—will mediate how school members will act on new knowledge. (Wagner, 1999, p. 152)

The discourse on leadership and change in education identifies the significant role played by school leaders in the change process. Leithwood & Riehl (2003) identified “a core set of leadership practices that form the basics of successful leadership and are valuable in almost all educational contexts” (p.5). These practices include setting directions, developing people and developing the organization. This discourse on effective leadership practice is evidenced as impacting the cues that teachers extracted to make sense during the implementation of the FNMI policy.

The findings in this study strongly referenced two leadership positions, director and principal that impacted the sense-making of teachers within the meditational system of individual agency, organizational structure and culture
and environmental messaging. The director was viewed by the teachers as a strong supporter of the policy. Rob stated that since the director was co-chair of the provincial Aboriginal education committee and was of Métis descent, she had a vested interest in the policy. For some teachers the support of the director for the policy gave credibility to its implementation. Teachers at St. Timothy perceived the director’s influence as the driving force behind the direction of their school and the policy implementation. Chris stated that because the director was “wholeheartedly” behind the implementation of the FNMI policy, there were fewer dissenters to the implementation process. The director’s influence on the implementation process was viewed by the principal at St. Timothy’s as instrumental in directing and supporting her efforts to implement the policy. Janet stated that she knew her director “had her back” throughout the implementation process, and this support helped her to take more risks during implementation. The director’s support positively impacted Janet’s agency and, in turn, influenced how she utilized her leadership to impact teacher agency and organizational culture and structure. The first implementation goal Janet had was to make some small physical changes in the entry way of the school which included framed pictures of smiling children engaged in learning, a television monitor that highlighted school activities and displays of Aboriginal cultural symbols such as the 4 colours. In addition, the welcome sign on the door was in English, French and Ojibway. Janet also ensured that each prayer centre in the classrooms had medicine wheels. These physical changes that Janet initiated signaled to the teachers and parents that the Aboriginal culture was welcome and respected in the school.
Janet’s previous role as Aboriginal lead strengthened her credibility in the eyes of her teachers, which also impacted policy implementation. Her teachers knew that because of her previous role, she had a good understanding of the policy expectations and they allowed her to frame the policy message for them. In her study on the sense-making of teachers in the implementation of a reading policy in California, Coburn (2001) found that principals play a key role in shaping the policy messages that teachers are exposed to and enact. This finding is confirmed in this study as Janet framed her interpretation of the main FNMI policy message as “what’s good for some, is good for all”, an interpretation shared by several teachers in this study:

No I think that if you are a smart person you take that policy and you see that it means, “Be a good person and a good teacher to everybody in front of you.” It doesn’t mean, “Do something special for these guys.” It means that if this is what they need to be successful then it’s good for everybody.

Janet

Janet’s previous role as Aboriginal lead also gave her access in her role as principal to resources and people to support policy implementation. She readily admitted that she knew who in the community to call to get support. Her previous role also gave her the knowledge of how to access financial support for her school’s implementation strategies. Her leadership in framing the policy message and accessing resources and supports increased the individual agency
of her teachers and promoted their efficacy. Most teachers were appreciative of her expertise and her guidance.

Janet’s confident leadership and her experience as Aboriginal lead were viewed by some teachers as limiting their agency. The complaints by some teachers that all they ever focus on at St. Timothy’s is Aboriginal student needs illustrated their feeling of frustration. As Iris revealed, “It seems like in the past year Aboriginal is the only word you hear and the teachers are saying, ‘What about my other students?’” Another teacher, Kate, viewed the focus on the policy implementation as the principal’s goal, not the school’s goal. Although the data revealed that Janet’s leadership was appreciated by most of her staff, some teachers perceived the implementation of the policy as Janet’s goal, not their goal. This perception could negatively impact the implementation process because some teachers disagreed with the direction of their leader. Complicating this further, these teachers did not feel comfortable sharing their concerns with Janet as she was the principal and had authority in their school. Two policy implementation outcomes are possible in this situation: the teachers comply with the direction of their leader on the surface but do not authentically embrace the policy changes, or the teachers covertly sabotage the implementation process. Neither outcome is positive for the implementation process. This example illustrates that leadership can both promote and constrain policy implementation.

Cathy, the principal at St. Mary’s, did not have the background expertise that Janet possessed, but she viewed her role in policy implementation as
promoting teacher agency by providing resources and supporting teacher leadership. Cathy was instrumental in accessing grant money to purchase Aboriginal literacy resources, and she believed that promoting teacher leadership in the implementation of the Aboriginal toolkit was an effective strategy. Like Janet, she too framed the policy message for her teachers to support the implementation process:

So I am trying to fit it all in so it makes sense. So it doesn’t always feel like you are doing something extra. What do we do that we naturally do where we can fit in these different expectations of culture?

One of Cathy’s leadership strategies during policy implementation involved assisting her teachers in seeing how the policy was aligned with other expectations. She also promoted her teachers’ professionalism by encouraging their leadership in the implementation process.

The leadership actions of the director and the principals provided teachers with a sense-making framework during policy implementation. The director’s support which included stating her vision for implementation and her strategic placement of principals appeared to positively influence how the teachers viewed the policy implementation. The principals were able to access resource support during implementation which promoted teacher efficacy. The principals were also instrumental in framing the policy message in a way that most teachers could understand and support. Although this framing was important, it could also be a detriment to implementation if the message was
framed in a way that minimized the intent of the policy by focusing only on the familiar policy features. Another way in which leadership was evidenced as possibly constraining policy implementation in this study was in the reticence of teachers to challenge authority. Some teachers at St. Timothy’s did not embrace the policy implementation, but were not comfortable articulating their concerns to their principal. This study highlighted the positive and negative role leadership can have as a cue in the sense-making process of teachers during policy implementation.

Conclusion

Although the cues that teachers used in this study to make sense during policy implementation were many and varied, clusters of cues could be identified that linked sense-making to socially generated frameworks or discourses. This finding confirms the significant role played by the social context of the individual during sense-making. As Ryan (1999) states,

This is not to say that individual men and women generate their own meanings. Rather they must necessarily take up positions within historically produced discourses or sense-making frameworks in order to make sense of the signs that they encounter. These discourses do not stand alone. They are in turn an intimate part of the social structures, institutions, and daily social practices in which they are embedded. (p. 54)
The meditational system in the co-construction conceptual model supported the identification of sense-making cues connected to three main discourses: the discourse of teacher as professional; the discourse of equity and inclusion; and the discourse of leadership and change. Teachers in this study used these frameworks to connect the new information of the policy to their existing cognitive understanding. In some cases these connections supported implementation and in other cases they constrained implementation. From my perspective as a principal who is responsible for policy implementation, this finding has implications for my leadership practices during policy implementation. These implications will be discussed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER NINE: IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This final chapter begins by restating the significance of this study and is followed by a discussion of the implications of the findings for other school boards. Recommendations to school boards fostering leadership, professional development and policy alignment during policy implementation are outlined, as well as recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the impact of this study on my professional practice as a secondary school administrator.

Significance of the Study

The Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy framework is the first policy in the Ontario public education context focused on improving educational outcomes for a cultural minority. The FNMI policy is intended to enhance the life chances of the rapidly growing Aboriginal population in Ontario. Given the destructive historical, political, and social experiences of Aboriginal peoples, the successful implementation of this education policy is a moral and economic imperative.

Teachers are major policy actors in this implementation process. This study sought to examine how teachers in two schools in one school board made sense of the policy implementation process. Sense-making is the process of mapping new information onto the sense-maker’s existing cognitive frame.
This study focused on identifying the cues that teachers used to make sense during implementation. Cues are cognitive or environmental stimuli that assist the sense-maker in linking new information to existing information resulting in the assimilation, accommodation or rejection of the new information. Sense-making cues impacted the information teachers noticed and selected in their environment during sense-making. This study explored how teacher sense-making impacted and was impacted by individual agency, organizational culture and structure, and environmental messaging during policy implementation. The following research sub-questions guided this study:

1. How does sense-making enable or constrain teachers’ agency during policy implementation?
2. How do organizational cultures and structures impact sense-making of teachers during policy implementation?
3. How do environmental messages impact the sense-making of teachers during policy implementation?

Identifying the sense-making cues that teachers used to promote or constrain policy implementation could more effectively inform the implementation process in the future.

*Implications for Policy Implementation Practices in School Boards*
Although the results of this study are not intended to be generalized, some of the findings may be helpful in informing policy implementation practices in other school boards.

Policy implementation is complex and when a policy focuses on improving the educational outcomes of a cultural minority considered to be the First Peoples of Canada, successful implementation becomes a moral and social imperative. The Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy framework was rolled out provincially in 2007. School boards across Ontario established implementation processes that would meet their specific needs. Implementation is a highly variable process as multiple actors interpret the policy at varying levels and act upon these interpretations.

This study provides an opportunity for educators, administrators, and policy makers to examine how some teachers shaped and were shaped by the implementation process. Changing teacher practice is ultimately the goal of policies targeting student learning, but many teachers are highly resistant to changing their practice for a variety of reasons. To improve the potential for successful policy implementation, understanding how teachers make sense of the change they are being asked to make is a key to managing the complexity inherent in implementation. This study examined this sense-making process with the intent of identifying the cues these teachers used to understand and engage in policy implementation. The data was organized according to the meditational system outlined in the sense-making/co-construction conceptual model (individual agency, organizational culture and structure, and
environmental messaging) in order to retain the complexity of the back and forth interplay of these variables during analysis. The analysis of the findings illuminated the cues within this mediation system that teachers used to notice and select information to map onto their pre-existing cognitive frame during policy implementation.

The findings revealed clusters of sense-making cues connected to three main discourses. These discourses included the teacher as professional, equity and inclusion, and leadership and change. These findings are specific to this group of teachers in this school board at the time of the study; however, some general variables impacting sense-making were noted in the findings that may be useful in guiding policy implementation in other school boards. The recommendations arising out of this study address leadership, professional development and policy alignment. These recommendations have been supported in the research (Coburn, 2001 & 2006; Datnow et al., 2002; Spillane et al., 2002).

• Leadership:

Leadership plays a critical role in shaping and supporting the implementation process. School boards should ensure that their leaders thoroughly understand the policy messages and are able to articulate these messages to their teaching staff. Leaders also need to be aware that their positional authority may prevent some teachers from articulating their concerns during implementation. Leaders need to
establish trusting and open environments that respect diverse opinions. These environments would support teachers as they negotiate the implications of the policy for their practice. Leaders must also be aware of the discourses that are impacting the sense-making of the their teachers. Leaders can use these discourses to articulate and clarify the policy expectations and enhance implementation.

- Professional Development:
  To increase teacher knowledge of the policy and teacher comfort with its expectations, school boards need to invest financial resources in supporting professional development throughout policy implementation. In this study the teachers who were provided with in-service and workshops supporting the policy were more knowledgeable about the policy expectations and more engaged in policy implementation actions. Professional development opportunities support teacher professionalism and provide sense-making frameworks that can promote policy implementation. In the cases where the identity construction of the teacher constrains policy implementation, this professional development is even more imperative but must take into consideration their conflicted experience. Professional development needs to be responsive to the needs of the individual teachers and should connect current practice to policy expectations. The principal can play an important role in
recognizing the identity conflict within the teacher and assist the teacher in lowering the anxiety related to the policy expectations.

• Policy Alignment:

School boards and principals should assist teachers in connecting the new policy expectations with current policies and practices. This strategy promotes teacher sense-making as it helps them to map the new information onto existing knowledge. Assisting teachers in making connections among the multiple messages and expectations may reduce implementation stress and increase efficacy. The caveat with this recommendation is that teachers may only see how the policy is similar to their current practice and ignore significant policy features they are unfamiliar with. This could result in superficial policy implementation. The broader knowledge of the policy features that the leader should have will help minimize this drawback, as the leader would assist teachers in deepening their understanding of the unique features of the policy.

• Final Note:

The above recommendations do not speak specifically to the unique focus of the FNMI policy. As was stated in Chapter One, this policy is the first education policy in Ontario to focus specifically on the needs of a cultural minority. The data in this study pointed to some important considerations when implementing such a policy. Ensuring that teachers
understand the historical, political, social and economic issues underlying the development of this policy is critical for teacher sense-making around the importance of its implementation. Teachers need to be able to recognize the “invisible” privileges given to members of mainstream society, and how minorities tend to be positioned as outsiders. These conversations are difficult and unsettling, but they can open up spaces for challenging the status quo and moving toward social justice. It will only be through this painful process that real progress in improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students can be made.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of this study are promising. By identifying the micro-momentary act of sense-making within the larger social sense-making framework, policy designers and implementers could increase their understanding of the variables impacting implementation and, with this knowledge, promote more positive instances of implementation.

The original intent of this study was to examine the sense-making of policy actors at varying policy levels to determine how sense-making impacts the implementation process. Interviewing teachers, principals, superintendents, directors and Ministry officials would give insight into how implementation is promoted or constrained at each level. Sense-making is situational and relational and each policy level should be examined to discover which variables impact sense-making of policy actors in ways that promote
positive instances of implementation. The impact of power relations was only
touched upon in this study and further investigation into how power relations
promote and constrain implementation is suggested in view of the importance
of leadership in the sense-making process during policy implementation.

Another recommendation for future research would be to create an
ethnographic study of one school to capture the subtleties of the sense-making
process among teachers over time. Extensive observation of daily interactions
could reveal the nuances of how power relations within the school context
impact the implementation of policy. Teacher worldviews and knowledge
structures could be examined in relation to the sense-making process. This
detailed research may reveal more data related to teacher silences arising from
their discomfort with Aboriginal culture and history. This data could be used to
improve professional development experiences for teachers around the FNMI
policy. This detailed research could provide valuable insight into teacher
sense-making of policies focusing on cultural minorities.

The final recommendation for future research would be to design a
comparative case study of several school boards in the province. This
comparative study could provide data that may be generalizable regarding
education policy implementation. The site selection could be based on similar
demographic features. Similarities and differences in teacher sense-making
could be examined to identify sense-making patterns. This data could be used
to refine future policy implementation processes.
The results of this study have confirmed some of the previous research in the field of sense-making and policy implementation, particularly in the area of the role of leadership in policy implementation (Coburn, 2006; Honig, 2006). It has also added new information to be considered in future research on policy implementation. This study affirmed the situational and relational nature of sense-making during policy implementation. These findings may inform future policy implementation processes.

**Implications for My Professional Practice**

As I stated in Chapter One, the focus of this dissertation arose out of a frustration I felt as an administrator at the complexity of the implementation process. My understanding of the policy implementation process was limited, yet I was required in my role as principal to ensure the implementation of education policy in my school. When the FNMI Education Policy Framework was unveiled, I fully supported its goal of reducing the achievement gap and increasing education outcomes for Aboriginal students, but I also knew from past implementation experiences that the likelihood of achieving these policy goals was very limited due to the apparent unpredictability of the process.

The journey to improved understanding of the policy implementation process that this dissertation has taken me on has been very illuminating for
my professional practice. Taking the time as an administrator to know how the teachers in my school make sense, I now see as a valuable investment. It is not only important to examine their individual sense-making, but also to situate this sense-making into broader frameworks. It is this interplay between the micro and the macro that shapes how policy is interpreted and enacted. As an administrator I have the ability to influence how the messages of the policy are shaped and enacted, and I need to be vigilant that my own sense-making does not constrain or discount the sense-making of others. I must also be aware of the discourses that are circulating in the policy implementation environment and how these discourses are impacting what is being thought, said, and done during implementation. It is within the synergy of the collective sense-making process that policy can be transformed into practice and result in improved outcomes for our students. This research process has helped me to connect the world of academia to my professional practice. My experience as a researcher and a practitioner has deepened my belief in the importance both worlds play in my desire to make a difference for students. I agree with Honig’s statement that,

...leaders should look to research not for prescriptions or to light a direct path to improvement in their own local communities. Rather they should mine the research for ideas, evidence, and other guides to inform their deliberations and decisions about how lessons from implementation research may apply to their own policies, people, and places. (2006, p. 23)
Although policy implementation is no less complex than it was when I started this research, my understanding of the complexity helps me to approach implementation in a way that will hopefully result in more positive outcomes for those impacted by the policy.

REFERENCES


Appendix A: Participant Interview Questions

Questions were derived from the First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework’s (2007) goals and strategies and organized according to the meditational system in the conceptual framework of this study.

Individual Agency

1. Do you see a gap in the achievement of Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students? In your view, what are the possible causes for this gap? (pre-existing knowledge)

2. What is your understanding of the underlying problem(s) of Aboriginal student underachievement? (pre-existing knowledge)

3. What approaches do you think would be the most effective in improving educational outcomes and reducing the gap? (pre-existing knowledge and educator efficacy)

4. How familiar are you with the First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education policy framework? Can you tell me about it? (policy interpretation)

5. How has this policy been implemented in your school/board? Do you think it has had a positive/negative impact? How? (policy implementation).
6a) Since the implementation of the First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education policy framework in 2007 what changes have you seen in the following areas: (policy implementation)

- curriculum
- classroom practice
- school organization and staffing
- parent involvement
- partnerships
- Aboriginal student achievement (literacy and numeracy)
- school culture
- Aboriginal student self-esteem

b) In your view, which of these changes can be attributed to the implementation of the policy document? Why do you think this is so?

c) How do you think the policy brought about these changes?

7. How has your practice changed since the implementation of the policy? What factors contributed to these changes? Do you have any examples from your instructional practice that illustrate these changes? (policy implementation)

8. Has your understanding of the problem of Aboriginal student underachievement changed since the implementation of the policy? If so, what contributed to these changes? (policy interpretation)

Institutional Culture and Structure

9. In your view, how has your school attempted to improve outcomes for Aboriginal students in the past? How successful have you been?
10. How does the culture of your school promote or inhibit the implementation of this policy/instructional improvements for Aboriginal students?

11. How has this policy affected the work of teachers in your school?

12. How does the leadership in your school promote or inhibit the implementation of the policy/instructional improvements for Aboriginal students?

13. In your view, are there sufficient resources to support policy implementation?

14. Does the organization of your school promote or constrain the implementation of this policy/instructional improvements for Aboriginal students?

**Environmental Messaging**

15. Why do you think this policy was developed?

16. Has the policy conflicted with other school expectations?

17. How have parents perceived the changes as a result of this policy?

18. How do you think -your colleagues view this policy and its implementation?  

   - your principal

   - your school board

   - your parents

   - the community
19. Can you identify any attitudes that support this policy?

20. Can you identify any attitudes that detract from this policy?

APPENDIX B: Information Letter for Participants

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study:

Policy Implementation and Sense-making

For my doctoral dissertation, I am investigating the phenomenon of how teachers, principals and board personnel make sense of the implementation of the First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework (2007) and how this sense-making impacts their practice in their local context.

I am seeking your participation in this study since your experience, insight and understandings will shed light on this policy implementation process.

You are invited to participate in an interview of about one hour in length on issues related to the focus of this study. Complete confidentiality of both survey responses and interviews is guaranteed. Any audio tape recordings of the interviews will only be done with the express written consent of the participants. A copy of the interview questions will be provided to you in advance if possible. All participants’ names and affiliations will be kept strictly confidential.

For the purposes of this study, each participant will be assigned a numerical and letter code. I will conduct the interviews at a place and time convenient to the participants.

If you have any questions about the project, I can be reached at 705-946-9818 or by email at cindy.salituri@hscdsb.on.ca

Thank you in advance for your thoughtful consideration.

Sincerely,

Cindy Salituri

Ed.D. Candidate

Department of Theory and Policy Studies
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT)

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

I agree to participate in the study Policy Implementation and Sense-making. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can leave the study at any time and with no undesirable consequences. The following points have been explained to me:

1. The purpose of this research is to investigate the phenomenon of how teachers, principals and board personnel make sense of the implementation of the First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework (2007) and how this sense-making impacts their practice in their local context. My input regarding this phenomenon is being sought.

2. My participation involves approximately a one hour interview and formal and informal observation that will be recorded and transcribed.

3. The researcher does not foresee any risks to me for participating in this study, nor does the researcher expect that I will experience any discomfort or stress. However, if I wish to withdraw at anytime, I may do so.

4. All of the data collected will remain strictly confidential. Only people associated with the research will see my responses. This consent form will be detached from the transcript and stored separately. My responses will not be associated with my name; instead my name will be converted to a code number when the researcher stores the data.

5. The researcher will answer any other questions about the research either now or during the course of my participation in the study. If I have any other questions or concerns, I can address them to the researcher Cindy Salituri at 705-946-9818 or cindy.salituri@hscdsb.on.ca.

6. Results of the study will be made available to all participants.

Participant’s name: _________________________________ Date: __________________