An Examination of Cooperative Inquiry as a Professional Learning Strategy for Inner City School Leaders

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Abstract

The study described herein is currently underway, and was initiated as doctoral dissertation research. The study investigates cooperative inquiry as a strategy for professional learning of inner-city school administrators in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The study will attempt to identify the central issues of concern for school leaders in high-poverty communities. It will also examine the use of dialogue as a means of constructing knowledge regarding these issues, and will identify the ways in which such knowledge impacts upon the professional practice of these administrators.
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Introduction

The role of principal brings with it ever-increasing challenges, as school reform efforts and demands for accountability continue to take centre stage in the field of education. Leaders in high-poverty community schools may find these challenges even more overwhelming (Harris, 2003), because they are responsible for ensuring the learning opportunities for our most vulnerable and needy youth. This challenge may appear insurmountable, since children in inner-city communities often face many critical issues, and yet school leaders continue to work toward goals of social justice and equity.

Research in the field of school leadership has all but ignored this issue (Thomson & Harris, 2005). The voices and experiences of inner-city administrators appear virtually absent from the literature, and few studies have looked closely at the professional supports needed by these leaders. The research within the Canadian context appears even more sparse (Maynes, 2001). Therefore, this research study aims to bring to light the realities of inner-city school leadership, and to contribute to the knowledge base by examining professional support strategies for these administrators.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to extend the knowledge base related to the unique issues of inner-city school leaders, and to examine the effectiveness of a cooperative inquiry approach for professional learning designed to address those issues. Cooperative inquiry is a form of action research that brings together people with similar experiences, usually professionals from the same discipline or field, with a focus on learning through
social dialogue and collaboration (Reason, 1994). The role of dialogue, as a means of constructing knowledge related to the professional practice of inner-city school leaders, is also examined. The guiding research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What are the central issues of concern for inner-city school leaders?
2. Do inner-city school leaders perceive cooperative inquiry to be an effective professional learning strategy that can assist them in managing those central issues?
3. How does the use of dialogue foster the construction of knowledge related to professional practice?

This study is emergent, descriptive, and evaluative in design, in that: (a) the professional learning strategy will emerge collaboratively, (b) the role of dialogue will be explored and described, and (c) the use of cooperative inquiry as a strategy for professional learning will be evaluated.

Conceptual Framework

The rationale for this study is based upon a social constructivist perspective. Vygotsky’s (1986) social constructivist theory emphasizes the shared and social construction of knowledge, which is central to the collaborative approach used in this research project. This study uses a social constructivist lens to examine how individuals construct knowledge by making meaning of the events and activities they experience, as inner-city administrators, while interacting with others in a dialogue group.

Dialogue theory is used as a parallel perspective in this study. Bakhtin (1986) posits that “language and the word are almost everything in human life” (p. 118). His concept of dialogue, as the central element of human existence, is a promising theoretical
construct in examining the processes of learning, because it focuses on how new knowledge is generated through interactive communication. He emphasizes that the meaning derived from dialogue is the basis of all communication. As Bahktin (1975/1981) suggests, “Understanding comes to fruition only in the response; understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition one another; one is impossible without the other” (p. 282). Shields and Edwards (2005) have examined dialogue theory within the specialized field of educational leadership. Their perspective on the role of dialogue in knowledge construction is significant in terms of professional learning, and is therefore incorporated into the conceptual framework of this study.

Importance and Contribution

Socio-economic status has consistently been found to be significantly related to the academic achievement of children (Human Resources Development Canada and Statistics Canada, National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth, 1996). In essence, children living in families with lower incomes are at a greater risk of experiencing negative outcomes in school (Ross & Roberts, 1999). Studies indicate that the corollary is also true: the lower the level of educational attainment, the higher is the risk of poverty (Silver, 2000). Such research leads to the practical conclusion that, even as schools in impoverished areas are challenged by issues related to low socio-economic levels, those same schools are, in part, the solution to persistent poverty.

The leaders of schools in impoverished inner-city areas are mandated to ensure that students are nurtured and provided with opportunities to meet their academic and social potential. Thomson and Harris (2005) suggest that principals in high-poverty community schools face unique challenges, and that little research has focused on the
everyday realities of these leaders. These realities include: (a) ongoing crises that require continual management (violence, abuse, crime); (b) variable teaching quality; (c) doing more with less; (d) students with a diversity of academic and personal needs; (e) managing truancy and retention issues; (f) unrealistic expectations about raising student performance; (g) fostering community involvement; and (h) working with multiple agencies (p. 6-7). It is therefore hoped that this study can address the lack of research in this area, and make suggestions for the support and professional practice of leaders in inner-city, high-poverty environments.

Effective leadership is identified in the research literature as a key factor in improving schools that face the challenges of educating impoverished children (Lyman & Villani, 2001; West, Jackson, Harris & Hopkins, 2000). However, Normore (2004) suggests that "school administrators cannot be expected to effectively embrace their roles and functions …without appropriate support structures" (p. 107). In terms of supporting educators, some research indicates that "authentic conversation" with peers is of critical importance (Clark, 2001). Ketelle (2004) suggests that dialogue groups provide school leaders with opportunities for mutual support and professional growth. However, few studies have focused on professional learning strategies for inner-city school leaders and, more specifically, on the effectiveness of collaborative inquiry and dialogue groups in addressing issues related to professional practice. Considering the unique issues faced by inner-city school leaders, effective supports must be developed and put in place so that future leaders can be recruited and retained. This study will build on the limited research in this area, provide an evaluation of a cooperative inquiry dialogue support group, help
to refine the theoretical perspectives in which it is embedded, and consider implications for future research and practice.

In terms of local context, this research may prove important to administrators in Winnipeg’s inner-city. Due to the demographics of poverty and related issues, it is evident that these school leaders work in high-needs communities. It is hoped that this research study will explore the issues of concern for these leaders and, in so naming them, determine ways in which these issues may be managed and addressed. This research may also act a springboard for discussion on the ways in which inner-city school leaders might be most effectively supported in their professional practice.

In essence, this study offers a unique approach for exploring leadership issues in schools that educate the children of greatest need. It is hoped that the findings of this study may, in fact, have far-reaching impact on inner-city school leadership, and in turn, address issues related to poverty and education.

Research Design

This study employs an action research approach. Action research had its beginnings in Europe, first used by the critical sociologists of the Frankfurt School, and became more widely known through the work of Lewin (1946). Stringer (2004) describes action research as “a cyclical, dynamic, and collaborative process in which people address social issues affecting their lives” (p. 4). Bogdan and Biklen (2003) articulate the approach as “the systematic collection of information designed to bring about social change” (p. 221). Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) further clarify this research approach as:
…a form of collective, self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of those practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out. (p.78)

These definitions suggest that action research involves self-reflection and collaboration, with the ultimate goal of improved policy, practice, or outcomes. In all cases, the focus is on social action. Stringer (2004) identifies nine key features of action research: (a) **Change**: Improving practices and behaviors by changing them; (b) **Reflection**: People thinking, reflecting, and/or theorizing about their own practices, behaviors, and situations; (c) **Participation**: People changing their own practices and behaviors, not those of others; (d) **Inclusion**: Starting with the agendas and perspectives of the least powerful and widening the circle to include all those affected by the problem; (e) **Sharing**: People sharing their perspectives with others; (f) **Understanding**: Achieving clarity of understanding of the different perspectives and experiences of all involved; (g) **Repetition**: Repeating cycles of research activity leading toward solutions to a problem; (h) **Practice**: Testing emerging understandings by using them as the basis for changing practices or constructing new practices; and (i) **Community**: Working toward the development/building of a learning community (p. 5). These assumptions clearly indicate the reflective, action-oriented, and participative elements prevalent in action research, and also reflect the social constructivist theoretical framework that underpins this study.

The cyclical nature of action research is one of the distinguishing features of this approach. Unlike many forms of research, action research defines itself by its evolving and repeating nature. This cycle is portrayed in a variety of different graphic forms that
have been modified from Lewin’s (1946) original plan/act/observe/reflect sequence. In the action research cycle, the sequence is repeated at least three times, if not more, in an effort to reflect on plans, actions, and progress. As such, it can be more challenging to establish specific timelines and expectations because the cyclical process can alter the plans of researchers, co-researchers, and/or participants.

Action researchers follow social guidelines that define their approach to inquiry. In terms of social principles, first and foremost, action research must be fully participatory. Involved people guide the process by following the cyclical sequence. Similarly, the process must be democratic, in terms of equal distribution of power and acknowledgement that all participants have a voice in the research. These two social principles allow for enhanced dialogic relationships and community-building.

As a result of active and equitable involvement, “as they participate in action research, people develop high degrees of motivation and are often empowered to act in ways they never thought possible” (Stringer, 2004, p. 31). This reflects the third social principle of empowerment. Closely related to the principle of empowerment is the notion that action research, by its nature, is life-enhancing. This suggests that one of the end results of action research is improved quality of life in the situational context of the research.

Cooperative inquiry is one form of action research. This approach is based on the work of Heron (1971), and is used as the foundation for this study’s research design. Heron suggests that traditional research methods are inadequate for examining the self-determining nature of humans. Further, such approaches isolate people from the inquiry and decision-making processes, and from the knowledge gained through the research.
itself. As such, cooperative inquiry provides a contrasting approach to the research process:

…in cooperative inquiry, all those involved in the research are both co-researchers, whose thinking and decision making contribute to generating ideas, designing and managing the project, and drawing conclusions from the experience, and also co-subjects, participating in the activity being researched. (Reason, 1994, p. 326)

According to Reason, cooperative inquiry differs from participatory action research in that PAR usually involves work with marginalized people, and is aimed at improving the lives of those people through focused efforts on social justice. Cooperative inquiry also brings together people with similar experiences and issues, but does not necessarily place emphasis on empowering marginalized populations. Instead, the focus is on learning through social dialogue and participation. For example, a group of nurses may undertake cooperative inquiry to examine post-operative care of patients. In this case, the nurses are not necessarily disempowered or marginalized in a societal context, but they do have a common issue that they wish to address and learn more about, through dialogic, cooperative inquiry.

According to Reason (1994), cooperative inquiry methodology includes four phases. First, the participants come together in commonality to identify some issues to explore, and to identify personal goals. This first stage generally involves focused dialogue in a group setting. Second, the participants set out to pursue their individual goals within the context of their daily life and work. This is the action phase of the process. During this phase, participants are involved in a parallel process of observing
and reflecting upon the consequences of their actions. Finally, the participants re-group to share and reflect upon their actions and observations, and to continue to discuss issues and refine goals. These four phases are repeated in the cyclical pattern distinctive of action research.

Methodology

Participants

Study participants work as principals in inner-city communities. Within the context of this study, the term inner-city refers to a district in the Winnipeg School Division. This Division of 85 schools is divided into four districts, each with its own superintendent. The Inner-city District, which includes 21 schools, is comprised of the area east to the Red River, north to Mountain Avenue, west to Arlington Street, and south to the Assiniboine River.

The Inner City District was established using criteria set out by the Division, for determining school communities most in need. The main criterion is socio-economic status, which is determined using Statistic Canada’s low-income cut-off rate (LICO). Low-income cut-off rates are determined on the basis of families that “usually spend more than 54.7% of their income on food, shelter, and clothing, and hence can be considered to be living in straitened circumstances (WSD, 2002, p. C1). Other criteria include migrancy rates, education levels of parents, family structure related to two-parent and single-parent households, English as a second language factors, and identified new Canadian immigrants and refugees.

Table 1 indicates that the students of the inner-city district schools come from homes where these factors imply greatest need:
Table 1. Demographics of Winnipeg Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Inner-City</th>
<th>Winnipeg School Division</th>
<th>Greater Winnipeg (CMA) *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Median Family Income</td>
<td>$26,154</td>
<td>$51,990</td>
<td>$64,422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families in Poverty (LICO)</td>
<td>65 %</td>
<td>25 %</td>
<td>15 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Parent Families</td>
<td>56 %</td>
<td>24.6 %</td>
<td>17.7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrancy</td>
<td>55.5 %</td>
<td>27.0 %</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents &lt; Gr. 9 Educ.</td>
<td>18.5 %</td>
<td>10.2 %</td>
<td>7.7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English as an Additional Language</td>
<td>9.3 %</td>
<td>7.9 %</td>
<td>5.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Canadians (refugees/immigrants)</td>
<td>7.2 %</td>
<td>6.0 %</td>
<td>2.0 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Study participants were selected by open invitation and voluntary involvement.

With the approval of the Inner-city District Superintendent, the principal researcher distributed letters of invitation to all current principals and vice principals in the district. This letter included a detailed description of the project and an outline of the expectations of participants. Five principals expressed interest in participating in the study – one from a Nursery to Grade Six school, two from Nursery to Grade Eight schools, one from a Grade Seven to Twelve school, and one from a Grade Nine to Twelve School. The group includes five female and one male principal, and all participants have over five years experience in inner-city administration.
Procedures

In cooperative inquiry, the initial steps are often taken by a principal researcher intent on examining a specific issue, but the participants also bring to the research their own knowledge of the issue. Hence, the research problem and questions first identified by the researcher are reexamined and possibly redefined by the group. As these are redefined, the group works to identify collective objectives for the study. The group then works together to reframe the inquiry by determining the place, time, and scope of the study. As knowledge is shared and new knowledge constructed, the group contributes to restructuring data gathering and analysis procedures, and offers insight into issues of ethics and validity. In essence, the researcher initiates the process, but once participants are involved, they direct the inquiry through dialogic cooperation and knowledge-sharing.

For this study, the researcher established the dialogue group, and at an initial planning meeting, the administrators determined the format of meetings, including dates, locations, times, and potential issues to be discussed. The format established was used initially, but was open to modifications based on the ongoing needs of the group.

In keeping with the action research approach, full participation is crucial to the process. As Stringer (2004) suggests, the method focuses on “people changing their own practices and behaviors, not those of others” (p. 5). Therefore, the issues that focus dialogue group sessions cannot be pre-determined. Participants must be empowered to identify the issues that are most critical and that most impact on their professional practice and must, in turn, determine their own courses of action. For the purpose of this research study, participants completed a pre-study questionnaire to identify potential issues for discussion. This data collection instrument includes questions related to the
central issues of concern for inner-city administrators determined in previous research. The issues included relate to those determined in the literature review on inner-city school leadership, but the questionnaire allows for participants to suggest additional issues. The results from this instrument acted as a starting point for planning dialogue sessions, but issues and topics changed as the research evolved.

Professional literature and related research was brought into dialogue group sessions, based upon the issues that were determined by participants. Therefore, the researcher’s “expert knowledge” or the findings of other scholars’ work framed part of the social construction of knowledge that was developed in the dialogue group. In keeping with the assumptions of action research and cooperative inquiry, in particular, the principal researcher acts as facilitator, in bringing outside ideas to the group as part of her own contribution, but she does not assume the role to “teach” the group.

Implementing the Inquiry Cycle

Once the project was planned by the collective group designed, the cycle of action, observation, and reflection was initiated. In cooperative inquiry, the action-observation-reflection cycle is an individual and group process. For example, the participants took action in the workplace, and observed the consequences of their actions. They, of course, reflected at that time, but also brought their reflections to the group. When the group met, participants shared reflections through dialogue, offered insights, and gathered new ideas. This, in turn, allowed individuals to revise or refine their subsequent course of action, and the cycle began again.

This cycle was also reflected in the process of the larger group. During each cooperative inquiry session, the dialogue itself is the action. The observation and
reflection takes place during these conversations, and continues to evolve. Through this reflection, the group determines subsequent objectives, activities and goals for learning that will be acted upon in future sessions. As such, the process for the individual and the group is constantly evolving through the cyclical and social nature of the inquiry.

*Data Collection Techniques*

The techniques used for collecting data within the context of an action research study can vary depending on the problems being examined and the information needed for reflection and action. According to Mills (2003), in order to ensure thoroughness “it is generally accepted in action research circles that researchers should not rely on any single source of data, interview, observation, or instrument” (p. 52). As such, action researchers practice triangulation, which involves the use of multiple and varied data collection techniques that allow researchers to clarify meaning from different perspectives. Wolcott (1994) presents a model referred to as The Three E’s, which are experiencing, enquiring, and examining, and represent categories of data collection that can be utilized, in combination, to accomplished triangulation:

(a) Experiencing through observation and field notes: participant observation, privileged active observer, passive observer, internet bulletin boards and research chat rooms; (b) Enquiring when the researcher asks: informal ethnographic interviews, structured formal interviews, focus groups, e-mail interviews, electronic surveys, questionnaires and surveys, attitude scales, Likert scales, standardized tests; and (c) Examining (using existing records) – archival documents, portfolios, policies, artwork, maps, audio/videotapes, artefacts, statistical/numerical data from reports, student work samples (p. 19)
For the purposes of this research study, data is being gathered using various techniques, in order to accomplish triangulation.

First, the data from the pre-study planning session and questionnaire was used to determine the issues of concern for inner-city administrators. The dialogue group sessions are being audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded. This will provide additional information related to the central issues of concern for inner-city administrators, as well as how dialogue plays a role in knowledge construction.

To further determine how the use of dialogue fosters the construction of knowledge, principals complete an exit slip at the end of each session to record feedback in terms of their roles in the dialogue and subsequent learning. This data is being analyzed using the theoretical concepts on knowledge and dialogue, as developed by Shields and Edwards. Participants also use a reflective journal to record their plans, observations, and actions. At the end of each dialogue group session, participants record action plans related to their professional practice, in order to address the social action element of action research. At each subsequent dialogue group session, they record their observations and reflections to determine evidence of change. They may also include their own data collection techniques, such as documents, artifacts, and visuals. Participants are invited to share their plans, observations, reflections, and evidence of change during the dialogue group sessions.

To ascertain the effectiveness of cooperative inquiry as a professional learning strategy, at the mid-point of the study, the administrators participated in a focus group session to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of the experience. Guiding questions for this session focused on the issues discussed, and the value and effectiveness of dialogue
and the cooperative inquiry approach. This also offered participants an opportunity to reflect on the experience and suggest modifications for future dialogue group sessions.

At the end of the study (there are two more dialogue sessions planned over the next two months), participants will complete a written post-study questionnaire focusing on the issues discussed during dialogue group sessions, the impact of cooperative inquiry as a strategy for professional learning, and the role of dialogue in the construction of knowledge related to professional practice. Finally, the administrators will take part in a summative focus group session to reflect on the overall cooperative inquiry experience.

Triangulation has been accomplished using the data collection techniques described above. In addition, the data matrix presented as Table 1 establishes direct links between the research questions and the data collection techniques that will provide information on these questions.

Table 1
Data Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the central issues of concern for inner-city administrators?</td>
<td>Pre-study planning session transcript,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-study survey,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dialogue group transcripts,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post-study questionnaire,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summative focus group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do inner-city school administrators perceive cooperative inquiry to be an effective professional learning strategy, in terms of assisting them in managing those central issues?</td>
<td>Mid-study focus group transcript,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post-study questionnaire,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summative focus group transcript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does the use of dialogue foster the construction of knowledge related to professional practice?</td>
<td>Exit slips,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflective journals,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dialogue group transcripts,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post-study questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summative focus group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis

Shagoury Hubbard, and Miller Power (1993) indicate that “data analysis is a way of seeing and then seeing again. It is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the data, to discover what is underneath the surface” (p. 65). As such, each data set is analyzed in a different way, depending on the data collection technique used in the study.

The data from the pre-study questionnaire, which contains both qualitative and quantitative data, has been analyzed. For quantitative items, mean scores were determined to identify responses to each question, which utilizes a four-point scale. This technique of collecting simple means and frequencies in order to tabulate results was selected due to the small sample. The anecdotal data from these questionnaires was analyzed and coded according to the research questions, once again determining consistent themes and patterns.

The transcript from the pre-study planning session was analyzed to identify the issues of concern for inner-city school leaders, and to identify participants’ initial views on cooperative inquiry and dialogue.

Transcripts from dialogue group sessions are being examined and coded throughout the study. After the first session, the transcript was analyzed and coded for themes related to the research question pertaining to the concerns and issues facing inner-city principals. This procedure included topic analysis, and will continue for all subsequent dialogue group sessions, as consistent patterns are examined and identified. As the study progresses, the data collected and analyzed will be indexed to establish emerging categories.
The exit slips completed by administrators at the end of each dialogue group session are intended to provide the researcher with data on the participants’ perceptions of the role of dialogue in knowledge construction. These exit slips will be coded according to the four types of knowledge gained through dialogue. These are:

(a) knowledge of the other’s horizon on a subject and knowledge of the other as revealed in encountering this specific horizon; (b) knowledge that the other gains of your horizon on a subject and knowledge of you as revealed in encountering this specific horizon; (c) knowledge that results from the synthesis of these two horizons; and (d) knowledge that one gains regarding one’s own horizon – one’s prejudices and situatedness – as well as working out one’s own meanings more completely (Shields & Edwards, p. 84).

During the mid- and post study focus group sessions, the participants will be asked to share their thoughts on the three identified research questions. As a group, they will discourse and share ideas and experiences. These sessions will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded in the same manner as other transcripts, with a focus on issues related to each of the three research questions.

At the end of the study, the reflective journals will be gathered and analyzed for trends and patterns related to evidence of change in professional practice. Topic analysis will be used, and the data collected and analyzed will be indexed to establish emerging categories. Indexing will be done in the same manner as noted previous.

Finally, the post-study questionnaire, which contains both qualitative and quantitative data, will be analyzed. For quantitative items, mean scores will be determined to identify responses to each question, which utilizes a four-point scale. This
technique of collecting simple means and frequencies in order to tabulate results was selected due to the small sample. The anecdotal data from these questionnaires will be analyzed and coded according to the research questions, once again determining consistent themes and patterns, and will be compared to the data from the pre-study questionnaire and planning session, as well as the mid-study focus group session, in order to elaborate upon people's growing awareness of the value of cooperative inquiry as a research method and participants' growing metacognition of the importance of dialogue in constructing knowledge related to professional practice.

Since participatory action research aims at giving voice, it is necessary to ensure that the voices of participants remain at the fore of data collection and analysis. As such, powerful oral and written commentaries, quotes, conversations and anecdotes will be collected and used to illustrate and support the findings of this study. Occasionally, this textual analysis also gives way to the identification of what Stringer (2004) refers to as “epiphanies and illuminative experiences” (p. 96), that are those transforming moments of knowledge discovery or construction. Such experiences offer insight into implications for future action, and are therefore significant to the action research approach.

**Interim Reflections**

Since this study is currently underway, it is not feasible or advisable to attempt to draw conclusions or state findings in terms of the research questions. It is, however, possible to discuss some of the nuances and ideas that have emerged from the data.

**Shared Knowledge**

The topics of conversation have been diverse and plentiful. There has not appeared to be one theme to the dialogue. Instead, it seems that, through dealing with
timely issues and the urgency within their jobs, the group has shared and constructed specific knowledge related to certain aspects of their leadership practice. For example, topics of conversation have included: (a) building relationships with community organizations and bridging cultural differences; (b) collecting authentic evidence of student learning; (c) completing specific school reports; (d) dealing with serious staffing issues; (e) accounting and budget processes; and (e) addressing attendance and migrancy issues. With each topic, the group shares experiences and approaches that others may then apply to their own practices, thereby offering new solutions and alternative approaches to inner-city school leadership.

*The Openness and Trust*

Building trust is a central characteristic of cooperative inquiry, and it is a process that develops over time as a group works together. The participants in this study have coined the term “the cone of silence” which they have used to refer to the confidential nature of their conversations. One participant wrote “the cone of silence helps with wellness” while another suggested that “the load is lightened because the trusting atmosphere of the group provides a healthy release.”

*The Time to Talk*

The participants have regularly articulated the importance of having an opportunity for dialogue. Their roles in leading inner city school do not lend themselves to down-time or informal opportunities for professional conversations. One participant made this implicitly clear when articulating her own rationale for this project, in terms of time out of the school:
It is very difficult to leave our buildings, as many days we have to make life and death decisions. It is hard to let go of that responsibility even temporarily. The fact that I choose to leave my school for a whole day each month speaks to the importance of this time to talk.

The benefit of this time is also implied in the fact that not one participant has been absent from any of the four sessions held thus far. This, again, supports the notion of the value of opportunities for professional conversation.

*Emerging Ideas*

Other themes that are emerging from the data and dialogue include the value of cooperative inquiry as a catalyst for critical reflection related to the principals’ own professional practice. As well, the group has articulated the powerful benefits of this group experience in terms of their own personal wellness and sense of being valued and acknowledged in their roles as inner-city school leaders.

**Conclusion**

This paper describes a research study currently underway, which investigates cooperative inquiry as a strategy for professional learning of inner-city school administrators. The study attempts to identify the central issues of concern for school leaders in high-poverty communities, the use of dialogue as a means of constructing knowledge regarding these issues, and the ways in which such knowledge impacts upon the professional practice of these administrators. As the data emerges and as the research questions are explored further, it is hoped that this study will contribute to the knowledge base by bringing to light the realities of inner-city school leadership and effective professional support strategies for these administrators.
References


