

# LEADING IN THE INNER CITY: CRITICAL ISSUES AND ESSENTIAL SUPPORTS FOR NOVICE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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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. Within the professional community of principals, those leaders in disadvantaged and high-risk schools may find these challenges even more overwhelming. For example, inner-city principals have been challenged to provide learning opportunities for our most vulnerable and needy youth and are expected to provide these children with the skills they will need to find their way out of a life of poverty. This challenge may appear insurmountable in terms of the many critical issues facing children in inner-city communities, 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 critical issue. The voices and experiences of inner-city principals appear absent from the literature, and few studies have looked closely at the professional supports needed for these leaders to do their jobs effectively. This research study helps to bring to light the realities of inner-city school leadership, the supports upon which these principals rely, and further initiatives required for these principals to successfully approach this challenging role. The purpose of this research project was to explore the critical issues facing novice principals in Winnipeg's Inner-city District. In an effort to identify the essential supports needed to function effectively, the research investigated principals' personal views about their essential needs for professional support.

## *Personal Perspective*

As a public school educator, I spent ten years in Winnipeg's inner-city schools in roles including special education teacher, resource teacher, vice principal, and principal. I therefore approached this study with experiences and perceptions about the issues on which I was

focusing. My personal perspective is that issues of poverty and other inner-city characteristics impact upon the school community in significant ways, and, as leaders of inner-city schools, principals experience more intense and frequent challenges. In turn, I have a sense that inner-city principals may benefit from specific supports and set out to determine what those supports might be. My approach in this study was to explore the opinions of other inner-city leaders in an effort to identify what they considered to be the issues and supports required.

All of the school principals in Winnipeg's inner city are known to me as colleagues. In order to deal with the resulting potential for bias, I explained to the interviewees that, to make the research as valid as possible, it was important that they share their views honestly, even if they thought that I might view some issues differently from them. I also stressed that they should share their thoughts in detail rather than assume that I might be familiar with their circumstances. In addition, I focused on establishing questions with objectivity and attempted to limit my comments during the interview to those that encouraged feedback or clarified issues.

### *Context of the Study*

#### *The Inner City*

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 overseen by a chief superintendent and is divided into four geographic regions, each with its own district superintendent. Winnipeg's 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. This geographic district was established using criteria set out by the Winnipeg School Division for determining school communities most in need. The main criterion is socioeconomic status, which is determined using Statistic Canada's low-income cut-off rate (LICO). Low-income cut-off rates are determined on the following criteria:

The cut-offs are set where families spend 20 percentage points or more of their income than the Canadian average on food, shelter and clothing (taking into account size of community of residence and family size), and hence can be considered to be living in straitened circumstances. Families that fall below the

latest low-income cut-offs spend more than 54.7% of their income on these essentials (Winnipeg School Division, 2005, p. D1).

Other inner-city criteria include migrancy rates that indicate the number of transfers in and out of a school in relation to the average enrolment, the 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 in inner-city district schools come from homes where these factors imply greatest need.

**Table 1. Inner-city District Demographics Comparisons**

Criteria	Inner City	Winnipeg School Division	Greater Winnipeg (CMA) <sup>a</sup>
Median Family Income	\$26,154	\$51,990	\$64,422
Families in Poverty (LICO)	65%	25%	15%
Single Parent Families	56%	25%	18%
Migrancy	56%	27%	– <sup>b</sup>
Parents < Gr. 9 Educ.	19%	10%	8%
ESL	9%	8%	6%
New Canadians	7%	6%	2%

<sup>a</sup> CMA is the Census Metropolitan Area, which currently includes the City of Winnipeg and the municipalities of West St. Paul, East St. Paul, Headingley, Richot, Taché, Springfield, Rosser, St. Francois Xavier, St. Clements, and the Brokenhead First Nation.

<sup>b</sup> Data not available.

Sources: Winnipeg School Division 2003/2004 School Demographics Report; Statistics Canada 2001 Census.

*Literature Review**Poverty and Schooling*

Today, 20% of Canadian children live in poverty (Lee, 2000). This is a crucial statistic for educators because the socioeconomic status of families is strongly related to the academic achievement of their children (National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth, 1996). In essence, children living in families with lower incomes are found to be at a greater risk of experiencing negative outcomes (Ross & Roberts, 1999). At the same time, 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 socioeconomic levels, those same schools are, in part, the solution to persistent poverty. Although educators understand that poverty plays a pivotal role in student success, they are often overwhelmed by the scope of the issue (Levin & Riffel, 2000).

In Winnipeg, "more than half of all inner-city households have incomes below the poverty line, and the proportion of inner children under six years of age has been growing most rapidly" (Lezubski, Silver, & Black, 2000, p. 26-27). Many of the children from these homes are faced with daunting challenges as a result of their families' socioeconomic status, which impacts on their ability to meet with academic success in school. For example, these families often lack affordable housing and move frequently in their efforts to find adequate shelter. High migrancy rates affect children's opportunities for educational consistency and the stability necessary for academic progress. In addition, these children often lack adequate food, clothing, and resources to support and enrich their school experiences (Silver, 2000).

The current state of Winnipeg's inner-city Aboriginal community is even more critical. Currently, almost 50% of inner-city families identify themselves as Aboriginal. While the Aboriginal population continues to grow in the city's core area, an astonishing four out of every five Aboriginal households in the inner city are below the poverty line. The impact of poverty adversely affects Aboriginal children's ability to succeed in school. As they progress through the school system, the plight of Aboriginal youth worsens, as they become discouraged, drop out of school, and experience the temptations of gang involvement and the violence of life on the streets. "The death rate and the rate of suicide among Manitoba Aboriginal youth are respectively four times and six times the provincial average" (Manitoba Health, 1995). These shocking statistics establish the urgency of need for research and action that will positively impact the lives of Winnipeg's inner-city children.

Studies have shown that Aboriginal people who attain higher levels of education also attain higher income levels, while those who do not meet with school success are prone to a future of poverty (Loxley, 1996). This indicates the necessity for direct focus and research on issues related to inner-city education and the role of schools in improving the lives of the families in these communities.

### *Inner-city School Leadership*

The leaders of schools in impoverished inner-city areas, such as those in Winnipeg, are uniquely challenged to ensure that students are nurtured and provided with opportunities to meet their academic and social potential. Effective leadership is a key factor in improving schools that face the challenges of educating impoverished children (Lyman & Villani, 2001; West, Jackson, Harris, & Hopkins, 2000). It is, therefore, essential that skilled and experienced leaders be recruited and retained for inner-city schools. Further, research indicates that principals leading schools in disadvantaged areas have:

a strong moral purpose but often wrestle with idealism/pessimism about how much this is possible in practice. Very often they spend long hours at work to the detriment of their health and family life. While this is not an uncommon feature of principals in other school contexts, it tends to be more prevalent in schools in challenging circumstances thus negatively affecting recruitment and retention in the areas of greatest need (Thomson & Harris, 2005, p. 3).

In Manitoba, the average age of school administrators is 52 (*Manitoba Teacher*, 2004). This suggests that, over the next few years, principals will be leaving the profession in vast numbers. School boards and senior administration will be challenged to recruit, train, and retain leaders in all areas since the opportunity for principal mobility will be high. Considering the unique issues faced by inner-city school leaders, the challenge might be greater to ensure that these schools are provided with skilled leaders who will remain in their positions. The future challenge for school divisions will be to ensure that effective supports are in place for inner-city principals in order to encourage these educators to work in these schools.

Thomson and Harris (2005) suggest that little research has focused on the everyday realities of principals in disadvantaged schools. These realities include: ongoing crises that require continual management (illness, death, violence, abuse, etc.); variable teaching quality and proficiency; doing more with less; students with a diversity of academic and personal

needs; managing truancy and retention issues; unrealistic expectations about raising student performance; developing community involvement; and working with multiple agencies (p. 6-7). These researchers also suggest that more focus is needed on specific training for inner-city principals.

### *Professional Supports for School Leaders*

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, research indicates that *authentic conversation* with peers is of critical importance (Clark, 2001). As well, Kettle (2004) offers that dialogue groups provide administrators with opportunities for mutual support and professional growth. In another study conducted in Norway, principals collaborated with researchers to examine the meaning and knowledge base of educational leadership and to determine an instructional plan for principal preparation and training (Møller, 1998). The participating principals found that the use of a collaborative forum allowed them to explore new ideas, grow professionally, and work closely with peers. Similarly, a more recent study conducted with principals in New Zealand involved principals working collaboratively with peers as they used action research to examine and refine their own leadership practice. The findings suggest that principals value dialogue and collaboration with their peers in an environment of support, trust, and honesty. (Robertson, 2000).

This review of related literature indicates that few studies have focused specifically on professional supports for inner-city school leaders. In order to contribute to the knowledge base in the field of educational leadership, this research project attempted to provide insight into the unique support needs of Winnipeg's inner-city principals and outlines potential implications for inner-city school leadership in general.

### *Method*

To investigate this issue, qualitative research methodology was used as a means of giving voice to inner-city school leaders. Flexibly structured interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) were designed to gather data on the issues facing these principals and on their views on the professional supports they needed. As such, specific open-ended questions were formulated and provided to the principals prior to their interviews. During interviews, however, the process

was flexible in terms of follow-up questions and conversation that encouraged participant perspectives (Erikson, 1986) as the principals were encouraged to reflect on their practice.

Three inner-city administrators with less than four years experience as principals were selected randomly from a list of potential participants provided to the researcher by the district superintendent. These three people were contacted, informed of the study, and invited to participate. All three agreed, and dates were established for meetings.

The interviews, which lasted from 60 to 90 minutes, were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Preestablished questions focused on obtaining data relating to the unique issues facing inner-city principals, the supports for inner-city principals, the choice to work in an inner city, and the likelihood of remaining in an inner-city school environment. Participants were also encouraged to share their views beyond the scope of the preestablished research questions in order to create an atmosphere of openness and freedom and to support participants' need to communicate (Stringer, 2004).

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to provide details on their careers in education, citing their experience in different schools and districts and the specific positions they held. This information, along with demographics data, formulates the following description of each principal and his/her inner-city school.

### *Description of the Participants and Schools*

Given the nature of the qualitative work in this study, it follows that a description of the principals, as well as the characteristics of the inner-city schools in which they work, becomes necessary. The following section elaborates upon the professional characteristics of each participant, and comparative demographics of each school is provided in Table 2. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the confidentiality of both the participants and the schools in which they work.

"Chris" is in her second year as principal of "Mackling School." Prior to this, she was the vice principal at another inner-city school, as well as a classroom teacher for 20 years in various Winnipeg schools. Mackling School has a population of approximately 225 students from Nursery to Grade Six and has an extensive special education program. The school has a vice principal and a staff of 50.

The second interviewee, "Kate," is in her first year as principal of "Jonathon Jones School." Prior to this, she had been vice principal at the same school for four years and has 22 years experience as a classroom teacher and support teacher in various Winnipeg schools. Jonathon Jones School has a population of approximately 300 students from Nursery to Grade

Eight. There are two special programs in the school for students whose behaviour dictates smaller and more structured classes. The school has a vice principal and a staff of 40 in total.

The third study participant, "Barb," is in her third year as principal of "Donald Laramee School." Prior to this, she had been vice principal at an inner-city junior high school for three years and has 20 years experience as a classroom teacher and counselor in various inner-city schools. Donald Laramee School has a population of approximately 370 students from Nursery to Grade Eight. There is an extensive special education program for students with behaviour issues as well as those with alcohol related effects. The school has a vice principal and a staff of 50 in total.

Table 2 features the specific demographics of these three inner-city schools. Comparisons between Table 1 and Table 2 indicate that these schools are located in communities of most significant need in terms of inner-city criteria related to socioeconomic factors. English as a second language and immigration factors are of little significance in these communities.

**Table 2. School Demographics of Participating Principals**

	Mackling School	Jonathon Jones School	Donald Laramee School
Median Family Income	\$24,358	\$22,964	\$22,292
Families in Poverty (LICO)	68%	74%	77%
Single Parent Families	58%	63%	65%
Migrancy	55%	90%	52%
Parents < Gr. 9 Educ.	19%	23%	25%
ESL	6%	2%	0%
New Canadians	2%	3%	0%

The percentage of Aboriginal families in these school communities is also a significant issue, inasmuch as the current state of Aboriginal youth is increasingly critical. The Mackling School community consists of 47% Aboriginal families while Jonathon Jones and Donald Laramee schools service 58% and 65% Aboriginal families, respectively.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis began by reviewing and transcribing each interview transcript soon after the interview was conducted. In order to determine consistent themes and patterns, the transcript from the first interview was analyzed and coded. This procedure included topic analysis which allowed for relevant issues to arise from the data. The second interview transcript was then analyzed, and consistent patterns and themes between these two interviews were determined. Finally, the third transcript was analyzed to identify themes and patterns consistently evident in all three interviews.

Once this summative data presented itself, a member check was conducted. The researcher presented the three participants with a written summary of the findings and asked for input as to their interpretations of these findings. The principals all supported the findings as presented, which indicates validity in the process and findings of the study.

### *Results*

It became apparent that the three principals shared a context for their work that was deeply embedded in the common characteristics of inner-city communities. This context impacted the nature of the issues they faced leading these schools and their needs for specific supports. The interviews also provided evidence as to the motivation of and perceived rewards felt by these school leaders.

#### *Inner-city Factors*

As the three principals participating in this study described their experiences in leading inner-city schools, it became apparent that the features of life in the inner city were integral to their school experience. The factors included poverty, crime, the impact of drugs and alcohol, and family issues.

Each principal identified the challenges of working with families experiencing economic difficulties. Barb discussed the need to feed and clothe children and to supplement student school supplies and field trip costs so that these children could gain experiences that they do not get in their daily lives. She also noted the frustration of fundraising in disadvantaged communities where families have little extra funds for such causes. Similarly, Kate discussed the challenges to communication between school and home when families do not have access to

telephones. Also at play were issues around housing and migrancy as families were often forced to move regularly in search of appropriate and affordable housing. This, of course, affected student enrolment rates and consistency in student learning and attendance.

The three principals identified criminal activity as another feature of life in their communities that influenced the school environment. They noted incidents of gang activity, prostitution, weapons offenses, and vandalism in their communities. Sometimes these crimes actually had direct impact on schools, as Kate indicated when she said: "We'll get gang members coming in to look for someone, or some teenager looking to lift a purse." In other cases, the crimes take place within the community but still threaten the safety of students and staff. In a third way, children whose families or acquaintances are involved in criminal activity are impacted as they witness crimes or, as Barb suggested: "Getting lured away from school and into the street life at a young age."

Closely related to criminal activity in inner-city communities are the issues around drugs and alcohol. Although, as these principals indicated, there are many healthy families in their communities, there are also many living with addictions and abuse. Barb suggested that there is an "epidemic of crack cocaine that is playing a significant role, [and] kids are coming to school not well looked after. They're not sleeping well because of partying going on, and not eating very well because the money is going to support drug habits." Children are also witnessing drug deals and are used as drug runners in the community.

Family issues also play a significant role in inner-city school life. As all three principals suggested, homes are often managed by single parents, and many families are dealing with issues of domestic violence, suicide, neglect, and abuse. As Chris suggested: "The stress that's going on within the family . . . comes with [children] when they come to school. It's not just a child walking through the door, it's a family."

### *Challenging Issues of Leading Inner-city Schools*

The interviews with these inner-city principals provided a wealth of information on the challenging issues they faced in leading these schools. Participants' comments focused especially on issues of safety, home/school connections, student achievement, and staffing.

Concerns for student and staff safety were discussed by all three interviewees. As Kate indicated: "Safety is a concern, and it is an immediate concern . . . We have prostitutes, drug deals, all of those things very close to the school, so making sure that the kids are safe in terms of who they interact with on their way to and from becomes an issue that I think we deal with more than any other people in other districts might deal with." Safety was also an ongoing issue

within the school itself, as each principal shared stories of lock-downs and vigilant safety plans designed to inhibit community dangers from harming the students and staff in their care.

These inner-city principals also noted the unique challenges of building relationships and home/school connections with families. Chris stated that many challenges were related to parents' pre-existing issues, which "range from economics, to safety, to education, to discrimination, to the residue from residential housing, and their own poor schooling experiences." It often became more difficult for these principals to build relationships and encourage community involvement in light of these issues. Barb suggested that parents in the inner city are not used to being respected and listened to and are often angry more as a result of their life circumstances than school issues. Barb therefore spends a great deal of time connecting with families, which she says is more challenging in the inner city:

*It takes a ton of work to get to that point where a parent can . . . feel respected and listened to. And just when you've built your relationship, they're gone, and the next one's coming in. . . . And the chances are all the new people that are coming in that revolving door are angry, upset people whose lives are trying. . . . I hadn't really thought about it that way before, but you're constantly building relationships, constantly.*

Kate saw communication with families as central to her role as an inner-city principal. She explained that: "Communication with families is different here in the inner city than anywhere else I have ever worked." Many of the families in her school community do not have telephones, so home visits are done on a regular basis—for Kate, an average of four or five a day. Communication with families is also challenging because, as she explained, there are "adult literacy issues and language issues. We have a lot of families where grandma is raising the kids, and she maybe speaks Cree. Also, we're trying to engage them."

Chris, Kate, and Barb all highlighted the pressure and unique circumstances related to student achievement in inner-city schools. Chris stated that inner-city children are "one of the most complicated, diverse groups of kids." She went on to explain that: "Families move, and we don't have consistent education, so the inner-city kids are struggling. They're really struggling. We're meeting so many social needs, and it's hard to keep the focus on the academics." Kate expanded upon this in discussing the gap between students' understanding and their ability to express that understanding through language. This is a key factor, especially in Aboriginal education, where language acquisition is as much a cultural issue as it is an academic issue. Still, with such barriers, these principals are challenged to find ways to meet the

academic needs of their students. As Barb shared: "I'm just feeling extreme pressure about student achievement, because students need to be achieving well, especially in the inner city, because it's their way out. So there's huge pressure to help them be successful." It appears that one of the motivating factors for these principals is in providing opportunities for students to find a route out of poverty and the potential dangers of inner-city life.

Another theme that presented itself during these interviews was the challenge of staffing inner-city schools. While highlighting the importance of having skilled and experienced staff, these principals noted their struggles to recruit and train staff. Kate actually shared that for all teaching positions advertised at her school, she had not one person apply. This meant that: "People have been placed in the position, and so then you're getting people who don't know what it's like to teach in the inner city. How difficult that is!" Chris explained further that the staff "tends to be the newest, most inexperienced teachers coming in. You get a lot of beginners in the inner city." Barb supported this same premise, explaining that she faces challenges in helping teachers adjust to teaching in the inner city, supporting them in learning how to teach these students and guiding them against being judgmental of the life circumstances of inner-city families.

One might suggest that safety, home/school connections, student achievement, and staffing are issues that every principal deals with, whether they work in suburban, rural, or inner-city settings. However, the comments of these three principals suggest that the issues they face are different. Safety sometimes involved serious and potentially life-threatening circumstances that may not occur often in other settings. Home/school connections are further challenged by family members who may have negative school experiences themselves and who are dealing with a multitude of other problems, often exacerbated by poverty. In the same way, student achievement issues are unique because these children deal with daily circumstances unlike students in other settings and are also affected by a host of social issues facing their families. Finally, inasmuch as staffing is an issue for all principals, inner-city principals are further challenged to acquire staff who are not only willing to work in these settings but are able to meet the needs of these children.

### *Supports Required by Inner-city Principals*

The three principals identified several areas in which they require professional support, and specifically they spoke of the need for skilled staff, opportunities for collegial networking and individual support, and personal wellness.

The principals all identified the importance of having skilled staff within their buildings. Chris described the ways in which her staff supports her personally through the collegial ways they cared for each other. Kate talked about the importance of her "good secretary, who knows

a lot and can share what happened in the past." She also stressed the importance of her staff's skills in dealing with students' crises when she explained that: "The teachers are good at making judgments about when it is an isolated crisis, or it's a crisis that we have no control over, and you need to ask for help." In much the same way, Barb noted that during a community crisis, such as a murder or suicide, it was important to be able to "count on your staff to be there for kids, to be looking after kids, and almost be hyper vigilant about how the kids are doing."

Colleagues outside of the school were also important supports for these principals. They all stressed the need to have a trusted colleague, a critical friend, or a reflective partner who understood the inner-city school environment and who could provide individual support. Chris, for example, explained that it was important to find "other inner-city administrators that you can be totally honest with." She described the support that such colleagues could become a "sounding board, and allow us to reflect, to help us, to observe us in our job, to give us feedback, to be peer coaches for us in our role." Kate also suggested that inner-city principals need a venue for crisis debriefing. When dealing with critical incidents, she said: "Administrators are subjected to protecting their staff, and protecting their kids and taking the emotional burden of the most stressful and direct situations into their own person, and then there really isn't anybody [to debrief with]. It's necessary, especially in the inner city because we deal with many more critical incidents."

In addition to individual support, each of these principals referred to the need for collegial networking opportunities, both for the purposes of professional development and of informal dialogue. They stressed the importance of meeting with other inner-city principals who, through first-hand experience, understand the issues they deal with on a daily basis. At the same time, they wanted more expansive opportunities outside the inner city, as Barb suggested: "To talk to colleagues and engage in more professional kinds of conversations with people." These principals were especially interested in professional development opportunities that allowed for the sharing of ideas and issues with colleagues through study groups, workshops, and topic-based focus groups.

The effect of personal wellness on job performance was critical to each interviewee's experience as an inner-city principal. Chris stated that: "I have to take care of myself in that way and that's huge. If I don't eat properly, if I don't sleep, this job is too hard." Similarly, Kate talked about not being good at self-care, and then realizing that, if she was going to continue in this job, she needed to take better care of herself. She set out on a "health mission" and began going to the gym every day after work, which helped her fitness, and also served as a "physical break" between the emotional issues of school and home life. In addition, Barb focused on the

need for self-care, for healthy relationships outside of school, and the importance of being able to establish boundaries between home and the emotional stress of life in an inner-city school.

### *Rewards and Motivation*

There is no doubt that inner-city communities are fraught with issues of poverty, crime, drug and alcohol abuse, and family issues. There is also no doubt that these life factors impact on the children living in those communities. Subsequently, the schools within those inner-city communities feel this impact. The three inner-city principals interviewed for this research have cited numerous examples of critical issues, stressful events, and heartbreaking circumstances that they face in leading these schools. So why, then, are they there? What rewards do they reap from their work, and will they stay the course in these communities? In order to portray the depth of their intrinsic motivation, the personal comments of each principal are offered since their sincerity, simplicity, and emotional impact offer more than any attempt at an objective summary could provide. In describing the intrinsic motivation for working in the inner city, Chris explained that:

*It really matters whether we do our jobs well. If we do, students can have a route to independence, employability, and economic security. If we don't, we lose them to the streets. If we can get them hooked on learning and provide them with the skills to be successful, we give them a route out of poverty. That gives their future children a hope of being well supported in their growing years and the chance to live out their dreams. For many of our students we are the ones who give them a glimpse of what the future can hold.*

Kate also referred to this sense of making a difference in the lives of children when she said that: "I really believe that we help these kids and make their lives better, or at least bearable, for the most part. That's why I work in the inner city. It's difficult, but it is rewarding in that we help the kids that need the most help." Barb described the rewards she reaps while building relationships with the families of her students. This is evident when she stated: "Then there's those connections with families. I believe I have a genuine respect for who they are as people, and it's not for me to judge how they live their lives, the parents in particular. . . . But I can be respectful and support them in what they need to do."

Chris also described the rewards she gets from the people with whom she works in the inner city. She explained how she "values the kind of people who choose to work in the inner city. Inner-city educators tend to have had varied personal experiences, they are open to new ideas and appreciate the kids who are a little off the beaten track. There is an appreciation of the individual and their personal stories."

The rewards and motivation of these principals were also evident when they were asked where they envisioned themselves professionally in five years time. Kate quickly replied: "I don't think I'd ever leave the inner city. Not the families, not the district. . . . It's what I really love to do." Barb expressed similar sentiments, saying: "I can't imagine teaching anywhere else. It has crossed my mind, from time to time, that I should expand my experience, and I should go to the burbs. I used to think that. But then I thought, 'Why would I do that?' Because I love this."

The words of these school leaders speak for themselves in describing their motivation and rewards in working in the inner city, even as they face unique and often critical issues.

### *Discussion*

The results of this research study support the findings featured in the literature review, especially in terms of the demands on inner-city principals and the need for specific professional supports. The impact of poverty, crime, drugs, alcohol, and family issues challenge these school leaders in areas of safety, home/school connections, student achievement, and staffing. Certainly, it may be argued that all principals face these issues. For example, even in suburban schools, principals have concerns for student safety and achievement, they work toward building strong home-school connections, and they experience issues involving the hiring and training of competent staff. However, these issues, as experienced by inner-city principals, are strongly influenced by factors related to poverty and life in disadvantaged communities. The inner-city principals interviewed argue that, although all schools face challenges, it is the frequency and intensity of challenges in the inner city that makes the job different.

In the same way, one might conclude that the supports that these principals cite as being essential to their effectiveness are the same supports that would be suggested by school principals in any other jurisdiction. This may well be the case. After all, every principal wants skilled staff, trusted colleagues, and opportunities for professional

networking. Moreover, each and every human being should be attentive to issues of personal wellness. Nonetheless, this study set out to identify the essential supports for principals in challenging circumstances because research indicates the key role that strong leadership plays in improving disadvantaged schools. It therefore follows that appropriate professional supports which pay attention to the inner-city context must be in place in order to allow these educators every opportunity to improve the lives of children and families in the inner city.

### *Implications for Practice*

There is no doubt that all educators face daunting challenges, as society demands accountability, and at the same time, social issues continue to have consequential impact on schools. Effective school leadership is critical in order for schools and teachers to meet these challenges. As such, senior administration of school divisions, elected boards, and government would best serve children by acknowledging the demanding roles of these school leaders and by ensuring that adequate supports are in place for them to effectively lead their schools. Similarly, these stakeholders must continue to acknowledge the principal's significant contribution to school effectiveness and to address the looming need for school principals in general, and inner-city principals in particular.

### *Future Research*

The findings of this research study suggest that there may be significant benefit in determining some of the successful strategies that enable inner-city principals to deal with the critical and unique issues they face. To this end, a second study is underway which will involve a focus group of novice and experienced inner-city principals. These school leaders will be provided with an opportunity to share effective approaches to the challenges of school safety, home-school connections, student achievement, and staffing. This follow-up study will offer inner-city principals a venue for dialogue regarding practical solutions to challenging issues and will serve as a means of further exploration into the area of leadership in inner-city schools.

A more extensive study is also being designed that will use participatory action research methodology to investigate professional supports for inner-city principals. This study will involve collaborative focus groups, mentoring, and individual action research that will encourage principals to reflect on their own practice of leading inner-city schools. It is hoped that these research studies will continue to contribute new knowledge to the field of educational administration through intensive investigations of inner-city school leadership.

### *Conclusion*

This research study investigated the issues faced by principals in inner-city schools and the professional supports they need in order to function effectively. Strong leadership is central to effective schooling, and schools are central to the future of inner-city youth. As such, it is imperative that research focuses on issues related to inner-city education and the school leaders working to make a difference in the lives of children in greatest need.

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