

**An Examination of Cooperative Inquiry as a
Professional Learning Strategy for Inner-City Principals**

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Abstract

This dissertation describes a research study that investigated cooperative inquiry as a strategy for professional learning of inner-city school principals in a large urban centre in Western Canada. The study attempted to identify the central issues of concern and means of redress for school leaders in high-poverty communities, many of which focused on educational leadership, school management, the context of their schools within impoverished communities, and the challenges of personal well-being. The findings suggest that cooperative inquiry was an effective strategy in that the approach was participatory, democratic, empowering, life-enhancing, and fostered community-building among participants. The findings also suggest that the approach was effective in that it was grounded in the action research cycle of planning, action, observation, and reflection. The study further examined the use of dialogue as a means of constructing knowledge regarding these issues, and identified the ways in which such knowledge impacts upon the professional practice of these principals. Findings suggest that participants gained knowledge from each other, offered knowledge from others, constructed knowledge together as a group, and developed deeper understandings of their own perspectives. Findings also suggest that meaning is lost when dialogic interactions are transcribed into print. Thus, dialogue is a form of communication in and of itself, one that cannot simply be transformed into the written word without losing part of that dialogic essence. Further, this study posits that dialogue has unique power to be both a process for meaning making, as well as an ontological means of clarifying one's own sense of reality.

Chapter One
Background to the Study

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 issues related to inner-city communities (Thomson & Harris, 2005). The voices and experiences of inner-city principals appear virtually absent from the literature, and few studies have looked closely at the professional supports needed by these principals. 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 principals.

The rationale for this study was based upon a social constructivist perspective, which is elaborated upon more fully in Chapter Two. In essence, 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 used a social constructivist lens to examine how individuals construct knowledge by making meaning of the events and activities they experience, as inner-city principals, while interacting with others in a dialogue group.

The concept of dialogue was 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 Bakhtin (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). As such, dialogue is not separate from ontological understandings of the world, since understanding is based on the mutuality and merging of ideas in the process of communication.

Shields and Edwards (2005) have examined dialogue 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 was therefore incorporated into the conceptual framework of this study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research project was threefold. First the study investigated the use of cooperative inquiry as a strategy for the professional learning of inner-city school principals. Second, within the context of cooperative inquiry, the role of dialogue was examined, as a means of constructing knowledge related to significant issues and professional practice of inner-city principals. As such, a dialogue group was designed and implemented as a forum for trusted sharing, questioning, reflecting, supporting, and collaborating for inner-city school principals. Finally, the issues and concerns of inner-city principals were identified. The overarching goal of this study was to provide supports to inner-city school leaders that will enable them to meet the

challenges of their jobs and, at the same time, expand the knowledge base related to effective professional development models and the role of dialogue in professional learning.

Research Questions

The guiding questions for this study focused directly on the study's purpose, and are outlined as follows:

1. What are the central issues of concern for inner-city school principals?
2. Do inner-city school principals 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?

These research questions provided a focus for the study, and were used to guide the literature review and the selection of data gathering techniques, which are presented in Chapters Two and Three, respectively.

Significance of the Study

A review of recent literature indicates that there appears to be a lack of research concerning leadership practices in high-poverty schools (Harris, 2003). Maden (2001) has suggested that there is a need for rich descriptions of leadership experiences and practices in such schools, in order to clearly determine the realities and needs of these leaders. The design of this research study may well respond to Maden's call, by offering examples of such rich descriptions through the voices and dialogue of inner-city principals.

Further, few studies on professional development for inner-city school leaders exist (Thompson & Harris, 2005), and even fewer studies that incorporate cooperative inquiry or other action research approaches (Robertson, 2000). Therefore, this research project may advance

knowledge in this field of educational scholarship by bringing to light findings related to the effectiveness of cooperative inquiry as a specific professional learning strategy, and the role of dialogue in knowledge construction.

In terms of local context, this research may prove important to school leaders in this urban centre's inner city. Due to the demographics of poverty and related issues, it is evident that these principals work in high-needs communities. It was hoped that this research study would 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 as a springboard for discussion on the ways in which inner-city principals might be most effectively supported in their professional practice.

In essence, this study offered 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.

Assumptions

From a theoretical perspective, this study was grounded in assumptions related to knowledge construction, philosophical lens, research orientation, and methodology. Heck and Hallinger (1999) developed a framework for the study of leadership, which identifies the broad conceptualization of knowledge, the lens through which research is conducted, and the corresponding methodologies used. This framework was designed as a means of conceptualizing the diversity of approaches to research on educational leadership. As such, Heck and Hallinger's framework has proven useful in terms of identifying the assumptions underlying this research study.

Knowledge

From an interpretivist perspective, knowledge is subjective and is grounded in the realities of the everyday world. This perspective provides both epistemological and ontological assumptions. As Burrell and Morgan (1985) contend, “the interpretive paradigm is informed by a concern to understand the world as it is, to understand the fundamental nature of the social world at the level of subjective experience” (p. 28). In this research project, the assumption was made that knowledge is grounded in the lived experiences of study participants and the interactions of those participants as they collaborate on common issues. This knowledge is subjective rather than objective in nature, as it is formulated in the human context.

Lens

The constructivist lens from which this study was viewed, assumes that knowledge is constructed by individuals, and not merely transferred from experts to learners. According to Bruning, Schraw and Ronning (1999), constructivism emphasizes “the learner’s contribution to meaning and learning through both individual and social activity” (p. 215). In using this lens, assumptions are made regarding the potential of study participants to construct and refine knowledge, both individually and collectively.

Research Methodology

In keeping with an interpretivist perspective, science is not hard and external, but personal and subjective. As such, knowledge of everyday realities is most effectively gathered through qualitative, values-oriented methods. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) suggest that “qualitative research is frequently called *naturalistic* because the researcher frequents places where the events he or she is interested in naturally occur. And the data are gathered by people engaging in natural behavior: talking, visiting, looking, and so on” (p. 3). Qualitative research focuses more

heavily on investigating peoples' interactions with others, interpreting events, and examining peoples' perspectives and reasons for their actions. Further, this view assumes the integral role of participants in the research process, which suggests the significance of action-oriented research. It is "a cyclical, dynamic, and collaborative process in which people address social issues affecting their lives" (Stringer, 2004, p. 4).

This study did not build upon a priori assumptions about science and research. Instead, in keeping with the assumptions of action research and qualitative methodology, the focus was on emergent design, such that participants drove the research agenda, and their voices were accepted as significant and valid.

Delimitations of the Study

The delimitations of this study were established in order to maintain manageability. This study was confined to one urban school division in Western Canada, and was further delimited to one district within that school division. Further, in keeping with findings regarding the optimal number of people to enable full participation in a focus group (Stringer, 2004), the dialogue group was limited to six participants. These participants included school principals working in the inner city of this urban centre. The study involved meetings once per month over a six month period. Each session was limited to five hours. The format and processes of these sessions are outlined in detail in Chapter Three.

Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study may not be widely generalizable, due to the limited geographic context and small number of participants in the study. In addition, due to the assumptions presented herein, and the subjective perspective utilized, there may be limitations in terms of the interpretation of data. Further, the findings and conclusions may reflect researcher

bias, as the researcher has experience as an inner-city school leader and a past connection to many potential study participants. This personal perspective may impact the interpretation of data and shape the findings, conclusions, and implications of this study. However, it may also add a richness to the nuances of understanding in this area, and precautions were taken (outlined in Chapter Three) to address researcher bias in the analysis of results.

This study was further limited in terms of its focus on the cooperative inquiry process involving a group of inner-city principals. It was not the principal researcher's intent to collect "hard evidence" of the participants' actual practice or school environments. Rather, the data collection focused on the "space" in between the issues that face inner-city principals and their action within the school, where they learn together to frame, conceptualize, and consider alternatives for action as they dialogue with others who face similar issues. For this reason, research questions and data collection techniques did not focus on evidence external to the participants and the collective group and, in fact, the value was in the reflection and dialogue itself.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this research study, the following terms and operational definitions were utilized:

Inner city

Within the context of this study, the term *inner city* refers to a group of identified schools within the 'Urban School Division' (USD), in a large metropolitan centre in Western Canada. The schools are identified 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 (USD, 2006, p. 20). 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 schools within this division come from homes where these factors imply greatest need:

Table 1. *Demographics of Schools in the Urban Centre*

Criteria	Inner city	School division	Urban centre *CMA
Median family income	\$26,154	\$35,060	\$64,422
Families in poverty (LICO)	65 %	41 %	15 %
Single-parent families	56 %	36 %	18 %
Migrancy	56 %	27 %	Not available
Parents < grade 9 education	19 %	10 %	8 %
English as a second language	9 %	8 %	6 %
New Canadians (refugees/immigrants)	7 %	10 %	2 %

* CMA refers to Census Metropolitan Area

Sources: School Division 2006 School Demographics Report,
Statistics Canada 2001 Census Data

Cooperative Inquiry

Based on the early work of Heron (1947), cooperative inquiry is one of three distinct forms action research (Reason, 1994). Cooperative inquiry brings together people with similar experiences and issues, usually professionals from the same discipline or field, with a focus on learning through social dialogue and collaboration.

Dialogue

With its focus on reciprocal oral discourse or conversation between two or more persons, dialogue is interactive and participatory. For the purpose of this study, dialogue was defined as the focused conversation related to professional practice that occurred amongst the participants of the dialogue group. Within the context of cooperative inquiry, which is both the methodological approach and professional learning strategy used in this study, dialogue is a social and collaborative process. However, beyond being simply a process for communication and learning, dialogue is also ontological, in that it is the essence of what defines humans and determines one's reality. As such, the work of Bakhtin (1986) and Shields and Edwards (2005) provide a framework for understanding dialogue.

Principals

These professionals were the educational leaders of public schools from Kindergarten to Grade Twelve who participated in the research.

Professional Learning

This term describes the intentionally focused activities and opportunities used to construct or refine knowledge related to one's profession. For the purposes of this study, professional learning focuses on leadership issues, skills, and practices within the context of a principal's school.

Summary

This chapter has presented a synopsis of a research study that examined cooperative inquiry as a professional learning strategy for inner-city principals. The study focused on these principals' issues of concern and the manner in which participation in a dialogue group may

assist in addressing these concerns. Further, the study explored the role of dialogue in fostering knowledge construction related to professional practice.

This chapter has outlined the purpose of the study, the specific research questions, geographic and demographic contexts in which study participants worked, theoretical assumptions, delimitations, limitations, and operational terminology. Chapter Two presents a review of related literature, and a discussion of the theoretical framework for the study. Chapter Three contains a description of the methodology of the study, including data collection techniques, and data analysis. Chapters Four through Eight describe the study findings, and Chapter Nine presents conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter Two
A Review of Related Literature

Introduction

This chapter first presents research related to the context of the study, which specifically addresses inner-city school leadership in low socioeconomic environments. As such, the literature review begins with a focus on three interconnected areas of concerns that focus the work of this study: poverty in Canada, poverty and education, and inner-city school leadership. The review encompasses an international perspective, while maintaining a focus on the Canadian and local context. Second, this chapter presents literature that formulates the theoretical framework of the study.

Poverty in Canada

In Canada, poverty rates are determined on the basis of demographic data. The main criterion for identifying communities of highest needs is socio-economic status, which is determined using Statistic Canada's Low Income Cut Off rates (LICO). The cut-offs are set where families spend 20 percentage points or more than the Canadian average on food, shelter and clothing (taking into account size of community of residence and family size). A family below the LICO is considered to be living in straitened circumstances because "any family spending such a high proportion of its income on these three essentials has too little money left for such other necessary expenditures as transport, personal care, household supplies, recreation, health, and insurance" (Lezubski, Silver & Black, 2000, p. 46).

From an international perspective, Canada is considered a wealthy nation, and its position in the global economy is respectable. In terms of economic patterns, poverty rates tend to decrease as the economy and subsequent employment opportunities improve. However, according to the National Council of Welfare (NCW), poverty rates in Canada have continued to

increase over the past 25 years, from 13.1% in 1979, to 18% in 2005 (NCW, 2005). According to Silver (2000), “the failure of Canadian poverty rates to decline in the mid-1990s as economic growth resumed and unemployment rates dropped represents a significant and worrisome break with traditional patterns” (p. 1).

In addition, 18 % of all Canadian children live in poverty (Campaign 2000, 2005). Specifically, 25% of children seven years of age and younger are impoverished. This is a substantial increase from 13% in 1981 (Tymchak, 2001, p. 11). It might be argued that the term *child poverty* is redundant because children do not earn incomes; they are poor if their parents are poor. However, there is strong evidence that children who are raised in poverty have much less opportunity for positive life outcomes. Campaign 2000, which is a national movement to end child poverty in Canada, based its mission on this concern:

...child poverty is associated with poor health and hygiene, a lack of a nutritious diet, absenteeism from school and low scholastic achievement, behavioural and mental problems, low housing standards, and, in later years, few employment opportunities and persistently low economic status. (Canadian Council on Social Development, [CCSD], 1994, p. 1)

This statement reflects the damaging cycle of poverty, as poor children grow up to lead poor households. In essence, a key strategy for eliminating persistent poverty is to attend to the critical needs of children, chief among which is the provision of a strong education that may help to break the cycle of poverty in which they live.

The Local Context

In the local context of this urban centre’s inner city, poverty issues are equally critical. As Lezubski, Silver, and Black (2000) state, in this city, “the population of the inner city continues

to decline, as do labour force participation rates and average income levels, while unemployment rates, the proportion of single-parent households, and poverty rates continue to grow” (Lezubski, Silver & Black, 2000, p. 26). At the same time, “the proportion of inner-city children under six years of age has been growing most rapidly” (Lezubski et al., p. 26). Many of the children from these homes are faced with daunting challenges as a result of their families' socio-economic status. 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).

Poverty and Education

In general terms, recent research indicates that most schools in Canada are succeeding in their mission to educate children. According to The Learning Partnership (2004), “Canadian students are among the best in the world and our schools have smaller gaps between the highest and lowest performing students than do most other countries, especially given our diverse population and large differences in wealth” (p. 1). The number of Canadians with post-secondary education has increased steadily, and there are fewer people without high school diplomas (Statistics Canada, 2001). These facts indicate the many accomplishments of schools, and the overall quality of education in Canada.

Nonetheless, these same statistics provide insight into those students at risk of not meeting with success in school. The Learning Partnership (2004) suggests that, “In broad terms, a student ‘at risk’ is one whose past or present characteristics or conditions are associated with higher probability of failing to complete high school” (p. 1). Research indicates that the factors

that place students most at risk are poverty, a child's natural development, parental influence, and the neighbourhood context in which a child lives and is educated (Levin, 2004).

The characteristics of inner-city or high-poverty communities extend beyond socioeconomic factors and geographic context. Oftentimes, there exist accompanying factors such as transience, homelessness, hunger, crime, ethnic diversity, single parent families, drug and alcohol dependency issues, refugee and immigrant issues, and higher levels of physical and sexual abuse. Phillipoff (2001) contends that, "what makes an inner-city school different is that it seeks to provide a quality education in an environment in which a substantial number of children have a critical mass of such factors affecting their lives" (p. 1). This may appear a daunting challenge for those educators working with children in Canada's high-poverty community schools:

One of the most powerful, yet often neglected, influences on schooling is poverty.

Family income is a very strong predictor of how well children will do in school. A great deal of research shows that poverty is related to lower achievement in school, to a greater risk of dropping out, and to lower eventual occupational status and income. (Young, Levin & Wallin, 2007, p. 310)

The statistics on poverty in Canada are significant for educators because the socio-economic status of families is strongly related to the academic achievement of their children (Human Resources Development Canada and Statistics Canada, 1996). In essence, children living in families with lower incomes are found to be at a greater risk of experiencing negative outcomes in school (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 socio-economic levels, those same schools are, in part, the solution to persistent poverty. Although educators understand that poverty plays a pivotal role in student success, and that higher academic attainment has the potential to offer better life opportunities for students, they are often overwhelmed by the scope of the issue (Levin & Riffel, 2000).

It is evident that a family's socio-economic status has direct impact on the educational outcomes of its children. It is also clear that those children living in poverty are less likely to achieve higher educational outcomes. However, this is not to suggest that schools and society at large have no means of improving the educational opportunities of poor children. On the contrary, there is much that can be done to respond to the needs of children and families living in high-poverty communities. The issue here is simply that the context in which these students must be educated often provides additional, unique, and highly stressful challenges for both the learners and the leaders within this environment.

School Leadership in High-Poverty Communities

There is no doubt that all principals face challenges in their roles leading schools responsible for educating today's youth:

One of the common themes emerging from school effectiveness over the past two decades is the centrality of in-school leadership to school success... This places a significant responsibility squarely upon the shoulders of the principal, who is increasingly called upon to adapt to new roles, demanding new capabilities, and changing bodies of knowledge, such as those relating to change processes, student learning, professional communities, and community engagement. (Burgess & Renihan, 2004, p. 20)

In examining the role of the principal, it is important to consider how effective leadership correlates with school improvement, in terms of student achievement. Recent research suggests that a principal's behaviour, in terms of beliefs, actions, and decision-making, is linked to school-level processes and student outcomes (Heck & Hallinger, 1999, p. 144). Oftentimes, the effects are indirect, as in the case presented by Sun (2006) who indicates the ways in which principal leadership influences teacher commitment which, in turn, influences student outcomes. Scholars in educational administration contend that it appears that "leadership is widely regarded as a key factor in accounting for differences in the success with which schools foster the learning of their students" (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 1).

School leaders in high-poverty community schools have been mandated to provide learning opportunities for our most vulnerable and at-risk youth. This challenge may appear insurmountable, in terms of the many critical issues facing children in high-poverty communities. These principals must ensure that students are nurtured and provided with opportunities to meet their academic and social potential. Studies indicate that principals leading schools in high-poverty communities face challenging circumstances, and 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)

Thomson and Harris suggest that little research has focused on the everyday realities of principals in high-poverty community schools. These realities include: (a) ongoing crises that

require continual management (illness, death, violence, abuse, etcetera); (b) variable teaching quality and proficiency; (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) developing community involvement; and (h) working with multiple agencies (p. 6-7).

In response to this need for research into the realities of school leadership in high-poverty communities, a recent Canadian study explored the issues facing novice inner-city principals (Lawson, 2005). The findings of the study suggest that novice inner-city school principals are challenged by the impact of various community factors on life within the school, many of which relate to socio-economic and other poverty-related issues. The research also found key areas of support required by the principals, including the support of skilled staff, opportunities for collegial networking, relationships with critical friends or reflective partners, and sustained personal wellness.

A second study by Lawson (2006) examined the experiences of administrators in high-poverty community schools, in order to investigate administrators' perspectives on work demands and the impact on their own families. Findings suggested that the work demands of these administrators were related to the characteristics of impoverished communities, whereas their work resources were based on intrinsic rewards and the pursuit of social justice. The nature of their work demands was central to the impact on their families. Findings indicated that emotional and physical exhaustion played an integral role in the administrators' family life. Conversely, the nature of their jobs caused them family stress, in terms of worry and fear for the safety and emotional well-being of these principals. The demanding nature of school leadership

in high-poverty communities, and its impact on the personal lives of these leaders was clearly articulated by study participants.

There is little doubt that the role of a school leader is challenging, and that the challenges facing principals in high-poverty community schools may be even more daunting. It follows, therefore, that these principals benefit from building a knowledge base related to research on effective school leadership within the context of high-poverty communities.

Effective School Leadership in High-Poverty Communities

Research indicates that effective leadership is a key factor in improving schools that face the challenges of educating impoverished children (Gregory, 2003; Harris, 2004; Harris, 2003; Lyman & Villani, 2001; Thompson, 2004; West, Jackson, Harris & Hopkins, 2000). These scholars identify significant correlations between leadership, student outcomes, and overall school improvement. It is therefore useful to examine the qualities of effective principals in these schools. Although the available research on this topic is limited, and very few appear available in Canada, there are a few extensive studies conducted in other countries.

Gregory's (2003) research examined leadership styles and characteristics of effective principals in high-poverty public schools. Her findings suggest that effective principals in these contexts:

...conscientiously, collectively and consistently work toward the goals and vision of their respective schools, providing opportunities for professional development of staff and teachers, holding high expectations for students and teachers, and working hard to encourage more participation from staff and teachers in the decision making process.

(p. 5)

In the field of educational administration, these characteristics are consistent with those of transformational leadership (Leithwood, 1994), a leadership style that focuses on transforming the culture of a school through motivation and collective vision.

Gregory's (2003) research also found that effective principals in high-poverty public schools were successful in obtaining grants to support programs, established effective learning environments by encouraging teacher creativity, and fostered an "accepting and nurturing climate for staff and teachers, which carried over into the classrooms, providing a learner-centred environment" (p. 6). As well, due the challenging demands of the job, these principals had developed strong organizational skills and focused on securing highly competent teachers and support staff. They were also known to make regular visits to observe teachers in practice, and were actively involved in the instructional process.

Harris (2004) explored the characteristics of leaders in ten socio-economically disadvantaged schools in the United Kingdom, in which significant improvement in student achievement had been identified. Harris contends that "while there is a great deal of contemporary interest in schools in difficulty, few research studies have focused exclusively upon leadership practices and approaches" (p. 2). The research suggests that approaches to leadership parallel the specific needs of a school at a given time. For example, although task-focused authoritarian approaches to leadership had been used by these principals successfully for expedient change in critical situations, this approach was not often used effectively for long-term, sustainable improvement. Instead, effective leaders of schools where significant improvement in students' academic achievement have been noted tended toward a "form of leadership that is democratic, people-centred and is centrally concerned with community building" (p. 5). These leaders articulated their vision and values through actions and words,

distributed leadership among the school community, supported staff development, focused on relationships, and fostered community building.

This study also found significant results in terms of specific approaches that the principals used in school improvement. These leaders: (a) improved the physical environment of the school building and grounds, which “had a symbolic and real purpose as it demonstrated to staff, students, and parents that the school was changing and improving” (Harris, 2004, p. 11); (b) broke down social barriers and engaged the community by enhancing the relationships between staff, students, and parents, through drop-in sessions, social events, clubs, and evening classes; (c) focused on teaching and learning by articulating a clear vision and high expectations of student achievement, which “exerted pressure upon staff and students to excel” (p. 12); (d) provided time and opportunities for professional development and collaboration among staff, including mentoring, coaching, peer reviews; (e) distributed leadership and built teams; and (f) conducted ongoing evaluations to gather data that identifies strengths and weaknesses, and set the next course of action toward improvement. Harris’ research found that these strategies, which were consistently employed by the principals in the study schools, had significant effects on student achievement. As such, it is apparent that principal effectiveness plays a critical role in improving schools in high-poverty communities.

As noted previously, a significant challenge for principals working in high-poverty communities is the staffing dilemma (Lawson, 2005). While highlighting the importance of having skilled and experienced staff, the inner-city principals in Lawson’s study noted their struggles to recruit and train staff. In some cases, teachers were hesitant to take on the challenges of these jobs, and therefore did not apply when openings at high-poverty community schools were advertised. This resulted in one of two situations: either teachers with no inner-city experience were placed in these

positions without choice, or new graduates were hired for these postings. Either option added more challenges for the principal, in helping new staff adjust to teaching in the inner city, supporting them in learning how to teach these students, and guiding them in understanding the life circumstances of inner-city families living in poverty.

To this end, it would serve principals well to envision and create the kind of school where teachers would choose to work. Heller (2004) suggests that “principals will have to lead the necessary changes to make their schools attractive workplaces for new teachers, with climates that attract applicants and encourage employees to stay, satisfying their professional needs” (p. 10). Recent research on the career paths of teachers indicates that, when choosing schools or choosing to leave/remain in schools, educators focus on specific qualities in a principal (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Findings from this study suggest that teachers are looking for a leader who: (a) makes reasonable program and workload assignments; (b) provides personal and professional support; (c) fosters professional learning; (d) is highly accessible, visible, and respectful; (e) supports teachers on student discipline; and (f) focuses on teaching, learning, and instructional leadership. These findings provide insight into the essential skills and competencies of principals in high-poverty communities who aim to staff their schools with high-quality teachers.

The research cited herein indicates a correlation between effective leadership practice and the success of high-poverty community schools in improving educational outcomes for youth. It appears that the professional practices, decisions, and policies of a school principal play a significant part in that leader’s ability to create a school that serves the best interests of children and families in high-poverty communities.

Professional Development for Principals

There is substantial research evidence to indicate that the effectiveness of school leaders impacts upon the quality of education and the achievement of students in their schools. As a result, scholars in the field of educational administration have examined the ways in which principals are trained to lead schools. Part of this research has focused directly on the characteristics of effective professional development programs.

Evans and Mohr (1999) suggest that, “teaching principals how to lead schools by giving them pre-digested ‘in-basket’ training hardly leads to new thinking about leadership, teaching, or learning” (p. 531). These scholars contend that to be most effective, professional development programs must be structured in small group settings, must offer time for reflection and learning, must encourage participants to reach beyond their realm of assumptions, and must take place in an environment that fosters trust and sharing.

There is also substantial research to indicate that many professional development opportunities do not transfer to daily practice (Wallin, Hildebrandt, Malik, 2008; Guskey, 2002). Although this may appear discouraging, there is also substantial research that suggests the criteria for effective professional development programs in which learning transfers to daily practice. Peterson (2002) conducted an extensive review of programs focusing on the professional development of principals, and concludes that effective programs should be long-term, carefully researched and planned, and should be embedded in the daily jobs of the participants. Fullan (2001) adds that, along with structural components such as these, successful professional development programs develop a culture of shared learning and community-building among the participants. This builds commitment to the program, the participants, and to oneself as a learner.

Professional Supports for Inner-City School Leaders

In Canada, there is a leadership crisis looming, as a result of an insurgence in the number of principals retiring nation-wide (Canadian Association of Principals, 2003). Within the local context, the average age of school administrators is 52 ('Provincial Teachers' Society', 2004). This suggests that over the next few years, principals may be leaving the profession in significant 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 school principals working in high-poverty communities, the challenge might be greater to ensure that these schools are provided with skilled leaders who will remain in their positions. Ensuring that effective supports are in place for principals working in high-poverty communities may be a strategy that could encourage educational leaders to work in these schools.

This issue involves two factors. First, there is a need for pre-service leadership training programs to specifically address the needs of leaders in high-poverty schools. General leadership preparation programs are readily available in most jurisdictions, and there are graduate-level university courses dealing with leadership in diverse contexts. However, there are very few, if any, leadership preparation programs that focus, with intent, on high-poverty community schools and issues of social justice (Lyman & Villani, 2001).

Second, there is a need for ongoing support for practicing school leaders in high-poverty community schools. Normore (2004) suggests that "school administrators cannot be expected to effectively embrace their roles and functions ...without appropriate support structures" (p. 107). Thompson and Harris (2005) also suggest that more focus is needed on training for principals working in high poverty communities. However, few studies have focused specifically on

professional supports for school leaders in these schools. This research study attempted to address this second need, by incorporating a professional development strategy based particularly on the needs of inner-city principals.

Discussion

This literature review has brought to light several issues related to school leadership in high-poverty communities: (a) the relationship between increased school achievement and increased future income speaks to the significant role of schools in addressing the poverty issues in Canada; (b) research indicates that effective leadership is correlated with improved academic achievement for students in high-poverty community schools; (c) principals in these schools face daunting challenges as a result of the community context; (d) there exist key characteristics of effective leadership that leads to improved academic achievement of students in high-poverty community schools; (e) preparation and professional development programs specifically designed for future leaders of high-poverty schools are few and far between.

This literature also highlights the gaps in research that focuses on school leadership in high-poverty communities. As noted throughout the review, a limited number of studies are available in terms of research that examines the specific challenges of these leaders and/or successful models of professional development programs focused directly on the needs of inner-city principals in low socioeconomic environments. Although conclusions have been drawn from the available research, an extension to the available research findings will serve to contribute to the body of knowledge in educational administration, school improvement, and leadership in high-poverty community schools.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was 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. As well, the role of dialogue in learning was explored 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 and changing action. Further, the work of Shields and Edwards (2005) provides a framework for investigating how knowledge is constructed through dialogic interaction.

Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory

Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, explored the learning processes of children and adults more than 50 years ago, and his work has played a pivotal role in the development of social constructivist theory (Prawat & Peterson, 1999). A constructivist approach to learning emphasizes "the learner's contribution to meaning and learning through both individual and social activity" (Bruning, Schraw & Ronning, 1999, p. 215). Constructivist theory focuses on how individuals construct knowledge by making meaning of the events and activities they experience.

Scholars such as Piaget, Bruner, Dewey, and Vygotsky adopt a constructivist perspective in their research, but their theories of learning vary significantly. Vygotsky (1934/1986), for example, emphasizes the shared and social construction of knowledge, while Piaget focuses more on the individual than the social context. Piaget's notion of constructivism is referred to by some scholars as *first wave constructivism*, with its emphasis on individual meaning-making

(Hoy & Miskel, 2005). Accordingly, Vygotsky's theory is an example of *second wave constructivism*, because it "puts thinking and learning in the context of social situations and cultural practices" (Hoy & Miskel, 2005, p. 67).

Vygotsky's theory of learning is sociocultural in nature, in that it emphasizes the social context within which development takes place. He believed that children construct knowledge through activity and interaction with their culture and society. As such, Vygotsky's social constructivist theory is grounded on four central ideas: (a) new knowledge is socially constructed; (b) learning can lead development; (c) development cannot be separated from the social context; and (d) language plays a central role in development (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky explored the first three of these ideas in his early work, which focused on the significance of social interaction on purposeful, task-based learning activities. Vygotsky found that individual learning is grounded in social and cultural experiences. In essence, "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being; on the contrary, it is their social being that determines their consciousness" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.19).

Vygotsky's early research shows a striking contradiction to Piaget's work, in that Vygotsky found that learning can lead development. Piaget's developmental theory suggests that a child's learning is pre-determined by his or her developmental stage, whereas Vygotsky's (1978) theory suggests that specifically designed *scaffolding* techniques can be successfully used to build bridges from what the child knows to what the child is being taught. Further, according to Vygotsky, there is a symbolic place for optimal learning that he defines as the *zone of proximal development*. This zone may be best understood as the fine line or edge of one's established understandings, whereupon one can venture beyond and toward new knowledge. In essence, Vygotsky suggests that one's formulated knowledge base is the springboard for

accessing new knowledge. To stay too much within one's current boundaries does not allow for new learning, while moving too far beyond makes learning inaccessible. Hence, the learner straddles that fine line, using prior knowledge as a link to newly acquired ideas.

Vygotsky's later work began to focus less on task-based activity and more on the role of language in the learning process. The most recent translation of Vygotsky's (1934/1986) *Thought and language* is a collection of papers based on his research in psychology and linguistics. Much of this work focuses on studies involving children, at varying developmental stages, interacting with adults, in experiments designed to determine the learning potential during dialogic and monologic scenarios. This provided Vygotsky with insight into how children and adults alike construct knowledge, how language is used in human social interaction, and how interactive language influences learning. His research found that, not only is learning potential greater through dialogic social interaction, but higher-order thinking skills, reasoning, and problem solving are heightened through dialogue:

Human thought development is determined by language, by the linguistic tools of thought. Thought and language, which reflect reality in a way different from that of perception, are the keys to the nature of human consciousness. Words play a central part not only in the development of thought but in the historical growth of human consciousness as a whole. A word is a microcosm of human consciousness. (Vygotsky, 1934/1986, p. 94)

In essence, Vygotsky contends that social interaction and dialogue are integral to the process of learning and knowledge construction.

Vygotsky's research on learning, and his subsequent theoretical conclusions, has played a key role in current social constructivist perspectives, and in educational practices. Hoy and

Miskel (2005) articulate how Vygotsky's theory is applied to knowledge construction and the teaching-learning process:

Knowledge is constructed based on social interaction and experience. Knowledge reflects the outside world as filtered through and influenced by culture, language, beliefs, interactions with others, direct teaching, and modeling. Guided discovery, teaching models, and coaching as well as the individual's prior knowledge, beliefs, and thinking affect learning. (p. 70)

Vygotsky's work has influenced two factions of social constructivists; those who support a teleological or activity-based approach to learning, and those who support a symbolic or language-based approach to learning. The field of education has adopted strategies from both factions. For example, the teleological approach is associated with results-oriented practical activity, which is reflected in pedagogical approaches such as the design process and activity-based problem solving.

The symbolic action approach to social constructivism is more closely associated with Vygotsky's (1934/1986) later work on *Thought and language*, and adheres to his premise that "the relation between thought and word is a living process" (p. 94). As such, learning is grounded in oral language and social dialogue. Cooperative learning approaches that focus on knowledge-building through dialogue and social interaction are prime examples of how practitioners have applied Vygotsky's social constructivist theory to the educational setting.

The major themes of Vygotsky's social constructivist theory posit that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of learning. Since dialogue is a central feature of social interaction, this form of communication is at the core of the learning process.

Bakhtin on Dialogue

Mikhail Mikhavailovich Bakhtin, 1895-1975, another Russian scholar, also played an influential role in the development of theoretical constructs of language and learning. Much of his work has yet to be translated, but those that have, such as *The dialogic imagination* (1975/1981) and *Speech genres & other late essays* (1986) have been hailed among the important works of Freud, Levis-Strauss, and Karl Marx (Holquist, 1986). With reference to disciplinary focus, Bakhtin has been referred to as a literary critic, a social thinker, and a philosopher of language, and his work has been cited throughout social and human science fields. Scholars such as Wood (2004) suggest that Bakhtin's work has influenced recent approaches to literary theory, linguistics, and discourse processing theory. Sidorkin (2002) and Shields and Edwards (2005) contend that Bakhtin's theoretical constructs have similarly influenced current understandings of learning theory, educational philosophy, and social constructivism.

Bakhtin posits that dialogue is the central element of human existence, and his notions focus on how new knowledge is generated through interactive communication. Bakhtin contends that speech can either be monologic or dialogic. Monologic language is "speech that is addressed to no one and does not presuppose a response" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 117). Conversely, dialogic speech is intended for acknowledgement and response by another human being, and "meaning is created as a bridge between the speaker and the listener" (Dysthe, 2002, p. 341). Hence, the roles and attitudes of the dialogic participants are essential to the generation of new meaning, as the higher the degrees of interactivity and dialogicality, the greater the potential for grasping new knowledge.

Bakhtin extends this concept of dialogic speech in his notions of polyphony, in which truth and understanding transpire “in the point of touching of different consciousness” (cited in Sidorkin, 2002). Interestingly, polyphony is generally used in the study of music, to describe “music consisting of two or more melodically independent but harmonizing voice parts” (Woolf, 1994, p. 538). Considering Bakhtin’s emphasis on dialogic relations and knowledge-building through discourse, the music analogy is quite fitting. In this sense, two independent minds come together to create something unique and different from each. In essence, the knowledge created through dialogue is not accessible by any other avenue. As Sidorkin (2002) suggests, in reference to Bakhtin’s concepts of polyphony, “his argument is that the multitude of individual consciousness has some epistemological meaning. What could be known by means of dialogue cannot be known by any other means” (p. 98).

Bakhtin argues that, when a person makes an *utterance*, a term he uses to describe dialogic language statements, the speaker is intent on his or her audience, and speaks in anticipation of attention and response. He suggests that, “the utterance is related not only to preceding, but also to subsequent links in the chain of speech communication...The utterance is constructed while taking into account possible responsive reactions, for whose sake, in essence, it is actually created” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 94). During the period in which a speaker is constructing and relaying an utterance, learning is taking place as he or she develops a heightened understanding of his or her own thoughts and the potential responses of the intended audience.

In Bakhtin’s views on dialogue, the audience, whether it is one or many, plays a key role in the interaction and learning process:

As we know, the role of the *others* for whom the utterance is constructed is extremely great. We have already said that the role of these others, for whom my thought becomes

actual thought for the first time (and thus also for my own self as well) is not that of passive listeners, but of active participants in speech communication. From the very beginning, the speaker expects a response from them, an active responsive understanding. The entire utterance is constructed, as it were, in anticipation of encountering this response. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 94)

Essentially, the process of knowledge-building begins in the mind of the speaker, where personal thoughts become understandings as the utterance is made. As these thoughts are shared with the listener, he or she internalizes and interprets the speaker's utterances. The listener's internal response may vary. Bakhtin contends that the listener "either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it, prepares for its execution, and so on" (p. 68). This becomes the beginning of the knowledge-building process for the listener, as the thoughts of another human are analyzed and applied to one's own thoughts. The knowledge-building process continues as the listener reacts and responds, thereby becoming the speaker.

In a similar notion to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, Bakhtin suggests that people in discourse meet at their borders of understanding. According to Bakhtin (1975/1981), "human thought becomes genuine thought, i.e., an idea, only under the conditions of a living contact with another foreign thought, embodied in the voice of another person, that is, in the consciousness of another person expressed in his word" (p. 71). As with Vygotsky's conceptualization, Bakhtin suggests that each participant in a dialogic interaction stands at the edge of his/her own prior knowledge, and seeks to gain new understandings through discourse.

Bakhtin posits that learning is not the product of dialogue, nor is dialogue a tool or avenue for learning. Instead, the dialogue is, in itself, the learning process. This is an ongoing course in human existence, as one dialogic interaction impacts upon the next, and the knowledge

gained impacts upon our actions. In essence, our learning extends with each and every utterance we make or hear. As Bakhtin (1986) suggests, “there is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context - it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future” (p. 170).

Other Perspectives on Dialogue

In addition to Vygotsky and Bakhtin, many other scholars from diverse fields have studied the role of dialogue in understanding human existence, relationships and learning. Shields and Edwards (2005) contend that, “at different periods over the centuries, philosophers and scholars have been attracted by the rich lineage and complex associations related to the concept of dialogue” (p. 15). Perspectives vary in terms of viewing dialogue as ontological or as a process, or as a blend of the two.

Austrian-Jewish philosopher, Buber (1923/1987), for example, supports Bakhtin’s notions that dialogue is ontological. He examines the relationship between human interaction and dialogue, and is best known for his published work entitled *I and thou*. In this book, Buber suggests that people interact with others on one of two levels, the first being the *I-thou* relationship, which involves the interactive and holistic participation of two equal beings. This relationship is mutually dialogic and builds upon the conversational offerings of both people. In contrast, the *I-it* relationship is one in which a person does not holistically interact with the other person in an effort to share understandings. Instead, such a conversationalist iterates one’s own thoughts with little regard for the ideas of the other person. This relationship is monologic and individual. Buber suggests that, in terms of the modern world, the emphasis on I-it relationships devalues human existence itself. Essentially, it is the interactive I-thou relationship that distinguishes humans from other life forms, and constructs reality for the human race.

As another example, Foucault (1980) takes an ontological view of dialogue, suggesting that the reality of our knowledge is directly tied to our application of that knowledge in communication with others. In essence, our ideas become reality when shared with other humans. Hence, on a philosophical level, dialogue is a central foundation in determining what actually exists for humans, and in our conceptions of reality.

The work of Gadamer (2002), on hermeneutic thought, implies a view that dialogue is a process, while suggesting an ontological element. He describes dialogue as the “to-and-fro movement” between humans who communicate with one another with openness and commitment, for the purpose of sharing, situating, and refining meaning. This descriptive notion of dialogue emphasizes an interactive process that enables participants to clarify ideas and construct a renewed sense of reality.

Bohm (1996), a theoretical physicist, examines the intricacies of dialogue in a group setting, as a means of exploring a microculture of our larger society:

Dialogue is a multi-faceted process, looking well beyond typical notions of conversational parlance and exchange. It is a process which explores an unusually wide range of human experience: our closely-held values; the nature and intensity of emotions; the patterns of our thought processes. (p. vii)

Bohm suggests that a dialogue group, whether formally structured or informally created, requires a facilitator, who initially guides conversation, but relinquishes this role as the group sets its own course. As such, the dialogic process is difficult to predict, in terms of direction or outcomes:

The movement of a dialogue group is rarely from point A to B. Rather, the movement is more typically recursive, with unexpected dynamic shifts following periods of frustration, boredom, and agitation, in a perpetual cycle. Even then, the creative potential of the

dialogue – its capacity to reveal the deeper structures of consciousness – depends upon sustained, serious application by the participants themselves. (p. ix)

In essence, Bohm contends that group dialogue is a means of constructing knowledge about that which makes us human. The process is both unpredictable and invaluable, in terms of its potential to shed new light on our knowledge base.

These scholars, examining the theoretical constructs of dialogue within various disciplines, contribute to the knowledge base on dialogue. Although each presents a unique view of dialogic relations, they have in common a sense that dialogue is an interactive process among humans, involving sharing thoughts, interpreting ideas, and constructing new knowledge.

The Role of Dialogue in Knowledge Construction

Scholars in various fields have embraced and applied the theoretical constructs of Vygotsky and Bakhtin to their own research on linguistics, literature, philosophy, and psychology, to name a few. Within the field of education, both of these scholars have been influential in determining new theoretical constructs of learning and knowledge construction. Their work has had significant implications for the professional learning of teachers and school principals.

The role of dialogue in the professional learning of educators. Within the field of education, scholars have examined the concept of dialogue and its application to learning in relation to the professional learning of teachers. Dialogue theory is arising in recent literature as a promising idea for enhancing educators' professional growth.

Burbules (1993), for example, focuses on the role of dialogue in teaching, and examines the interaction among students, students and teachers, and teacher peers. In embracing diversity as an integral component of how humans learn from one another, Burbules describes dialogue as

a social relation that engages its participants, and therefore opens the mind to new ideas. In terms of peer dialogue among teachers, Burbules contends that collaborative conversation about ideas and experiences increases participants' knowledge and supports the development of problem solving skills. Moreover, "without collaborative conversation, there is a heightened feeling of one's own deficiency" (p. 78). In essence, participative dialogue leads to learning and the increased professional confidence required to improve practice.

Clark (2001) explains that "authentic conversation" with peers is of critical importance to teachers, both in terms of personal and professional support. As editor of the book entitled, *Talking shop: Authentic conversations and teacher learning*, Clark explores the use of dialogue as a means of teacher learning and changing practice, and his own conceptual framework for the book is closely tied to the work of Vygotsky. Clark (2001) suggests that, "progressive theories of learning and approaches to teaching grounded in the social constructivism of Vygotsky have been developed during the past 2 decades that empower both teachers and schoolchildren in personal and cooperative sense making" (p. 3). Clark therefore contends that dialogue is an effective means of such cooperative sense making, professional learning, and improving teacher practice.

Clark brought together seven scholars from American and Israeli universities to share their research on *teacher inquiry groups*, a term used to describe collaborative dialogue among educational practitioners. The collective findings of the research have strong implications for practice:

When teachers told their stories and responded to others' stories in sustained conversation groups, they came to understand their own practices in new ways. Their participation in these groups led them, many said, to new insights, new restoried knowledge. They

reported that their practices changed. Many described their experiences in these groups as their most powerful professional development. (Clandinin, 2001, p. viii)

These findings speak to the potential of dialogue as a practical strategy for teacher learning and professional development.

In reflecting on the work of these seven scholars, Clark (2001) further examined the case studies in order to identify qualities of good conversations and, subsequently, develops criteria for dialogue-based professional development. He suggests that conversations can become authentic learning experiences for teachers when, first, the conversation is voluntary and, second, occurs on common ground in terms of teacher specialization. For example, Clark suggests that the male literature teacher from an affluent suburban school may not have adequate shared experiences and beliefs to benefit from authentic conversation with women who teach science in high-poverty schools. As such, “values, ideas, fears, and important shared experiences” (p. 178) among participants allow for more open interaction, making full participation possible.

Clark (2001) also suggests that authentic conversations require safety, trust, and care, and must be allowed to develop over time. As well, he advises that such conversations cannot be forced or structured by definition:

What we know is that good conversation may be invited, never commanded, and that some invitations are more likely to bear fruit than others. The optimistic manner in which we come to the conversation and the stories that we bring are critical. (p. 177)

Clark concludes that effective and authentic conversations demand good content worth talking about; something he terms *generative conversational content*. A personal story or article might well generate such dialogue, but it is necessary to keep in mind that the content must have “a personal connection for the conversants” (p. 176). At the same time, however, such content is not

predictable in terms of anticipating its potential with any given group. According to Clark, “not every promising text or story fulfills its promise, and some of the best conversations came as complete surprises” (p. 177).

Finally, Clark (2001) suggests that authentic conversations have a future, in terms of subsequent dialogic potential and further learning:

A conversation group, in the best circumstance, becomes a social context for doing the work of reflective practice. But collective reflection, satisfying as it is, did not become an end in itself. Conversational reflection became a means for organizing ourselves for future action in our classrooms and schools. In this sense, teacher conversation groups can become field-based, self-directed, sustainable extensions of more conventional teacher education and professional development programs. (p. 180)

This conclusion speaks strongly to the utility of discourse in the processes of teacher learning and changing action.

The role of dialogue in the professional learning of school principals. As Murphy (2002) suggests, scholars and practitioners in the field of educational administration are facing new and unique challenges:

The ways of thinking about school administration that we relied on for most of our history provide an inadequate platform for educational leadership in the 21st century, Because of powerful political, social, and economic shifts in the environment in which school are nested...new foundations for the profession need to be built. (p. xi)

Murphy contends that a new vision is needed for the ways in which potential leaders are trained, and the manners in which principals are provided with professional development opportunities necessary for effective school leadership.

In response to Murphy's challenge, Kochan, Bredeson, and Riehl (2002) rethink the professional development of school leaders, and suggest that new approaches are needed to initial training and ongoing professional learning for educational administrators. The authors contend that traditional approaches to professional learning, those which often constitute short-term seminars by experts, "seldom relate to the realities of the job and rarely result in changes in participant behavior" (p. 290). Similarly, research by Schön (1983, 1984) supports this notion, suggesting that learning experiences requiring long-term commitments, participant reflection, and dialogic inquiry are much more likely to result in changes in professional practice.

In response to calls for this type of professional development, scholars in educational administration have begun to examine the role of dialogue in the professional development of school leaders. Unfortunately, however, this research is limited to a few key studies. Ketelle (2004) examined the potential of using informal dialogue groups with school administrators for the purposes of mutual support and professional growth. Ketelle's experimental development project focused on the structure of dialogue groups, the nature of conversation between principals, and the benefits of dialogue groups.

Ketelle's (2004) study involved seven principals who were invited to join a group that would meet once a month to discuss issues related to their roles as leaders. The participants were heterogeneous in nature, and included high school and elementary principals, males and females, diverse cultures, and varying years of experience. Ketelle played the role of facilitator, but was also a dialogic participant in the sessions. She did not take notes or record any conversation. Instead, she would reflect on each session after the group met, keeping anecdotal records, and identifying starting points for the next session. At the onset, it was emphasized that all conversations were confidential and there needed to be a sense of trust among the participants.

By the end of the study, which followed the group of principals over a six-month period, Ketelle was able to draw some interesting and valuable conclusions as to the impact of dialogue groups for administrators. First, it is important to note that none of the seven participants missed even one session, which is quite a feat considering the busy lives of these leaders and the many unplanned events that can necessitate the principal's immediate attention. The participants viewed these sessions as valuable to their own personal and professional needs, and therefore made them a priority.

The principals also indicated that one of the most beneficial aspects of the dialogue group was that they were affirmed in the many challenges they faced each day, there was comfort in knowing that others understood the rewards, challenges, and crises of the job. This helped to build personal relationships among the participants, and a high degree of support and trust. The principals participating in Ketelle's dialogue group also saw great value in the sharing of techniques, strategies, programs, resources, and materials that others found to positively impact their schools. This was a clear indication of the professional development value of using dialogue groups with school leaders.

Another valuable component of the group was in the sharing of problem solving strategies. As each participant discussed a current issue, others helped to offer new perspectives and options. This enabled the participants to attempt new approaches, reflect upon their actions, and share their observations with the group. This finding clearly indicates the value of dialogue in terms of acquiring new ideas that empower leaders to change action and seek to improve their professional practice.

Likely the most extensive work on the role of dialogue in the professional learning of school administrators was conducted by Shields and Edwards (2005), in their book entitled, *Dialogue is not just talk: A new ground for educational leadership*. This publication is an effort to describe a new approach to educational leadership that attends to the current state of

education, the challenges placed on principals, and the role of dialogue in the daily life of a school leader:

In order to achieve the multiple purposes of schooling and to reconcile the competing political, social, cultural, and economic demands placed on educators, more and more people are becoming interested in the moral purpose of leadership, in ethical leadership (Sergiovanni, 1992), and in the potential of dialogue as a focus for teaching and leadership (Burbules, 1993; Edwards & Shields, 2002). (p. 3)

The authors focus on two main issues in their exploration of this new approach to school leadership. First, there is a thorough examination of dialogue theory as it applies to educational leadership. The authors contend that the school community, and the groups within that community, reflect the larger world and, as such, dialogue becomes the central way of communicating and understanding. Teachers and students participate in dialogic interaction through the teaching and learning process. Teachers do the same with one another as they discuss their roles, successes, and challenges. Similarly, the school administrator builds dialogic relationships with all members of the school community, both internal and external groups. As such, dialogue is central to the principal's role in the school community.

Shields and Edwards (2005) embrace Bakhtin's theoretical construct in terms of the meaning and value of dialogic communication:

Dialogue is a way of standing outside something, apart from someone, but seeking to understand... Thus dialogue is a way for us to understand something or someone who is in some way different from ourselves, who has a different perspective, alternative lens, varied history, and so forth. (p. 15)

The process of dialogue therefore becomes a way of better understanding others and learning from others.

The “visual heuristic” that comes from this conceptual framework is that of a triangle with the term *dialogue* at its centre. On the three sides of the triangle are the terms *relation*, *understanding*, and *ontology*. Shields and Edwards (2005) use this graphic organizer to portray the essential dimensions of dialogue and the interactions among these dimensions. According to the model, during the process of dialogue, relationships are built, understanding deepens, and one’s sense of reality and identity are heightened. Each dimension directly impacts upon the other dimensions in the same way, suggesting that “even as these dimensions are essential to dialogue, dialogue is central to being, to relationships, and to understanding” (p. 17).

In terms of professional learning, Shields and Edwards (2005) attest to the significant role of dialogue. They suggest that, “dialogic understanding holds rich promise for the unique context and goals of educational leaders. This promise arises from the development of new knowledge, new modes of reasoning, and the potential for mutual action” (p. 83). The authors suggest that humans use dialogue to communicate their own ideas, even when those ideas are not clear. The process of dialogic communication allows for a sounding board, which helps to clarify one’s own thoughts. As one articulates their ideas and processes the thoughts of others, those ideas become more clear, awareness and meaning is heightened, and new knowledge develops. According to Shields and Edwards, four types of knowledge can be constructed during the “to and fro” dialogic interaction. 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 (p. 84).

In essence, through dialogue, one can acquire knowledge from another, knowledge can be jointly constructed, and knowledge can be gained by examining and clarifying one's own ideas. These types of knowledge proved useful in interpreting knowledge construction during dialogue group sessions, and are applied in the methodology section of Chapter Three.

The position articulated herein supports the notion that dialogue has the potential to play an integral role in learning and knowledge construction related to professional practice. Theorists such as Vygotsky (1986) and Bakhtin (1986) have suggested that social discourse brings our thoughts into reality that, in turn, transforms these ideas into new knowledge. Scholars such as Shields and Edwards (2005) offer a means of operationalizing the theoretical perspective into a practical framework for exploring ways of learning and types of knowledge construction. This framework was used to examine the content and the construction of knowledge of inner-city principals as they dialogue on the current issues they face in their educational contexts. The dialogue group provided the vehicle for professional learning that has been found in the research to be needed for principals in these high-stress environments.

Discussion

Recent research related to inner-city school leadership suggests that these leaders require ongoing professional support in order to meet the challenges of their daily work (Harris, 2003). Research also suggests that such support needs to include networking with like-minded colleagues, and connecting with critical friends (Lawson, 2005, 2006). As such, there appears to be a call for dialogue and learning through collaborative interaction with other professionals. The

recent research on effective professional learning also appears to support this approach, in terms of recommending small group venues that foster trust, sharing, and community-building (Peterson, 2002). The theoretical framework for study, which is based on social constructivism and knowledge construction through dialogue, was chosen to address these particular issues of inner-city school leadership.

Summary

This chapter first presented a review of literature related to the content of the study, notably, poverty in Canada, poverty and education, and school leadership in high-poverty communities. The theoretical framework was then presented through a review of literature relating to social constructivism, perspectives on dialogue, and knowledge construction through dialogic interaction. Chapter Three presents details on the research methodology used in this study.

Chapter Three
Methodology

Introduction

This chapter presents the research design for the study, including an overview of action research and cooperative inquiry, and a description of the study's methodology, data collection, and data analysis techniques. The methods outlined in this section were utilized in order to address the following research questions:

1. What are the central issues of concern for inner-city school principals?
2. Do inner-city principals 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?

Research Design

This study employed 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.

Types of Action Research

Chapman, Sackney, and Aspin (1999) suggest that “action research is a method of inquiry that brings together academics and practitioners, such that practitioners move in a cyclical manner between understanding, action, and assessment of alternative practices” (p. 92). Reason (1994) identifies three distinct forms of action research, those being participatory action research, action inquiry/practitioner research, and cooperative inquiry.

Participatory action research. Participatory action research (PAR) “emphasizes the political aspects of knowledge production” and assumes an understanding of knowledge as a means of empowerment and control (Reason, 1994, p. 328). As such, PAR often involves work with marginalized populations. The approach also supports the notion that the lived experiences of people hold the essence of new knowledge and social change. A third element of participatory

action research is its emphasis on authentic commitment and genuine collaboration, “which are resplendent with feelings and attitudes of an altruistic, cooperative and communal nature and which are genuinely democratic” (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991, p. 5).

Oftentimes, a participatory action research initiative begins with a concern voiced by a community or, alternately, an outside agency provides funds and resources for a specific need. In either case, community meetings are staged to involve participants in the process of dialogue in order to identify issues, assess alternate solutions, plan actions, gather data, analyze information, and reflect on progress. Methodologically, PAR can involve both qualitative and quantitative systems of gathering data, depending on the issues being focused upon and the actions being taken.

Action inquiry/practitioner research. A second form of action research is referred to by Reason (1994) as action inquiry or action science, but is more commonly known as practitioner research. In this type of research, a professional reflects upon, plans, and acts to improve his or her own practice. For example, service providers such as nurses, social workers, or educators may partake in practitioner research within the context of their daily jobs. Although their patients, clients, or students, respectively, are often involved in feedback and data collection, the emphasis in practitioner research is on the professional practices of individuals. Methodologies vary, and strategies often include both qualitative and quantitative data collection gathered within the context of the everyday work world.

Cooperative inquiry. 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.

Reason (1994) distinguishes between the three in terms of emphasis, suggesting that practitioner researcher emphasizes inquiry into one's own professional practice. Cooperative inquiry emphasizes psychological factors and learning, while participatory action research emphasizes political factors and social change. Reason contends that:

These three seem to be well-articulated in both theory and practice and to stand together in quite radical contrast to orthodox scientific method; at the same time, all start from different premises and emphasize different aspects of the participative inquiry process.
(p. 325)

Essentially, these three approaches to research are in contrast to other approaches in terms of the role of the researcher, the goals of the research, and the nature of the research design.

In reflecting upon the utility of dialogue in the processes of learning and knowledge construction, it appears that the theoretical constructs of both Vygotsky (1934/1986, 1978) and Bakhtin (1975/1981, 1986) apply to the underlying principles of cooperative inquiry, in acknowledging the significant role of social discourse in the construction of new knowledge. Conceptually, action research affirms Vygotsky's social constructivist viewpoint that knowledge is grounded in social interaction. Action research also parallels the work of Bakhtin on dialogue theory, by supporting the notion that knowledge is constructed when humans participate in dialogic interactions.

A case study example of cooperative inquiry was conducted with school leaders in New Zealand, and involved principals working collaboratively with peers as they used action research to examine and refine their own leadership practice (Robertson, 2000). Participants met regularly

to discuss their leadership practice, and to identify areas of required learning. They conducted study group sessions, made individual action plans, and then implemented these plans in their daily work in schools. Here, they observed and reflected upon their actions.

The findings of this study suggest that principals value dialogue and collaboration with their peers, in an environment of support, trust, and honesty (Robertson, 2000). The study, however, goes further, in establishing that the process of action research has the potential to become:

...part of the professional development model itself. A researcher can not only use action research methods to gather data on a development, but can also lead a group of action researchers toward a greater awareness of their own practice in their own institutions.

(Robertson, 2000, p. 77)

In essence, Robertson concludes that the study participants perceived collaborative inquiry to be an effective model for professional development for school leaders. This study extends Robertson's research to examine the value of cooperative inquiry as a professional learning strategy for inner-city principals in this urban centre.

Methodology

The following section outlines the selection of participants, procedures conducted, methods for implementing the inquiry cycle, data collection techniques, and data analysis procedures.

Participants

Study participants were selected by open invitation and voluntary involvement. The superintendent responsible for inner-city schools within the Urban School Division distributed letters of invitation to all current administrators in the district. This letter also included a detailed

description of the project and an outline of the expectations of participants. Four to six administrators would be randomly selected from those expressing interest in participating in the study. It was hoped that there would be diversity within the group, in terms of years of experience, gender, and level of school, but this was not controlled within the study design. In essence, to ensure equity and fairness, participants would be randomly selected from those administrators with interest in the project.

Procedures

In cooperative inquiry, the initial steps are often taken by a 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 were reexamined by the group. Although the research questions were accepted as is, the group worked to identify collective objectives for the study. The group then worked together to reframe the inquiry by determining the place, time, and scope of the study. As knowledge was shared and new knowledge constructed, the group contributed to restructuring data gathering and analysis procedures, and offered insight into issues of ethics and validity. In essence, the researcher initiated the process, but once participants were involved, they directed the inquiry through dialogic cooperation and knowledge-sharing.

For this study, the researcher established the dialogue group, and at an initial planning meeting, the principals determined the format of meetings, including dates, locations, times, and potential issues to be discussed (Appendix A). The format established was used initially, but was open to modifications based on the articulated and 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 focused dialogue group sessions could not be pre-determined. Participants were empowered to identify the issues that were most critical and that had most impact on their professional practice and, in turn, determined their own courses of action.

For the purpose of this research study, participants completed a pre-study questionnaire to identify potential issues for discussion (Appendix B). This data collection instrument included questions related to the central issues of concern for inner-city principals determined in previous research. The issues included relate to those determined in the literature review on inner-city school leadership, but the questionnaire allowed 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.

Related research and literature 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 acted as facilitator, in bringing outside ideas to the group as part of her own contribution, but she did not assume the role to “teach” the group.

Implementing the Inquiry Cycle

Once the action research study was redefined by the participants, the cycle of action, observation, and reflection was initiated. In cooperative inquiry, the plan-act-observe-reflect cycle is an individual and group process. For example, the participants made plans and took action in the workplace, and observed the consequences of their actions. They, of course,

reflected at this 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 was the action. The observation and reflection took place during these conversations, and continued to evolve. Through this reflection, the group determined subsequent objectives, activities and goals for learning that were acted upon in future sessions. As such, the process for the individual and the group was 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 accomplish 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, artifacts, statistical/numerical data from reports, student work samples (p. 19)

For the purposes of this research study, data were gathered using various techniques, in order to accomplish triangulation.

First, the data from the pre-study planning session and questionnaire were used to determine the issues of concern for inner-city principals. The dialogue group sessions were audio-recorded, and then later transcribed and coded. This provided additional information related to the central issues of concern for inner-city principals, 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 completed an exit slip at the end of each session to record feedback in terms of their roles in the dialogue and subsequent learning (Appendix C). These data were analyzed using the theoretical concepts on knowledge and dialogue, as developed by Shields and Edwards (2005).

Participants also used an action research cycle (Appendix D) to record their plans, actions, observations, and reflections. At the end of each dialogue group session, participants used the action research cycle to 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 recorded their observations and reflections to determine evidence of change. Participants were invited to share their plans, actions, 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 principals 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 (Appendix E). This session also offered participants an opportunity to reflect on the experience and suggest any modifications for future dialogue group sessions.

At the end of the study, participants completed 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 (Appendix F). Finally, the principals took part in a post-study focus group session to reflect on the cooperative inquiry experience in its entirety (Appendix G).

Triangulation was accomplished using the data collection techniques described above. In addition, the data matrix presented in Table 2 establishes direct links between the research questions and the data collection techniques that provided information on these questions.

Table 2. *Data Matrix*

Research questions	Data sources
What are the central issues of concern for inner-city principals?	Pre-study planning session transcript, Pre-study questionnaire, Dialogue group transcripts, Mid-study focus group transcript, Post-study questionnaire, Post-study focus group transcript
Do inner-city principals perceive cooperative inquiry to be an effective professional learning strategy, in terms of assisting them in managing those central issues?	Action research cycles, Dialogue group transcripts, Mid-study focus group transcript, Post-study questionnaire, Post-study focus group transcript
How does the use of dialogue foster the construction of knowledge related to professional practice?	Dialogue group transcripts, Exit slips, Mid-study focus group transcript, Post-study questionnaire, Post-study focus group transcript

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). To this end, each data set is analyzed in a different way, depending upon the data collection technique used in the study.

The pre-study questionnaire used in this study contained both qualitative and quantitative data. For quantitative items, mean scores were determined to identify responses to each question, which utilized a four-point scale. This technique of collecting simple means and frequencies in order to tabulate results was selected due to the small number of study participants. Ranges were identified to determine significance of mean scores, with scores ranging from 1.0 to 1.5 suggesting weak significance, scores from 1.6 to 2.4 suggesting marginal significance; scores from 2.5 to 3.4 suggesting substantial significance; and mean scores from 3.5 to 4 suggesting

strong significance. The anecdotal data from these questionnaires were analyzed and coded according to the research questions in order to determine consistent themes and patterns.

The transcripts and audio-recordings from the pre-study planning session were analyzed to identify the issues of concern for inner-city principals, and to identify participants' initial views on cooperative inquiry and dialogue.

It is important to note that the initial plan for qualitative data analysis focused mainly on the review of typed transcripts from dialogue and focus group sessions. However, during analysis, it became evident that the voices of the participants and the nuances of the dialogue were central to the findings. As such, all audio-recordings were listened to, in conjunction with transcription review. This allowed for a more authentic view of the research experience, and allowed for the more subtle, yet powerful themes to come to light. Data were analyzed and coded for themes related to each research question. This procedure included topic analysis focused on identifying consistent themes and patterns in the data.

The exit slips completed by principals at the end of each dialogue group session were intended to provide the researcher with data on the participants' perceptions of the role of dialogue in knowledge construction. The data from these exit slips were 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. (Shields & Edwards, p. 84)

During the mid- and post study focus group sessions, the participants were asked to share their thoughts on topics related to the three identified research questions. As a group, they partook in discourse and shared ideas and experiences. This session was 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 action research cycles were gathered and analyzed for trends and patterns related to evidence of change in professional practice. Topic analysis was used, and the data collected and analyzed were indexed to establish emerging categories. Indexing was done in the same manner as previously noted.

Finally, the post-study questionnaire, which contained both qualitative and quantitative data, was analyzed. For quantitative items, mean scores were determined to identify responses to each question. The same ranges as used for the pre-study questionnaire ranges were used to determine significance of mean scores, once again with scores ranging from 1.0 to 1.5 suggesting weak significance, scores from 1.6 to 2.4 suggesting marginal significance; scores from 2.5 to 3.4 suggesting substantial significance; and mean scores from 3.5 to 4 suggesting strong significance. The anecdotal data from these questionnaires were analyzed and coded according to the research questions, once again determining consistent themes and patterns, and were 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 understanding of the role of dialogue in constructing knowledge related to professional practice.

Since participatory action research aims at giving voice, it was necessary to ensure that the voices of participants remained at the fore of data collection and analysis. For this purpose,

powerful oral and written commentaries, quotes, conversations and anecdotes were collected and used to illustrate and support the findings of this research study. Oftentimes, this textual analysis also gave 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 often offered insight into implications for future action, and were therefore highly significant to the action research approach.

Researcher Positioning

The Role of the Action Researcher

In traditional approaches to inquiry, the researcher is often viewed as the initiator, director, and controller of a study. In this sense, a researcher selects an issue to study, formulates a plan, implements the plan, and gathers and analyzes data in order to determine findings. The researcher’s role in this type of study is that of the knowledgeable expert, who maintains distance from study subjects in order to remain objective.

In action research, the researcher takes on a very different role. Due to the nature of this form of inquiry, there is an understanding that the participants, as well as the principal researcher, bring valuable expertise to share. As such, the researcher becomes one member of the group, participating in discourse and reflection, but not directing or leading the group in its plans or actions. In essence, each member of the group extends his/her own thoughts and actions, but does so while participating in autonomous discourse with others. The principal researcher reflects, plans, acts, observes, and learns alongside the other participants. As Heron (1996) suggests, “self-directing persons develop most fully through fully reciprocal relations with other self-directing persons. Autonomy and cooperation are necessary and mutually enhancing values of human life” (p. 176).

Morris (2002) articulates the equitable and empowering role of study participants in participatory action research and cooperative inquiry, while deferring from any centrality of role or ownership on the part of the researcher:

In true participatory research, research participants (called “subjects” in traditional research): (a) decide the research objectives, research questions, and methodology, (b) are involved in data collection, analysis, and reporting; and (c) determine the use of the research. They are not only the “subjects” but also the researchers. The participants “own” the research. (p. 10)

This approach ensures the participants’ active involvement and collaborative control over the research process.

In cooperative inquiry, the researcher takes on the role of facilitator, and does not attempt to maintain distance from the group. This is vastly different than the role of the traditional researcher, who attempts to maintain an objective view of the issues, content, and subjects. In the co-researcher approach central to action research, it is not essential, nor even preferred, that the researcher or other participants remain objective. Instead, value is placed on bringing one’s own thoughts, opinions, and life experiences to the forefront of the research:

The validity of this encounter with experience in turn rests on the high-quality, critical, self-aware, discriminating, and informed judgments of the co-researchers, which may be called “critical subjectivity.” Critical subjectivity means that we do not suppress our primary subjective experience, that we accept that our knowing is from a perspective; it also means that we are *aware* of that perspective and of its bias, and we *articulate* it in our communications. (Reason, 1994, p. 327)

In essence, the action researcher is able to bring assumptions and personal experiences to the research, but is obligated to acknowledge and express these ideas, as would any other participant.

When using a cooperative inquiry approach, the role of the researcher may be fraught with challenges and responsibilities. On one hand, the researcher has tasks to accomplish and studies to complete. On the other hand, the process must be fully placed in the hands of the participants. As well, study participants bring their own issues and personalities to the forum, and the researcher must work with the group to ensure that the social principles of action research are maintained. It is not difficult to imagine that, in some groups, it might well be challenging to establish and maintain an atmosphere that reflects democratic participation and life-enhancing empowerment. Researchers must therefore address this challenge from the onset of a study, by sharing the social principles and assumptions of action research with the study participants, in order to ensure that everyone involved is committed to the premise and the process of this participatory approach to inquiry.

As noted previously, the principal researcher may have “expert knowledge” and access to outside research that may be of value to the participants of the dialogue group, in terms of the issues being focused upon. As needs arise and are articulated, the principal research will share these ideas and materials but, in keeping with the assumptions of action research, this will be done through facilitation and not through direct teaching.

Personal Perspective

As a public school educator, the researcher of this study spent ten years in this urban centre's inner-city schools, in roles including special education teacher, resource teacher, vice principal, and principal. Therefore, the researcher approached this study with experiences and perceptions about the issues being focused upon. This indicates that personal perspective must be

acknowledged and addressed in terms of interpreting data and shaping the findings, conclusions, and implications of this study.

All of the principals involved in this study were known to the researcher as colleagues. Therefore, the researcher and participants had a pre-existing relationship. Although this can be a benefit in ensuring a comfortable relationship for action research, it also had the potential for limitations and ethical considerations. For example, participants may feel hesitant to provide constructive feedback and suggestions to improve the research study, in light of personal connections. In order to address this concern, it was explained to all participants that, for the purposes of valid research, it was important that they share their views honestly, even if they think that the researcher might view some issues differently from them. It was also stressed that they share their thoughts in detail, rather than assume that the researcher may be familiar with their circumstances. In addition, data collection techniques and resulting data analysis needed to be approached with objectivity and integrity, in order to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the research.

Validity and Reliability

Since action research, and specifically cooperative inquiry, is outside the realm of traditional approaches to scholarship, researchers using this approach are well advised to ensure that their studies are strong in terms of disciplined inquiry:

People want assurance that sloppy, poorly devised, or unbalanced research is not likely to result in inadequate or potentially damaging outcomes. In these circumstances, they often require an examination of the rigor or strength of the procedures to be included in the methodology section of a research proposal. (Stringer, 2004, p. 55)

In essence, action researchers need to focus on credibility, validity, and general quality of their research designs, by articulating clear standards and procedures. They also need to ensure that their research designs address the previously mentioned criticisms.

Issues of Soft Science and Reliability

It is unlikely that action research studies will utilize strictly quantitative measures, as the approach supports the notion that the experiences and voices of participants are central to knowledge construction. As such, qualitative measures are oftentimes more effective in capturing these voices. This means that action research may be criticized as a form of soft science, and for its lack of empirically-based reliability measures. In response, researchers using the action research approach must address issues of validity in order to ensure the quality and credibility of their research and findings.

Addressing Validity Issues

According to Scheurich (1992), “validity becomes a boundary line that divides good research from bad research, separates acceptable research from unacceptable research” (p. 5). Since action research uses a diversity of methods, the procedures used in experimental studies are not fully applicable. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that there is really no objective measure of validity but, rather, one must address the issue of trustworthiness, or the extent to which we can trust the truthfulness of a research project. As such, Lincoln and Guba identify the following criteria for assessing validity in action research:

Credibility. This refers to the plausibility and integrity of a study. Credibility is enhanced when the researcher ensures that the following practices are followed during the inquiry process: (a) prolonged engagement, investing sufficient time to understand the issues and context of the study; (b) persistent observation, recording the number and duration of observations and

interviews; (c) triangulation, utilizing multiple sources and data collection methods to provide a thorough understanding of the research problems; (d) participant debriefing and follow-up conversations; (e) diverse case analysis, ensuring that all perspectives affecting the study have been included; (f) referential adequacy, clearly reflecting the perspectives, perceptions, and language of participants; and (f) member checks, ensuring that participants are given opportunities to review raw data, analyzed data, and reports.

These practices were taken into account in the research design of this study. For example, the six month time line of the study, and the regularity of dialogue group sessions, ensured prolonged engagement. As well, triangulation was accomplished through the diversity of data collection techniques being employed. Participants also debriefed through focus group sessions and member checks were conducted for all data sets and summative reports, to ensure that the views of participants had been accurately conveyed.

Transferability. Quantitative researchers attempt to ensure transferability so that findings can be generalized. However, due to the nature of action research, which often utilizes qualitative methods, results can only be applied to the context of the study. However, it is still possible to provide for the possibility of transferability to other similar contextual settings. Action researchers must therefore describe the context and participants in detail, so that similarities to other jurisdictions and people might be identified. This may “enable others to assess the likely applicability of the research to their own situation” (Stringer, 2004, p. 59). In this study, it was possible that findings may be transferable to other similar people and jurisdictions, notably principals and other managing personnel working in high-poverty communities. Therefore, in this study, the context of the inner-city community in this urban

centre is thoroughly described, and a description of the working context of each participant is presented in Chapter Four.

Dependability. This refers to the degree to which others are able to identify and assess whether the research design is adequate for the purposes of a particular study. This is achieved through an inquiry audit, whereby participants and other audiences are provided with details of the research design process, the procedures for collecting and analyzing data, and methods used for constructing reports. This practice was adhered to during the development of this study, the dissemination stage, and publication phase.

Confirmability. This refers to the degree to which results and findings can be confirmed by an examination of raw data. In essence, researchers provide an audit trail, by retaining all records, transcripts, tape recordings, field notes, and other sources of information so that they are available for review. It is important to note, however, that informed consent forms often obligate the researcher to destroy raw data following a study, so the researcher must decide on an adequate amount of time for which to retain data before destroying such material. Once again, this practice was followed throughout this study, to ensure that data and findings could be confirmed. In addition, member checks of transcripts were conducted, and exit slip information was used to determine whether participants could, in fact, confirm the raw data audio-taped within the dialogue group sessions. The mid- and post-study focus group transcripts and the post-study questionnaire data were also used to confirm or deny previous data gathered throughout the course of the study. By following these procedures for validity, it was anticipated that this research study would meet the criteria for disciplined inquiry.

Ethics

In action research, as with other approaches to inquiry, ethical considerations are intended to protect research participants. For example, researchers should be diligent in seeking permission from organizations, must follow a protocol of informed consent, and should maintain strict standards of confidentiality. They must also act with sensitivity and care in terms of the potential for emotional responses by participant sharing difficult experiences. In doing so, researchers should ensure that opportunities are provided for debriefing and further counseling by appropriate professionals.

These steps were adhered to throughout this study to ensure a focus on the best interests of participants. Many of these elements were dealt with by following the Ethics Protocols held by the University of Manitoba. In addition, permission was sought and granted by the school division prior to any formal contact with potential participants. Informed consent guidelines were followed, and efforts were made to ensure confidentiality of participants and their schools in terms of identity.

Another ethical issue to be considered was that some study participants may be concerned that their personal views will be shared outside the research group, and in ways that would reflect on them personally. For this reason, member checks were conducted for all published data, and pseudonyms were used at all times. The researcher also emphasized the importance of maintaining confidentiality within the group, so that a trusting atmosphere could be established and maintained. However, the limitations of confidentiality were explained to participants, since the researcher could not guarantee that all participants would ensure their views remain confidential. In addition, the actual data of the study were kept in a locked filing

cabinet and accessed only by the principal researcher, and was destroyed according to University of Manitoba guidelines once the study had been completed.

Dissemination of Information

Dissemination of findings and information to participants was ongoing throughout the project. Participants were provided with verbal feedback, and verified dialogue group transcripts. They were also provided with a summative account of the research findings, and will check all subsequent published works.

Special emphasis will be placed on ensuring that higher education institutions and school divisions are informed of the research and results, through presentations of research findings, and through written reports that will be submitted for presentation at educational conferences. In addition, professional organizations will be provided with opportunities to learn about strategies for supporting educational leaders in inner-city settings, through presentations and workshops. Such organizations will include the provincial and urban teachers associations, the appropriate principals/vice principals association, the local chapter of the Council of School Leaders, and the local chapter of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Efforts will also be made to share findings with inner-city community groups, in order to discuss how these findings might impact their children, what further action may be required, and how to ensure that future research continues to focus on issues of inner-city schooling.

Time Lines

This study was initiated in early January, 2007, with an initial pre-study planning session. Six dialogue group sessions followed, beginning in late January and ending in early June, 2007. The mid-project focus group session was conducted in March, 2007. The post-study focus group

session was conducted in late June, 2007. The member check and group data analysis session was conducted in October, 2007.

Summary

This chapter has presented the research design for the study, including an overview of action research and cooperative inquiry, and a description of the study's methodology, data collection, and data analysis techniques. This description has also addressed issues of reliability and validity specific to action research and cooperative inquiry approaches. Chapters Four through Eight present the findings of this research study.

Chapter Four Participants and Procedures

Introduction

This chapter provides a description of the participants and procedures of the study, and includes the following elements: (a) personal demographics of participants; (b) demographics of the specific schools in which the participants work; (c) and the process of implementing the action inquiry cycle.

Participants

Study participants were identified by open invitation and voluntary involvement. During the August 2006 inner-city principals' meeting, the superintendent distributed letters of invitation to all current principals and vice principals in the district. This letter also included a detailed description of the project and an outline of the expectations of participants. Five principals expressed interest in participating in the study. For purpose of confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used for the names of the principals and their schools.

There was significant diversity within the group, in terms of years of experience, gender, and level of school. At the time that this study was conducted, Chris had been the principal of Nelson School for four years. Her rationale for joining the dialogue group was to have "a chance to reflect on [her] practice, and to get support from colleagues who value conversation." Prior to her position at Nelson School, Chris was the vice principal at another inner-city school in the same urban centre. She is an experienced educator, with 20 years as a classroom teacher in various city schools. She has taught in elementary, secondary, special education, multi-age, and gifted programs, in this school division.

Nelson School is located in the core area and, at the time of this study, had a population of approximately 200 students from nursery to grade six. The school had a vice principal, who

was in his sixth year in this position. There were 14 teachers and 40 support staff. Nelson School had an extensive special education program, with students attending from other catchment areas of the inner-city district.

Kate was in her third year as principal of Wellman School at the time of this study. Her reasons for deciding to participate in this study were the “opportunity to dialogue with colleagues and friends, and to build knowledge and confidence.” Prior to her current position at Wellman School, Kate had been the vice principal at the same school for a period of four years. Kate is an experienced educator, with 22 years as a classroom teacher and support teacher in various local schools. She has taught in elementary, special education, and in a specialized program for students with behaviour issues.

Wellman School is located in the core area and, at the time of this study, had a population of approximately 300 students from nursery to grade eight. There were two designated classrooms in the school for students whose behaviour dictated smaller and more structured learning environments. Wellman School was also involved in a community school project and an internationally recognized program to empower its Aboriginal community. The school had a vice principal, who was in her second year in the position. In total, there was a staff of 50, which included 13 teachers, as well as teacher assistants, Aboriginal support workers, family support workers, youth workers, custodians, and office staff.

Barb was in her fifth year as principal of Dennison School at the time of this study. She decided to join this research project because “school administration is quite isolating. [She] hoped (and received) an opportunity to meet with professional colleagues to talk about issues that we could choose to focus on.” Prior to her current position, Barb had been a vice principal at

an inner-city junior high school for a period of three years. She is an experienced educator, with 20 years as a classroom teacher and counselor in various inner-city schools.

Dennison School is located in the core area and, at the time of this study, had a population of approximately 300 students from nursery to grade eight. There were three segregated special education classrooms in the school, for primary, intermediate, and middle years students. The school had a vice principal, who was in her third year in the position. The staff included 17 teachers and 33 support staff.

Alice was in her fourth year as principal of Gregory School. As a middle and senior high school administrator, she chose to join in this research project “to make links and better understand elementary schools and broaden [her] understanding of issues in these schools.” Prior to this appointment, Alice had been a principal of another inner-city school and a vice principal of one inner city and one suburban school within the same school division. Her teaching experience focused on home economics and native studies in various senior high schools.

Gregory School, servicing students from grades seven to twelve, is located in this urban centre’s downtown area. There were 1010 students in attendance at the time of this study. The school had two vice principals, one for middle school and one for senior school. There were 65 teachers and 62 support staff. Programs included a special education centre, life skills, adapted skills, flexible learning, advanced placement, business education, pre-employment, and four off-campus sites.

Greg was in his fifth year as principal of Roland School. He chose to participate in this study for the “opportunity to ‘talk’ with other professionals, other people’s company, and sharing of experience.” Prior to this position, Greg had served a short term as an acting principal in

another senior high school, and had been a vice principal in the same school as well as in a middle years school. Greg had over 20 years of teaching experience at the senior high level.

Roland School is a grade nine to twelve facility in the core area. The school has an extensive vocational program, as well as an academic stream and special education program. The school had one vice principal in her second year in this position, as well as 42 teachers and 18 support staff.

In terms of demographics, data on schools in the 'Urban School Division' (USD) are presented each year in the *School Demographics Report* (USD, 2006). This report combines division data with Statistics Canada Census data to provide a picture of demographics across the school division. According to Census guidelines, families are considered in a low income range when they spend more than 55% of their income on food, shelter, and clothing, and are therefore considered to be living in challenging economic circumstances. Table 3 features the specific demographics of the five inner-city schools in which the study's participants worked, in comparison with the larger school division and urban centre. The demographics data indicate that these inner-city principals' schools are located in communities of most significant need, in terms of inner-city criteria related to socio-economic factors. English as a second language and immigration factors are of little significance in these communities.

Table 3. *School Demographics of Participating Principals*

Inner-City Criteria	Nelson School	Wellman School	Dennison School	Gregory School	Roland School	School Division	Urban Centre *CMA
Median Family Income	\$22,891	\$22,497	\$22,576	\$29,270	\$27,257	\$35,060	\$64,422
Families in Poverty (LICO)	71%	73%	73%	53%	59%	41%	15 %
Single Parent Families	66%	72%	67%	71%	84%	36%	18%
Migrancy	61%	85%	59%	45%	107%	27%	not available
Parents < Gr. 9 Educ.	19%	23%	24%	12%	18%	10%	8 %
ESL	8%	2%	10%	22%	1%	8%	6 %
New Canadians	2%	0%	1%	18%	8%	10%	2%

* CMA refers to Census Metropolitan Area

Sources: School Division 2006 School Demographics Report,
Statistics Canada 2001 Census Data

It is important to note that, although diversity existed in the group in terms of gender, experience, and level of school, school contexts were very similar in terms of inner-city criteria, and increasingly dissimilar from the larger school division and urban centre, respectively.

Procedures

Once the participants for the study were identified, the group met for a pre-study planning session, in January 2006 (Appendix A). The meeting was held outside of work hours in a local restaurant. A private room was secured and the session was audio recorded. The purpose of this session was to: (a) introduce the study by describing its purpose, data collection instruments, and background information from related literature on inner-city school leadership, cooperative inquiry, and dialogue theory; (b) review ethics procedures and issues related to confidentiality; (c) discuss potential topics for dialogue group sessions; and (d) plan dates, times,

and locations of future meetings. This session was rich with sustained discussion for approximately four hours.

The venue selected for the dialogue group sessions was a centrally located university-affiliated club at which the researcher was a member. The facility offered private meeting rooms in a comfortable, non-institutional setting. The atmosphere was less formal and reflected more of a family home environment. As such, the group often began their days with conversation in the sun room, over coffee and a light breakfast. They would then move to a private dining room for the majority of the meeting, except for lunch, which was held in the dining room on a lower level of the facility.

Six dialogue group sessions were scheduled from January to June, 2006. Each session was five hours in length. The researcher had received permission from the school division to plan these sessions during the workday, as part of the participants' professional development. As such, meetings were scheduled from 10:00 am to 3:00 pm. However, midway through the study, the researcher received notification that the superintendents' department had decided that the use of school working hours needed to be restricted. It was requested that future meetings be held outside of school time. After discussions between participants and the researcher, and following negotiations between the researcher and senior administration, scheduled times were altered such that meetings began at noon and extended into the early evening. The impact of this change will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

Each dialogue group session began with open conversation, which usually lasted for 30 minutes. At the first session, the more formal aspect of the day began with an explanation of informed consent, the signing of related forms, and a general discussion around confidentiality. Participants completed the pre-study questionnaire, which focused on central issues of concern to

inner-city principals. This led to an extensive discussion of these issues, and participants' perceptions of related problems and solutions.

Following this, the action research cycle (Appendix D) was introduced. Participants were asked to identify a plan of action related to their professional practice, and to focus on that plan over the course of the month leading up to the next focus group session. This process led to individual action research by participants, within the context of their daily work. Participants used the action research cycle to record plans, actions, observations, and reflections related to their plans.

The final part of the dialogue group session involved completion of the exit slip (Appendix C). Participants used this form to reflect on the role of dialogue in knowledge construction.

Each subsequent dialogue group session followed a similar format. The day always began with casual conversation, followed by participants reflecting on and sharing their action research cycles. This was an opportunity for each member to highlight his or her personal goals, actions, observations, and assessment of his or her own action research. Other members offered feedback, suggestions, advice, and support.

Following the discussion of the action research cycles, the session usually involved topics of discussion or activities determined by the participants. Oftentimes, participants shared resources related to school leadership. As was articulated in the study's methodology, related research and literature 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. However, the other participants also regularly shared such literature, which

reflected the participatory and democratic characteristics of the group. The sharing of this literature inspired dialogue related to participants' professional practice and, in many cases, ideas shared from this literature inspired participants to refine their action plans and work toward new professional goals.

Many times, participants came to the sessions with a critical issue to share, seeking advice from colleagues on how to deal with professional challenges. This process reflected the action inquiry cycle within the context of the group, as they planned collaboratively, took action together, observed the experience, reflected on the dialogue group sessions, and continued the cycle at subsequent dialogue group sessions.

Dialogue group sessions always ended with a focus on another action inquiry cycle to establish plans for the next month, and the completion of the exit slip to reflect on the role of dialogue in knowledge construction.

During the third meeting of the dialogue group, participants were involved in a mid-study focus group session, responding to questions related to the value of the dialogue group sessions and topics of discussion, the role of dialogue in knowledge construction, the effectiveness of cooperative inquiry for professional learning, and ways upon which this professional development experience could be improved (Appendix E).

At the completion of the study, participants were involved in a post-study focus group study, responding to similar questions, while also providing general feedback about the study (Appendix G). Participants also completed a post-study questionnaire focusing on the issues of concern to inner-city principals, the role of dialogue in knowledge construction, and the effectiveness of cooperative inquiry as a professional learning strategy (Appendix F). In order to determine those topics of conversation most valuable to the participants, all dialogue group

transcripts were reviewed, and topics were identified from these data sets. These topics were used to design the questionnaire. In general, many of the topics appeared to be related to the primary responsibilities of a principal as outlined in an existing divisional document entitled *School Administrator Performance Assessment* (USD, 2005). Since this document was already in place and related to the performance categories of their profession, it was used in part to organize the topics. The categories on the performance assessment included leadership/management, program, personnel, and communication/relationships. There were several topics of conversation that did not apply to these categories, many of which related to community issues and personal issues. Hence, these two categories were used as well.

In terms of attendance and involvement in the study, it is important to note that all participants attended all six dialogue group sessions, in addition to the pre-study planning session. As a culmination of the study, participants planned a celebration of learning evening. At this event, in the absence of the researcher who had been called away for personal reasons, the group made the decision to continue meeting during the next school year. One member initiated action the following August, to establish dates, times, and location. To date, the five participants and the researcher have met monthly, on their own time, to continue the professional dialogue. It is important to note that these sessions are not part of this research study. No data are collected and no findings will be published.

As is advocated in action research (Stringer, 2004), once data from the study emerged and initial findings were explored, the study participants were invited to participate in the data analysis and provide member checks. The researcher presented the participants with a written summary of the findings, as well as raw data, and asked for input as to the participants' interpretations of these findings. They generally supported the findings as presented, which

indicates validity in the process and confirmed the findings of the study. However, the participants' involvement went far beyond confirmation of findings, as they contributed valuable suggestions for categorizing data and for highlighting essential findings that they deemed critical to the study. These suggestions will be discussed within the context of specific results.

Summary

This chapter has described the five inner-city principals participating in this action research study, and the demographics of their schools. As well, the specific procedures that evolved during the study are described. The following chapter explores the findings related to the central issues of concern for these inner-city school principals.

Chapter Five
Central Issues of Concern for Inner-City Principals

Introduction

This chapter provides a description of the results related to the study's first research question, which focuses on the central issues of concern for inner-city school principals. Trends and patterns emerged through the analysis of qualitative data from focus groups, dialogue groups, exit slips, action research cycles, and questionnaires, as well as quantitative analysis of specific questionnaire data. In a general sense, the central issues of concern for these principals focused on school management, the context of their schools within impoverished communities, and the challenges of personal well-being.

Findings

The principals involved in this study indicated that their central issues of concern were embedded in the content and context of their work. As school leaders, their roles focused on key responsibilities such as management, personnel, communication, and educational programming. Within these areas, the participants highlighted central issues of concern that were especially challenging. In addition, it appears that the context of their jobs, leading schools in high-poverty communities, resulted in further issues of concern. The culmination of these challenges sometimes led to issues of a personal nature. The following presentation of findings explores these central issues of concern in detail.

Pre-Study Questionnaire

The pre-study questionnaire featured issues from the literature related to the challenges of leading inner-city schools. Participants were asked to rank each identified item in terms of the degree to which it was a critical issue in their daily work. For all quantitative items on the questionnaire, mean scores were determined to identify responses to each question, which

utilized a four-point scale. This technique of collecting simple means and frequencies in order to tabulate results was selected due to the small number of study participants. Ranges were identified to determine significance of mean scores, with scores ranging from 1.0 to 1.5 suggesting weak significance, scores from 1.6 to 2.4 suggesting marginal significance; scores from 2.5 to 3.4 suggesting substantial significance; and mean scores from 3.5 to 4 suggesting strong significance. Table 4 presents the mean scores resulting from this questionnaire. Data are presented by topic in descending order of significance. The table in Appendix H presents the frequency distribution for these data.

Table 4. *Central Issues of Concern for Inner-city Principals*

Category	Issue	Mean Score (/4)
School-based Issues	Student achievement	3.8
	Training staff	3.6
	Budget constraints	3.6
	Student/staff safety	3.2
	Hiring staff	3.2
	Behaviour management	3.0
	Truancy	3.0
	Accountability/assessment	3.0
	Home/school relations	2.8
	Working with outside agencies	2.8
	Fund raising	1.2
Poverty-related Issues	Lack of telephones in homes	3.8
	Housing/migrancy	3.8
	Family funds for school-related supplies and activities	3.6
	Nutrition/clothing	3.6
Crime	Gang activity	3.4
	Weapons	2.6
	Prostitution	2.2
	Vandalism	1.6
Drugs and Alcohol	Family addictions	3.4
	Trafficking/Dealing	2.8
	Student use	2.6
Family Issues	Suicide	3.2
	Neglect	3.2
	Abuse	3.0
	Single parents	3.0
	Family literacy	3.0
	Domestic violence	3.0

n = 5

The data from these tables suggest that those issues of most significance to these inner-city principals included the school-based issues of student achievement, training staff, and budget constraints, as well as the poverty-related issues of lack of family funds for supplies and activities, lack of telephones in homes, housing/migrancy, and nutrition/clothing.

In addition to the items listed on the questionnaire, participants anecdotally cited other central issues of concern. These included general school-based issues such as: (a) maintaining staff, (b) sustaining initiatives, (c) building leadership capacity among the staff, (d) coping with the stress on staff from work and personal lives; (e) dealing with too many priorities; and (f) managing too many requests for grant writing and written reports.

The participants leading schools with senior years programs also cited some unique issues of concern, including: (a) maintaining student numbers in order to offer instructional programs; (b) improving the image of an inner-city high school; (c) dealing with staff perceptions about what a successful graduate should look like (i.e. unreal expectations that all should go to university); (e) enhancing staff's knowledge of the world of work and how to help students access it; and (f) supporting students adjusting to school, specifically refugees and northern aboriginal students living alone in the city.

Participants also cited community-based issues of concern such as: (a) the number of families moving due to community problems; (b) the challenge that the community has in supporting the school; (c) the difficulty of dealing with the justice system; (d) understanding the Aboriginal perspective; and (e) unaddressed issues in the lives of children. As one participant noted, there are "many, many children who need tremendous levels of support in areas of social and emotional needs that have to be addressed before they are even ready to learn!"

Data Analysis of Transcripts and Audio-Recordings

Qualitative data related to the central issues of concern for inner-city principals were derived from the transcripts and audio-recordings of the pre-study planning session, dialogue group sessions, and both focus group sessions. As the data were analyzed in conjunction with quantitative data, themes and categories began to emerge in terms of these issues of concern.

The findings from this analytical process suggest that many of the central issues of concern for these principals related to the context of inner-city communities. As a result, community context became an overarching theme. Other significant issues of concern fell under categories synonymous with principals' job expectations and, as such, have been organized using the *School Administrator Performance Assessment* (USD, 2005) for the division in which the participants worked. The performance assessment criteria established in this document outline the indicators for performance of all principals. These include: (a) leadership/management, which focuses on school organization, program supervision, planning, decision-making, building content/safety concerns, and budget; (b) personnel, which includes the supervision, professional development, and performance assessment of staff; (c) communication/relationships, specifically with senior administration, community, staff, and students; and (d) program, which includes implementation and adaptation of curriculum, program evaluation, and student assessment. However, in this group, there also arose issues related to personal contexts in the workplace. Hence, this became the sixth theme evident in the qualitative data.

It is important to note that, before the group data analysis and member check was conducted, the researcher had organized the findings into five categories, those being the four criteria in the principals' performance appraisal document and the fifth as personal well-being. It was thought that, since community context immersed itself within all of the themes, the related

issues might best be discussed within those five themes. However, at the final group data analysis and member check session, the participants expressed strong conviction that community context be presented as a central theme unto itself. As Chris expressed:

I think it is really important to highlight the fact that the state of our communities is not considered at all within our evaluations. Because everything we do is in response to our communities. Our communities are unique, and you can't compare our jobs to every other principal in other districts. Some of our issues are principal-based, like every other principal, but most are community-based and that needs to be featured in the final report.

As a result of this discussion, the results were re-organized under six categories, those being (a) community context; (b) leadership/management; (c) personnel; (d) communication; (e) program; and (f) personal well-being.

Community Context. The literature presented in Chapter Two identifies many characteristics of inner-city communities that affect the schools within those jurisdictions. The *School Demographic Report* (USD, 2006) from the Urban School Division also establishes criteria for identifying inner-city schools. These include poverty, single parent families, migrancy, and parents' education levels. This study found that the participating principals identified many similar issues that resulted in greater challenges in their roles leading inner-city schools. These include poverty, migrancy, student attendance, relationships with parents, students' well-being, crime, and school safety.

The demographics data on the school communities in which these principals worked were presented in the previous chapter. These data indicated high percentages of families living in poverty. This community factor appears to have significant impact on life within an inner-city school. Poverty results in families with inadequate housing, clothing, food, and resources. Many

children go to school hungry and staff must find ways to nourish them so that they are prepared for learning. As Barb suggested, “We have so few kids that actually are not needy. They come to school hungry... Kids need to eat. They can’t think and function and behave with an empty stomach. And the research shows it. Lunch raises test scores. Doesn’t anybody else care that kids are hungry?” One challenge for these principals was in accessing funds to feed children, as division budgets support only a portion of their schools’ nutrition program. The remaining funds must be sought out by the principals themselves, through grant writing and external initiatives.

Another factor related to poverty is housing. Within inner-city communities, families are constantly seeking out affordable housing, and, as a result, they tend to move a great deal. As noted in the demographic data presented in the previous chapter, the migrancy rates at the schools of these participating principals are significantly higher than the average division rates. As Chris suggested, “It’s not uncommon to get a [cumulative] file on a student in grade 4 and see that they have attended 12 different schools.” Migrancy causes challenges in schools due to the fact that students are not receiving a consistent school experience. The Urban School Division’s website states that “migrancy of students and families has been identified as a risk factor for inner-city students” (USD, 2008). Their research suggests that students who have moved three or more times by grade six get poorer grades, are less likely to access special services, are less likely to attend school regularly, are more likely to repeat a grade, have lower self-esteem, often have feelings of anger, have more issues with classroom behavior, and are at a higher risk of dropping out of school. These findings are well-known to the principals participating in this study and, as a result, they are challenged by the impact of migrancy on their students. As well, these principals work to reduce migrancy rates, through initiatives such as housing registries and access to bus transportation for students.

As noted above, migrancy and student attendance are closely connected issues. Alice discussed in terms of the impact of attendance by the time students reach middle school:

I am going to bring up a radical new thought. I am collecting data, and I think we should take some staffing and put it into the elementary to address attendance in the early years. Because when we get them in grade seven, they are six years in entrenched habits. If I'm getting them in grade nine, it's almost a write-off. So if I have to give up half a teacher so that we can get those kids in school, it is well worth it. I'm collecting data for the community. And I'm not laying blame. It's not the teachers. You can have the best teacher in the school – in the world – and if kids are missing 95 days, it doesn't matter how talented your teacher is or how good your resources are. It doesn't matter. The pattern is set early. By the time you are in grade three you are two years behind, by the time you're in grade six, you are four years behind, and then I get them in grade seven and it's hopeless. And what a horrible thing.

Others in the group concurred on the severity of this problem. As Chris stated, "That's one that I've been battling with, too. You can work all you want on getting the best things happening in your school, but the kids who aren't progressing are the kids who aren't there." As Kate suggested, it is not uncommon for a student profile to describe attendance issues indicating an average of 100 days missed every school year, from kindergarten onward. The group discussed various approaches to dealing with non-attenders, including mandating a one year/one school policy and focusing on stronger connections with parents. During this conversation, Chris discussed the parent engagement issue:

What I would like would be some focus groups with parents. We need to engage parents. If we try to do it all on our own, we're just going to the house with a bigger stick and they

still don't open the door. They pretend they're not home, or refuse to answer the phone, or they get their kid to lie, whatever. I don't know if it's going to change unless we engage in that conversation with the parents. As a district we need to say that we believe in the importance of regular attendance by your children, and we will do whatever we can to support you.

It is important to note that, although this dialogue may present as a form of blaming parents, participants presented a strong understanding and empathy for the families with which they worked. As Kate suggested, "This is the nature of our community. They do the best they can with what they have been given, and they love their kids." Participants also acknowledged the challenges facing families in the inner city, and agreed that this has direct impact on parenting. As Barb pointed out, "Our kids, with all their baggage, become parents without many positive role models and life skills, and the cycle begins again." Nonetheless, the participants still acknowledged relationships with parents as a central issue of concern. Concerted efforts are made to foster community and parental involvement in inner-city schools, but participants acknowledged the difficulty in doing so when migrancy was such an overwhelming issue. As Barb commented, "We are constantly trying to build relationships with families. And just when we do, they are gone and another family is there with little trust in schools."

Participants also identified the challenge when a conflict arose between the school and a family. Chris shared a difficult situation that resulted from a student disciplinary issue:

Okay, so what do I say to this parent tomorrow? She came in and threatened a teacher, called her a [expletive] and said, "Watch your back." We had to call the [community police officer] because it was a direct threat. But the question is, do I want to allow her in the building?

The challenge for these principals often revolves around building relationships and promoting positive problem solving skills, something that many of their parents lack. As Alice articulated, “Many in our community only know how to react with anger or violence. It’s all they’ve ever seen and it’s all they know.” These responses, however, can have significant impact on the principals who are often in front line positions of such conflicts. Chris, Kate, and Barb shared stories of a parent who had moved her family back and forth between their three schools, and was well-known for her aggressive behaviour. Kate shared an incident with this parent that involved “screaming, swearing, threats, and verbal abuse.” As Kate commented, “After she left, I felt like I had the life sucked out of me.” The participants suggested that this was an example of “the mental health issues that are prevalent in inner-city communities” (Barb), and agreed that stronger connections are necessary between schools and mental health agencies that provide support to families in crisis.

Closely related to the issue of parental well-being is that of student well-being. Participants spoke at length about their concerns in dealing with emotionally at-risk children. Greg suggested that “mental wellness is impacting at all levels.” As Kate commented:

I go through the list of my kids who I know have the potential to snap. And I have a lot, unfortunately. [Alice concurs, “We all do, unfortunately.”] I have one boy in my school, at high-risk for violence, who carries my cell phone number 24 hours a day. I did a risk assessment on him after attending the workshop on threat assessment, and that kid has gotten no support. He’s had no counselling, no follow-up. The family is open to [family services], but nothing has happened, and he’s still living a life entrenched in violence. And yet it’s my responsibility to prevent a crisis.

The pressure that these situations place on principals is, at times, overwhelming and frustrating.

Chris shared a similar story focusing on the lack of follow-up by family services:

We had two brothers who were really having a hard time. We had them for two years and the school psychologist worked with them. We had been advocating for them, and at one point they were taken into care because we had all these letters with warning signs of all kinds documented. They left us a year and a half ago. This year, we get a call from a [social] worker who says, "I've just gotten this case and there is nothing in the file. Did you do anything with these kids?" I couldn't believe it. Nothing in the file? Not a single thing. The worker had left with not a word. So these kids have had nothing.

The frustration is multi-faceted in these circumstances. There is the concern for the student's well-being, the frustration with outside agencies, and the stress involved when principals are, as Kate stated, "dealing with issues we are not trained to deal with, life and death issues."

The principals identified crime as another feature of life in their communities that influenced the school environment, and therefore became a central issue of concern for them as school leaders. They noted incidents of "gang activity, prostitution, weapons offenses, and vandalism in the community" (Barb). Sometimes these crimes actually have direct impact on their schools, as parents or other family members are involved. 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, "Get lured away from school and into the street life at a young age." The impact of crime was evident as participants discussed their response to local media stories. Chris articulates this clearly:

Every media incident we hear on the radio or television, we immediately ask if our kids or families are the victims or the perpetrators. And if it's not our kids and families, then it's one of our colleagues who will deal with the fall-out, supporting kids and families and staff, and dealing with the impact in our buildings.

With crime came participants' concerns for the safety of students and staff. Participants shared many stories of school lockdowns, dangerous intruders, weapons offences, and break-ins.

Kate shared one particularly vivid story of crime and school safety that clearly articulates issues of concern for inner-city school leaders.

The first time I felt real terror was with a big arrest in our community. At the end of the day, two big white guys dressed in regular street clothes came into the school. It was close to home time, and there were already junior high students and nursery/kindergarten parents and students in the hall. These guys headed toward the office, and I assumed they were yet another pair of social workers. We had had a lot of new faces and changes lately, so I didn't know everyone. They didn't stop at the office, but walked right past, and right outside the N/K classroom door, they cuffed and arrested one of our junior high students who was there to pick up his younger brother. I couldn't believe it!

After the arrest, they dragged the boys through the crowd and walked directly in front of [my vice principal]. She asked them what was going on, but they just turned away, said nothing, and kept walking. I mean, at no time, either before or after the arrests, did they identify themselves. I followed them outside of the building and watched them put the two boys in their car. Then, all of a sudden, I could hear really loud yelling and swearing - "Get the f--- away from the truck." I still cannot get this image out of my head. Right on the next block, at the corner of [street name] and [street name], there were

undercover cops, gang unit cops, uniformed cops, police dogs, drawn guns and a whole lot of yelling. And in the middle of all this were my kids trying to walk home. They were on the snow banks, all over the road and right between the good guys and the bad guys. It was insane.

So, I ran over to get them out of there. I sent the crossing guard home and crossed the kids to the other side of [street name], yelling at them to get inside. [My vice principal] came outside because she saw me running and thought there was a fight. The two of us were trying to get the kids across the street and home safely, but as we're doing this, cop cars were arriving, flying down [street name] and taking that corner sideways - it was just nuts. We watched as they arrested family members from the home, including the mom whose little ones were clinging to her and screaming out for her. It was so painful.

So, then I went inside and called to speak to [the chief of police] - out of town, of course, but I got someone else who tried to explain why this was necessary. I have never felt terror as I did trying to do my job and keep my kids safe. How can I convince these children and this community of their value when the very people who are supposed to protect us have no regard for their physical or emotional well-being? The cop I talked to said I should be glad they caught the bad guy. But does the means always justify the end? The next day, my little kids were in the same hall as the arrests, pretending to be cops and saying, "You are under arrest - get down on the ground." I mean, how sad is that?

This story clearly articulates the impact of crime on the children in an inner-city school, and also suggests the emotional effects that these incidents have on the leaders of those schools.

Leadership/management. Many of the central issues of concern cited by the participants in this study dealt with their roles as leaders and managers. According to the Urban School Division, the leadership/management aspect of the school administrator's job involves all tasks related to school organization, program supervision, planning and decision-making, building contents/safety conditions, as well as budget preparation, implementation, and control (USD, 2005, p. 5). In this context, the greatest challenges for these inner-city principals came in the area of time management. As Chris commented, "the amount of paperwork and legwork involved in a work order to get something fixed, or to get quotes to purchase some items, is so frustrating." Barb adds that the context of the inner city takes the majority of their time and "others don't have a clue how much time and effort goes into issues unique to the inner city." The time spent dealing with these issues means that less time is available for management tasks. Furthermore, Greg commented that "all of these management tasks are completely doable, but there are many more pressing tasks to do. We need to maintain a focus on teaching and learning, because that is what will make the difference, especially for our students." Even in terms of management responsibilities, the context of the inner city has direct impact on the role of the school leader.

Personnel. According to the Urban School Division, the personnel aspect of the school administrator's job involves all tasks related to supervision and direction, professional development, and performance assessment of all school staff. Participants suggested that hiring, training, and maintaining staff was particularly challenging. Alice described the "difficulty hiring senior years subject specialists, especially math/science people who have any context of the inner city, of refugees, of Aboriginal kids." This sentiment was shared by other participants as well. As Greg suggested, "many educators have little understanding of our kids or our communities."

In terms of hiring staff, the process begins when the principal projects staffing requirements for the following school year. Barb spoke of the “difficulty accurately projecting staffing numbers in the inner city because of the migrancy.” Many families who are enrolled in a school in the spring will have moved by the fall. Since the student population is not stable, staffing fluctuates as well. This often leaves principals having to add or cut staff in October, “just as kids are settling in and feeling comfortable” (Chris).

Another challenge for inner-city principals results when a position becomes vacant in a school. First, the position is advertised internally, to allow teachers within the school division to apply for the position. Unfortunately, as Kate articulated, “many people don’t apply for inner-city schools.” In this case, teachers who are declared surplus in others schools, as a result of changes in enrolment, are often placed in positions for which no one has applied. Kate spoke of the frustration around “being forced to take surplus staff rather than the crackerjack new grads that really want to be in the inner city.”

In addition, participants articulated that there are some needs within inner-city schools that should be automatically funded positions, not tied to student enrollment. For example, with the social and emotional needs of many inner-city students, “counselors should be automatic in the inner city, but these positions have to be taken from classroom staffing compliments” (Barb). As well, Chris suggested that many inner-city students “only get arts experiences and sports opportunities in school, and so these kinds of teaching positions should be a given. We shouldn’t have to fight so hard to provide our kids with a level playing field.”

Another issue of concern related to personnel involved professional development. All of the participants expressed frustration in terms of the number of compulsory workshops for staff, and the impact on their students who “don’t handle it well when their teachers are away – these

kids need stability” (Barb). In addition, it is often difficult to access substitutes who are willing to work in inner-city schools and who are properly skilled. This also appears to be the case for other staff positions, as all participants commented on the difficulty accessing substitute teacher assistants, clerks, and custodians.

Staff stress is another critical concern for inner-city principals. Much of the stress that staff experience relates to community context. For example, when a crisis occurs in the community, such as a death, a serious crime, or an apprehension of children by social service agencies, staff witness the effects of trauma on the students and their families. In turn, as Chris states, those staff “grieve for the children. Remember, these kids are with them every day and there are very close bonds, so teachers are really affected by the victimization of their students.”

In addition to the stress of witnessing such trauma, staff in inner-city schools also experience stress in other ways. For example, it is not uncommon for staff to be the bearer of parental threats and verbal abuse. They also experience the direct stressors related to safety, when lockdowns occur in the school, and when their schools are vandalized. Chris told the story of “arriving at school on a Monday morning to broken windows after a long weekend. The staff was extremely demoralized and that’s all they could talk about in the staff room.” As Barb suggested, “It’s our reality. Our staff is really affected by what happens in the community. Emotional support is not just for kids.”

Communication. The Urban School Division identifies the communication aspect of the principal’s job as involving the exchange of information with senior administration, the community, staff, and students. The participants in this study found most of their issues of concern to be in relation to communication with senior administration, especially in terms of reporting. As with all administrators, they are required to correspond with senior administration

through the development of school plans, staffing and enrollment projections, budgets, reports to the community, year-end reports, and various funding initiatives. It is likely that all principals find this daunting, at times. The participants in this study articulated that these responsibilities often deterred from their ability to focus on their priorities as school leaders. As Greg suggested, “we need to keep the focus on teaching and learning.” Barb concurred:

We have so many other more important things to focus our energy on, things that really make a difference in the lives of our kids. I’d really like to be able to throw all that paperwork out. I know we can’t, but it is much more important how we help kids daily, how we meet their needs, how we help them find peace.

Kate agreed with this, suggesting that, “When we’re too busy doing reports and feel that kids start getting in the way, then we are doing the wrong thing. Kids *are* the job! The rest of this stuff is getting in the way of us doing our jobs with the kids!”

Program. As determined by the Urban School Division, the program aspect of the principal’s job deals with the implementation and adaptation of curriculum, program evaluation, and student assessment. In this area, there appears to be little doubt of the participants’ significant focus on student achievement. For example, when the group discussed the results of the pre-study questionnaire, they noted that “everyone ranked student achievement as a 4” in being a critical issue. As Barb pointed out, “there is no doubt of its importance. We have to get our kids to do well.” Alice concurred, stating that “educational success is the answer to [students’] problems and the answer to our communities.” The challenge is substantial, in that, as the research indicates, students living in poverty face barriers that impede academic achievement.

Participants in this study felt the reality of this in their schools, and discussed their concerns around student assessment. For example, provincial examination results are often discouraging, as “inner-city schools almost always rank at the bottom, even though teachers and kids work so hard” (Kate). On a recent grade seven mathematics examination, two of the participants’ schools ranked in the bottom three for the entire division. The principals were as frustrated with the results as they were with the process. As Barb commented, “The format of most exams is just too foreign to our kids.” Similarly, Alice articulated the challenges her students faced when writing a recent exam:

It had been 100 degrees for days on end. You know, these kids go home to these houses on [street name]. They don’t have air conditioning, they can’t get to a mall, they don’t have a pool in their back yard, and they can’t drive around in their air conditioned car. No, they go to the third floor in the school where it’s 110 degrees, and they write an exam. They haven’t eaten breakfast, they haven’t slept because of the heat, and they don’t have a pencil. Now tell me how well that kid is going to do on this exam?

This description clearly indicates the daily realities and the barriers that keep many students in the inner city from meeting their academic potential.

Closely related to the issue of student achievement are those issues related to instructional leadership. In order to support teachers in fostering student success, these principals were acutely aware of the importance of spending time in classrooms observing teaching, gathering evidence of learning, and providing feedback. However, all participants concurred that time restrictions and the barrage of daily tasks and unexpected events in their schools often made it difficult to get into classrooms. As Barb commented, “I need to find tried and true strategies to help me get into classrooms on a regular basis. I barely get a chance to step out of the office.

Something always comes up that stops my plan to visit classrooms.” The group spent a great deal of time discussing this issue and sharing strategies. Several also included this focus in their action plans, the details of which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Another issue of concern related to programming was special education. Participants suggested that “there are many more students with special needs in the inner city, with all degrees of disabilities of every kind.” (Kate). This resulted in challenges related to paperwork and funding applications, but more so, the challenges came in meeting the diverse needs of special needs students within the regular classroom setting. There were also challenges related to training staff and acquiring experienced specialists. As well, family stability became an issue for special needs children. As Chris explained, “migrancy is also a big issue, because our special ed. kids are as migrant as our other kids. How do we provide them with good programming when they’re moving all the time?”

One strategy that participants saw as a way to address many of their concerns around student achievement was to ensure that families had access to early childhood educational programs in their communities. As Alice suggested, “Young children in the inner city may have the same potential as others, but they are not entering the school system with the same experiences, background, and conceptual knowledge.” Kate agreed, stating that “more than half of [her] kids don’t talk when they start school.” The group concurred that there is a need for access to full-day nursery and kindergarten programs that will help foster school readiness and increase the potential of inner-city children to meet with success in school.

Personal Context. Considering the diversity and critical nature of many of the central issues of concern cited herein, it is little wonder that personal stress factored in as another concern for the participants of this study. They each spoke of the potential of the job to be

emotionally draining, and shared their strategies for dealing with such stress. Greg, for example, said he “never accessed divisional email at home,” while Alice stated that she makes it “a rule not to work at home, even if it means long hours at work. At least there is a division between the two.” Barb stated that she had to work hard to “find a balance” and “to not sweat the small stuff even though so little of about the job is small.” Chris also emphasized the importance of self-care, nutrition, and exercise in maintaining a positive attitude at work.

Greg recalled a crisis intervention workshop, in which an RCMP officer said to the group: “You are all in a helping profession, which usually results in you not seeking help yourself.” The officer suggested that those in helping professions required opportunities to debrief after critical events. As Greg suggested, “That is exactly what we have in this group: it’s called regular debriefing.” Participants concurred that, as Chris articulated, “The opportunity to talk with one another was one remedy for personal stress.”

Post-Study Questionnaire

The items included on the post-study questionnaire were taken directly from dialogue group transcripts. The transcripts were reviewed in order to determine the topics of conversation that occurred during these dialogue group sessions. Participants were then asked to rank the topics according to which were most valuable to them in terms of professional learning. Table 5 presents the means scores resulting from this questionnaire. Data are displayed by topic in descending order of significance. The table in Appendix I presents the frequency distribution for these data.

Table 5. *Value of Discussion Topics to Principals' Professional Learning*

Category	Issue	Mean Score (/4)
Program	Getting into classrooms	3.8
	Evidence of learning	3.6
	Academic success	3.4
	Professional reading	3.4
	Co-teaching model	3.4
	School-based PD	3.2
	Pike market	3.2
	Conference sharing	3.2
	Feedback for learning	3.2
	Teacher instruction	3.0
	Student voice	3.0
	Data collection	2.8
	Code of conduct	2.6
	School-to-work initiatives	2.6
	CAP	2.4
	Technology	2.4
	Stott spiral curriculum	1.8
	Leadership/Management	Time management
Paper management		3.0
Building Maintenance		3.0
Budgets		2.8
Enrolment		2.8
Purchasing		2.6
Personnel	Staff wellness	3.8
	Staffing	3.6
	Human resources	3.2
	Secretarial issues	3.0
	Custodial issues	3.0
	Substitutes	2.6
Communication/Involvement	School plans	3.0
	Parent council	3.0
	Grant writing	2.8
Community	Student/family wellness	3.6
	Attendance	3.6
	Student safety	3.4
	Migrancy	3.4
	Reports to the community	3.4
	Outside agencies	3.2
	Cultural/racial clashes	3.0
	Health issues	3.0
	Edmonton's inner-city model	2.8
	Early years entry, pre-school, full-day K	2.6
	ESL issues	2.4
	War-affected refugees	2.4
Personal	Relationships	3.8
	Stress Management	3.6
	Personal wellness	3.6

n = 5

The data in these tables confirm the qualitative findings, such that participants identified many of the same issues of concern. The issues of most significance were getting into classrooms, evidence of learning, staffing, staff wellness, student attendance, student/family wellness, as well as personal stress management, wellness, and relationships.

The post-study questionnaire also included an opportunity for participants to provide anecdotal comments on the topics of discussion. Some comments were brief and poignant, such as, “Variety was amazing!” Others spoke to the structure of the dialogue group sessions, suggesting that the topics of discussion “very naturally evolved from our discussions and our passion about how we do our jobs. They were never laid on us or felt imposed.” Similarly, another participant suggested that it was “very important that it was member driven.” In another vein, one participant spoke to the characteristics of inclusion and community, when stating, “I can’t believe we talked about so many things! All topics were important because they were important to someone in the group! I think everyone had an opportunity to share, seek help, and celebrate at some point.” Finally, another participant spoke of the benefit of the dialogue group topics of discussion to personal professional practice, when suggesting that the experience “gives me more sense of balance in my own perceptions and understandings in school planning and management.”

Discussion

The inner-city community context may appear rather bleak if one considers only the findings presented thus far. One may also tend to be led to the conclusion that participants conveyed a sense of negativity about their roles in these schools. However, the participants readily acknowledged, as Greg articulated, “the passion of this group, who clearly love what they do.” Barb also commented that, “there are many negatives, but we stay because we make a

difference.” Similarly, Chris shared a profound success story describing what began as a class discussion among grade five and six students who were frustrated by the crime in their community. This discussion evolved into a class project and letter-writing initiative that inspired community organizing and action that has led to a greater sense of safety in the neighbourhood. It is important to note that, for reasons of confidentiality, the details of this class project and its ramifications are not provided herein.

Upon reviewing these findings related to the central issues of concern for inner-city principals, one might also assume that dialogue group sessions focused on complaining about the discouraging realities of their schools and roles within their schools or to foster “groupthink” (Janis & Mann, 1977). This was far from the truth in terms of the context of the dialogue. The central issues of concern were rarely, if ever, the final intent of the dialogue, nor were participants always in agreement over the issues of concern or the solutions they proposed. Critique and disagreement, as well as support and encouragement, were regularly part of the conversation. Participants raised such issues in order to identify solutions, offer strategies for success, and construct new knowledge that could be applied to their action plans.

At the same time, it was clearly evident that the role of these inner-city principals was challenging. According to current research on work-related stress, the emotional stress experienced by inner-city school staff and principals is considered as a form of vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma is a stress reaction that may be experienced by professionals who work with victims of trauma (Nelson, 1996). As educators in the inner city, these principals and their staff are exposed to trauma on a regular basis, through the experiences of students and families in their communities. Nelson describes the personal impact of vicarious trauma:

As witnesses, we can't help but to take in some of the emotional pain [victims] have left with us. As the victim releases some of their pain, we take it in. By the end of the day, we've collected bits and pieces of accounts of trauma. We may have pictures in our mind or intense feelings running through our body. In simple terms, this is vicarious trauma, as experienced by professionals and volunteers in the helping fields. (p. 1)

There is no doubt that working in inner-city schools can be a stressful professional. It is therefore important to examine ways in which these stressors can be addressed through supports provided to these professionals. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, the dialogue group experience was one such support for the participants in this study.

Summary

This chapter has described the themes and patterns that emerged from the data related to the central issues of concern for inner-city school principals. The results presented herein suggest that the central issues of concern for these inner-city school leaders are related to professional, contextual, and personal challenges. Inasmuch as their roles are like principals in other jurisdictions in terms of responsibilities, their roles are also unique in that inner-city communities present distinctive and often critical characteristics that they must address within their schools. This, in turn, leads to concerns related to emotional and personal well-being.

It is important to note that the purpose of this chapter was to identify central issues of concern for inner-city school leaders and, as such, the findings tend to describe difficulties and challenges within the role. However, this does not suggest that there are also not many positive aspects to their jobs, many successes, and meaningful rewards. These will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

Chapter Six
The Effectiveness of Cooperative Inquiry

Introduction

This chapter provides a description of the results related to the study's second research question, which focused on participants' perceptions of cooperative inquiry as an effective professional learning strategy that can assist them in managing central issues of concern. Findings related to this research question emerged from data collected from the transcripts and audio-recordings of dialogue group sessions, the mid-study focus group, the post-study focus group, the participants' individual action research cycles, and the post-study questionnaire. In general, the results of this study suggest that participants perceived cooperative inquiry to be an effective strategy for professional learning. Both quantitative and qualitative data reflect this finding.

Quantitative Data Analysis

There was only one question on the post-study questionnaire that was related to cooperative inquiry and that resulted in numerical data. The question asked, "To what degree was cooperative inquiry an effective professional learning strategy for you as an inner-city principal?" Participants were to choose a ranking from 1 to 4, 1 being not effective and 4 being effective. The mean score for this item was 3.8, which suggests a strong significance in participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of cooperative inquiry as a strategy for professional learning.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data related to the effectiveness of cooperative inquiry as a professional learning strategy for inner-city school principals was derived from the transcripts and audio-recordings of the pre-study planning session, dialogue group sessions, and both focus group

sessions. As well, anecdotal data were collected from the action research cycles and the post-study questionnaire. Data analysis resulted in three emerging themes; the first related to participants' need for effective professional learning experiences, the second related to the key characteristics of action research, and the third related to the format and structure of this professional learning experience.

The Need for Professional Learning Experiences

Throughout dialogue group sessions, participants often reflected on past professional learning experiences and their ongoing need to find opportunities to foster professional growth. They suggested that they needed a blend of professional learning opportunities specifically designed for inner-city school leaders, as well as opportunities to network with other principals within and outside their own school division. As Chris suggested:

I went from [a suburban school] to Dennison in my first appointment as a VP. I had never taught in the inner city before. You can never be prepared for the inner city. It's not the kind of stuff you learn in a formal PD session. You need to be able to talk and share the learning curve with others in a similar situation.

Even as experienced inner-city principals, the study participants still felt their professional learning opportunities were lacking. Chris suggested that, although beneficial, "Most have been focused on Aboriginal culture" and there are many other pressing issues that need attention. Barb added, "We aren't getting what we need to address the issues central to our job. We get lots of work assigned, but no chance to talk."

The learning opportunities available to these principals within the inner-city context were mainly structured in large-group venues and small, assigned cluster group networks. In terms of the district-wide initiatives, Kate found the "openness and sharing limited." Chris commented

that these meetings “tend to make us feel like we have more to do and don’t know much. We focus on a strength-based model with kids, but they use a deficit model with us.”

In the cluster groups networks, principals were assigned to clusters of three schools, based on geographic location, and they met, along with their vice principals, to discuss imposed topics and district-wide initiatives. Kate suggested that these experiences were less than effective:

Top-down structured networks have been dysfunctional. People need some choice in terms of networking. Our cluster dialogue is always superficial and mostly bullshit. It is a classic case of people not being honest about what is going on in their schools.

In addition to this concern, the group suggested that they needed more opportunities for professional learning with leaders from other districts and divisions. As Greg commented, “We could focus on general leadership skills on a divisional basis. With my involvement in the Council of School Leaders that’s what I get – an opportunity to talk about different leadership issues with people from different school contexts. It’s very valuable.”

These findings suggest that the study participants have an ongoing need for effective professional learning opportunities, especially those that allow leaders the freedom to share their issues and gain a wider perspective through dialogue with other school leaders.

Professional Learning through Cooperative Inquiry and Action Research

When analyzing the qualitative data related to the cooperative inquiry approach, there emerged key findings that closely paralleled the features and principles of action research. Stringer (2004) identifies the nine key features of action research as reflection, participation, inclusion, sharing, understanding, repetition, practice, change, and community. As well, he describes four social principles as participatory, democratic, empowering, and life-enhancing.

These characteristics of action research will be used to present and discuss the findings from qualitative data which are related to the effectiveness of cooperative inquiry as a professional learning strategy.

Inclusion. According to Stringer (2004) inclusion involves considering the agendas and perspectives of all those affected by common problems. In terms of this study, inclusion was reflected in the similarities of concern and community context of the participants. As Chris suggested, “Our conversations are consistently of very high quality, about professional practice. When we get together, we talk about our practice, and the conversations start at a high level completely given that we’ve all got the same kinds of variables going on in our schools.” Barb supported this by adding that the conversations are “so very valuable because we have common ground and common struggles.” These findings speak to the importance of establishing dialogue groups with participants who share a substantial degree of common issues.

Participatory and democratic. Stringer (2004) also suggests that action research studies are participatory and democratic – participatory in that involved people guide the process, and democratic in that there is an equal distribution of power and acknowledgement that all participants have a voice in the research. This was especially evident in the results of this dialogue group study. As Greg suggested, “The open agenda makes it work. We come with what’s on our mind, and we can just throw out questions. It’s unstructured in that it’s not ‘here’s a topic that you now must discuss.’ It’s absolutely random; it gives greater opportunity for dialogue and learning.” In the same way, the role of the researcher was critical to these participatory and democratic features. As Chris commented, “Having an external facilitator with no responsibilities for a division agenda allows for the freedom of dialogue and the open agenda.” Kate extended this idea to suggest that professional learning opportunities facilitated by

those in superior positions did not meet principals' needs in the same way. As she stated, "You need personal support as well as professional support, and you need a mentor who is not your boss." Similarly, on the post-study questionnaire, one participant suggested that "it was a comfortable setting without rules and the expectations that every minute had to be filled with what someone else would measure as valuable. Most PD has one focus and is pre-determined. The opportunity to discuss issues at the specific time they are pressing was great!" In essence, the democratic structure of the dialogue group, with participants driving their own learning and each participant having a voice in all decisions, is central to what these principals deemed as most effective about the approach.

Sharing. Action research also involves people sharing their perspectives with others and developing clarity of understanding of the different perspectives and experiences of all involved. In the dialogue group sessions, sharing was a key element of the process. Sessions began with people sharing their previous month's action plan. In turn, through dialogue, participants offered various perspectives on each participant's plan, actions, and reflections. In the same way, several sessions included participant sharing using the Star, Wish, Cloud template (Appendix J). This offered participants opportunities to share issues beyond the scope of their individual action plans. As Barb suggested, "It also lets us celebrate the good stuff that's happening instead of always dwelling on the big issues."

In terms of sharing, there never seemed to be a lack of issues to discuss. As Barb noted: We got a chance to talk about staffing while we were away together in Toronto. We didn't have to talk about school, but we did, a lot! Here we were, sitting in the bar having a beer and we were still talking about school! And here, at these sessions, even in this relaxed setting, this group is still driven to talk about as many things as we can.

Anecdotal comments from the post-study questionnaire supported the importance of sharing. As one participant commented, “the cooperative inquiry process raised a lot of questions for me that came as a result of other people’s issues. The discussions provided validation and support, but also led to new ideas and new plans for my own school.”

The action research cycle. The action research cycle itself involves the practices of reflection, practice, and repetition. Participants think, reflect, and theorize about their own practices, behaviors, and situations. At the same time, participants establish plans in an effort aimed at changing those practices and behaviors. When they act on those plans, they test emerging understandings by using them as the basis for changing practices or constructing new practices. This process is continued in a cyclical nature, as repeating cycles of research activity lead toward solutions to a problem.

All participants in this study completed action research cycles at the end of each dialogue session. The template developed for this activity focuses on planning, acting, observing, and reflecting [Appendix D]. Participants had the option of selection one focus issue for the duration of the study, or could select short-term goals to focus upon from month-to-month. This was decided by the group during the pre-planning session, in order to eliminate restrictions and to add to the diversity of the issues being discussed. With the exception of the primary researcher, whose action research cycles are discussed in Chapter 8, the following description provides a synopsis of individual participants’ ongoing action research.

Greg focused on a long-term plan, based on research he had conducted on school performance assessments. He wanted to have the staff define a focus for their collective and ongoing professional learning aimed at one or more components of the School Performance Assessment plan developed by the United Kingdom’s Office of Standards in Education (Ofsted)

(United Kingdom Office of Public Sector Information, 2008). Greg first met with staff cluster groups to share the approach and, through dialogue, the staff “achieved a group outcome to impact teacher instruction.” From this, Greg planned an instructional strategy pilot project aimed at promoting “compelling conversations to promote reflection on classroom practice.”

Throughout the course of this study, he initiated conversations with clusters of teachers who, over the six month time period, not only took part in reflective conversations, but also designed a plan of action for the following school year. Their plan was, in many ways, similar to the cooperative inquiry approach, in that the cluster groups were to meet regularly for reflective conversation about classroom practice, while individuals identified issues within their own practice upon which to focus.

The main frustration that Greg encountered in implementing his action research cycle was the “need to prioritize and not let other stuff get in the way.” At times, it was challenging to accomplish what he had planned to do in a given month, due to other responsibilities and school issues. This became an overarching theme for all participants.

Alice focused on short-term action plans on a monthly basis. Her first plan was to “continue to go into classroom and devise a way to provide feedback to staff.” To this end, Alice established a schedule for classroom visits and constructed a form for feedback. In the dialogue session, she shared her observations of the classroom visits and the feedback provided to staff, most of which was directed at “younger and stressed staff who were still learning the ropes.” Alice acknowledged the challenges that she experienced in supporting such staff, and articulated the importance of reflection, stating, “I need/require time to de-brief with others and remove myself from the stress to reflect and think (and laugh).”

Another of Alice's plans involved personal wellness. She aimed to "take time to re-group" and acted on this plan by walking alone every two days. At the same time, she continued to get into classrooms, but was experiencing the frustration of "distractions – everything is important! Not enough time to go in and talk to kids. How does one organize oneself to reach their goals?" As was Greg, Alice was challenged to remain focused on her action plan while assuming the other responsibilities of her job.

Alice's third action plan was to meet with Barb "to discuss how we can resolve human resources problems/issues in a positive way." At this dialogue group session, conversation had focused strongly on the challenges of staffing issues. Barb had expressed intense frustration in terms of accessing substitutes for teachers, teacher assistants, clerks, and custodians, and was seeking feedback from others. Alice therefore made it her action plan to provide this support to Barb. They met for breakfast, discussed Barb's concerns, and Alice provided Barb with alternative solutions to specific problems. As Alice reflected, "It was good to talk to a trusted colleague about dealing with human resource problems."

A final action plan for Alice involved re-examining the school's timetable. In her own words, "To blow up the timetable and create new positions is the dream! I want our junior high kids to stop being restricted by a junior high timetable format." As a result, Alice met with her vice principals, department heads and team leaders to examine the issue. There was much conversation about the barriers to change, such as staff considerations, the course credit system, building facilities, and space, but with "compromise, the junior high timetable has changed for the better!" Nonetheless, Alice expressed her frustration with the limitations to change, when commenting, "If only we didn't have so many barriers, we could do so much to benefit kids."

Alice's approach to the action research cycle was to respond to immediate issues that arose as a result of dialogue. Although the cycles were developed on a short-term basis, many of the actions implemented, such as the timetable restructuring, have had direct long-term impact within the school setting.

Chris's action research cycles were short-term, but had several re-occurring themes. She began the process by focusing on teacher instruction and evidence of student learning during classroom observations. She intended to develop a template to use to record evidence and to share this at upcoming district workshops. However, life at Nelson School got in the way. As Chris documented on the action research cycle form, "other priorities took over – critical illness of a staff member – personal stress due to family change – theft and drug issues at school." Chris came to the realization that the documentation process she designed, using the template, may well be too time-consuming within the context of her job. As a result she "decided to use photographs [to record evidence of learning, as it is] painless, quick, and effective for reflection." This indicates a benefit in terms of the action research cycle, in that participants are encouraged to reassess and refine plans, as opposed to maintaining a focus on a plan that may not reap the most effective results. In the end, Chris used this experience to further her own learning, as it taught her to "keep it simple, acknowledge the impact of personal stress and the realities of the work environment, and it gave me permission to not do it all!" Chris's second action research cycle evolved from the first, and focused on the use of photographs as evidence of learning. She was able to accomplish her plan by taking photographs in classrooms and sharing these at inner-city council.

Chris's remaining action research cycles focused on the implementation of a co-teaching model at Nelson School. Friend (2005) offers the following definition of co-teaching:

Co-teaching is a delivery system in which two or more educators or other professionally certified staff share instructional responsibility for a single group of students primarily in a single classroom or workspace to teach required curriculum with mutual partnership, pooled resources, and joint accountability although each individual's level of participation may vary. (p. 7)

With the extensive special education program at Nelson School, Chris saw co-teaching as a means of offering a more inclusive teaching and learning environment for all students and staff. She therefore planned to make time available for those staff members already engaged in co-teaching to meet, dialogue, and plan. This was accomplished during the first month, and Chris was also able to plan similar meetings for the remainder of the staff who would be involved in co-teaching during the following school year. On her next action research cycle, Chris continued the focus on co-teaching, with a plan to “design a staffing model for next year which reflects the benefits of co-teaching for curriculum implementation, students, and engaged learning.” This was accomplished via a concerted effort to consider co-teaching in all staffing decisions, and Chris reflected on her success:

The staffing plan does reflect co-teaching approach. The two grade teams are organized around team planning, so the potential is there for teaming. The consensus on staff supports co-teaching. The support is there and excitement is building!

In her final action research cycle, Chris continued with the focus on co-teaching, and was seeking ways “to narrow goals focus to be achievable.” She planned direction-setting meetings with each team and observed that their goals focus was getting “slightly better, but specific goals were only set where there was a real process in place.” In reflecting on this, Chris determined a follow-up plan to “set aside specific times for specific tasks and focused conversations in the

spring, use facilitators and enhance the process by connecting goals to actions.” In many ways, this plan reflects the cooperative inquiry approach, in that it is based on conversations between professional with similar issues, uses a facilitator to guide the process, and is intent on the plan, act, observe, and reflect cycle. Both Chris and Greg identified long-term plans which utilize elements of dialogue and action research. This suggests the perceived effectiveness of the model for not only their own professional learning, but their recognition that such methods can benefit their own practice as they work with the educators in their schools.

Barb’s action research cycles focused primarily on classroom observation and dialogue with staff. Her first plan was to make a template to record visits and follow-up conversations, and, as she explained, she was able to accomplish this plan, at least in part:

I actually got a list of all staff with checklist boxes made. I announced my intention to staff and wrote ‘classroom visits’ into my daybook. I did it on two out of five days!!

Other issues did get in the way several times, but the visits actually happened. Although I did not accomplish all visits, I did do two more half hour visits that I would have!!! I gave three teachers some written feedback and gathered great information for myself!

Barb’s second action research cycle focused again on the classroom visits, but she added an additional plan for self care. She was able to continue with the classroom observations and articulated that she was “really seeing a lot in very short visits.” In terms of self care, she went to an appointment with a dietician and picked up a YM/YWCA schedule to plan a fitness program. In her words, “the need for self care is important and will lead to better days and better decision-making.”

By the third dialogue group session, Barb was experiencing more difficulty in terms of implementing the action plans. Her plan for the third action research cycle was to partake in

more professional reading of the books recommended by other participants. However, she was unable to accomplish this task or complete the action cycle. She expressed her concerns about this issue within the dialogue group:

I started stressing about not getting it done. But then I thought, “Now wait a minute, this group is supposed to be a good thing, not another thing to feel guilty about.” I know I’m doing more. I’m certainly doing more thinking. I’m talking more with my staff, and I’m talking more here, so that is action, too, I think.

Barb’s fourth and fifth action cycles were incomplete as well, and she suggested that, “as the school year draws to a close, the stress of year-end just gets too much and there is no time to do anything but what has to get done. So I get the staffing and the budget and the reports done and just try to meet those deadlines.” The issue of timing and time constraints was articulated by others in the group as well, even those who were able to complete their action plans. As Chris stated, “June is nuts. You end up just doing what needs to be done to stay on top of things.”

Kate experienced similar challenges in terms of the implementing the individual action research cycles. Her first plan involved three goals. First, she was to “work on evidence of learning in the two classroom of teachers [she was] evaluating.” She was able to accomplish this by visiting the classrooms and having follow-up conversations with teachers. Kate’s second plan was to read the new professional books recommended at the dialogue group session, but she was unable to accomplish this task. Her third plan was to “ignore division memos” – an interesting goal that resulted from group dialogue. At the first dialogue group session, participants discussed that they “would be out of their buildings every day if [they] went to every meeting mandated.” (Chris). Participants discussed the fact that they had a greater responsibility to their students and

teachers, and had to ensure visibility in their schools. As a result, decisions had to be made in terms of setting priorities for which meetings to attend.

There was also discussion and clarification regarding the use of funds for a teacher-in-charge when both administrators were out of the building. Some participants thought that they were not able to access these funds if they had a vice principal but, in fact, they could access coverage for a teacher-in-charge if both the principal and vice principal were out of the building. Kate built these conversations into her action plan for the following month:

I ignored two division memos from [senior administration]. I didn't go to the CAP meeting on data, and I didn't even have any anxiety about it, which I normally would have. And I ignored the memo about the teacher-in-charge issue, and asked [my vice principal] to follow up on that for clarification. This was really powerful for me!

Kate stated that she was better able to implement this plan because she had articulated it in writing. As she commented, "I think the fact that I wrote it down made me more focused, and forced me to not get so tied into all of those distractions. Some of the distractions you have to address, like the social issues, but some of them, like those memos, you have to make a choice to ignore." It is important to note that Kate was not totally ignoring the directives, but suggested this in jest. She was, in fact, implementing ways to either delegate them so that she personally did not have to take ownership of them, and/or becoming more comfortable with prioritizing school issues over district recommendations which have overall less importance.

Kate's next action cycle involved a plan to focus on evidence of student learning. She was able to meet with her grade 5/6 teachers individually for what she referred to as "learning conversations." At each meeting, Kate and the teacher examined assessment data from the

divisional assessments and provincial examinations and discussed ways in which the data could drive classroom instruction. As she commented:

The learning conversations motivated me to do more learning conversations...I feel so good about it and so did the teachers. Our assessment data can be really discouraging if you look at it without a plan for the future. But to use it for planning was just so positive for the staff. It really empowered them to move forward. I feel encouraged and hopeful about it.

Throughout the study, Kate continued to articulate the significance of the learning conversations that she had with teachers. On the post-study questionnaire, she identified “dialogue with staff around instruction” as a key change in her professional practice that she attributed to this professional learning experience.

Kate’s third action cycle focused on the school plan, with an aim to “review school goals and develop a three year plan.” This came about as a direct result of dialogue group discussion, as Greg shared that his staff had implemented a three-year plan. Other members of the study were not aware, until that time, that they were allowed to develop anything but a one-year plan. As Barb commented, “I never knew that we had any flexibility in terms of the plan. I mean, really, how can we accomplish long-term goals in one year, especially in our schools? You need much longer term plans, but how do you design it?” As a result of the information that Greg shared, the participants all brought their school plans to the April meeting and shared their ideas. This inspired Kate to re-examine and re-design her school plan.

Unfortunately, Kate “didn’t get to the action plan at all because [they] had a ton of community issues this month.” As a result, Kate rolled this action cycle over to the next month in order to accomplish her goals. She established a school committee to review the school plan,

gather feedback from staff and the community, and re-construct the document. This was accomplished, as a collective effort, with her school committee. Kate was unable to complete the subsequent and final action cycle, and had provided no documentation for this month.

These results indicate that participants' success in developing and following through on action plans varied. Some articulated specific plans at each dialogue group session and were able to implement those plans by the next meetings. Others were challenged by a variety of barriers that will be examined later in this chapter. It is important to note as well that some of the participants' action plans and goals for their schools would naturally require a longer time span than one month or even the six month duration of this study. Nonetheless, part of the action research process was to just start thinking through and dealing with the challenges that would occur at the front end of any initiative. In this way, many of the plans made but not accomplished may still be considered necessary and fruitful endeavours.

Community. According to Stringer (2004), action research is designed in a way so that participants are “working toward the development/building of a learning community” (p. 5). In this study, participants acknowledged and articulated this sense of community in various ways. Barb, for example, saw that the group, “allows for connections and reduces the isolation” of their work. Chris concurred when stating that, “inasmuch as a school is like a family, our jobs are very isolating. Working together takes you out of the isolation.”

The sense of community was also acknowledged in the ways in which participants built relationships by finding common ground and supporting one another. The more time they spent in dialogue with one another, the more they realized that they “had way too much in common!” (Kate). Through the sharing of professional issues and sometimes personal stories, they “discovered a lot about each other” (Barb). As relationships developed, participants openly

conveyed support for others in the group. When, for example, Greg was considering applying for a senior administrative position, each participant identified the skills that he would bring to the job. On a more personal level, when Kate was dealing with the death of a local firefighter and colleague of her husband, the group provided her with a venue to share her grief.

As relationships developed, trust was created in the group. As Alice articulated, the cooperative inquiry approach “builds positive relationships amongst professionals who rarely have time to meet. It also builds trust between professionals.” The development of trusting relationships is another element related to building a sense of community. In establishing trust within the group, participants regularly referred to the “cone of silence” that enabled them to discuss even the most confidential issues and know that their words would not go beyond the room. This issue of confidentiality was, in part, established at the pre-study planning stage, when participants signed oaths of confidentiality. However, the real trust came as relationships were built within the group. For example, during the first few dialogue group sessions, it was not uncommon for a participant to ask, as Barb did, “Is that damn tape recorder still on? Will we lose our jobs when this thesis is published?” Efforts were regularly made to appease these worries by reviewing ethical issues of confidentiality. As the study progressed, participants no longer asked about the recorder. Similarly, it was not uncommon early on in the study for participants to request the cone of silence before speaking, but as the study progressed, participants no longer made this request. As Kate suggested, “It’s nice not to feel vulnerable. One of the best things about this group is the cone of silence. This is the freest that I have ever felt. I am not one to share my crap. The honest conversation about relevant pressing issues has been extremely helpful.” Anecdotal comments from the post-study questionnaire supported this finding. One

participant wrote that “this was the most honest and real sharing opportunity I have had as an administrator. The depth of our conversation was real.”

Results from the study also suggest that this sense of community extended beyond the context of the dialogue group sessions. As Greg commented, “The added bonus of ‘our’ group is the bond/level of trust, which transfers to other situations.” Kate also spoke of this transference when reflecting on the impact of the experience:

I have people now that I can call when I have a really tough situation. I used to try to do everything myself because I didn’t know who I could trust. I mean, how do you know? I don’t want to have to look good. I want to be able to share honest feelings and appreciate the feedback from people with similar concerns.

These results suggest that the relationships and trust developed within the constructs of the dialogue group have extended beyond the context of the study.

Empowerment. Stringer (2004) also suggests that, as people participate in action research, they “develop high degrees of motivation and are often empowered to act in ways they never thought possible” (p. 31). The element of empowerment was articulated especially during the mid-study focus group session. When asked how they would describe the dialogue group experience thus far, participants used terms such as “energizing”, “affirming” and “empowering.” They found, as Barb suggested, “strength in numbers” and “passion through common struggles.” They were also empowered as leaders, as they constructed new knowledge. As Alice stated, “The experience has stretched my thinking without stressing me or adding to my workload. I have a much better understanding of the issues affecting my school, and this has had direct impact on my decision-making and leadership.”

Life-enhancing. Stringer (2004) suggests that one of the end results of action research is improved quality of life in the situational context of the research, in this case, participants' lives within their schools. Participants spoke often of the positive impact of the dialogue group experience. Chris clearly articulated this impact:

Often our job is filled with days of just doing stuff, a day of no end, no chance to chuck it. But it's the knowledge that there will be that time that makes it better now. I find now that I tend to anticipate issues and save up problems to discuss here with the group. I'll say to myself, "Oh, I can ask people on Monday how to fix something," or, "Oh, I can bounce that off my people on Monday. The knowledge that there will be time to talk makes the day-to-day job easier.

Similarly, as Barb stated, "The job is just too hard to do without this. I am more at ease now. Being part of the group has allowed me to relax and let go of some baggage."

It appears that the effectiveness of cooperative inquiry as a professional learning strategy was seen by these inner-city principals to be directly related to the structure of the dialogue group and the relationships that developed between participants. In essence, the key features and principles of action research as identified by Stringer (2004) relate directly to the results in terms of positive impact. As such, the cooperative inquiry approach was effective because it fostered reflection, participation, inclusion, sharing, understanding, repetition, practice, change, and community; while being participatory, democratic, empowering, and life-enhancing.

Cooperative Inquiry as a Model for Professional Learning

This study also provided findings related to specific structural features that had either a positive or negative impact on the participants' experience. For example, research indicates that selecting a non-institutional setting for dialogue enables participants to better relax and reflect on

professional issues (Ketelle, 2004). As such, the dialogue group sessions were held at a private university-affiliated club, housed in a turn-of-the century home in a residential area. The venue was also centrally-located, which allowed for easy access for all participants. The meeting space itself was anything but institutional. The group was given the private use of a full floor of the house, including a dining room with banquet table where sessions were held, and a sunroom where the group met for informal conversation in the morning as participants arrived. Breakfast and afternoon refreshments were served in the meeting room, while lunch was served in a formal dining room on the lower floor. Participants regularly commented on the venue of the meetings. Kate suggested that “it was nice to be spoiled. It added to the sense that our work here was valued.” Chris also stated that “being away from a school-like setting allows the mind to open up.”

A second structural issue that was illuminated in this study was the significance of scheduling the meetings. It appears that even the day of the week has significant impact on these principals, in terms of what they brought to the meetings and what they could accomplish. At the pre-study planning session, the dates for all subsequent meetings were set by the participants. As challenging as it was to mesh the schedules of six busy people, the group was able to establish a schedule for the study. Although meetings were held on various days of the week, participants agreed that the specific day had much to do with entering behavior and experience in the group. As Alice suggested, “Fridays are usually a write-off. We are just too burned out, and it is critical that we be in our schools because Friday is usually when everything blows.” As the study progressed, participants found that they gained the most from the dialogue group sessions when they came refreshed. As Kate suggested, “Coming on Monday, we come relaxed from the weekend. That makes a big difference in how energetic you are, how you feel, how you learn and

think.” At the final data analysis and member check session, participants came to a consensus that the scheduling of meetings is critical to the effectiveness of the professional learning experience.

As noted previously, the study had been designed with the intent of having full-day dialogue group sessions, and for the first three sessions, the group met accordingly. Following this third session, senior administration cut the participants’ time, such that they used equal hours of work and personal time. As a result, the final three dialogue group sessions began at 11:30 and carried into the early evening. For participants, this incident had critical impact on their professional learning experience. Barb found a dramatic difference meeting first thing in the morning as opposed to coming from school. As she suggested, “When we met early, we were thinking and reflecting in the car on the way to the meetings. It was like preparation for our dialogue and learning.” Alice spoke of the difference in energy and readiness to learn when coming mid-day from work to the dialogue meetings. As she commented, “When we come from work, we’re coming tired already, not refreshed and relaxed. We’re worn, because the wheels have been going, so when we pause, they get stuck.” Chris concurred, stating that having been at work changed the context of the group dialogue:

When we’ve already been at work, we already dealt with the broken windows, the intoxicated kid in the office, and the wing nut coming in. Usually, when we meet, we start by talking about what we come in with. And until that’s off the table, we can’t talk about ed. leadership. We have to clear the crap first. And that’s the difference with starting at 12 o’clock, because when we started with breakfast, I don’t think we started that heavy. We didn’t have as much to unload so we could get right into deep dialogue. Even on the way here, the only thing I think about now is how late I am, because we’re

always trying to get out of the door and get here. It's different than when you come from home. I think that's a consideration that if you're going to have people come straight from work, there's got to be that time there to decompress before you can talk about anything else.

These comments suggest that the schedule and timing of meetings had a direct impact in the participants' readiness to learn.

The findings also suggest that the duration and time of year of the study may also have a direct impact on the effectiveness of the approach. As noted previously, participants found it increasingly difficult to accomplish their action plans as the year-end drew nearer. This may suggest that initiating such plans earlier in the school year may be warranted. As well, participants suggested that "six months just wasn't enough to accomplish what we want" (Barb). Chris also suggested that "many action plans take much longer to address." These comments suggest that such studies or professional learning experiences may be more effective on a longer-term basis.

There was also a sense that the initial support offered by senior administration was important to the participants. As Alice suggested, "the value of this process needs to be acknowledged, and we, as professional learners, need to be valued as well." The impact of the decision was also evident in Kate's comment on the issue:

What offends me is that, on a daily basis in our jobs, we make critical decisions about things that sometimes are life-threatening. It's really important that we are in our buildings. None of us here are leaving our schools and just keeping ourselves busy doing nothing. When we make a decision to leave our buildings and use this time, I feel

offended that our credibility is being questioned. We are responsible for so much, and yet we can't be trusted to be responsible enough to know how valuable this opportunity is.

All of the participants agreed that it was a challenge to leave their buildings, but the value of this professional development experience made the effort worthwhile. As Gary suggested:

This is a great opportunity for PD. Do we go off on all kinds of different tangents? [collective, 'yes']. Do we go off dealing with different issues? [collective, 'yes']. Do we talk about stuff that we wouldn't probably talk about in an open forum? [collective, 'yes']. For all kinds of great reasons, this is a learning opportunity... You need to value professional collegiality, critical friends, networking, and dialogue. Schools are relationship-based. That is why we like it and that is why we work there.

At the group data analysis and member check session, participants discussed further the impact of this senior administrative decision on the research study. They agreed, as Barb articulated, that it "affected us all, it deflated us, and it devalued us." Chris also suggested that "it even affected the action plans, because there didn't seem to be the same level of passion or drive to get the plans done." As was discussed previously, as the study progressed, there were cases in which participants became challenged to complete their monthly plans, and this may suggest one reason for this lack of success.

In terms of the participants themselves, group members often pondered over whether or not, as Alice stated, "the group would work with a different mix of people." The participants discussed the potential for dialogue and learning in such contexts. For example, they agreed that such groups required voluntary participation "in order to include only people committed to the group and to their own professional learning" (Chris). There was also discussion regarding prior relationships. Kate suggested that "it was not necessary to know everyone beforehand. We had

no idea who else would be here until we showed up at the first meeting.” At the same time, they acknowledged that personalities could play a role in the success of a dialogue group. As Chris articulated, “it’s the trust issue. To have somebody in the group who you’ve been burned by, it would change the nature of the dialogue.” Kate also suggested that if there was such an issue, “you’d need to spend more time building relationships and trust” and Alice recommended that “you might need to create more structure and adhere to rules for dialogue. You might also need to provide guidelines for how to talk to others, how to listen to others, how to take turns, and especially how to maintain confidentiality.”

The findings of this study have identified several factors that influenced the perceived success of the dialogue group and cooperative inquiry strategy. Some of these key findings will be elaborated upon in the following section.

Discussion

The results of this study, in many ways, parallel those findings in current research. For example, in terms of the effectiveness of professional learning for principals, Evans and Mohr (1999) contend that to be most effective, professional development programs must be structured in small group settings, must offer time for reflection and learning, must encourage participants to reach beyond their realm of assumptions, and must take place in an environment that fosters trust and sharing. These contentions were also expressed by the participants of this study. Further, Fullan posits that successful professional developments programs develop a culture of shared learning and community-building among the participants. This idea was certainly articulated by these study participants as well.

The degree to which participants were able to accomplish their monthly actions plans is an interesting issue for discussion. As participants noted, their daily jobs were, at times,

overwhelmingly busy with a diversity of tasks that made additional plans difficult to accomplish. Certainly, principals of schools in all jurisdictions might suggest that they have heavy workloads and demanding roles. Certainly, it may be argued that all principals face issues related to safety, home/school connections, student achievement, and staffing. For example, even in affluent 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, the experiences of inner-city principals are strongly influenced by factors related to poverty and life in disadvantaged communities. These inner-city principals argued that, although all schools face challenges, it was the frequency and intensity of challenges in the inner city that made the job unique and, in many ways, more demanding. As such, it may be more difficult to accomplish the many plans that one sets out to attain. This may also have an impact on the nature of the plans that can be developed and/or the consideration that, in reality, these plans will naturally take longer within the context of this challenging workplace.

It is also interesting to note that some study participants had more success than others in terms of accomplishing their action plans. As such, it is a worthwhile endeavour to examine the context of the specific schools in which these participants worked. Barb and Kate, the two participants who were most challenged to accomplish their plans, work at Dennison and Wellman Schools, respectively. It is important to note that, among the five participants' schools, these two schools rank highest in terms of inner-city criteria (USD, 2006). They have the poorest families and the neediest communities. This fact may offer some enlightenment in terms of participants' challenges in addressing and accomplishing their action plans.

As noted previously, the sense of community that developed in the group transferred to other venues, as the participants sought support from one another outside of the context of the study. This transference is also apparent in that, although the study was completed in June, 2007, the participants have initiated an ongoing dialogue group. They meet on a monthly basis, on their own time and at their own expense. To date, each participant has attended all of these sessions. This suggests catalytic validity in terms of the impact of this research study.

Summary

This chapter has identified findings related to the study participants' perceptions of cooperative inquiry as an effective strategy for professional learning. The findings suggest that inner-city principals have specific needs for professional learning, both within the context of the inner-city, and with school leaders in other jurisdictions. Findings also suggest that what the participants deemed as most valuable about this experiences relates directly to the features of action research in terms of reflection, participation, inclusion, sharing, understanding, repetition, practice, change, and community. As well, participants saw the value of the experience in terms of the social principles of action research, in that the experience was participatory, democratic, empowering, and life-enhancing. Finally, the chapter identifies key factors that had a positive or negative effect on the participants' experience and might therefore shed light on considerations for future professional practice.

Chapter Seven
Dialogue and Knowledge Construction

Introduction

This chapter presents findings on the role of dialogue in the construction of knowledge related to professional practice. These findings emerged from data collected from the dialogue group transcripts and audio-recordings, exit slips, the mid- and post-study focus group transcripts and audio-recordings, and the post-study questionnaire. The findings are organized and categorized according to the four types of knowledge constructed during dialogue – knowledge acquired from another, knowledge one offers another, knowledge of one’s self, and knowledge constructed together (Shields & Edwards, 2005).

Quantitative Data Analysis

There were four questions on the post-study questionnaire that were related to dialogue and knowledge construction, and that resulted in quantitative data. Table 6 presents these questions and the mean scores.

Table 6. *Participant Responses Related to Dialogue and Knowledge Construction*

Question	Scale	Mean Score(/4)
How important has the dialogue between participants in the dialogue group been for your professional learning?	1 not important 4 very important	3.8
To what degree do you perceive that your learning was enhanced by the contributions of others in the group?	1 not at all 4 significantly	3.6
To what degree do you perceive that you contributed to the learning of others in the group?	1 not at all 4 significantly	*2.0
To what degree do you perceive that the dialogue had impact that resulted in changes to your professional practice?	1 no impact 4 strong impact	3.4

n = 5 * n = 4

These data indicate significant findings in terms of the importance of dialogue for professional learning, as noted by the mean scores for the first two questions. It is especially interesting that participants were less convinced of the ways that they personally contributed to the learning of

others in the group. In fact, one participant did not respond to the question, whereas all other questions on all instruments were completed fully by all participants. Those who did respond were not convinced of the significance of their contributions to the learning of others. This leads to questions regarding the humility of human nature, the uncertainty of personal strengths and knowledge, and the difficulty of acknowledging one's own contributions. This issue will be explored further in terms of qualitative data analysis.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data related to the role of dialogue in knowledge-construction were derived from the transcripts and audio-recordings of dialogue group sessions and both focus group sessions. As well, anecdotal data were collected from the exit slips and the post-study questionnaires. Findings will be discussed in terms of the four types of knowledge that can be constructed during the "to and fro" dialogic interaction, as described by Shields and Edwards (2005). These are: (a) knowledge acquired from others; (b) knowledge one offers others; (c) knowledge constructed together; and (d) knowledge of one's self.

Knowledge Acquired from Others

The participants in this study affirmed that their learning was enhanced by the contributions of others in the group. During dialogue group sessions, knowledge was shared on a regular basis. Participants discussed strategies related to the management aspect of their jobs, including budgeting, accessing grant funds, completing forms, interpreting memos from senior administration, interpreting fire inspection guidelines, and writing reports. As Chris suggested, "Learning tricks of the trade from more experienced colleagues, or learning what others do really helps me broaden my skills and manage my job demands better."

The group also spent significant time sharing strategies for teacher evaluations and staff disciplinary issues. This situation can be stressful and challenging for principals since, as Barb suggested, “We’re supposed to be supporting people, but when they aren’t doing their jobs, you feel so conflicted.” The group discussed procedures for staff assessment, specific issues of concern, steps in disciplinary action, and strategies for related meetings. Alice shared with the group one of her strategies when dealing with teachers being disciplined or receiving a less-than-positive evaluation:

When they start saying that they’re going to call the [teachers association], I open my drawer and hand them the phone number, and say, ‘that is probably a good idea’. It shows the seriousness of the situation and it suggests my support while also showing that I am following procedure.

Other group participants agreed that this was valuable knowledge. As Chris suggested, the strategy is useful because it “empowered administrators” and gave her “another approach during these tough meetings.”

Participants also shared knowledge in terms of how they manage to visit classrooms, provide feedback to teachers, and collect evidence of learning. Some participants shared strategies for developing a schedule and checklist to track classroom visitations, using forms for providing feedback, and taking photographs to collect evidence of learning in classrooms. Participants found these strategies very useful, and many times implemented them within their own action plans. For example, after the researcher shared her strategy of using a checklist to track classroom visits, Barb used the same procedure as part of her plan. Similarly, after Chris shared her plan to take photographs of classrooms for an upcoming principals’ session where each administrator was to bring evidence of student learning, several other participants used this

suggestion. Kate found it especially useful and less threatening for teachers, explaining that, “I just popped into classrooms and said, ‘I have to do my homework and it’s due for a meeting this afternoon!’ Everyone in the class laughed and helped me get it done. And the photos were a great way to show what kids and staff were accomplishing.”

Another way that participants shared knowledge with one another was by suggesting valuable professional books. Reading topics ranged from those related to educational leadership, business management, motivation and teamwork, poverty and schooling, classroom instruction, and refugee students. As Barb articulated, “We don’t have time to read everything out there and a lot of it isn’t worth reading, so if a colleague can make a suggestion for a good professional read, it saves me time and helps my learning.”

In a similar way, participants shared their professional development experiences each time they attended such an event. When four members of the group attended the National Inner City Conference, they each shared the specifics of sessions, while the other two participants shared their experiences at other national conferences. Topics included walk-about training, alternative models of schools, co-consulting models for peer professional growth, raising literacy, and internet safety. The principals also shared professional development activities that they were participating in within their individual schools, including sessions on teamwork and motivation and vicarious trauma. In many cases, other participants planned and implemented similar workshops with their own staff after hearing about such sessions. This was especially true of the vicarious trauma sessions. When Chris shared the concept of vicarious trauma and the workshop implemented with her staff, other principals in the group immediately related to the issue, and several planned sessions for their own staff. At subsequent dialogue group sessions,

they shared further the benefits of these workshops in providing themselves and their staff with emotional and professional support.

At the end of each session, participants were asked to reflect on the dialogue and record ways that they constructed new knowledge. When sharing their thoughts on how they learned from others, one prevalent theme was the similarity in the issues they face. As one principal suggested, “Similar issues surface for others in a variety of ways. Dialogue provides a way not only to affirm but also to provide insight from different perspectives on the same issue.” Along the same theme, another participant wrote that, “Others in elementary and smaller schools face similar issues in leadership that we in larger senior high schools do – because the context of our schools is so similar.” In many ways, the similarity in these issues or perceived similarity of experiences appeared to be featured throughout dialogue on knowledge construction. On exit slips, during dialogue sessions, and on questionnaires, participants reflected on the unique aspects of their jobs as inner-city principals, and the value of sharing their concerns with people in similar contexts. This appears to be a powerful component of the dialogue group strategy.

One such discussion that several participants referred to on their exit slips revolved around special education students. When discussing the identification and funding of students at varying levels of the special education spectrum, several principals shared that they understood that level one special education students, those not requiring extensive one-to-one support, did not receive any funding, but instead, funds were immersed in the general instruction budget. However, other participants assured the group that they should identify their level one students, because special funding was accessible. Hence, participants learned from others in a way that had direct impact on their school budgets and subsequent programs, and several reflected on the importance of this new knowledge when completing their exit slip following this session.

On the post-study questionnaire, one principal noted that “hearing a variety of opinions and approaches to dealing with issues has been affirming in some situations and in others has provided new ideas and ways of thinking.” Another suggested that he/she had “discovered valuable insight into why we have some of the issues in our schools and ideas as to their causes.” Others found the new knowledge very empowering. For example, one participant noted that she/he learned that she “was in charge,” while another noted that “it was good to learn that you could go up against authority and live to tell about it.” As well, participants found that they learned more about defining their roles as principals. One participant suggested that she learned “how to focus on educational leadership.” Another noted that she “learned a lot, especially about what people choose to emphasize and what they choose to ignore... Also the importance of sticking to your guns especially about advocating for students and separating what is our job and what isn’t.” It appears that these principals believe in the adage “knowledge is power,” since they articulated the empowerment of new ideas, yet this power/knowledge was gathered through the use of the democratic, shared dialogue.

Knowledge One Offers Others

As mentioned previously, participants had difficulty determining how they contributed to the learning of others in the dialogue group. This issue first arose when the group was completing their first exit slips. As Chris commented, “I think it is a very hard thing to know. I don’t think you’re aware of it unless people tell you.” During subsequent sessions, people were still struggling with this. Of the four elements on the exit slip, reflecting the four types of knowledge acquired during dialogue, this is the only section that was ever left incomplete. In fact, on ten of the thirty six total number of exit slips, this section had been left blank. It is interesting to note, however, that there appeared to be progress in terms of acknowledgement of

what one offered the group, in that the number of fully-completed exit slips rose throughout the course of the study. Table 7 presents these data:

Table 7. *Participants' Completion of Exit Slip Section: How Others Learn From You*

Dialogue Group Session	Completed Exit Slips
1	4
2	2
3	4
4	5
5	6
6	6

n=6

These data may suggest that participants were progressively more able to reflect upon the knowledge that they brought to and shared with the group.

These findings may be related, in part, to the self-perceptions of the study participants. On the post-study questionnaire, when asked to what degree they perceived that they each contributed to the learning of others in the group, one participant did not respond to the question at all, while another simply stated that, “This is a really hard one. I hope that I was able to support others in some way.” Another principal was more self-critical, and commented that she “often felt less experienced than the others and very often more spineless than others.” This certainly suggests why one might perceive that they did not significantly contribute to the learning of others. However, other participants suggested that they contributed to the learning of others through their alternate thinking, their questioning, and their experience, as Alice suggested, having “been around in lots of schools and situations.”

Knowledge Constructed Together

During dialogic interaction, participants construct new knowledge together, knowledge that is unique and distinct from that which any participant previously possessed. Within the context of the dialogue group sessions, the principals constructed knowledge together on

occasions when they planned group learning activities and when they participated in collaborative problem solving.

During the course of the research study, the participants planned several professional learning activities together. For example, they watched and discussed the motivational video *Fish!* (Charthouse, 2002) on the characteristics of teamwork, as well as *Beating the Streets* (National Film Board of Canada, 2006), a documentary about an inner-city high school in Edmonton, Alberta. The videos offered opportunities to explore areas of professional interest and discuss issues related to their jobs as inner-city principals.

Another professional learning activity involved three participants and the researcher attending the National Inner City Conference in Toronto, Ontario. Unfortunately, the two other participants were already committed to out-of-province conferences and could therefore not attend this event. Nonetheless, for those who attended it was, as Chris suggested, “yet another way to get new ideas, build relationships, and talk. It just added to our experience in this project.”

In terms of collaborative problem solving, oftentimes, one participant would bring a challenging issue to the group and, together, through dialogue, the group would attempt to solve the problem, by examining alternatives, weighing pros and cons, exploring each other’s views, and articulating potential solutions. Many times, these issues were related to typical duties of a principal, such as Barb asking for help with timetabling and Kate asking for ideas to expediently process a work order to fix a ventilation problem. In these cases, the group shared ideas to help the individual plan action. In other cases, an issue brought to the table evolved into a group planning session. For example, Chris asked for help in developing the school plan in a more manageable and meaningful way. The group decided to bring all of their school plans to the

following dialogue group session, at which time they shared the documents, asked questions, and clarified ideas.

At times, the collaborative problem solving issues were highly emotionally-charged. In one example, Barb brought a very difficult issue to the table involving a partnership with a local community organization. The organization had received a grant to provide a traditional teaching program to community children, and the school was invited to bring classes to the organization's community centre for these programs. The school staff was excited by the venture. As Barb explained:

I thought this was awesome. We can be a good neighbor. We can reach out into the community to work with other organizations that work with our community. We can expose our kids to a service that our families can access. And we can get some more cultural programs from appropriate people. Or so I thought.

Unfortunately, the first session did not go well, as there was a vast discrepancy in terms of teaching approaches. The school staff was upset by what they saw as inappropriate behavior of the students, and when they attempted to respond to this, they were admonished by the organization's staff for interfering with "our" children. In response, Barb "stewed about it all weekend" and then planned a follow-up meeting with the organization's staff and her own community worker to resolve these concerns. Once again, the results were not positive, as Barb "felt beaten up" by the organization's staff, who accused the school of not understanding their children or responding to their children's needs. Barb returned to the school and, with other involved staff, decided to try again. The school staff and organization staff shared plans for the next session, and Barb attended along with the students and teachers. Once again, the unstructured format gave way to limited learning and even safety concerns for students.

At this point, Barb and the teachers decided that they simply could not participate in the program. Her concern now, however, was how to share this decision with the organization in a way that was respectful and allowed for community relations to be maintained. She shared with the dialogue group her ideas for writing a letter or having another meeting, and also her thoughts on specifically what to say. Collectively, the group acknowledged Barb's feelings and concerns, and the importance of maintaining a relationship with the organization. They offered alternatives, agreed and disagreed with one another, shared similar experiences, and provided suggestions on what to say. As a group, they actually helped Barb scribe her exact words.

It is important to note that Barb's emotions were highly affected by this experience. As the audiotape indicates, her voice trembled and she paused several times to hold back tears. In her own words, "it just felt so awful to work so hard in our community and to be seen as not understanding or helping. It hurt to my core." At the same time, it is equally important to point out the support that was offered by the other members of the group. At the outset of the conversation, Barb expressed concern over not wanting to "monopolize the conversation" but was met with strong commentary in terms of permission and support. There are several quiet but audible comments such as, "no, no, go ahead" and "take your time" that clearly articulate the support evident among the group members. They gave Barb permission, but more importantly, they provided her with emotional and professional support for a burning issue. In the end, the solution offered by the group did, in fact, allow Barb to respond to the concerns and maintain a working relationship with the organization.

When recording their perceptions on the exit slips about how participants learned together with others, group dynamics was often featured. One participant suggested that, "People are open more than expected" while another commented that, "Even in a relaxed setting we still

tend to be driven to talk about as many things as we can fit in!” In the same way, one principal articulated that, “Conversation helps us work through our frustrations” and another referred to the “importance of dialogue.” It appears from these comments that one thing the participants learned together with others was the value of the dialogue for building a learning community. This led to a change in their practice, as they more clearly saw the value of learning conversations within their own school communities. Greg, for example, focused on learning conversations within his action plan, and suggested that “the experience reinforced that relevance and significance of professional dialogue with peers.” As another example, on the post-study questionnaire, one participant commented that he/she was “spending more time on learning conversations with teachers.” As another participant suggested, “Ideas created together result in good thinking, pondering, and planning for change.”

One issue that came up regularly under this heading on the exit slips dealt with the importance of humour in the group setting. One participant wrote, “Humour – never forget it!” while another responded, “Humour! Yahoo!” Interestingly, this issue was also discussed by the transcriber, who commented that, on several occasions, she was unable to understand the conversation due to the amount of laughter. The participants acknowledged that humour was essential to the group dynamics. As Alice articulated, “We can come here and laugh about anything, even things that others wouldn’t find so funny.” Barb concurred, suggesting that “it is part of the cone of silence. We are safe to laugh here at some very unfunny things.

Barb had shared a story of a recent break-in that had the group in gales of laughter, as a result of the perpetrators actions:

We’ve had a terrible rash of break-ins, but last weekend was the worst for me, because it was my office. Somebody could now set up a home office: my stapler, my calculator, my

tape, everything – my bulletin board, with all my phone numbers to everybody in the world. My financial binder, with all my finances for the school year. All my little cheat sheet notes and everything about how we were spending. Now, luckily I have a good partner who keeps a lot of the same notes.

But, when I saw my office, I thought, “Kids have been playing in here. That’s what this is – kids have been playing.” It’s sad, but it’s also kind of funny. They played in my office for a long time. They read books, they made pictures, they wrote on papers. They were playing school, and one was being the principal. She’d taken a marker and drawn, crossed out some stuff and circled some stuff, and put little squares and put her name on the top of four different pages, and stapled a whole bunch of stuff together! But I thought for sure they wouldn’t put their own names on the paper, right? Wrong!

[Laughter]

So, later, I was standing in the office looking at some kids’ artwork being put up, and I thought, “That’s the same kid!” I looked at the art, then at the drawings in my office. I looked again, back and forth. [Barb acts out the process. Laughter]

So I called her in the next morning, and I said, “You’re in big trouble sweetheart.” And she said, “Yeah.” And I said to her, “When you were writing your name on these papers, were you like, playing school?” Just a little nod. Busted! [laughter]

It turned out that there were five kids, grade two and grade three. They had climbed in through a broken screen in my office window and, of course, no alarm in my office. They climbed in the window, had a good time, they were safe, it was quiet, no one bothered them. They played for a long time, but then they had to go to the bathroom, and

when they opened the door, the alarm went off. It all comes down to having to pee.

[laughter]

The story is certainly funny, in terms of how the students were caught, but at the same time, the fact that the children were in grade two and three suggests more serious issues in terms of their current circumstances.

Another clear example, portraying the community context and element of humour was evident in Kate's water balloon incident:

Did I ever tell you the story about the day one of my moms was having a tête à tête with one of my crossing guards? So they were nose to nose on the corner and it's looking like they're going to go at it, so I go over there to mediate. And then all of a sudden, this water balloon comes flying through the air, and just sloshes me. I'm soaked from head to toe! And the mom's face just drops because it was her kid who threw the water balloon. The kid was aiming at the woman that her mom was fighting with, but she hit me. So the Mom turns to the kid and goes, "You idiot, you hit the fuckin' principal!" [laughter]...So everybody started laughing. The mom started laughing, the kid started laughing, the crossing guard started laughing, I started laughing. So here we are all laughing. I had thought for sure there would be a huge fight because they were in each other's face, but it was just so funny all we could do was laugh. And it was over, but it's still my funniest moment.

During the group data analysis and member check session, the participants discussed their use of humour on the job at length. As Barb commented, "Sometimes when we have to write funding applications for students with behavior issues, we have to reflect on all of the incidents in the school, the things that they've done. And sometimes when we read them back we are howling.

We are peeing our pants every time we read another ridiculous thing. It is a release. But there is also an element that the circumstances are so ridiculous, nobody could make it up, and if we don't laugh about it we'll make ourselves crazy." Chris concurred, stating that, "It is a part of our own resilience. Humour is essential. You have to laugh because the only other choice is to lose it and we can't keep doing that."

Knowledge of One's Self

While in dialogue with others, participants gain knowledge of themselves and their own horizons. Through self-reflection, the principals explored what they learned about themselves during each dialogue group session.

During the mid-study focus group session, participants shared their perceptions in terms of meta-cognition, by reflecting on their understanding of how they learned in comparison with the cooperative inquiry experience. Greg shared with the group the following:

I know that I'm a listener, not a talker, so my rationale for getting involved in different groups has always been to make myself get into conversations, because I know that helps. Structured meetings and formal conversations are easier, but open dialogue is clearly not a comfort area... I mean, I believe it's really encouraged and challenged me outside of my comfort zone.

In a similar vein, Alice reflected on her own learning style and the impact of the dialogue, stating, "It's not my way of learning. I have to think. My instinct is to back up and reflect. But I have learned to look at issues from different perspectives, such as elementary." Chris suggested that she does, in fact, learn dialogically and states, "I learn best through conversation, but I'm better one on one." It appears that many of the study participants were challenging themselves and moving beyond their own horizons just by participating in this type of professional learning

group. This, in and of itself suggests an element of risk-taking, which is highly empowering when new knowledge results.

Also during the mid-study focus group session, participants reflected on how the dialogue group experience was re-framing their personal and professional perspectives. Kim, for example, suggested that she has learned that she was oftentimes focusing on the less critical elements of her job:

I think part of what is happening for me is realizing that I have spent too much time on the non-essential stuff. It is now clearer to me what my responsibility is, and I mean dealing with those issues that are really important. I can get caught up in all this other stuff, but it seems, gradually, I'm getting better at letting go of some of that and leaving the responsibility for some issues to the people that it's meant to be. I feel just more relaxed.

Barb concurred that she was prone to "sweat the small stuff" and had seen herself "letting go of the anxiety" by re-examining and prioritizing the elements of her job. Barb also shared that she found herself "actually doing more thinking" and credited the dialogue group experience with fostering this.

The exit slips completed at the end of each dialogue session also offered insight into what the participants were learning about themselves. Their comments revolved around self-perceptions and action plans. For example, self-reflective comments included, "I am impatient. I want it all done now" and "It takes me time to relax and respond. I need the cone of silence as it helps my wellness." Action-oriented comments, relating to what participants wanted to do, included, "I have the tools to give feedback to staff – I just have to do it! I need to set targets and embed practice into routines" and "I need to timetable to make the important things happen, like

observations and visits.” Similarly, one participant commented, “I have to make more time for professional reading and relaxation (or burn out).”

It appears that the time spent completing the exit slips became a self-reflective experience, one where participants articulated what they were learning about themselves within the context of this dialogue group. Secondly, the reflective time gave them an opportunity to weigh and prioritize their goals. Since the exit slips were completed immediately prior to the action cycles, participants were able to use these reflections and goals to articulate their individual action plans for the following month. It therefore appears important to ensure a balance of time between interactive dialogue and self-reflection.

On the post-study questionnaire, one participant responded to the topic of knowledge of oneself with a very powerful statement:

If things are going well, I’m looking through a window. If things aren’t going well, I’m looking in a mirror. I’ve realized that I tend to credit everyone else for our successes, but look within myself and my role during challenging times. But self-reflection is an importance task if one is to improve, so I think I’ll stick with this habit.

This comment speaks strongly to the importance of self-reflection and developing an understanding of oneself for the purpose of professional learning and growth.

Discussion

In order to connect the findings of this study with current research, several of the themes presented herein will be discussed in depth. These themes include the use of humour in dialogue, and changes in professional practice resulting from new knowledge.

Current research on resiliency identifies a sense of humour as a key element (Bobeck, 2002). The study participants acknowledged the importance of humour in their daily work, as a

means of maintaining emotional strength. Fenwick (1998) maintains that, “humor and laughter promote good health: they benefit the major systems of the body, relieve stress, and are psychologically uplifting.” However, one might consider that the use of humour in dealing with challenging and oftentimes traumatic events may be inappropriate, but the research on the use of humour in dealing with stress and trauma is substantial:

A sense of humor can be effectively used in mitigating the intensity of traumatic stress reactions. It has the ability to diffuse stressful situations and can actually be a powerful healing tool. Humor does not minimize the significance of a terrible event, but it does allow us to see how we can cope and thrive in our environment. (Garrick, 2006, p. 169)

It appears that these principals, in dialogue with others, are able to utilize humour to share experiences and manage stress. Humour therefore establishes itself as a positive aspect of this professional learning strategy.

In terms of the value of new knowledge that study participants acquired through dialogue, one must examine how, if at all, this new knowledge has affected their professional practice as principals of inner-city schools. Therefore, it is importance to explore evidence of change in terms of the impact of this professional learning experience. On the post-study questionnaire, participants were given the opportunity to reflect on this issue, by commenting on how their professional practice has changed as a result of their participation in this dialogue group.

In terms of concrete and measurable evidence of change, participants did note that they were “getting into classrooms more” and providing “more direct messages to staff.” Other comments focused more on professional perspective. For example, one participant suggested that she/he was “more passionate about doing what matters, willing to ask others for help, and confident in [his/her] own instincts.” Another noted “more time spent on educational leadership”

and an ability to “be in the present.” As well, one participant suggested that, as a result of this experience, her/his “thinking/strategies/planning is more knowledge-based.”

It is also important to note that numerous changes in professional practice resulted from the participants’ individual action plans. These were discussed in detail in the previous chapter. It is equally important to suggest that, in keeping with the theoretical framework established in this study, which is based upon social constructivism and dialogue theory, the dialogic process in and of itself is a form of action. As Bakhtin suggests, “Dialogue is not the threshold to action, but the action itself” (1973, p. 213). Similarly, Shields and Edwards (2005) posit that educational leaders who participate in dialogic interactions, and who foster such relationships amongst other educators, are enhancing their professional practice through this dialogic action.

With the findings articulated in terms of dialogue and knowledge construction, it is a valuable exercise to revisit the visual heuristic of Shields and Edwards (2005) in order to explore the dimensions of relation, understanding, and ontology. Much has been articulated in the findings to suggest that understanding emerged through knowledge construction. Similarly, there is no doubt that relations were fostered and enhanced through community-building and collegial support. In terms of ontology it appears that, as participants explored what they had learned about themselves and what knowledge they offered others through dialogue, they developed a more keen perspective of their own horizons and perceptions. In an ontological sense, this, in turn, led to a refined acknowledgement of one’s own reality.

Summary

This chapter has identified the ways in which dialogue fostered new knowledge related to the professional practice of the inner-city principals participating in this research study. Findings suggest that participants gained significant and valuable knowledge through dialogue. Further,

findings imply that this new knowledge was utilized by the participants in order to enhance their own professional practice. In connecting the theoretical framework for this study, findings also support the notions that knowledge is constructed socially, and that dialogue depends upon and fosters the dimensions of relation, understanding, and ontology.

Chapter Eight
Researcher Reflections

Introduction

This chapter provides a venue for researcher reflections. The opportunity to facilitate and participate in this research study has been a powerful learning experience, one that has had substantial impact on my understanding of inner-city school leadership, the value of dialogue in knowledge construction, and the effectiveness of action research as a professional learning strategy. In this chapter, I will explore issues related to my role as an action researcher, the data analysis experience, and the challenges of reporting dialogic processes.

The Action Researcher

This section describes the challenges I experienced in the dual role as participant and facilitator in this action research study. As well, I discuss my reaction to administrative decisions that had direct impact on the study and participants. Finally, this section includes my experiences during the process of data analysis

Participant and Facilitator

As suggested in Chapter Three, in traditional approaches to inquiry, the researcher is often viewed as the initiator, director, and controller of a study. The researcher's role in this type of study is that of the knowledgeable expert, who maintains distance from study subjects in order to remain objective. In action research, however, the researcher takes on a very different role. Due to the nature of this form of inquiry, there is an understanding that the participants, as well as the principal researcher, bring valuable expertise to share. As such, the researcher becomes one member of the group, participating in discourse and reflection, but not directing or leading the group in its plans or actions. In essence, each member of the group extends his/her own

thoughts and actions, but does so while participating in autonomous discourse with others. The principal researcher reflects, plans, acts, observes, and learns alongside the other participants.

During the process of this action research study, I experienced many challenges in terms of balancing the roles of participant and researcher. Among the group members, there was little doubt that I was the principal researcher and facilitator. After all, it was I who set up that audio-recorder at the beginning of each session and took observational notes throughout the day. It was I who maintained the agenda, ensuring that time was provided for dialogue, as well as completion of the research instruments. I had tasks to accomplish, data to collect, and a PhD to complete. There were no options in terms of assuming these responsibilities.

At the same time, by choosing to implement a cooperative inquiry approach, I was agreeing to share these responsibilities with the study participants. Hence, it was not my choice to determine how much time was spent on various group activities, or to decide what these activities might entail. The members of the research group collectively and successfully planned each session, and chose the ways in which they would direct their own learning. For example, there were times that participants did not complete action research cycles. Although this may have been a disappointment for me in terms of data collection, I emphasized that this experience was not to be fraught with guilt and pressure. Participants did what they could within the context of their jobs and lives outside the study. I could control their action no more than I could control their learning or construction of new knowledge – but I could participate with them to construct knowledge together--and this is the underlying premise of action research.

Interestingly, I found it just as difficult as other participants to consistently complete my action plans. At the end of each dialogue group session, I established an action cycle along with my colleagues. My goals were aligned more toward the study itself, and included plans such as

to “identify resources on instructional leadership and student achievement in high-poverty schools” and to “compile criteria for leadership in urban schools.” My plan was to share this information with the group at our next meeting. However, I often found that, a few days prior to this next meeting, I was scrambling to act on my plan. I found it extremely easy to articulate my plan, but equally difficult to complete it, and reflected on the action cycle that “I have no time” and “I need more time to read.” It appears that the time factor played a significant role for all of us in terms of implementing our individual action research.

My own exit slips presented a sense of the other challenges I often experienced. After one session, I wrote that “I still feel quite responsible for the conversation and the value of the experience for the group.” There were times, for example, that the conversation paused, and part of me wanted to take charge to re-direct. I had to work hard at allowing for those pauses and empowering the participants to choose the next path on our dialogic journey. During a later session, I recorded the following note on my exit slip: “Not easy to manage and not manage the agenda, contribute but not control, facilitate but not initiate.” This was an ongoing challenge for me, one that continued throughout the study. Although participants understood and accepted their empowered roles, they often looked to me to lead – and I had to learn to look right back.

There is no doubt that study participants bring their own issues and personalities to the forum, and the researcher must work with the group to ensure that the social principles of action research are maintained. It is not difficult to imagine that, in some groups, it might well be challenging to establish and maintain an atmosphere that reflects democratic participation and life-enhancing empowerment. In this study, results indicated that no member or group of members attempted to take control or overpower other participants. The dialogue was shared and the balance of power remained equally distributed among participants. We often joked and

queried about how the group dynamics might have been different if there was a participant who thought they already knew it all, who liked to hear themselves talk, or whom others did not trust. I can only imagine how the role of researcher might have been even more challenging if this were the case. There is a strong need to create a democratic and honest environment in which participants can interact, and yet this is not something that the researcher can do alone. Once again, the participants need to be empowered as equal participants for the sake of the group as a whole.

In this study, it was evident that the relationships and group dynamics were positive. One must therefore ask if this was simply a matter of good fortune, or if other issues were at play. Possibly, the mere fact that these participants volunteered for this particular kind of study indicates the value they place on dialogue and learning with and from others. Possibly, the presentation of the study and the pre-amble regarding the social principles of action research established clear guidelines for participant behavior. Perhaps it was the inviting and open atmosphere that I tried to create at each session. And perhaps it was the collection of the personalities in the room, mine included. More than likely, it was a combination of these factors, and possibly a little luck, that allowed for this group to mesh in such a positive manner.

As a researcher and participant, these relationships took on personal meaning and emotive context. As the study was coming to an end, I began to realize how important these people were becoming to me. I wrote in one exit slip that I was realizing “the emotion and passion connected to the people, not the study. I am feeling a certain sadness as we come to an end of our journey together.” This was very evident for me at our last session. To show my appreciation for their very valuable contributions to my research, I gave each group member a copy of the book, *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Stories for a Better World* (Canfield et al, 2005), as

an acknowledgment that their work in inner-city schools was indeed creating a better world. Knowing how emotional the last day would be for me, I chose to share my thoughts via a personal written note to each of them inside the book cover, as opposed to speaking at length. This turned out to be a good decision on my part, as I spent the majority of the day with a lump in my throat. It was clear to me that this research study became as personal as it was professional. I believe that this was the case for the other participants as well, and that their decision to initiate a continued “dinner and dialogue group” was an effort to maintain these positive relationships, as much as it was to continue the learning.

Decisions From Above

The decision by senior administration from the Urban School Division to reduce the working hours that the principals could use for dialogue group meetings was a challenge for me. The parameters of the study had been established months previous to this decision, and the division administration had agreed to those parameters. As a researcher, I was frustrated by the late change in plans, and the impact that this would have on the participants. When I first received the email from one of the superintendents, I was shocked and disappointed. I spent the first day mulling over the news and determining a course of action.

I was conflicted in terms of supporting the study participants and respectfully adhering to the parameters established by the school division, but realized that my first responsibility was to inform the principals of this recent occurrence. Their responses indicated disappointment, but they were anxious to continue our work together. It was collaboratively decided that I would advocate on behalf of the group by requesting a compromise in terms of the use of time. The email from the superintendent indicated that we were to use no more school hours for the study, and that all meetings should take place outside of school time. We decided to make a request that

the decision not be retroactive. In essence, we were requesting that we balance school and personal time for the remaining meetings, such that participants used equal amounts of both. I decided that the most professional approach was to respond with a formal letter, as I could take the time to articulate my wording and avoid any potential personal responses. Hence, I spent much time and effort to articulate the needs and upcoming plans of the group. A copy of the letter can be found in Appendix K

The superintendent telephoned me the day she received the letter and, after a lengthy discussion, agreed that the group could meet for half days in the afternoon, and participants would use their own time in the early evening. Dialogue session times in April, May, and June were modified accordingly. This compromise was manageable but, as described previously, still resulted in challenges for the group. In terms of findings, I do believe that the administrative decision negatively affected the dialogue group experience for all involved. However, every researcher is mandated to follow guidelines established by the organizations that have approved their research and, hence, this circumstance was no different than the restrictions often placed on researchers. Nonetheless, this did provide a qualitatively different experience for the group, and as such, underscores how very important the process and procedures involved in an action research study can be in the final outcomes of that study.

Data Analysis

The process of analyzing the data collected during this study posed its own challenges for me. In an effort to ensure a valid and reliable study, and to maintain triangulation, I had chosen to use a variety of data collection techniques. However, the amount of data I collected turned out to be overwhelming. This included data from the pre-study questionnaire and post-study questionnaire for the five participants, the exit slips and the action research cycles for all six

participants (including me) from the six dialogue sessions, and typed transcripts from the mid-study and post-study focus group sessions and the six dialogue group sessions. In total, there were 42 hours of audio-recording resulting in 323 pages of transcription.

I began the data analysis process by examining the pre- and post-study questionnaires, in an effort to analyze the quantitative data and look for over-arching changes from the beginning to end of the study. Next, I began trudging through reams of paper, analyzing transcribed data to identify emerging themes, trends, and patterns. This is where I got stuck. At one point during this process, when I was attempting to clarify some typed transcription by listening to the audio-recording, it became evident to me that words lost their significance when transcribed into print. This was my epiphany! I put away the transcripts and decided to listen to the recordings of our dialogue again. I created a three-page graphic organizer identifying my three research questions at the top of each page using the following categorical chart below each question:

Category	Context	Data Source	Line Number	Audio Time

I also began another document entitled *Action researcher learning* to record my reflections during the auditory/analytical process. I put on the headphones and began to listen to our dialogue, from beginning to end, all 42 hours. As I listened, I identified categories or themes, recorded brief notes of the dialogic examples provided, identified the source of the data, and recorded the line number from the transcript and the time on the audio-recording. I also recorded my thoughts, reflections, conclusions, and ideas. The data from exit slips, the research cycles, and questionnaires were then used to support the themes that emerged through this data analysis process.

Listening to the audio-recordings of our dialogue was an incredible experience. I listened, I laughed, I cried, I reflected, and most importantly, new knowledge emerged. I came to realize that the construction of knowledge transcends the actual moments in time of the dialogue group experience itself, as I continued to learn when I re-experienced the dialogue. This second experience was unique, in that I was not physically involved in the dialogue. However, the distance created by listening to the recordings allowed for deeper analysis. This may be part of what Shields and Edwards (2005) suggest is the deeper learning potential and power of dialogue as we learn about self, others, and together create knowledge. The power is such that even the re-experience of dialogue continues to support knowledge construction. The experience was more analytically reflective than participating in the actual dialogue group sessions, and more respectful of the human condition than reading transcripts. The themes related to my three research questions emerged with clarity as I journeyed through our dialogue a second time.

Reporting on Dialogue

Once the results emerged and the writing began, more challenges arose for me. I found that, by attempting to transcribe our dialogue into print, the humanness of our conversation was often lost. One cannot capture the nuances of dialogue when transformed into the printed word.

One clear example of this became evident as I attempted to describe how humour evolved as a central characteristic of our dialogue. There were several stories shared that were sources of laughter and absurdity. Many of them involved elements of dark humour, as participants told of some of the critical and yet preposterous events that occurred in their schools. Examples included stories of neighbourhood crime and even death. Likely these stories were humorous to the group members because they could relate to them so well and because humour is often used

to alleviate stress in traumatic situations. However, others might well have been offended at the gales of laughter that often echoed from the room.

The challenge for me came when I attempted to share these stories in print. In many cases, the transcribed events lost their comedic impact and were anything but funny. I found that, as an advocate for the participants, it would have been unethical to share these stories as examples of humour. As a result, many of the stories are not included in the results, because the humour could not be effectively captured when translating the story from spoken word to printed word. In addition, there is an import to the context in which these principals worked that is clearly essential to these examples, and the written word alone cannot translate that reality to those who have not experienced it.

Another example of the challenge of transcribing dialogue related to the capture of emotion. Many of our conversations focused on inner-city issues that were difficult and even traumatic for participants sharing their stories. When writing up the results of this study, I attempted to use these stories as examples of the central issues of concern for inner-city principals. However, it became evident that the more emotive forms of communication – the frustration, the quivering voice, the body language- were lost in transcription. Equally so, the ways in which others supported the storyteller – through nodding heads, hands on a shoulder, eye contact, and looks of empathy and compassion- were impossible to capture in print.

These challenges have led me to the conclusion that elements of reality are lost when one attempts to alter dialogue from its original form. As such, research results are equally altered from the original raw data as they become words without context, without embodied understanding. They only partially represent the experience of the research, and at best offer glimpses of the understandings socially constructed. The articulation of words alone is NOT true

dialogue. Dialogue occurs through the use of all communicative forms and is embodied in the body language, tonal inflections, pauses and speed of articulation, and the spoken words of participants. Human dialogue, with all of its intricate subtleties and relationships, is the essence of this study.

Summary

This chapter has presented personal reflections of the action researcher and the challenges experienced during this study. It included a description of the unique responsibilities of an action researcher and the ways in which I dealt with these challenges. It also presented an overview of the barriers and successes of the data analysis experience, and the challenges of reporting dialogic processes. Chapter Nine will present a summary, the conclusions, recommendations, and implications of this study.

Chapter Nine
Summary, Conclusions, and Implications

Introduction

This final chapter provides a discussion of the findings as they relate to the guiding research questions of this study. The section also includes the implications and recommendations for professional practice, theory, and scholarly research.

Answering the Research Questions

The purpose of this study was 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, was also examined. The guiding research questions for this study were 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 action research study focused on leaders in one inner-city school district in an urban centre in Western Canada. Five principals volunteered to be involved in monthly dialogue group sessions for a period of six months. In keeping with the assumptions of action research and

cooperative inquiry, the format and topics were developed by the participants, based on the ongoing needs of the group. The cooperative inquiry approach provided a forum for dialogue and an opportunity for professional learning. This study was emergent, descriptive, and evaluative in design, in that: (a) the professional learning strategy emerged collaboratively; (b) the role of dialogue was explored and described; and, (c) the use of cooperative inquiry as a strategy for professional learning was evaluated.

Central Issues of Concern for Inner-city Principals

The principals involved in this study indicated that their central issues of concern were embedded in the content and context of their work. As school leaders, their roles focused on key responsibilities such as leadership, management, personnel, communication, and educational programming. However, this study concludes that many of their most significant issues directly relate, or are affected by, the context of the inner-city communities in which they work. Those characteristics include poverty, migrancy, student attendance, relationships with parents, students' well-being, crime, and school safety. In turn, as the principals address these issues within the context of their jobs, they are affected on a personal level. Personal issues centred on work-related stress, including experiences of vicarious trauma.

The Effectiveness of Cooperative Inquiry as a Professional Learning Strategy

This study builds on the notions of dialogue and knowledge construction, by focusing on the dialogic cooperative inquiry process involving a group of inner-city principals. Rather than collect "hard evidence" of the impact on participants' actual practice, the findings focus on the inner-city principals' plans, actions within the school, observations and reflections. They also focus on the social construction of knowledge in the dialogue group, where they learn together to frame, conceptualize, and consider alternatives for action as they converse with others who face

similar issues. As such, a focus on the voices, perceptions, and reflections of the study participants was emphasized as they provided evidence of changes in their professional practice.

To determine the effectiveness of cooperative inquiry as a professional learning strategy, participants conducted their own individual action research within the context of their daily work, and recorded their plans, actions, observations, and reflections on action research cycles. As well, participants were involved in mid-study and post-study focus group sessions, and also completed a post-study questionnaire. Dialogue group and focus group transcripts also offered insight into the effectiveness of this approach to learning.

In general, the results of this study suggest that participants perceived cooperative inquiry to be an effective strategy for professional learning. Throughout dialogue group sessions, participants often reflected on ineffective past professional learning experiences, and their ongoing need to find opportunities to foster professional growth. This speaks to the importance of accessing quality professional learning opportunities.

With specific regard to the cooperative inquiry approach, it appears that those features of this professional learning strategy that participants found to be most effective were related to the features and principles of action research. Stringer (2004) identifies the nine key features of action research as reflection, participation, inclusion, sharing, understanding, repetition, practice, change, and community. As well, he describes four social principles as participatory, democratic, empowering, and life-enhancing. These characteristics of action research were evident as the participants described the ways in which this experience benefitted them both professionally and personally.

Dialogue and the Construction of Knowledge

The theoretical framework utilized in this study was based on three conceptual strands: (a) Vygotsky's (1986) social constructivist theory which emphasizes the shared and social construction of knowledge; (b) Bakhtin's (1986) concept of dialogue which offers promising techniques for enhancing educators' professional growth (Murphy, 2002) and for examining and refining professional practice (Sidorkin, 1999); and, (c) Shields' and Edwards' (2005) identification of four distinct ways in which knowledge is constructed through interactive dialogue. These theoretical concepts were used to examine and analyze knowledge construction related to the professional practice of inner-city school leaders, as they participated in a dialogue group.

To identify how the use of dialogue fostered the construction of knowledge related to professional practice, participants completed exit slips at the end of each dialogue session to record feedback on their roles in the dialogue and their subsequent learning. The exit slips were designed to consider the theoretical concepts related to knowledge and dialogue, as developed by Shields and Edwards (2005). Dialogue group and focus group transcripts also provided data on dialogue and knowledge construction.

The findings of this study suggest that participants constructed knowledge from others through the sharing of work-related strategies, suggestions for professional reading, and sharing what they had learned in other professional development venues. As a group, they constructed knowledge together through projects focused on specific tasks, attendance at other professional learning events, and especially through collaborative problem solving at dialogue group sessions. The findings also suggest that, initially, participants struggled to articulate the knowledge that they brought to the group. However, as the study progressed and as they constructed new

knowledge about their own horizons and understandings, they were progressively more able to articulate the knowledge that they shared with others.

The findings on dialogue clearly support the dimensions of relation, understanding, and ontology as expressed by Shields and Edwards (2005). Through dialogic interaction, the participants of this study built relationships which enabled them to work and learn together. This led to greater understanding by all members of the dialogue group. Further, as participants learned about themselves and how they contributed to the knowledge construction of together, they also developed a greater sense of their own perspectives and ontological understanding of reality.

Analyzing and Reporting on Dialogue

It is important to note that the initial plan for qualitative data analysis focused mainly on the review of typed transcripts from dialogue and focus group sessions. However, during analysis, it became evident that the voices of the participants and the nuances of the dialogue were central to the findings. As such, all audio-recordings were listened to, in conjunction with transcription review. This allowed for a more authentic view of the research experience, and allowed for the more subtle, yet powerful themes to come to light. It was determined that analysis was more effective and accurate when the actual audio-recordings were used as the main source of data

It was also found that efforts to transcribe dialogue into print were often unsuccessful due to the subtle nuances and distinct communicative features of dialogue, which separates it from the printed word. In the same way that in some languages certain ideas cannot be translated, meaning of the dialogue can be lost when one attempts to transcribe that meaning into a written form.

Implications for Practice

The findings and conclusions from this action research study have significant implications for practice in the field of education, specifically relating to inner-city principals. Recommendations are presented for principals themselves, for senior administration, and for others connected to the field of education.

Recommendations for Principals

This study has suggested that the role of the inner-city principal is fraught with challenges. As a result, it is recommended that these principals, first and foremost, take care of themselves. As with any challenging career or pursuit, personal and physical well-being are essential to success. Principals should therefore practice self-care. In a similar vein, the study indicated that laughter is an antidote to personal stress and trauma. So, as simple as it sounds, principals are advised to celebrate humour... and laugh.

It is also recommended that inner-city principals seek both personal and professional supports to ensure their long-term success in the profession. Personal supports may be sought from within or outside the profession, and may vary according to personal needs. For some, the opportunity to participate in a book club may provide this, while others may find appeal in music, spiritual endeavours, nature, or time with family and friends. Whatever the personal interests are, the key is to find one's own *joie de vivre* outside the workplace, in order to enter that workplace in a positive life space.

Findings and conclusions drawn from this study also suggest that inner-city principals should seek professional supports from colleagues. This may be accomplished one-on-one with a mentor, or in a group setting. Collegial networks may be established on an informal basis, with a

few colleagues who meet for lunch, or on a more formal basis, through study groups, professional learning communities, or committees.

It is also strongly recommended that inner-city principals seek learning opportunities that will best meet their professional needs. There is a vast array of inservices, workshops, courses, professional groups, and other projects that may meet individuals' learning requirements. If, however, what one needs is not available, it is recommended that principals take the initiative to start their own professional learning projects. This study has found that the inner-city principals participating in what they perceived to be an effective learning opportunity was a benefit to each of them, both personally and professionally. However, this research project is not unique in its ability to be effective, as there are many other beneficial learning opportunities available. It is the responsibility of individual inner-city principals to continually seek out the learning opportunities that will provide them with positive learning experiences throughout their careers.

When principals do seek out and find such learning opportunities, it is further recommended that they reflect on and acknowledge the skills, experiences, and knowledge that they bring to the learning environment. This study found that the principals were often challenged to identify the contributions they made to the learning of others, and yet their colleagues could effectively articulate these contributions. As such, it is important to recognize and value one's own knowledge in order to benefit more fully from new learning experiences.

And, finally, it is recommended that principals participate in dialogue - with colleagues and others involved directly or indirectly with the field of education. Talk, listen, and learn.

Recommendations for Senior Administration

This research study has suggested that principals leading schools in high-poverty urban communities have articulated needs in terms of opportunities for professional learning. There is a

need for learning experiences which focus directly on community and school context, as well as a need to extend beyond this context to examine general issues in educational leadership.

Therefore, it is recommended that senior administration consider these needs when planning professional learning opportunities for inner-city principals.

This study has also identified the importance of senior administrative support for the professional learning experiences of principals. Participants in this study were strongly affected, first, by the positive support and acknowledgement they received from senior administration in terms of approving the principals' participation in this study and providing the release necessary. At the same time, participants were equally affected, in a negative way, when that support was restricted. It is therefore recommended that senior administration acknowledged and articulate the importance of lifelong learning for principals, and support such endeavours by means of time and resources.

The study also found that there were specific features of this cooperative inquiry experience that enabled participants to deem it as an effective strategy for professional learning. These features include: (a) similar work context; (b) voluntary participation; (c) small group of five to six participants; (d) facilitation by a professional versed in the needs of participants, but without an agenda articulated by the jurisdiction in which participants work; (e) an open agenda in which participants choose topics of discussion and learning activities; (f) manageable expectations in terms of adding to the time constraints and workloads of participants; and, (g) long term dialogue. It is recommended that these features be considered when planning professional learning opportunities for school leaders.

It is also recommended that professional learning experiences offer participants opportunities to reflect on their practice, participate in decision-making, share perspectives with

others, heighten their own understanding of issues, test emerging ideas through practice and repetition, and celebrate change as a means of enhancing professional practice. Such professional learning opportunities must also foster inclusion and community-building among participants, promote empowerment, and result in a sense of life-enhancement within the context of the participants' work. If those responsible for planning the professional learning opportunities in which inner-city principal participate consider these guidelines, they are more likely to ensure positive outcomes.

An additional recommendation for practice relates to the performance appraisals of principals. The job of a school principal is directly related to the characteristics of the community in which his/her school is located. Hence, community factors must be acknowledged and addressed when evaluating principals. It is therefore recommended that senior administration consider including community context in principal performance appraisals.

It is also important for senior administration to not only be aware of the challenges facing inner-city principals in their daily work, but to acknowledge and support them. Beyond providing opportunities for professional support, other forms of acknowledgment might include planning events that focus on personal and physical wellness, morale, and, self-care. And it certainly never hurts to provide positive feedback personally and in writing.

In acknowledging the unique issues of concern to inner-city principals, senior administration must also provide the kinds of support required during times of crisis. Participants in this study suggested the need for crisis debriefing, a support that is not currently in place for them. Through their own actions, they also articulated the need to address vicarious trauma, which is an initiative that should be assumed by senior administration as well.

And, finally, it is recommended that senior administrators participate in dialogue – with inner-city principals, colleagues, and others involved directly or indirectly in the field of education. Talk, listen, and learn.

Other Recommendations

The findings and conclusion drawn from this study also have implications for practice for outside organizations working in inner-city communities. The participants in this study articulated the need to build effective working relationships with family services, community safety agencies, housing directorates, as well as agencies responsible for physical and mental health issues. It is recommended that such organizations ensure that their work focuses on the well-being of families in the inner-city. They must be pro-active and responsive to concerns and issues in a timely manner. They must also pursue the building of strong professional connections with school staff, by demonstrating open communication and professional responsibility. As the African proverb suggests, “It takes a village to raise a child” and those members of the ‘village’ must work together to ensure each child’s safety and future success.

And, finally, it is recommended that professionals working in the above-mentioned organizations participate in dialogue – with inner-city principals, colleagues, and others involved directly or indirectly in the field of education. Talk, listen, and learn.

Implications for Theory

This section includes a reconceptualization of the theoretical framework underpinning this study. As well, an emerging model for using cooperative inquiry as a professional learning strategy is presented.

Reconceptualization of the Theoretical Framework

With findings and conclusions drawn, it is important to re-visit the theoretical framework of this research study, in order to apply knowledge to existing conceptualizations. For this purpose, the work of Vygotsky (1986, 1978), Bakhtin (1973, 1981, 1986), and Shields and Edwards (2005) will be reviewed.

Vygotsky's social constructivist theory posits that learning is sociocultural in nature, in that it emphasizes the social context within which development takes place. He believed that knowledge is constructed through activity and interaction with one's culture and society. As such, Vygotsky's theory also suggests that development cannot be separated from the social context, and that language plays a central role in development (Vygotsky, 1978).

The findings and conclusions of this action research study support this theoretical construct, in that the knowledge constructed by study participants occurred in a social context. One might even suggest that by bringing together like-minded professionals from similar school settings, they were given the opportunity to construct knowledge as they interacted with what Vygotsky refers to as their culture and society. Further, the study findings parallel Vygotsky's position that language is essential to development, in that participants used dialogue to construct new knowledge related their professional practice.

Bakhtin (1986) posits that dialogue is the central element of human existence, and his theory focuses on how new knowledge is generated through interactive communication. Hence, the roles and attitudes of the dialogic participants are essential to the generation of new meaning, as the higher the degrees of interactivity and dialogicality, the greater the potential for grasping new knowledge. Bakhtin suggests that people in discourse meet at their borders of understanding. Each participant stands at the edge of his/her own prior knowledge, and seeks to

gain new understandings through discourse. Bakhtin's dialogue theory also posits that learning is not the product of dialogue, nor is dialogue a tool or avenue for learning. Instead, the dialogue is, in itself, the learning process. This is an ongoing course in human existence, as one dialogic interaction impacts upon the next, and the knowledge gained impacts upon our actions.

The findings and conclusions of this study mesh with Bakhtin's theoretical constructs in much the same way as does Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism. This action research study supports the notion that dialogue is an essential act for humans, and that new knowledge is constructed through this act. Bakhtin's theory also supports the notion that the speaker and listener benefit equally from the dialogic process, as they both clarify their own and the other's knowledge. Finally, like Bakhtin, this research study contends that the dialogue is and of itself the learning process and the action, rather than the tool for learning that leads to action.

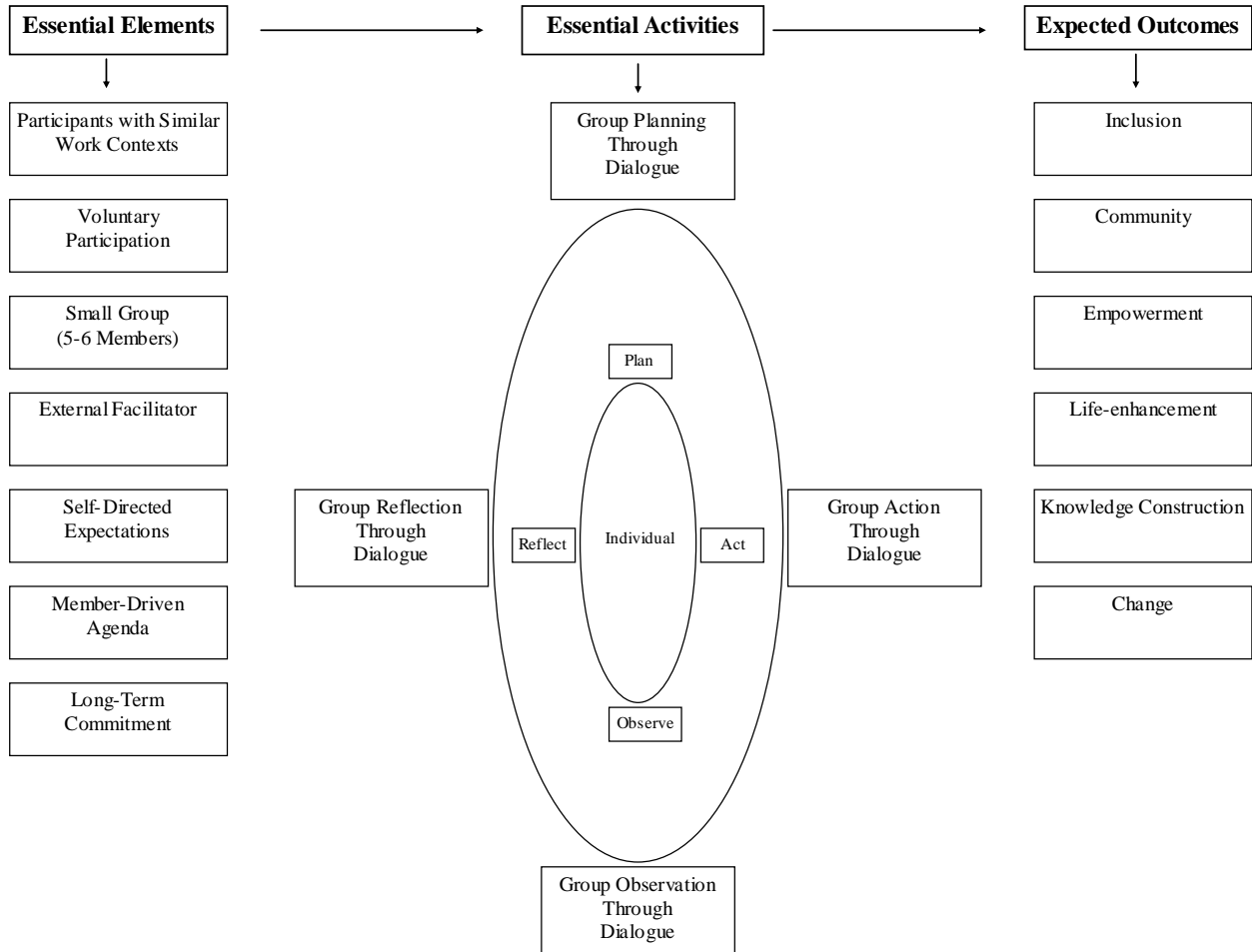
Shields and Edwards (2005) focus their work specifically on the dialogic role in educational leadership. They contend that dialogue is central to leadership and, further, that dialogue is the cornerstone of the communities in which leaders lead. As such, Shields and Edwards suggest that there are four sorts of new knowledge that are created through the dialogical process. These are: (a) knowledge that one gains from another; (b) knowledge that one offers another; (c) knowledge that participants construct together; and, (d) knowledge of oneself. In this study, these four types of knowledge were used to articulate participants' learning. All four types were evident, which supports the notion that the dialogic process leads to new and varied types of knowledge.

Emerging Theoretical Model

The findings and conclusions drawn from this study suggest an emerging model for professional learning of inner-city principals. The model is based on a review of related

theoretical constructs, as well as the implications for practice cited previously. As such, the following figure provides a graphic organizer for this model:

Figure 1. A Theoretical Model for using Cooperative Inquiry as a Professional Learning Strategy



This model suggests bringing together small groups of five or six professionals who experience similar contextual issues in their workplace. The example, herein, is that of inner-city school leaders. The group includes a facilitator from outside the professional jurisdiction, but who has experience and knowledge of the workplace context. The facilitator does not articulate expectations but, rather, participants determine their own expectations as they take part in action research.

The group meetings are loosely structured with an open agenda that is member-driven. Group activity focuses on interactive dialogue on topics raised by the participants. The model requires long-term commitment by the group members, with time in between meetings for action, observation, reflection, and change.

The action research cycle occurs on two distinct levels. First, the group as a whole acts through dialogue, and then plans, observes and reflects during group discourse. Second, the individual participants make plans of action for the workplace, act on those plans, and then observe and reflect upon their professional practice.

This process of cooperative inquiry and action research involves active participation through decision-making and sharing, with the aim of knowledge construction related to professional practice. Such professional learning opportunities lead to a sense of inclusion, community, empowerment, and life-enhancement.

It is suggested that, by implementing the elements of this model, and focusing on the model's essential activities, positive results will occur in terms of participants' professional knowledge and practice.

Implications for Future Research

Inasmuch as this action research study has brought forth substantial findings and conclusions, it has also led to equally as many questions that warrant further examination. Hence, it is relevant to determine implications for further research that have evolved from this study.

First and foremost, it is advisable to consider applying the professional learning model suggested herein to other similar contexts. For example, cooperative inquiry may show promise

for use with other inner-city educators, such as classroom and support teachers, as well as educators working in specialized areas such as music, physical education, or languages.

Similarly, there may be potential for using this professional learning model with other school leaders, such as those working in First Nations communities, rural jurisdictions, or isolated Northern locations. The model may also offer a professional learning approach for new administrators, as a component of their leadership preparation programs.

While the findings of this study have led to indications of the merit of cooperative inquiry, critiques could be leveled against this model as a professional learning strategy which may warrant further investigation in terms of future research. For example, the notion of “groupthink” (Janis & Mann, 1977) could be explored to determine whether participants maintain independence in their ideas, decisions, and actions, and the extent to which debate, critique, and critical, independent thought is fostered. Similarly, critics might suggest that the open-ended dialogue that occurs during cooperative inquiry could degenerate to criticism and negative talk about the overwhelming challenges of participants’ daily work that leads to little action or change. These potential critiques might offer avenues for future research in order to ascertain evidence of groupthink or negative talk, or to determine the most effective role of the facilitator as s/he works to maintain a positive, critical, action-based cooperative inquiry environment.

There is also much room to examine the unique characteristics of dialogue as a data source, as a process, and as an ontological way of knowing. The study suggests that, as participants interact dialogically, they learn from others, they offer new knowledge to others, they construct new knowledge together, and they develop a deeper understanding of their own

perspectives and reality. As such, dialogue is a powerful means of constructing knowledge through relation, understanding, and ontology.

At the same time, the study's findings suggest that the unique characteristics of dialogue may result in limitations for the researcher, and may have implications for further study to determine ways in which these limitations may be addressed. For example, the study's findings suggest that the dialogical experience is one that is challenging to transcribe without losing meaning. As such, research may be warranted in terms of examining alternative ways in which to analyze data and report findings, such as through the use of audio or video clips inserted directly into final reports.

This research study has attempted to contribute to the knowledge base in the field of educational leadership, and has also brought to light significant findings on action research and cooperative inquiry as research methodologies. Further, the study has provided insight into the application of social constructivism and notions of dialogue to professional learning. At the same time, it is essential that these new understandings be explored further to clarify ideas and extend knowledge.

Conclusion

This action research study explored the effectiveness of cooperative inquiry as a professional learning strategy for inner-city school principals in one urban centre in Western Canada. The study also examined the central issues of concern to these principals, and the manner in which dialogue was used to construct knowledge related to their professional practice.

The findings suggest that many of the central issues of concern for these principals focus on job responsibilities such as leadership, management, personnel, program, communication, and involvement. There are also significant issues of concerns related specifically to the inner-city

community context, such that the school environment is strongly affected by poverty, crime, migrancy, student attendance, as well as student and family well-being. These concerns result in substantial personal issues for the principal leading inner-city schools.

Through six months of dialogue, the participants in this study explored these issues. Through dialogic interaction, they learned from one another, and gained a deeper understanding of themselves as school leaders. As this new knowledge was harnessed, participants implemented individual action research plans focusing on their own professional practice. They planned, acted, observed, and reflected, both individually and as a community of learners.

The study findings suggest that this process of cooperative inquiry is an effective strategy, one that has potential as a theoretical model for professional learning. It is therefore apparent that action research and, more specifically, cooperative inquiry, is much more than a research methodology, but may also serve as a powerful tool for integrating dialogue and knowledge construction for the purpose of addressing the challenges and professional practices of inner-city principals.

“When the dialogue is finished, all is finished. Therefore, the dialogue cannot and must not come to an end.” (Bakhtin, 1973, p. 213)

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Appendix A

Pre-Study Planning Session

Agenda and Questions

Pre-Study Planning Session
Agenda and Questions

1. Introductions

2. Introduce the study's purpose, research questions, and related literature (e.g. summary of research on inner-city school leadership, cooperative inquiry, and dialogue theory)

3. Discuss responsibilities of principal researcher and participants.

4. Discuss participants' perceptions of cooperative inquiry and the role of dialogue in learning:
 - What are your perceptions and experiences with action research and, specifically, with cooperative inquiry?
 - In what ways do you think conversation with colleagues may be helpful for learning about professional practice?

5. Discuss potential issues to be discussed during dialogue group sessions:
 - What topics would you see as important for discussion?
 - What are your major issues of concern in your daily practice?

6. Discuss and decide details as to dialogue group sessions (e.g. time, location, and dates)

7. Discuss and review data collection instruments

8. Distribute Questionnaires

Appendix B

Pre-Study Questionnaire

Central Issues of Concern for Inner-City Principals

Please mark responses by circling your answer, as in the example below:

1 2 3 4

1. Research indicates that school leaders working in high-poverty communities are challenged by many issues. What are the central issues of concern in your daily work as an inner-city administrator?

	Not an Issue			Critical Issue
Student/staff safety	1	2	3	4
Home/school relations	1	2	3	4
Student achievement	1	2	3	4
Behaviour management	1	2	3	4
Truancy	1	2	3	4
Hiring staff	1	2	3	4
Training staff	1	2	3	4
Fund raising	1	2	3	4
Accountability/assessment	1	2	3	4
Social issues (see page 2)	1	2	3	4
Budget constraints	1	2	3	4
Working with outside agencies	1	2	3	4

Other: Please provide additional comments on these or other critical issues that you face as an inner-city school leader.

2. Research suggests that social issues play an important role in inner-city education. Which of the following social issues most impact your school and your role in the school?

	Least Impact			Most Impact	
Poverty					
▪ Family funds for school related supplies and activities	1	2	3	4	
▪ Lack of telephones in homes	1	2	3	4	
▪ Housing/migrancy	1	2	3	4	
▪ Nutrition/clothing	1	2	3	4	
Crime					
Gang activity	1	2	3	4	
Vandalism	1	2	3	4	
Weapons	1	2	3	4	
Prostitution	1	2	3	4	
Drugs and Alcohol					
Family addictions	1	2	3	4	
Student use	1	2	3	4	
Trafficking/Dealing	1	2	3	4	
Family Issues					
Domestic violence	1	2	3	4	
Suicide	1	2	3	4	
Neglect	1	2	3	4	
Abuse	1	2	3	4	
Single parents	1	2	3	4	
Family literacy	1	2	3	4	

Other: Please comment on these or other social issues that most impact your school

Appendix C

Exit Slip

Date: _____

The Role of Dialogue in our Learning

The purpose of this exit slip is to help understand how we can learn through dialogue with others. Citing examples wherever possible, please describe the ways in which conversations in our dialogue group session helped:

1. You learn from others	2. Others learn from you
3. You learn together with others	4. You learn about yourself

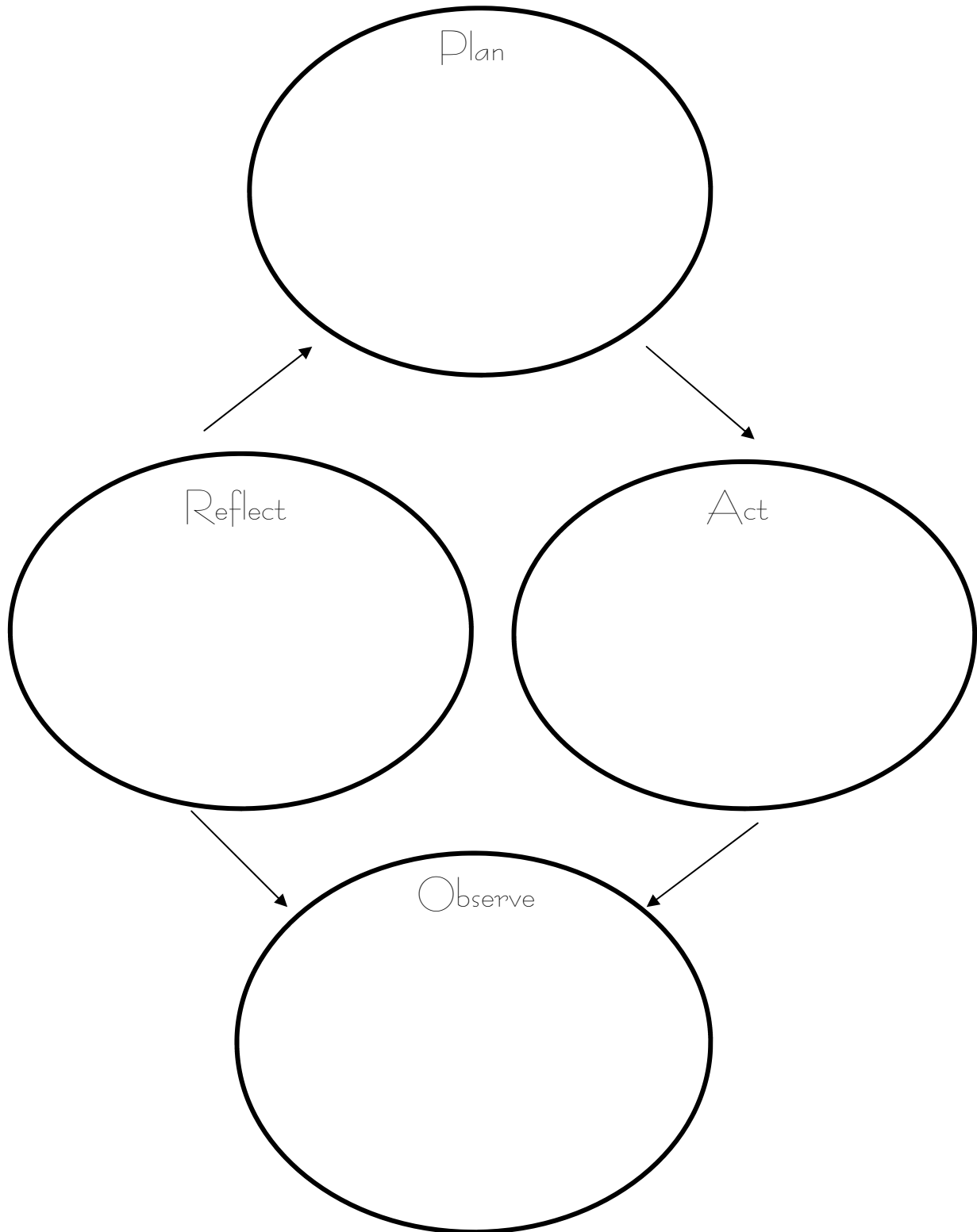
Other comments:

Appendix D

Action Research Cycle

Name: _____

Date: _____



Appendix E

Mid - Study Focus Group Questions

Mid - Study Focus Group Questions

1. What are your general perceptions in terms of the value of the dialogue group sessions we have had thus far?
2. What topics of discussion have been most valuable to you? Why?
3. Has the dialogue played a role in the development of your awareness of your own learning? Have you become more aware of other peoples' learning, and if so, in what ways?
4. Is cooperative inquiry an effective strategy for your professional learning? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
5. In what ways could the cooperative inquiry model implemented thus far be improved upon for our future dialogue group sessions?
6. Any other general feedback?

Appendix F

Post-Study Questionnaire

Post-Study Questionnaire

The purpose of this Post-Study Questionnaire is to help understand your personal perspective on: (a) the issues discussed that were most valuable to your professional learning (b) the effectiveness of cooperative inquiry as a strategy for professional learning, and (c) the role of dialogue in learning and professional practice.

Personal Demographics:

Length of time in current position: _____

Grade levels: _____ Number of students: _____

Number of Vice Principals: _____ Teachers: _____ Support Staff: _____

Special Programs:

Previous Experience

Previous principalships: _____

Vice principalships: _____

Teaching: _____

Other: _____

1. Why did you choose to participate in this dialogue group? What were you hoping to gain from the experience?

2. For each issue listed below that was focused upon in dialogue group sessions, indicate the value of this topic of discussion to your professional learning.

	Not Valuable		Very Valuable	
<u>Educational Leadership</u>				
Teacher instruction	1	2	3	4
Academic success	1	2	3	4
CAP	1	2	3	4
Professional Reading	1	2	3	4
School-based PD	1	2	3	4
Stott Spiral curriculum	1	2	3	4
Getting into classrooms	1	2	3	4
Technology	1	2	3	4
Code of conduct	1	2	3	4
Student voice	1	2	3	4
School-to-work initiatives	1	2	3	4
Pike market	1	2	3	4
Co-teaching model	1	2	3	4
Conference sharing	1	2	3	4
Feedback for learning	1	2	3	4
Data collection	1	2	3	4
Evidence of learning	1	2	3	4

	Not Valuable		Very Valuable	
<u>Management</u>				
Time management	1	2	3	4
Paper management	1	2	3	4
Purchasing	1	2	3	4
Budgets	1	2	3	4
Building Maintenance	1	2	3	4
Enrolment	1	2	3	4
<u>Supervision and Assessment of Staff</u>				
Staffing	1	2	3	4
Human resources	1	2	3	4
Secretarial issues	1	2	3	4
Custodial issues	1	2	3	4
Staff wellness	1	2	3	4
Substitutes	1	2	3	4
<u>Communication/Involvement</u>				
School plans	1	2	3	4
Grant writing	1	2	3	4
Parent council	1	2	3	4

	Not Valuable		Very Valuable	
<u>Community</u>				
ESL issues	1	2	3	4
War-affected refugees	1	2	3	4
Cultural/racial clashes	1	2	3	4
Outside agencies	1	2	3	4
Edmonton's inner-city model	1	2	3	4
Student safety	1	2	3	4
Health issues	1	2	3	4
Attendance	1	2	3	4
Migrancy	1	2	3	4
Early years entry, pre-school, full-day K	1	2	3	4
Reports to the community	1	2	3	4
Student/family wellness	1	2	3	4
<u>Personal</u>				
Stress Management	1	2	3	4
Personal wellness	1	2	3	4
Relationships	1	2	3	4

3. Comments on the dialogue group topics of discussion:

Cooperative Inquiry:

Cooperative inquiry is a type of action research that brings professionals together in a forum of collaborative learning. In this approach, the group members drive the process, making all decisions regarding schedules, topics, goals, and actions. Group members have a dual responsibility, to the collaborative efforts of the group and to themselves as professional learners.

4. To what degree was cooperative inquiry an effective professional learning strategy for you as an inner-city principal?

Not Effective

Effective

1

2

3

4

5. Describe the impact of this cooperative inquiry experience on your professional learning.

6. Describe drawbacks to the approach, as a professional learning strategy for inner-city principals.

7. In what ways could these drawbacks be addressed in order to improve upon the approach?

8. How does the cooperative inquiry approach compare to other models of other professional learning (PD experiences) in which you have participated?

9. Other comments on the cooperative inquiry strategy.

Dialogue and Learning

10. How important has the dialogue between participants in the dialogue group been for your professional learning?

Not Important		Very Important	
1	2	3	4

11. To what degree do you perceive that your learning was enhanced by the contributions of others in the group?

Not at all		Significantly	
1	2	3	4

12. If you perceive that you did learn from others, please provide examples. If not, why not?

13. To what degree do you perceive that you contributed to the learning of others in the group?

Not at all		Significantly	
1	2	3	4

14. If you perceive that you contributed to the learning of others, please provide examples. If not, why not?

15. Please describe the ways in which dialogue has fostered knowledge related to your professional practice? What have you learned?

16. To what degree do you perceive that the dialogue had impact that resulted in changes to your professional practice?

No Impact

Strong impact

1

2

3

4

17. If you did perceive changes in your professional practice, describe these changes, citing examples and evidence if possible. How has your professional practice changed as a result of your participation in this dialogue group?

18. Other comments. Please provide any other information that you deem important to this research study.

Thanks for your participation in this study, and for your very valuable feedback!

Jennifer

Appendix G

Post - Study Focus Group Questions

Post - Study Focus Group Questions

1. What are your general perceptions in terms of the value of the dialogue group sessions in which we have participated?

2. What topics of discussion were most valuable to you? Why?

3. Has the dialogue played a role in developing your awareness of your own learning? Have you become more aware of other peoples' learning, and if so, how?

4. Is cooperative inquiry an effective strategy for your professional learning? If so, how? If not, why not?

5. In what ways could the cooperative inquiry model implemented thus far be improved upon for future use?

6. Would you be interested in continuing this type of professional learning opportunity? Why or why not?

7. Any other general feedback?

Appendix H

Central Issues of Concern for Inner-City Principals:
Frequency Distribution

Central Issues of Concern for Inner-city Principals

Category	Issue	Frequency of Responses			
		1	2	3	4
School-based Issues	Student/staff safety	0	0	4	1
	Home/school relations	0	2	2	1
	Student achievement	0	0	1	4
	Behaviour management	0	1	3	1
	Truancy	0	2	1	2
	Hiring staff	0	1	2	2
	Training staff	0	0	2	3
	Fund raising	4	1	0	0
	Accountability/assessment	0	1	3	1
	Budget constraints	0	0	2	3
	Working with outside agencies	0	0	2	3
	Poverty-related Issues	Family funds for school-related supplies and activities	0	1	0
Lack of telephones in homes		0	0	1	4
Housing/migrancy		0	0	1	4
Nutrition/clothing		0	0	2	3
Crime	Gang activity	0	1	1	3
	Vandalism	3	1	1	0
	Weapons	0	3	1	1
	Prostitution	0	4	1	0
Drugs and Alcohol	Family addictions	0	1	1	3
	Student use	0	2	3	0
	Trafficking/Dealing	0	2	2	1
Family Issues	Domestic violence	0	1	3	1
	Suicide	0	1	2	2
	Neglect	0	1	2	2
	Abuse	0	1	3	1
	Single parents	0	1	3	1
	Family literacy	0	2	1	2

n = 5

Appendix I

Value of Discussion Topics to Principals' Professional Learning:
Frequency Distribution

Value of Discussion Topics to Principals' Professional Learning

Category	Issue	Frequency of Responses			
		1	2	3	4
Program	Teacher instruction	0	1	3	1
	Academic success	0	0	3	2
	CAP	0	3	2	0
	Professional Reading	0	0	3	2
	School-based PD	0	0	4	1
	Stott Spiral curriculum	1	2	2	0
	Getting into classrooms	0	0	1	4
	Technology	1	2	1	1
	Code of conduct	0	2	3	0
	Student voice	0	0	5	0
	School-to-work initiatives	0	2	3	0
	Pike market	0	0	4	1
	Co-teaching model	0	1	2	2
	Conference sharing	0	0	4	1
	Feedback for learning	0	0	3	2
	Data collection	0	2	3	0
Evidence of learning	0	0	2	3	
Leadership/ Management	Time management	0	0	4	1
	Paper management	0	1	3	1
	Purchasing	0	3	1	1
	Budgets	0	2	2	1
	Building Maintenance	0	1	3	1
	Enrolment	0	0	5	0
Personnel	Staffing	0	0	2	3
	Human resources	0	1	3	1
	Secretarial issues	0	1	3	1
	Custodial issues	0	1	3	1
	Staff wellness	0	0	1	4
	Substitutes	0	3	1	1
Communication/ Relationships	School plans	0	1	3	1
	Grant writing	0	1	4	0
	Parent council	0	0	5	0

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Community Context	ESL issues	1	1	3	0
	War-affected refugees	1	2	1	1
	Cultural/racial clashes	0	2	1	2
	Outside agencies	0	0	4	1
	Edmonton's inner-city model	0	2	2	1
	Student safety	0	0	3	2
	Health issues	0	0	5	0
	Attendance	0	0	2	3
	Migrancy	0	0	3	2
	Early entry, pre-school, full-day K	0	2	3	0
	Reports to the community	0	1	1	3
	Student/family wellness	0	0	2	3
Personal Context	Stress Management	0	0	2	3
	Personal wellness	0	0	2	3
	Relationships	0	0	1	4

Appendix J

Share a Star, a Wish, or a Cloud Template

Share a Star, a Wish, or a Cloud



A success related to your school or leadership



A question, or something you would like to change



A problem or difficult situation

Appendix K

Letter to Superintendent

March 18, 2007

Superintendent of Inner -City Schools
Urban School Division

Dear _____;

Further to your recent email indicating that the Inner-City Principals' Dialogue Group will need to hold future sessions outside of work time, the participants in this research study have requested that I respond on their behalf.

We are hoping that it might be possible for the decision of the superintendents to not be retroactive. We understand the need to have the participating principals give of their own time in a balance with work time. Actually, this has already occurred, in that our pre-study planning sessions were held in the evening. Moreover, to change our schedule now poses many problems for the group members, especially when the study is well underway. First, there is an issue regarding the location of our sessions. Since I am a member of this club, we have access free of charge if we meet during the day. As well, the facility is heavily booked for evenings. As a group, we also found it extremely difficult to set six dates together, due to our many professional and personal commitments. We believe that we would be challenged to identify alternate dates at this time.

On behalf of the study participants, I would like to respectfully request that, from this point forward, we find a balance between school time and out of school time for our upcoming sessions. We would accomplish this by beginning our meetings at midday, such that the 5 ½ hour sessions take place during the afternoon and early evening. This will allow us to maintain the dates and duration of meetings, enable us to have the sessions at the club at no additional costs, and ensure that the timelines for the research study are met.

I would greatly appreciate it if you would consider this request in order that our Dialogue Group can continue our work together. Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to your reply in the near future.

Most Sincerely,
Jennifer E. Lawson