

The Tale of Two Urban School Principals: Barriers, Supports, and Rewards

Karen S. Acton

University of Toronto, OISE

Urban schools in high-poverty communities face unique challenges. It is often the school principal who is tasked with addressing achievement gaps, low scores, and students with high needs. Despite the importance and the difficulties of their role, the voices of many of these dedicated leaders are not often heard. This narrative inquiry shares the insights of two elementary principals in urban schools who recount the barriers, supports and rewards of their role. Using moral leadership as a theoretical framework, the findings of this study include a call for school boards to consider carefully the qualities and passions of their leaders when assigning principals to urban schools.

Les écoles en milieux urbains avec des taux élevés de pauvreté font face à des défis uniques. Il revient souvent aux directeurs d'école de répondre aux écarts en matière de rendement, aux faibles résultats et aux élèves ayant des besoins élevés. Malgré l'importance et les difficultés de leur rôle, les voix de plusieurs de ces leaders dévoués ne se font pas souvent entendre. Cette enquête narrative présente les perspectives de deux directeurs d'écoles primaires urbaines qui racontent les obstacles, les supports et les récompenses qui les accompagnent dans leur rôle. Reposant sur le leadership moral comme cadre théorique, les résultats évoquent, entre autres, le besoin pour les conseils scolaires d'examiner soigneusement les qualités et les passions de leurs leaders lors de l'affectation des directeurs dans les écoles urbaines.

A long-time friend recently revealed an anecdote about her children's schooling that took me by surprise. When I mentioned I was interested in understanding the challenges faced by high-poverty, urban schools, she unexpectedly shared a personal story. It took place in the late 1980's while raising her two young children in Toronto. The principal at her children's highly regarded school had been there for 20 years and my friend started noticing that the teachers were also, in her words, "old school". She became more and more uncomfortable each time she met with them. The teachers were very willing to praise and shower adoration over her children (both blond haired and blue eyed) and yet they made highly disparaging remarks about other groups of students. My friend grew concerned enough to consider transferring her children to another school. She met with a positive and caring principal at a school a few neighbourhoods away. He made it clear that he expected his teachers to believe that all students could achieve high levels of success. It was at this point in the story that my friend revealed to me that this other school was located in a poverty-stricken area of the city. Yet she was emphatic that this did not concern her. Her decision to transfer her children was based on the warm and welcoming nature of the school due to its leadership.

I pondered over this conversation with my friend for some time. I had never heard of anyone deliberately transferring their children from an affluent school into a high-poverty urban school. It seemed that, for my friend, it was all about the positive influence of the principal, as she believed that school leaders hold the key to the culture of a school. Yet some researchers claim that charismatic leaders are not the answer to urban school reform, as this model is not viable (Kirp, 2013; Russakoff, 2014). Parker and Flessa (2011), in their case study of seven urban elementary schools in Ontario, found that “a reliance of heroic individual teachers or principals to improve schools affected by poverty is neither sustainable nor feasible” (p. 103). However, in this age of accountability (Ranson, 2003), it seems that these heroic efforts continue to be prevalent at urban schools, as principals face pressure to close the achievement gaps and make schools the great equalizer. I agree with Parker and Flessa (2011) that we are asking too much of urban school leaders, many who routinely “go above and beyond the call of duty” (p. 104). Yet, I argue that inspirational leaders are necessary to lead our schools in challenging circumstances and that we need to understand how to support these dedicated principals. Passionate leaders continue to make a difference for our most disadvantaged students, yet their voices have not been widely heard (Kimball & Sirotnik, 2000; Orr, Byrne-Jimenez, McFarlane, & Brown, 2005; Wright, 2009). To address this gap in the literature, urban school researchers such as Milligan and Howley (2015) stated that they moved away from the prevalent positivist approaches towards narrative inquiry in order to “provide a richer and more appropriately complex representation of education leadership” (p. 45). Understanding the narratives of urban school principals is essential in order to analyze how to ease their burden. “Small stories” provide an up-close and personal lens that help to provide a counterpoint to the prevalent “meganarratives” from a systems lens that may be based on faulty logic (Olson & Craig, 2009). The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the perception of principals as to the barriers, supports and rewards of elementary urban school leadership. This work benefits from and augments the current literature by not only providing new insight into the nature of school leadership in high-poverty schools in Ontario, but also by adding depth to the dialogue by including the voices of those individuals who have lived this experience. This paper first reviews the literature on leadership in urban schools including the Canadian context and then shares the results of a narrative inquiry of two principals in high-poverty schools.

Urban Schools and Leadership

The concerns facing urban schools serving high-poverty families and communities is a dominant topic in the literature (Anyon, 2014; Gorski, 2015; Kozol, 2012). The research question has shifted from asking whether disadvantaged students perform less well than their affluent peers to “*how large* those differences are, what influences best explain the gap between poor students and other students, and what reforms shrink that gap” (Parker & Flessa, 2011, p. 20). This paper focuses on one of these areas of study—principal leadership in urban schools. The literature frequently refers to the finding that principals are second only to teachers as having a critical influence on student achievement (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Therefore, it is not surprising that principal leadership is seen as a fundamental component of successful urban schools.

Over the past century, leadership has been studied in an attempt to find the best practices that will guarantee improved school outcomes. There have been numerous leadership theories that progressed from managerial models to behavioural models and subsequently to the

transformational model first derived by Burns (1978). Burns, in his quest to define the ways leaders influence and improve employee performance, introduced the concept of transformational leadership which moved away from the traditional male-dominated, autocratic style to a more collaborative model with an enhanced focus on relationships. This was a departure from charismatic or heroic leadership styles, which are often used to describe a leader who ‘single-handedly’ reforms a school. As already mentioned, this type of individualistic leadership is seen to be unsustainable and is seen as an elusive “gift, charm or alchemic ability—inaccessible to most—that some leaders have” (Antonakis, Bastardo, Jacquart, & Shamir, 2016, p. 294). One might then ask, which transformational leadership framework might be best suited for urban school principals? As with many leadership styles, there is no unitary concept of transformational leadership and many collaborative styles are currently topical in the literature including shared, servant, distributed or inclusive leadership. While all have their merits, the moral component is one common theme that is found in social justice leadership research (Dantley & Tillman, 2009; Evans, 2007; Rivera-McCutchen, 2014). As explained by Oplatka and Hefer-Antebi (2008): “Moral educational leaders are characterized by strong emotional commitment toward pupils expressed by concern for their well-being, attention to their needs, awareness of their uniqueness, and profound identification with their difficulties” (p. 205). Greenfield (2004), in his review of the literature on moral leadership in schools, found that the challenge for urban school principals was to foster shared commitments at a moral level; he concludes that “the personal qualities of school administrators have a big impact on what they do, how they do it, and how well they do it” (p. 190). Fullan’s (2011) theory of moral leadership is one model for leaders in challenging schools with disadvantaged students. His framework includes the following six strategies: make a personal commitment, build relationships, focus on implementation, develop the collaborative, connect to the outside and be relentless. This model seems well suited to guide urban school leadership, as Fullan (2011) believes “the moral imperative focuses on raising the bar and closing the gap in student learning and achievement for *all children regardless of background*” (p. ix). He is optimistic that this form of school leadership is attainable and that all school leaders, committed to making a difference, can move in this direction. Fullan (2011), like the researchers cited in the previous section, states that it need not be the ‘bold and gutsy’, heroic or charismatic leaders who are the most successful, but it is rather the leaders who have a strong moral compass who can inspire others and have the largest impact. For this narrative inquiry, which seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and rewards of urban school leadership, Fullan’s (2011) model of moral leadership was used as the theoretical framework.

Urban Schools and the Canadian Context

The literature is robust with urban school leadership research. Some researchers such as Wieczorek and Theoharis (2015) have focused on the emotional needs of principals, as they acknowledge “principals working in high-needs, urban contexts experience greater amounts of role conflict and stress” (p. 282). Yisrael (2013) in his book *The Warrior Principal: New Leadership for Urban Schools* paints a very bleak picture: “Most urban public schools are in a state of emergency. They are plagued by inefficiency, disorganization and ineffectiveness—making them unhealthy places for students to learn and adults to work” (p. 4). In Canada, there may not be the same level of crisis or crumbling buildings as in the United States. Gaskell and Levin (2012), authors of *Making a Difference in Urban Schools: Ideas, Politics, and Pedagogy*,

offer the explanation that large cities in Canada do not experience the same educational challenges as those in the United States due to differences in policy commitments to our public institutions. They explain: “Canada certainly has issues of poverty, racism, intolerance, and urban segregation to overcome, but they have very different causes than their counterparts in the United States ... Canadian cities are much more diverse, and no single ethnic group dominates across the country” (p. 33). Bosetti and Gereluk (2016), in their book, *Understanding School Choice in Canada*, concur that the Canadian situation is different than that of our neighbours south of the border, both in how our social services are structured as well as the policies our government issues to address the problem: “Provincial equalization policies in Canada lessen disparities between different schools in different neighbourhoods or regions” (p. 7). Yet, we still continue to see significant academic gaps for disadvantaged students and our unique Canadian context warrants further research to better understand the persistent negative effects that low socioeconomic status (SES) has on marginalized populations of students. The two schools in this study are examples of this phenomenon, as they are located in high-poverty communities in southern Ontario and are also among the lowest achieving in standardized test scores. In this paper, I will share the insights of the principals in these two urban schools on the barriers they face and what supports they require so that their voices might join others to shape the discourse of policy and practice in this province and others.

Narrative Inquiry Approach

Narrative inquiry is relatively new to the social sciences, although it has long been used in the humanities (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Researchers have voiced their support of this methodology to more deeply understand the role of school administrators. Cooper and Heck (1995), in their study of effective administration practices, believed that school principals’ complex knowledge was not fully revealed by large, empirical studies. They found narrative inquiry “useful in examining the professional lives of school principals and the ways in which they grapple with the problems they face ... [and] may provide previously hidden glimpses of problem-solving practices” (p.195). Slater (2011), in his review of the literature supporting the argument that leadership matters, also supports the advantages of the narrative approach and recommends that “future research in educational administration should address the lives of principals expressed in their own voices” (p. 219). Riessman (2013) coined the phrase “the narrative turn” and lyrically describes the field of narrative analysis as “a useful addition to the stockpot of social research methods, bringing critical flavours to the surface that otherwise get lost in the brew” (p. 185).

The challenges facing high-poverty, urban schools are well documented, such as students with health issues or poor diets, lack of parental involvement, limited English proficiency, disruptive student behaviour, and lack of adequate funding (Dolph, 2017). Yet, the literature on the perspective of urban school leaders tasked with overcoming these obstacles is limited. The few narrative inquiry studies that exist reveal critical insights of the pressures and challenges of urban school leadership that warrant further exploration. West, Peck, and Reitzug’s (2010) narrative study into the pressures faced by urban school principals found that their sense of isolation augmented their stressful conditions caused by relentless accountability coupled with limited control. Magee and Slater’s (2013) narrative study of new principals in an urban school district in California also indicated principals experienced stress and frustration. The authors felt that the voices and stories of the participants supported the recommendation for improved

mentoring or coaching. These studies add significant insights to the research literature, but much is left to be explored, such as perceptions of urban school principals in contexts outside of the U.S., as well as studies that include not only the challenges but also the rewards of the role.

I wish to give voice to two principals on their perceptions of their role in urban schools, thus this study is well suited to a narrative approach. As with other qualitative research methods, there is debate amongst scholars as to the definitive nature of narrative inquiry. In this study Creswell's (2012) characteristics of narrative designs were used as a guide. He describes narrative researchers as those who explore an educational research problem by focusing on the experiences of one or two individuals and collecting their perspectives or stories. The data is analyzed for key elements and then further coded into themes or categories. "The identification of themes provides the complexity of a story and adds depth and insight about understanding individual experiences" (Creswell, 2012, p. 511). An important part of the narrative includes incorporating details of the setting or context, and the story is often told in a chronological sequence.

There are multiple methods by which narrative research can generate qualitative data. This study used the unstructured interview, whereby a few open-ended questions are prepared, but the interviewee directs the discussion. As was the case in this study, the unstructured interview often takes the form of a conversation, in which the participant can talk at length, thus helping the researcher understand their situation in more depth. This inquiry involved interviews with two experienced elementary principals of high-poverty urban schools in a city in Ontario. The selection of the participants was purposeful—the principals were at schools that had amongst the highest poverty indexes in the city. In addition, both principals were experienced leaders with over 10 years of administrative experience at multiple schools. The duration of the interviews was at the discretion of the participants and each lasted approximately 2 hours. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed for key elements, using first and second cycle coding techniques (Saldaña, 2015). In addition, the data was analyzed for its alignment with the six components of the moral leadership theoretical framework. In order to verify the credibility of the data, member checks were conducted, by inviting both participants to comment, make corrections or add further insights to the preliminary findings. The final themes that emerged formed the structure of the resulting narrative, which is chronicled in the remaining sections of this paper.

Insights from Two Urban School Principals

Mrs. Jones (all names are pseudonyms) is the principal of Hilldale Public School, a small, kindergarten to grade six elementary school. Nearby Crestview Public School is a slightly larger school and is led by Mrs. Smith. Hilldale and Crestview are similar in their demographics and achievement levels. According to the city's public health report, both schools are situated in communities with low household incomes and have amongst the highest percentage of adults who did not complete high school. These neighbourhoods also have a high percentage of kindergarten children who are vulnerable in two or more Early Development Instrument (EDI) domains. Neither community has a significant percentage of new immigrants. In terms of academic data, according to the Fraser Institute school rankings, Hilldale and Crestview are amongst the lowest ranked schools in the city. These results are partly based on the Ontario standardized testing results that showed poor academic achievement for both schools.

In the Beginning

Both principal Jones and Smith began their placements in their current schools more than four years ago. It didn't take either one long to recognize the lay of the land. Jones learned that her school drew many of its students from the nearby housing complex. She described that there was a wait list for families to gain a place there, but families who could demonstrate abuse can jump the cue. Jones explained: "So, it skews the population and most kids coming to my school from the housing units have not only poverty to deal with, but also trauma. This adds another dimension to their needs." Jones found out early on that the stigma of the community was well known to others. When a maintenance worker came to her school to replace the boiler, he remarked: "Ah yes, Hilldale! This is the land with no fathers." Smith had similar experiences when she started at Crestview. She recognized the entrenched, multi-generational poverty in her families, many of who also lived in housing complexes. She explained:

I always try to be outside before and after school to chat with parents. Many are hard to reach by phone so this is the only opportunity I have to speak with them. There were many, many single families at my school, but I was also surprised at first how often I saw both parents come to pick up their children. I found out it meant that neither Mom nor Dad has a job right now. But I also found it significant how often I deal exclusively with grandmas, as their grandchildren were either just left with them, or placed with them by a children services agency.

Smith indicated that life in the cramped housing complexes added to the "baggage" that children brought to school. She cited an example of how student behaviours can be impacted after new, but temporary relationships formed between children's parents in the complex. Smith told the story of how Billy came to school extremely happy one day, because his Mom had found him a "new Dad". He was excited because now he could call his friend Brian, another student at the school, his brother. However, Smith lamented that often these new relationships didn't last, and sure enough, the next week Billy came to school to say his Mom and "new Dad" had gotten into an argument and broke up. Soon after, the Mom called the school to tell the principal that Billy was no longer allowed to play with Brian at recess. Understandably, this left the teachers at the school dealing with Billy and Brian's disappointment, anger and escalated behaviours.

At their first school council meeting, principal Jones and Smith quickly discovered that parent engagement would become one of their most critical issues. Jones had only two parents attend the meeting and Smith had three. Jones explained that she felt this apathy was an indication of "poverty in spirit":

I felt that the women living in housing were dispirited and that they felt they had no input and no way to make a difference. So I thought—what would draw them in? Something that we could actually get done that they would see as something that they had accomplished. The survey I put out determined that they wanted a school playground structure. So I thought—come hell or high water we are getting that climber! With no fundraising base, it was a real challenge. But we asked all the businesses and agencies to pitch in. It took a year, but we got the climber! We had a grand opening and invited everyone and made a big deal of it! So in the end—I showed them that *they* had put out the goal, and that *they* had the power to see it done.

Smith and Jones admitted that they spent a lot of their time generating ideas to invite the community into their buildings to increase parent engagement. Smith found out rather quickly

that math nights and academic events were a flop. She realized that parents felt vulnerable coming to these types of events as it made them feel incompetent. Smith decided to stop worrying about whether the events had an academic focus and instead embraced hosting fun activities designed to build relationships. Over the past few years, Crestview has hosted a variety of activities including movie nights, fun fairs, Zumba classes, drumming circles, cartooning workshops, and ‘doors open’ Monday morning coffee klatches. Both Smith and Jones feel that increased parent engagement had a positive impact on their students’ wellbeing and achievement. Their sentiment is supported by the literature, including a recent survey research study by Dotterer and Wehrspann (2016) involving 108 students at an urban school. Their findings demonstrated that “parental involvement was positively associated with behavioural and cognitive engagement, which in turn contributed to academic competence and achievement” (p. 812).

Barriers and Supports

Principals Smith and Jones shared a number of struggles they felt were specific to urban, high-poverty schools. When the topic of *Education Quality and Accountability Office* (EQAO) testing came up, both expressed their deep frustration. They felt their teachers went the extra mile to try to close the achievement gap. The staff at Crestview and Hilldale went to professional development sessions, were keen to try new teaching strategies, met with their professional learning teams, and brought student work to the table for shared marking. Both schools used the services of Board-level curriculum teachers who came to the school to work directly with teachers. Smith was emphatic about their efforts:

You can ask Dave, our curriculum lead. The last time he came for a visit to Crestview he saw all the good things our teachers were doing, including success criteria, learning goals and collaborative learning. Dave actually told me: ‘You don’t need me here!’

But despite these efforts, each September when EQAO results were released, Smith and Jones knew that they would have to prop up their disheartened teachers again. Jones confided:

Let me tell you, EQAO is the most frustrating thing in the world to me. Teachers are killing themselves, even during their breaks and at recess to try to get those kids to succeed. The entire school is doing everything right. I am working with some of the best teachers I have ever worked with and a few students do move up [to the provincial standards], but not many.

Both principals receive the EDI scores for their schools and know their students came to kindergarten already far behind their peers who live in wealthier neighbourhoods. Many of the students at Crestview and Hilldale don’t have parents who can afford to take them on holidays, or who can pay for extracurricular music lessons, or sports, or summer camps. Parents often don’t have time to help with homework or read to their child at night. But even without the EDI data, Smith and Jones would not have been surprised by Hart and Risley’s (2003) study that estimated by the age of three, children in professional families will have heard 30 million more words than children in welfare-dependent families. Smith told me about an incident that occurred while she was cutting up vegetables to put in the classroom snack baggies she prepared every day. A student on a behaviour break was helping her. Smith recounted: “Jason was looking at me in a funny way when I finished with the carrots and starting cutting up the next type of

vegetable. So, I smiled and said: ‘What’s the matter?’ He asked: ‘Is that white broccoli?’ It dawned on me then that he had never seen cauliflower before.”

Jones felt that it wasn’t fair to measure success using standardized test scores where disadvantaged students are always compared to students with more privileges. Thus, at Hilldale she raises staff morale by sharing scores that map the growth of a student over time to show individual gains. This includes academic improvements such as a student’s increased reading levels from grade to grade. Jones also uses non-academic measures. She charts behaviour visits to the office and tracks whether major and minor infractions decrease over time due to interventions. Success is also measured using student attendance, results of school climate surveys, and tracking the number of people who attended school events. Smith uses similar measures to qualify success, but she also mentioned a more subjective type of evidence. Smith thinks:

When you walk into the school now, as compared to before I started, you will *feel* a difference. It’s hard to explain [pause] ... but it’s calmer, it feels [pause] ... more open, because it’s a place where kids know they can go to an adult they trust with their fires and that adult will say ‘we will put them out together’.

It was while we were discussing alternate ways of measuring success that I shared that People for Education are undertaking a project to shine a spotlight on new competencies as highlighted in their 2016 report *Measuring What Matters: Competencies in the Classroom*. The proposed measures include the areas of creativity, citizenship, health, and social-emotional learning. While Smith and Jones were highly intrigued by the concept, both were sceptical that there would be a shift away from the hyperfocus on literacy and numeracy scores any time soon. Jones ruefully stated: “It would be so wonderful to be able to officially acknowledge my students’ growth in these important areas. But, I’ll believe it when I see it as a real assessment supported by the Ministry in my school!”

Principals Smith and Jones admitted they were not fully prepared for the amount of time that was necessary to devote to dealing with agencies and organizations. Although they knew that poverty brought with it many types of deficits, the time it took on a daily basis to connect with the right people for the specific situation for each child was “huge”. Jones eloquently listed the different types of deficits as: “poverty of support, poverty of mental health, poverty of cognitive capacity, poverty of physical health, poverty of purpose, and poverty of skill sets”. Both itemized the many outside supports available, including children services, mental health agencies, public health, social workers, neighbourhood groups, nutrition providers, and various program sponsors such as Start2Finish, and reiterated that forging each connection took time. They also spent a lot of time making sure they took advantage of applying for the quarterly Board equity grants to fund students’ many diverse needs such as shoes, summer camps, EpiPens, snow pants, field trips, lice removal kits, etc. Smith was worried, however, that the time she spent on managing these critical tasks took time away from her other important responsibilities as a principal.

Rewards

Smith and Jones shared individual insights into what they felt made the role of a principal in a high-poverty urban school different from that of their counterparts in wealthier

neighbourhoods. Smith believes urban school principals need to have a special focus on student well-being:

I don't think my fellow principal colleagues have any idea what I do on a daily basis. The biggest difference, I think, is the mindset you have to have. I am looking out for kids constantly—it never shuts off. Every time I walk down the hall, I find myself continuously scanning my students. Whose pants are too big? Whose shoes are too small? Whose clothes need to be cleaned? Who is acting out because they are hungry?

Smith found she gave a lot more of herself personally than she had at any of her previous schools. Not only did she bring in clothes, games and books her own child had outgrown, she also shared stories from her own personal life if she felt it would help comfort a parent or student: “I found the difference for me at this school as a principal was how much of yourself you give—but you know in your heart that this is what they need from you.”

Jones felt principals of high-poverty urban schools need to have a specific type of moral compass. She took care to illustrate this concept, as she very much wanted to get her point across:

It's tricky. Some of the things I did when I first got to my school might not have looked good. [Long pause] When I got there the school was buying 67 pairs of boots and 67 snowsuits every year through the equity funding. The parents were pretty much ordering their clothing items through us every year. It became an expectation. On the surface, it looked like you were doing right by the parents. But I knew I had to wean them off. And, even though the optics were again problematic, I also refused to do a breakfast program and changed it to a snack program. So instead of only certain kids coming to school to get a hot breakfast, *all* kids were offered snack in their classrooms in the morning. No one got singled out. It takes away the stigma. I feel that when we buy kids clothes and feed them breakfast we are undermining the parent. So, instead we worked on providing the parent with resources that they could use to take care of their family, like doing a coat drive where parents got to come and browse and choose what they needed. Or we had a 'come and make your own brown bag lunches' day in the neighbourhood group kitchen. So, it was the parent who made them and gave the lunches to their kids.

Jones added, to make sure I understood her message: “It's not as simple as ‘I am going to come in as the principal and use my super powers and fix everything’. Because then I would be undermining the entire community.” She felt very strongly that the role of the school was to make the parents feel capable and valued and a principal needs to check their ego at the door and work behind the scenes. Upon hearing these words, I felt that Jones had underscored the difference between the often short-lived effects of the charismatic or heroic principal who seeks the spotlight, versus those dedicated and quietly inspirational individuals who use a moral imperative to guide their actions and seek a more sustainable outcome that empowers others.

Jones' and Smith's perspectives are tied together not only with high levels of commitment, but also with a heart for kids and parents. This passion for their students was highlighted further when I asked the two school leaders to reflect on the future, when the Board would inevitably move them on to the next school. My question brought both principals to tears. I felt concern that my interview had caused this reaction, especially when Jones admitted she is not one to cry easily. Smith explained she was worried about the impact her departure would have on her neediest kids:

I think someone like Dylan will melt down because he will feel abandoned. It's so hard. You finally break down the walls and get through to these kids, and then you are gone out of their lives and their trust in you is broken.

Jones too confided that the greatest reward for her was the gift of working with students:

This might sound corny but it's how I feel. It's the kids. You and the rest of staff in your school are sometimes the best thing they have in their lives. It's the best part of their day. For some of these kids one teacher can be life changing. We get to get up every day and give these kids safety and security - and we get paid to do that!

In the telling of their stories, I found that the principals followed the six components of Fullan's (2011) model of moral leadership. Their narratives demonstrated a deep personal commitment, a focus on building relationships and developing collaboration, a connection to outside organizations and a relentless drive to help their students succeed. Smith voiced her deep conviction that urban principals require a strong moral compass and Jones' personal anecdotes outlined her unwavering dedication to her students. Their actions and views mirror Fullan's (2003) belief that "the moral imperative of the principal involves leading deep cultural change that mobilizes the passion and commitment of teachers, parents and others to improve the learning of all students" (p. 41). However, in the sixth component, the focus on implementation, the principals indicated that they experienced some difficulty in finding sufficient time for instructional leadership due to the increased challenges of leading an urban school. This may potentially be a contributing factor as to why, despite their other efforts, their schools were not able to improve in standardized test scores. The recommendations in the final section of this paper provide suggestions to address this barrier.

Moving Forward

Although it pained them to think about leaving their schools, Smith and Jones offered final thoughts on what a principal new to their school needed to know. Smith advised: "I would tell them it's really all about trust. This is important in all schools but it is even *more* important at this school." Jones agreed building rapport was essential to success: "Relationships come first. It's what I tell my staff. Without trust, kids with trauma or neglect can't learn." Smith shared she does a number of little things every day that make kids feel safe, such as noticing that a child only has one mitten while out at recess and giving away her own mitten, or calming a child by pulling out a sliver, or agreeing to keep a child's pet moth in her office after the little girl's foster mother refused to let it live in her house. Smith hopes a new principal will make it a priority to make a connection with students at Crestview. She added that building trust with parents was equally important, and noted that this was not easy, as there can often be a big divide between the parent and the principal:

A parent needs to know that you are not judging them in any way. Sometimes that means you have to be vulnerable, and give a piece of yourself before they trust you enough to respect your decisions about consequences for their child's behaviour, or deciding on the best teacher for their child next year.

Jones had the same perspective: “I built relationships with parents so that when things fell apart, they trusted us.” Smith and Jones’ emphasis on the importance of trust aligns with the finding of previous studies. For example, Tschannen-Moran (2014), in her book: *Trust Matters: Leadership for Successful Schools*, illustrates how principals in low-performing schools “must learn to create conditions in which trust can flourish within their school as well as between their school and their community” (p. 12-13). Bryk and Schneider (2002) in their research involving disadvantaged urban schools in Chicago found that schools that measured higher on relational trust also showed higher likelihoods of greater organizational learning and academic productivity.

Both principals had similar advice for the decision-makers in their Board. When deliberating over which leader to place in a school, Jones feels that the Board must listen to what the principal indicates that they are suited for. She knows that her own resume reflects her love for working with at-risk kids. She added:

I think it is about *us* as principals—that we need to be acutely aware of what our passions are, what we are excited by and what motivates us. We need to articulate this to our supervisors and our supervisors need to respect that.

Smith’s insights were similar. She felt strongly that other leaders should have a better understanding of running a high-poverty, urban school, as only those who have a heart for the job should be placed there: “A principal needs to know what the job entails, so that the Board puts the right type of people into the right type of school. It’s not for everyone, so don’t just shuttle anyone in.” Jones summed it up: “There are definitely people with different wheelhouses of expertise and passions and you have to be sure you put the right people on the right seats on the right bus going in the right direction!”

Conclusion

Kimball and Sirotnik (2000), in their studies on school principalship, ask: “Has the job of urban school principal, as currently conceived and structured, become nearly impossible?” (p. 537). They state that leadership is often seen as the key to success in creating and sustaining effective schools, but are concerned that urban school leadership is poorly understood: “Where are the voices of those who actually have to work in the schools” (p.537)? This study has added to the call for a deeper understanding from the perspective of those who have first-hand experience working in high-poverty schools. Although the nature of a narrative inquiry methodology with one or two participants limits the generalizability of the data, narratives instead “are identified as having an explanatory, invitational quality, with evidence of authenticity, that is, elements of adequacy and plausibility” (Pepper & Wildy, 2009, p. 22). Thus, the intent was not to generalize the findings but rather to develop a thorough understanding of how these principals conceptualized their challenging role. It is up to the reader to decide whether they recognize the particulars in the narrative or the learnings outlined below as applicable to their own situation.

This study demonstrates the often-discussed complexity of the role of the urban school principal. Although this study is situated in Ontario and not all same challenges were indicated here as those common to the U.S., such as the concern of crumbling buildings or poor retention of teachers due to low wages (Dolph, 2017), other challenges were similar. Jones and Smith spoke of issues impacting the school caused by poverty such as poor nutrition and lack of proper

clothing. Both principals dealt with high incidences of student behaviour and were also concerned with the lack of parental involvement. Jones felt that apathy was an indication of “poverty in spirit” that principals needed to address. In addition, Jones and Smith spoke of low staff morale and their own personal frustrations resulting from poor standardized testing results. However, the frank insights contained within the narrative of Jones and Smith’s journeys also reveal a number of novel learnings. The moral leadership model was found to be a useful framework for the urban school principals who participated in this study, as Fullan’s (2011) components appear to be embedded in their actions and beliefs. Both demonstrate high levels of personal commitment, building relationships, collaboration, connecting to the community and perhaps especially essential to their role, being relentless. Smith and Jones’ unwavering drive to support marginalized students may be key to making the difference for marginalized students in schools, according to the findings by Rivera-McCutchen (2014) on the moral imperative of social justice leadership. Her case study of four principals of high-poverty schools in New York City suggests that school leaders who have a “predisposition for equity and fighting injustice” (p. 760) are better able to deal with prejudice and promote fairness. With regards to Fullan’s (2011) sixth moral leadership component, although Smith and Jones understand the importance of the focus on instruction, they found it difficult to give this the attention it deserves, due to the number of other critical issues vying for their attention. Thus, Smith and Jones feel that urban schools should be given additional support staff to help with the role of liaising with agencies, or to deal with the unique behaviours stemming from disadvantaged circumstances, in order to free up principals to perform their vital roles as instructional leaders. Fullan’s (2011) moral leadership framework was found to be relevant in this study, thus further research may be useful to determine the applicability of using this model as a supportive tool in leadership preparation and training for urban school principals.

Despite the many challenging dimensions to their role, it was evident that both Smith and Jones remain extremely passionate about being a leader at an urban school. In addition to sharing the barriers they face and the supports they feel they need, they also provide us with much needed inspiration. Their positive outlook on the rewards of the role mirrors the results of the study by West, Peck, and Reitzug (2010) who found “despite all the stress and pressure of the principalship, many of our study participants expressed their love for the position, for their teachers, for their students, and for the tremendous variety and challenge of their work” (p. 260). We need to pay attention to their stories and those of other urban principals so that decision-makers can make better decisions about how to provide support to dedicated leaders in challenging schools and lessen their burden.

Smith and Jones underscore the need for Boards to understand the individual strengths of their principals and carefully consider the qualities and passions of their leaders when assigning principals to urban schools. The findings by Orr, Byrne-Jimenez, McFarlane, and Brown (2005), in their collaborative inquiry of principals in low-performing schools, seem to concur with this sentiment. They found a disconnect between the uniform approach to school improvement taken by district officials and the different needs of principals in urban schools. They concluded: “without a better understanding of how and in what ways principals lead and facilitate change in low-performing schools, it is likely that district supervisors will not optimize the principals’ role through empowerment” (p.51). District officials and senior administration would gain valuable insights by listening to the voices of their principals. Principals too would benefit greatly from learning from their colleagues’ experiences. At the very least, principals who are newly placed at urban schools would be encouraged to heed Jones’ final words of advice: “You have to do a lot of

reading and thinking about your own moral compass. You need to come to understand that it's about building the capacity of others." Indeed, our most disadvantaged students are counting on principals to not only understand their unique needs, but to also believe in their capacity for success.

References

- Antonakis, J., Bastardo, N., Jacquart, P., & Shamir, B. (2016). Charisma: An ill-defined and ill-measured gift. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 3, 293-319.
- Anyon, J. (2014). *Radical possibilities: Public policy, urban education, and a new social movement*. (2nd ed.) New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bosetti, L., & Gereluk, D. (2016). *Understanding school choice in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Bryk, A., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks.
- Cooper, J. E., & Heck, R. H. (1995). Using narrative in the study of school administration. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8(2), 195-210.
- Creswell J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Pearson Education Inc.
- Dantley, M. E., & Tillman, L. C. (2009). Social justice and moral transformative leadership. In C. Marshall, & M. Oliva (Eds.), *Leadership for social justice: Making revolutions in education* (2nd ed.) (pp. 19-34). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Dolph, D. (2017). Challenges and opportunities for school improvement: Recommendations for urban school principals. *Education and Urban Society*, 49(4), 363-387.
- Dotterer, A. M., & Wehrspann, E. (2016). Parent involvement and academic outcomes among urban adolescents: Examining the role of school engagement. *Educational Psychology*, 36(4), 812-830.
- Evans, A. E. (2007). Horton, highlander, and leadership education: Lessons for preparing educational leaders for social justice. *Journal of School Leadership*, 17(3), 250-275.
- Fullan, M. (2003). *The moral imperative of school leadership*. Toronto: Ontario Principals' Council.
- Fullan, M. (2011). *The moral imperative realized*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Gaskell, J. S., & Levin, B. (2012). *Making a difference in urban schools: Ideas, politics and pedagogy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Gorski, P. C. (2015). *Reaching and teaching students in poverty: Strategies for erasing the opportunity gap*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Greenfield Jr, W. D. (2004). Moral leadership in schools. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 42(2), 174-196.
- Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (2003). The early catastrophe: The 30 million word gap by age three. *American Educator*, 27(1), 4-9.
- Kimball, K., & Sirotnik, K. A. (2000). The urban school principalship: Take this job and ... !. *Education and Urban Society*, 32(4), 536-544.
- Kirp, D. (2013). *Improbable scholars: The rebirth of a great American school system and a strategy for America's schools*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Kozol, J. (2012). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Louis, K. S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K., & Anderson, S. (2010). *Learning from leadership project: Investigating the links to improved student learning*. St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota.
- Magee, C., & Slater, C. L. (2013). Narratives of new principals in urban schools: Facing challenges and finding support. *Advances in Educational Administration*, 19, 245-268.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (2015). *Designing qualitative research* (6th ed.). London, UK: Sage.

- Milligan, T. M., & Howley, C. B. (2015). Educational leadership in our peculiar institutions: Understandings of principals in segregated, White-staffed urban elementary schools in the United States. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 17(1), 43-61.
- Olson, M. R., & Craig, C. J. (2009). "Small" stories and meganarratives: Accountability in balance. *Teachers College Record*, 111(2), 547-572. <http://www.tcrecord.org/library> ID Number: 15225
- Oplatka, I., & Hefer-Antebi, E. (2008). Instructional and moral leadership in early twentieth century: The story of Yehuda Antebi, a primary school principal in Galilee. *Planning and Changing*, 39(3), 17.
- Orr, T. M., Byrne-Jimenez, M., McFarlane, P., & Brown, B. (2005). Leading out from low-performing schools: The urban principal experience. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 4(1), 23-54.
- Parker, D. C., & Flessa, J. (2011). *Poverty and schools in Ontario: How seven elementary schools are working to improve education*. Toronto: Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario.
- People for Education. (2016). *Measuring what matters: Competencies in the classroom*. Toronto. Retrieved from: <http://peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/P4E-MWM-Phase-3-report.pdf>
- Pepper, C., & Wildy, H. (2009). Using narratives as a research strategy. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 18-26.
- Ranson, S. (2003). Public accountability in the age of neo-liberal governance. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(5), 459-480.
- Riessman, C. K. (2013). Analysis of personal narratives. In A. Fortune, W. Reid & R. Miller (Eds.), *Qualitative research in social work* (pp. 168-191). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Rivera-McCutchen, R. (2014). The moral imperative of social justice leadership: A critical component of effective practice. *The Urban Review*, 46(4), 747-763.
- Russakoff, D. (2014, May 19). Schooled. *The New Yorker*, 90(13), 58.
- Saldaña, J. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Slater, C. (2011). Understanding principal leadership: An international perspective and a narrative approach. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 39(2), 219-227.
- Tschannen-Moran, M. (2014). *Trust matters: Leadership for successful schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- West, D. L., Peck, C., & Reitzug, U. C. (2010). Limited control and relentless accountability: Examining historical changes in urban school principal pressure. *Journal of School Leadership*, 20(2), 238-266.
- Wieczorek, D., & Theoharis, G. (2015). "We're going to make lemonade out of lemons": Urban principals, emotion, and race to the top implementation. *NASSP Bulletin*, 99(4), 281-303.
- Wright, L. L. (2009). Leadership in the swamp: Seeking the potentiality of school improvement through principal reflection. *Reflective Practice*, 10(2), 259-272.
- Yisrael, S. B. (2013). *The warrior principal: New leadership for urban schools*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.

Karen Acton is a PhD Candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy program at OISE, University of Toronto. Her studies focus on school leadership—both principal and teacher leadership. Karen's interest in these areas stems from her experience in the elementary and secondary panels as a teacher, department head, principal, system-level leader, and at the Ontario Ministry of Education as an Education Officer.