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"GOOD, STEADY PROGRESS": SUCCESS STORIES FROM ONTARIO ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN CHALLENGING CIRCUMSTANCES[1]

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This paper presents findings from a funded case study research project conducted in Ontario, Canada during the 2007-2008 school year. Together with the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), the researchers undertook a qualitative investigation to identify and describe success stories from a diverse sample of 11 Ontario elementary schools working with students and communities affected by poverty. Through school visits, interviews, and document analysis, researchers identified three major findings: schools made connections with parents and the broader community; schools built a sense of collective endeavor and community within the school; and schools struggled with a persistent dilemma regarding students' social versus academic needs. The project contributes to the Canadian research literature on poverty and schooling and to the practical understanding of how schools can better work with students and communities affected by poverty.

Introduction: Framing the Study of Poverty and Schooling

Economic inequality has grown over the past generation. All measures of health, child well-being, and education show striking gaps between socioeconomic classes, with those who are less well off doing worse than those with greater economic resources (see Carpiano, Link, & Phelan, 2008; Green & Kesselman, 2006; Lin & Harris, 2008, OECD 2008). Within this context, North Americans have displayed a renewed commitment to the idea that schools are an engine of

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both individual social mobility and social change. Although economists and historians have long been skeptical of the power of schooling to counterbalance pervasive structural inequalities (see for example Anyon, 2005; Grubb and Lazerson, 2004; Katz, 1995; Katznelson & Weir, 1985; Rothstein, 2008; Thrupp, 1999), politicians, policymakers, and popular opinion place schooling at the heart of government anti-poverty strategies. "More young adults with strong literacy skills will have a world of opportunity in front of them," the Ontario Minister of Education recently wrote. "They will have a real chance to escape the poverty cycle and become Ontario's future leaders and innovators" (Wynne, 2008).

Schools serving students affected by poverty have thus come under renewed scrutiny by policymakers and researchers alike. In the United States, the *No Child Left Behind Act* requires collection and disaggregation of annual test score data to identify achievement gaps associated with race, class, language, and special education status. In Ontario, Canada's most populous province and the home to its largest city, Toronto, test-driven accountability measures look different from the U.S. model, with annual collection of data from students in Grades 3, 6, and 9, and a literacy test in Grade 10. But like the United States, researchers have used these results to make comparisons of schools and to suggest explanations of why some schools in challenging circumstances do better than others (see Johnson, 2005; Potter & Reynolds, 2002).

These comparisons necessarily incorporate some kind of measure for success. The most obvious measures - standardized, test-driven measures of student achievement – all too often are seen as an adequate or complete definition of school success. Testing can provide useful data for educators seeking to inform and improve their practice. But there are many measures of school success that are important to parents and to educators that are overlooked in a narrow focus on standardized tests. There are multiple ways of defining success that extend beyond standardized

indicators to issues of school culture and climate (Firestone & Louis, 1999; Mintrop, 2008; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007) and to the nature of relationships and shared meanings and practices (e.g., Fullan, 2007) within the school – between teachers, between staff and students, between teachers and school leaders (e.g., Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004) – and beyond the school into children's families and communities (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Hands, 2008; Riley, 2008, R.A. Malatest & Co., 2002).

Difficulty arriving at a single definition of success reflects, in part, the diverse goals of education itself (Cuban, 2000; Labaree, 1997). However, observing these areas can provide better understanding of how schools attempt to define and meet goals that are most important to them. This paper identifies and analyzes the narratives of success of those who are closest to the school. By narrative (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) we means stories with a particular point of view that provide rich contextual information about meanings, beliefs, and processes. From these narratives we learned that success had multiple meanings for participants. We use this emergent approach to let the front-line actors identify their goals and struggles along the way. In our view, working definitions of success-in-practice can serve as an important corrective to a single-minded focus on test scores as a measure of success.

The empirical evidence showing schools for poor children doing poorly across a range of different indicators exists alongside the reality that there is significant variability between schools serving low-income communities (e.g., Frempong & Willms, 2002; Johnson, 2005; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979). A popular body of research that focuses on success stories in challenging circumstances has its origins in the Effective Schools movement (Edmonds, 1979). Suggesting that a focus on failure is akin to a self-fulfilling prophecy, an effective schools-style perspective argues that studying successes teaches more than studying

failure (see Conchas, 2006), and furthermore that more than enough is known about what needs to be done to improve outcomes for low income students. A recent quote from Arlene Ackerman, newly appointed superintendent of schools in Philadelphia, represents this perspective: ""We already know everything we need to know about educating children well. We just need the political will to do it" (Aarons, 2009). This sentiment is an echo of the concluding sentence of Ron Edmond's often-cited 1979 article on effective schools. He states,

> We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us; we already know more than we need to know to do that; whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far. (Edmonds, 1979, p. 23)

Thirty years separates the Ackerman and Edmonds quotes, which suggests that the political will to make positive change for schools affected by poverty has been slow in coming. Frustration with the lack of progress on school improvement in high poverty areas has led recently to the embrace of "no excuses" or "no shortcuts" rhetoric by researchers and activists on both the political right and left, both in the U.S. and in Canada (Carter, 1999; Corbett, Wilson & Williams, 2002; Glaze, 2008; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Whitman, 2008).

The authors of this study share with the effective schools movement a conviction that school-level factors do make a difference for children's learning and experiences in schools; this study emphasizes school change at that level. However, we also share the view of Richard Rothstein, among others, that pretending achievement gaps are entirely within teachers' control, with claims to the contrary only 'excuses', actually limits our ability to distinguish better from worse classroom practice. Furthermore, such a stance is based on a myth that lets political and corporate leaders off the hook for narrowing pervasive inequalities of society (see Rothstein, 2008, p.11).

Together with the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), we have undertaken a qualitative case study project to identify and describe success stories from a diverse sample of 11 Ontario elementary schools working with students and communities affected by poverty. Through school visits, interviews, and document analysis, we developed narratives to describe the ways that adults in the sample schools think about and shape their work with students and communities affected by poverty. The project contributes to the research literature and to the practical understanding of how schools can best work with students and communities affected by poverty (e.g., Noguera, 2003).

Purposes and Perspectives: Canadian Content, Collaborative Context

Previous research has concluded that poverty makes for distinctive challenges affecting teachers, administrators, and others involved in school change (e.g., Bascia, 1996; Cuban, 2001). Most of the North American literature on poverty and schooling describes U.S. schools. International studies draw attention to significant differences between jurisdictions in terms of educational achievement, child well-being, and policy context (e.g., *Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-Being in Rich Countries*, 2007; PISA, 2007). Our project sheds much-needed light on the ways that urban, suburban and rural schools in Ontario, Canada have sought to better serve students and communities affected by poverty. There are over 2 million children in Ontario's public schools; the province is geographically vast, with large urban areas, rapidly expanding suburbs, and rural and remote locations. There is considerable diversity: 27% of the population was born outside of Canada; 20% of the population are visible minorities, a number that is far higher in Toronto and the surrounding areas. The province also faces considerable child poverty. Campaign 2000, a respected advocacy group, calculates one in

nine children in the province lives in poverty (Campaign 2000, 2009, p.2). Ontario over the past five years represents an interesting model of system-wide school change (Levin, 2007 & 2008); achievement goals monitored by testing in grades 3, 6, 9, & 10 have been combined with significantly increased per-student resources, a tightly-coupled policy role for the Ministry at the board, school and classroom level, and a collaborative approach that sees provincial funding for research and professional development through teachers' federations. At this point, however, much of the literature around the Ontario reform has emanated from those close to the Ministry of Education (see e.g., Campbell & Fullan, 2006; Levin, 2007; Levin & Fullan, 2008; Zegarac, 2007).

This research project operated on a collaborative basis between ETFO and university researchers and was designed to learn from close-to-the-school perspectives. The research project is also one aspect of the Federation's larger multi-year emphasis on poverty and education. Beginning in 2006, ETFO developed a Poverty and Education project to focus professional development activities and school change initiatives across the province. It has subsequently funded a province-wide tour of a play about an elementary school aged student affected by poverty as well relevant professional development associated with the play; it has identified a subset of schools across the province to receive intensive resources to develop and initiate site-based plans for school improvement; it has hosted a Poverty and Education symposium with participants from across the province; it has convened research and evaluation of its interventions from university partners. The subset of schools identified by the Federation for additional resources received one of several levels of professional development support – either teacher release time plus a one-time grant of $10,000; or just $10,000 to be spent to help the school community address poverty issues. Six of the schools in the research project were

chosen from this list. The other five schools were chosen for their reputation for success in challenging circumstances, although they had not received the release time and professional development resources.

A note here to reiterate and clarify the relationship between the researchers and the funders of the research project: The researchers share with ETFO an ongoing concern with the interaction between poverty and schooling and the impact of challenging circumstances on teachers' work. The researchers developed the methodology, gained ethics and research approval from their home universities and the pertinent school districts, and carried out the field investigations. The research sites were selected in communication with the Federation, and a research officer with the Federation reviewed this manuscript for accuracy. The researchers alone are responsible for the conclusions in the study.

Using the case-study method, we have developed insight into the dynamics of school change in the present moment with a close-to-the-ground description of the attitudes, beliefs, practices, and policies of schools that are successfully working with students and communities affected by poverty. We examined the context-specific ways that schools have become "success stories" and described what, generally, these stories have in common.

Selecting Schools, Learning from Participants

Eleven elementary schools in school districts across Ontario – northern, urban, suburban and rural - were visited during the 2007-2008 school year. Our sample included six schools from small urban areas, three schools from the same *large* urban area, one suburban school, and one rural school. Our schools' student populations ranged demographically from those that were all White and English-speaking to a school that was 50% new immigrant and English Language

Learners to a school that was majority Aboriginal. In Canada, there is no standard measure for student poverty. The schools selected by the Federation for participation in their project were identified from a list provided by the Ministry of Education, which used Statistics Canada data about schools' neighbourhoods to determine high incidence of poverty. To characterize the income-based demographics of the schools we visited, we also asked teachers, administrators, and parents to describe the school and its surrounding neighbourhood.

Between two lead researchers and graduate research assistants twenty-two full person days were spent in these diverse schools collecting data. At each school tape-recorded interviews were conducted with the principal, with at least four teachers in leadership roles, and with at least two parents per school. In many cases, teachers participated in focus groups. In addition, publicly available documents such as school newsletters for the past school year were collected. Overall we interviewed more than 100 adult stakeholders (administrators, teachers, and parents) during the 2007-2008 school year. In addition to demographic and background information used to establish the context, interview protocols asked respondents to define what success meant for them, what success meant at that school, how such success was recognized, how if at all the school had changed over time, what explained any changes, what aspects of school life made respondents most proud, and which one aspect of the school seemed to make the most difference in the educational lives of students. Parent participants were recruited by school personnel and were not necessarily representative of all parent perspectives or backgrounds; however, the direct feedback and comments from even a limited sample of parents adds an important element to a study of school change based on teacher and principal points of view.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim to facilitate analysis and development of emergent themes and for the writing of case studies to be distributed back to each school for

"member checking" and for the correction of errors of fact. In general, a grounded theory approach governed our inquiry. Grounded theory "is a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed. Theory evolves during the actual research, and it does this through the continuous interplay between analysis and data collection." (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273). Transcripts were coded and themes emerged through constant comparison. Feedback from the case study schools typically took the form of correcting the number of enrolled students or the names of particular clubs or co-curricular programs. In one school, we adjusted descriptions of a parent-involvement event after feedback from the principal that the word choice in her interview implied inaccurately that the tone of the event was frivolous. No school took issue with our description of its challenges and no school expressed disagreement with our assessment of where the schools had experienced success and where more focused work was needed.

Results

A number of common themes have emerged from the data. In this paper, we will focus on three major areas: the significance that all case study schools attached to *efforts to connect with parents and the broader community*; the variety of approaches that case study schools took when attempting to build *a sense of collective endeavor and community within the school*; and the recognition at all case study schools that *research and inquiry are themselves an intervention* that have an impact on school improvement efforts. In this paper we also draw attention to a persistent dilemma articulated in all case study schools regarding students' social versus academic needs.

Efforts to Connect with Parents and Community

Northern School[2], a small school with declining enrolment in an industrial city in Northern Ontario, was demographically unique in our sample. The only school in our sample serving an urban Aboriginal population, Northern School's descriptions of the significance and the challenges associated with connecting with parents highlighted several pertinent themes: positive relationships were only possible when staff engaged parents respectfully; formal mechanisms like school councils were of limited utility compared to other initiatives; school fundraising was not an appropriate way to channel parental involvement; and even though progress might be slow, the work was a necessary component of school improvement.

Resisting deficit attitudes and showing respect. Interacting with parents on their own terms and in ways that are non-judgmental may strike some readers as so obvious as to be unworthy of remark. Unfortunately, generations of scholarly and activist writing on parental engagement have found precisely this kind of interaction lacking, particularly in schools that serve high poverty communities (see Flessa, in press; Valencia, 1997; Valencia, 2009). Deficit frameworks about students and their families are a pervasive phenomenon in schools affected by poverty. We follow Valencia's (2009) definition of deficit thinking:

> The deficit thinking model, at its core, is an *endogenous* theory — positing that the student who fails in school does so because of his/her internal deficits or deficiencies. Such defects manifest, deficit thinkers allege, in limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to

[2] Consistent with the research regulations of the University of Toronto, Brock University, and the participating school districts, as well as the expectations of the participants themselves, all school names are pseudonyms and all participants are anonymous.

> learn, and immoral behavior….[It] *is a relatively simple and efficient form of attributing the "cause" of human behavior* [emphasis in original].

Deficit frameworks about families typically take the form of unsubstantiated assertions about families supposed lack of interest in their children's education or lack of support for school-based goals and priorities.

Given all too common negative stereotypes that exist about Aboriginal families and families coping with poverty, confronting educators' negative attitudes was understood to be Step 1 at Northern School. This finding was echoed in our conversations with teachers, administrators, and parents at many schools in our study in quite different contexts. Making parents feel welcome, and treating parents with respect were not mere platitudes in the schools that had seen progress in their school/family relationships. As the principal at Northern School informed us,

> You can't pass judgment on these parents. Give them value. Don't piss off or alienate them. Don't think you are better than them. If you pass judgment on the parents, or give them hell – the kid just doesn't show up in school.

Importantly, this quote indicates that resisting deficit-based attitudes about parents was seen as a matter of basic professional courtesy as well as a requirement for school effectiveness.

A parent we interviewed at a school across the province likewise emphasized the importance of communication with parents in both formal and informal ways as a step toward school improvement. "My advice is not to be afraid to talk to parents, not just when there's a negative issue," one parent told us. "Give some positive feedback. I don't know anyone who doesn't like positive feedback." As the parent explained, communication with parents isn't just a way to kept them connected to the school; it's also an investment towards problem solving when issues arise. "If you've had a lot of positive back and forth," one parent told us, "then when a negative issue crops up, you have a different attitude." Along these lines, educators at more than

half of our case study schools drew connections between student attendance (chronic absences were a problem in some settings) and the positive or negative reputation the school had among parents. Where parents and schools interacted in positive ways (student showcases, a pow-wow, community barbeques), teachers and administrators were able to capitalize on positive, personalized relationships with parents to determine what problems were affecting regular student attendance. Sometimes these problems were beyond the reach of the school, as the quote from this teacher indicates:

> Most parents are renting month to month and at the end of the month, if they haven't got their rent they'll move to the next house or next apartment. The same with telephone. You could have an emergency and not be able to contact the parents because their number changes every month when the plan runs out. It's cheaper to buy a new plan than to continue with the old. For many parents here, it's just keeping one step ahead.

But some of the times, an encouraging voice from a teacher, combined with interesting classroom opportunities to learn, were sufficient to reconnect families with the school. In the words of a teacher at one school, "A lot of parents have a bad idea about us, they think we're out to get their kid or they think we're out to get them. An activity like [a family Pasta Night] works to build community."

McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) have identified deficit thinking as one of the most prevalent "equity traps" shaping educators' work; they recommend neighbourhood walks, shared conferences between teachers, families, and students, and collecting community oral histories as ways to resist the deficit trap. Seemingly echoing these recommendations, a teacher in a small urban community in southern Ontario described nuts-and-bolts work that builds bridges with parents:

> I think there's a lot of fear in our parent community, because perhaps their own school experiences weren't positive. One of the biggest successes that I've had,

> that I'm really excited about over the last two years is that I've managed with every single student to have one of their family members, an uncle, an aunt, a mother, a father, whoever, come in and spend an hour with our class. And that's not me going over report card marks, that's me just saying "this is what we do every day, we would love to showcase you and show you off, please come in and join us." And I think because of that my parents are much less hesitant to come in and hear any sort of follow up, be it positive or if there's a big issue, and I'm really proud of that, because I think parents are often really scared to come into the school. And I think in a school like this, it's really important to start there and to have those experiences like that quite often, before you start saying "okay, now we need your help to do this, to take your child to the doctor, to get that child lunch every day." Before dealing with those issues, you have to start small.

Another teacher at this school followed up this sentiment by pointing out,

> When you make the school friendly and inviting, and it's not a scary place to be, and it becomes a fun place where, for example, a parent can come in and participate in a hands-on science activity with their child, well, all of a sudden the school becomes a really beautiful place to be. And I think that's a great place to start.

This teacher's last words—"a great place *to start*"—are important to note. Many of our respondents in our case study schools emphasized to us that they viewed their work with parents as work in progress. In other words, even at schools with remarkable success changing staff (and family) attitudes in a short period of time, there was little sense that they had reached their ultimate improvement goals. As one teacher put it,

> I think it is something we always have to work on. There are still so many things that we need to do at the school level, at the parent level, at the student level. We have to look at all three of those. How do we strengthen each one?

Another teacher in the focus group chimed in, saying, "it takes patience." And across the province, in quite a different setting, another elementary-level colleague put it this way:

> Don't get the wrong idea that I think we've accomplished miracles here because I don't. I think we've made some good, steady progress in certain areas. I think that's a great platform, the foundation for us to now move forward with higher academic standards.

The limits of formal structures for parental involvement. All schools in our study struggled to find ways to make more positive connections with families, and some schools were more successful than others in their approaches. The experience described to us at Tecumseh Street School, a small school in a small southern Ontario city, was one where non-traditional or unofficial parental engagement efforts were seen as more beneficial than the official, school-council model approach required by policy. Particularly successful were events where families could attend with their children, because, in the words of one parent we interviewed,

> I think a lot of people don't have a babysitter, so they can't attend the meetings. If they have extra kids at home and you have a meeting during the day and you can't bring them with you, you have to stay home.

For example, the principal described two unsuccessful traditional parental involvement situations—the school council and Literacy Night. The principal had held a raffle to win a very valuable prize if parents attended school council meetings, "but only five people showed up." At a school "Literacy Night" a year ago, after much preparation and hard work from staff, only 25 parents attended. In the words of one teacher, "we had a Literacy Night last year that bombed because it smacked of 'we're going to teach you how to be better parents.' And that just makes them back away." The principal explained how things were different this year:

> So this year we decided "we're not going to call it Literacy Night, we're going to call it School Showcase Night." And so basically what we thought is that we'd have the kids perform. So choral reading, poems, I think the Grade 6/7 did Casey At Bat. Those types of things because we thought if the kids are performing, the parents will come. And sure enough. So the deal was if we had over 100 people show up to it, the incentive was I told the kids I would do something fun…That picture over there of me with the wig on, I'm dressed as Hanna Montana.

What did Tecumseh Street learn about parental involvement from these experiences? "These parents love their kids," the principal told us, "and they want to be involved in that way." Therefore, when thinking about future events, Tecumseh focused on the ways to orient them

around students and student work. As one teacher explained, "If you call it a Student Showcase Night and make it student-centred, which it should be, all of a sudden the support is found." Whereas some schools draw conclusions about parental support of education by attendance at official events like back to school night or parent conferences, the teachers at Tecumseh were hesitant to draw conclusions from those traditional proxies of involvement because they seemed to be an ineffective way of connecting with parents about their children.

The fundraising trap. Parental involvement is often equated with funds raised by school council activities. This measure is problematic for many reasons (see Flessa, 2008; Warren et al., 2009), including the fact that already-strapped communities are unlikely to have the resources to raise additional funds for schools, no matter how interested in or useful they would find such an endeavor. As the advocacy group People for Education (2008) noted in a recent report,

> While fundraising has been commonplace in Ontario schools for many decades, the growing amounts raised are cause for concern. Some affluent neighbourhoods have the capacity to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for their public schools; other neighbourhoods, where parents' incomes are lower, raise little if any money. Thus, some schools have significantly enhanced resources, such as better stocked libraries and enrichment programs. (pp.1-2)

Teachers at Tecumseh Street School raised the issue of funding when they discussed the particular needs of the school, noting that at other schools where, ironically, supplemental materials are probably less important, "they were able to raise 15,000 dollars at Christmas time. We could fundraise all year and probably not make the $3000 we need to take kids on a trip that other kids do on a weekend." For this reason, the ETFO/Danny incentive money was particularly meaningful in supporting positive school change at several of the schools we studied —it provided a range of material supports (arts programming, a homework program, a well-used literacy room with take-home books) for teachers and students in a school where extra funds were difficult to come by. But as one teacher told us, "we're going to be facing the challenge of

how do we continue what we started this year, next year, and the year after with no additional money." There are several lessons here for schools in challenging circumstances: first, that parental involvement can have a positive impact on school climate and community separate from the function of fundraising, and second, that additional funds are crucial for supporting the kinds of extra- and co-curricular activities that provide students with meaningful opportunities to learn and grow. There are obvious policy implications for both issues, since schools like Tecumseh cannot do it alone.

Almost all the teachers, principals and parents we interviewed talked about the real challenges of connecting parents to school. This was an area where all our interviewees stressed the importance of continuing effort to improve relationships. Only one school pointed to an active role with high levels of participation for the Parent Council, the provincially mandated body for parent involvement in school decision-making. This finding is consistent with the literature that has shown very mixed results and a strong middle-class bias in these more formal bodies. We were struck by the extent to which the parent council role is typically defined by fundraising and disbursement; in high-poverty schools with limited parent fundraising this role did not empower parents. Events such as curriculum nights were often disappointing for organizers, even where food was provided. Parents we interviewed tended to see more value in activities that their children were excited about attending. Many schools, however, were experiencing success in school-community events such as a pow-wow or holiday celebrations where they had the opportunity to see their child 'in action' or coming on field trips. Some schools had made strong links with a handful of parents who regularly volunteer in programs such as a pizza lunch. For many of the teachers and principals we interviewed, the emphasis is on building relationships one family at a time; making parents feel that they can approach the

school with questions or concerns; and helping to share what and how children are learning with parents who may be turned-off from the school system.

Connections to the broader community. Several of the schools in our study had made successful efforts to mobilize resources in the broader community to bolster their own programming. Many of the schools boasted after-school programs which the principal had initiated through partnerships with local organizations such as the YMCA or the Aboriginal Urban Services group; hot lunch and/or snack programs funded by local businesses; early childhood / family literacy / parenting programs offered through cooperation with provincial Early Years Centres; or more specialized services, such as dental care for all students, tutoring by university students, and cultural events where the school co-hosted activities with community organizations.

The benefits of these programs to the school and the students were both direct – as children got access to needed services and nutrition – and indirect, as part of a process of opening the school to the community. Particularly in cases such as the northwestern Ontario school, where the school was able to leverage empty classroom space to open its doors to an Aboriginal agency which ran significant onsite programming during and after school, the cooperation was a way of bringing the community into the school itself and contributed to improved support for children and their parents (see also R.A. Malatest & Co., 2002).

Building Connections Within the School

A second major theme that emerged from our research concerns the efforts of these successful schools to connect kids to one another and to caring adults in the school by whole-

school initiatives. Schools used strategies like regular whole-school assemblies (around themes varying from literacy to 'character' values that are part of the provincial curriculum); and through arts-based initiatives including performances and shared music to build a sense of the school community as a whole. Many of the schools we visited had quite small populations, particularly schools in rural or northern boards, which were strongly affected by declining enrolment. Teachers in those schools repeatedly emphasized the benefits for young children of being known by all the adults in the building: they saw it as integral to making schools a welcoming place where children wanted to be.

Likewise, teachers and administrators in the schools that we visited were remarkably consistent in the ways that they explained the value of inquiry-based approaches to problem solving at the school sites. One of the most consistent success stories we heard at our 11 research sites was the fact that teachers had developed a sense of collective purpose in seeking to ameliorate the effects of poverty on student learning in their schools. Other researchers have referred to this phenomenon as the creation of a "personalized environment" (McLaughlin, Talbert, Kahne, & Powell, 1990). In the words of an educator at one school,

> There was a sense that we can do something here, [whereas before] we were just sort of tripping through each day. I think the first step then is to sit down and say, as a group, we have a lot of things going on here. Is there anything we can do? What can be done to change a little thing? What can we start to do about it right now? We really stress the positive stuff.

Another teacher put it this way:

> What has worked for us has been recognizing what the needs are, and I think looking at the individual needs of the school and trying to meet those needs and coming up with a collective idea that all staff can be on. The reality is that change has to come from a recognition of necessity.

Building students' sense of belonging and developing character along the way. At two of our case study schools, we learned about regular (daily or weekly) whole-school assemblies that

were designed to create a sense of cross-grade community. At Tecumseh Street School, parents, teachers, and the principal all pointed to their efforts to build whole-school community as a particularly noteworthy success in recent years. Students and teachers know one another beyond the borders of classroom or grade groupings. During our visit, we observed all Tecumseh students filing into the gymnasium and noted that the routine ran smoothly and had an orderly and happy feel to it. A few quotes from our interviews will give an idea of how important these events were. From a parent:

> You don't hear of a school all getting together and physically being together and discussing issues. If there's an issue, it's discussed. And if somebody has something to say, they say it. And you're not just saying it into the microphone, you're saying it to the whole school. It just makes the children more connected, instead of all sitting in their individual classrooms and hearing it over the P.A. I think that's what makes this school a little bit closer knit.

Another parent chimed in:

> And if there's a new student, they introduce the new students, and if you have a birthday, you go in the middle and everyone sings "Happy Birthday."

The principal articulated the purpose of these daily assemblies in this way: "We try to build that sense of community so that kids really know that this is a great place to be."

At Further from the Lake School, as part of the commitment to fun and enrichment as part of the academic program at the school, there are a wide variety of creative approaches to literacy and numeracy curricula. There is a weekly school-wide literacy assembly – at which parents are made welcome – where students work on reading – by reading song lyrics – and singing accompanied by staff members on guitar and fiddle. One teacher said, half-joking, "we call it 'Summer Camp' now, jokingly, because it's a lot of camp song stuff. They love it." Students have also done work on extended projects – including each student writing and producing a book, with help from a local author – which would later be displayed at the town

library and celebrated at a social at which more than a third of parents attended. Students also used a wide range of skills and got real-world experience producing a series of public service announcements which were broadcast on the local radio station for earth month that year. A group of grade three and four students ran their own popcorn business over the length of a school year, and chose to divide the profits between local charities (naturally, they needed to be researched and discussed) with a small personal dividend for each participant at the end of the school year.

Further from the Lake School has also focused on bringing performances into the school – or bringing children out to performances in the community – making the staging of Danny King of the Basement fit naturally into the curriculum. Performances are used as a basis for different kinds of classroom work together – whether creating the masks that impressed us as visitors to the school, or sparking lively discussion with children on the meanings of poverty in schools. As one teacher explained it, "you kind of Velcro knowledge onto those life experiences, and language and books in the home, and just all that enriching stuff that's a given in a lot of the other homes." The school is committed to providing enough textured experience to allow more of the curriculum to stick for the children it serves, and it creatively brings students and teachers together to create a sense of community that sustains hopefulness among teachers and students and families.

Research and Collaborative Inquiry as Opportunities for Teacher Learning

The experience of Country School usefully surfaces several ideas that we heard about teacher learning in our research visits throughout the province. The staff at Country School are actively engaged in trying to learn what works in their classroom. The school had heavy

involvement from the Ministry and the Board to try to understand poor test results, but the team of teachers, supported by their principal and full-time on-site literacy coach, has taken a very proactive role in developing their instructional repertoire, and in using data to assess their progress conceived as changes in student attitudes and learning. In monthly staff and divisional meetings, the teachers set school-wide SMART Goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-bound; see Dufour, Eaker, & Dufour, 2005) and measure progress towards meeting them. So, for example, the entire school will adopt a goal that forty-five percent of students will improve one level at a particular skill. The teachers are remarkably consistent in identifying the use of data as useful to them in their practice, and in noting that they have worked together as a team to develop that appreciation over the past few years.

Teachers identified a couple of important factors that caused them to make this shift. Leadership from the principal, "she expects a lot but she's also very fair", was identified as key. The principal clearly identified an investment in building a strong team with high levels of teacher ownership. Especially when she started at the school, she spent "lots of time" talking to teachers as a group:

> 'So what is it that we want? What is it that we believe in? Do we all support the idea of whatever?' Having that common vision. A lot of talking about that kind of thing had to happen, and during that time we needed to establish expectations that are high. ... [O]ver the time they have been together they have really begun to gel together and work as a group, and that makes all the difference... that has been great for me. And I think it's good for the kids too.

The literacy coach was gradually accepted as someone who supported classroom practice. Although at first a number of teachers were concerned that she was there to evaluate, over time confidence in her support grew. Teachers began to recognize, as she said, "'I'm not making you change, I'm here to support the change.' So I went to the people that came to me first." Because of the success experienced by the teachers she was supporting using model lessons, coaching,

and joint planning where time allowed, word began to spread. After a year, she was working jointly with all the teachers as a very highly valued resource. In addition to her primary role in providing classroom support, the literacy coach was also able to spearhead a number of school-wide initiatives from a child-designed 'Learning Garden' in an underused courtyard, to a Division-wide 'Battle of Books' (both supported with ETFO funding) to new, more targeted evening events to build parent involvement.

Teachers expressed a willingness to ask for help from her and from one another, and an expectation that they would receive that help from their colleagues. Regular, productive divisional meetings, lead by classroom teachers, that allowed the teachers to work together to focus on student learning were identified as very important. Reflecting on how she motivates herself, one teacher identified a commitment to research as a baseline for her professionalism:

> What always appeals to me, when someone asks me to make huge changes is, "show me the research." And I've said that to people. Okay, I hear what you're saying, back it up for me. I need to see the research." Where does it say that this is the way that we should be doing things? I've found over the last few years that the research backing for new programs has been there. So I think that if you can get to that place and teachers who aren't willing to work on new things, how do they argue with that? "Yeah, you've been doing it for 25 years, but guess what, it doesn't work. This works better." Your internal combustion engine looks good, but maybe we can do it better. There are better ways of doing things. There are certain things that stand the test of time, but you show people the research. If they're professional at all, they should be able to take their [work] on, and put together a team, a divisional team, with an appropriate lead that is not somebody who is picky or anything like that, and have those teams meet once a month and discuss what's going on. What are your results like? And let people know what is expected. We're looking at higher order thinking skills. ... Can you bring something to discuss that you've been doing for inferencing?

Although the term professional learning community was not in common use at Country School, the practices of shared leadership, research-driven inquiry into their own practice, and mutual support certainly exemplify core tenets of the approach in application. In the words of the literacy coach, "we're always working together with the kids. It's not just you and the twenty

kids in your room... somebody will start talking about the kids in their class, and people will give suggestions, so it's almost like these are all the kids that we're working with, it's not just the 20 that are in your care right now. It's everybody in a school."

The inquiry stance at the schools that we visited led teachers to be skeptical of off-the-shelf, teacher-proof remedies for school improvement. In the words of one teacher working in a suburban context within the same district as Country School,

> When I first came here, I was like a lot of people and I just thought that these people are down on their luck and need a hand up, or else they're lazy, or whatever. But, having worked in this environment now, I can just see that it's so complex and there are so many variables to each kid's situation. There are no simple answers…Poverty is a big, multifaceted problem and there's no simple, easy solution.

Although teacher collaboration is not a panacea and important prior research has indicated that teachers in reforming schools risk sharing bad practices, discouragement, and deficit based stereotypes of the students and communities they serve (Lipman, 1998), inquiry and collaboration were professionalizing activities at the schools we visited. One principal described this dynamic, saying,

> There's something special happening here. But it's not just a collection of strong people. If you liken it to a hockey team or basketball, it's not just about a team of all-stars. It's about a community of collaboration here that works. That culture of collaboration has an impact not only on how we feel coming to work but it also has an impact on the success of students.

Academic Versus Social Needs of Students: A Persistent Dilemma in Schools in Challenging Circumstances

An important tension runs throughout the interviews conducted and case studies developed for this project: when is talking about outside-of-school factors an exercise in hand-washing, and when is it an appropriate articulation of the context-specific challenges to policy

and practice in the schools we visited? Teachers in high poverty schools very often encounter students who face learning challenges relating to social needs which could include anything from hunger to unmet needs for mental health services to struggles with a new language. Persistent gaps in achievement, however, raise a concern that when educators talk too much about social needs of students, they may be neglecting these same students' academic needs. Or is it futile to try to address achievement gaps without responding to students' often pressing social needs? The principal at Northern School brought up this tension succinctly when he stated,

> You need to appreciate the implications of circumstances of poverty but you can't get pulled into the black hole – you can lose what has to remain our primary focus – to give kids the skills they need to succeed.

Our case study of Downtown Core showed that teachers there were particularly alert to this tension, and a description follows here. Downtown Core is a "Danny School," which means that during the 2007-2008 school year it received additional funding and release time from the Teachers' Federation for school-based efforts to address the effects of poverty. Importantly, Downtown Core focused on both students and teachers in their initiatives. In a December letter to the Danny Schools coordinator at the Federation, the principal and lead teacher wrote,

> In addition to focusing on our students, we also want to address any negative stereotypes towards the poor and needy by our entire staff, to ensure that they are better able to assist in bringing about a significant transformation in our school community.

This combination of efforts—academic and co-curricular enrichment for students in conjunction with professional development for teachers—shows the importance of multiple responses to the challenges schools face regarding poverty. Focusing on students without addressing teachers' attitudes, or focusing solely on teachers without proposing nuts-and-bolts alternatives for students would only have limited the initiatives' success.

At Downtown Core, the Danny funding built upon and coordinated previous efforts at school change at Downtown Core. One focus for staff at Downtown Core was encouraging and rewarding student attendance. One teacher said,

> We say expectations are different for different kids. For some it's just "alright, you made it here for five days this week. That's great." We celebrate it. We tell them "I need you to be here, and remember your books, and remember to come in and sit down and get to work. That's it. That's all I expect for that day. And for others, of course, it's "you're able to do *way* more that that!"

Strategies for improving attendance at Downtown Core relied more upon carrots than sticks. "I'm coach of a team," one teacher told us, "rather than a dictator." There was remarkable consistency in reports from teachers, administrators, and parents that the way to improve attendance was to create a climate that made students *want* to come to school and encouraged parents to make sure that that happened. Making sure that students felt comfortable at school was important. In the words of one parent,

> It's very important that kids feel safe and secure and comfortable and have that overall feeling of goodness when they come to school. If it's not a chore, if they are going to learn something new, they're going to have fun doing it.

Teachers, administrators, and parents were consistent in their descriptions of the school goals at Downtown Core. All emphasized the importance of social and behavioural goals for students as well as academic ones. In some interviews, participants articulated an order of operations along the lines of "do consistent discipline first so that you can get to academics" whereas in other interviews the causal chain worked in the other direction (strong academics lead to better behaviour). This tension, between academic and social needs of students, is one that we heard again and again in our case study research. Because it exists in much of the literature on schools in challenging circumstances (see for example McDougall, et al., 2006) it merits extensive examination here.

During one interview with two teachers, the tension between acknowledging outside of school factors while maintaining school goals emerged in this way:

> Teacher 1: Success is not letting them get away with low expectations, ever…I can make some accommodations for them, but still have very high expectations of them.
>
> Teacher 2: And that's a fine line at our school because when they have not met the expectations of the day for them, then we hear the story of what they had to get through to get to school. It's a fine line because you can put the reason why you are here aside to try to fix that, and then big expectations are lowered.
>
> Interviewer: How do you walk that fine line?
>
> Teacher 1: I'm more of a tough one. "This is what you are doing today, and it will be done." Even though I can also be there for them, I think they want to do more for you once they know. They know that I care about them, even though I'm tough with them. They know that and they want to get those things done, and there is no question about it.

A different teacher in another interview highlighted a similar tension, saying,

> Success for me is when students are working at their potential. Not just academically, but especially at a school like this, it's social. We work probably hard on the social skills, more than…well, just as much as the academic. And I really focus on those two. Wanting them to reach their potential, and being good citizens.

And the principal at Downtown Core shared this perspective:

> If you look at that hierarchy of needs, there are certain things we have to provide to the kids. A lot of them what they need is stability in a place where they feel safe. So a safe environment is probably the first one. And having somebody that they know will respond to them in a consistent manner. Knowing that they can come and speak to somebody. They have a lot of trust in our staff. They know who they have built relationships with and who they can go to and talk about any problems that they might have. That being said, we also feed them. We have a huge food program at the school.

It is not difficult to understand the principal's emphasis on school environment; putting systems in place to make sure that the school is a safe and welcoming place are certainly leadership responsibilities. Instructional leadership is also a principal's responsibility, and at Downtown

Core the principal has emphasized consistency and safety in academic learning as well. Academic language, scaffolding, and data collection for teacher development are priorities. "We make sure the teachers are developing the same kind of balanced literacy programs. So all the kids know what shared reading is and they all know what guided reading is and they all know what word walls are," the principal reports. The principal drew attention to the importance of changing instructional practices from the routines of "20 or 30 years ago when you did round robin reading." The principal also recognized and supported curricular innovations that made connections between instructional content and the multicultural context of the school:

> The one that had the biggest impact on me was our French teacher…she wanted to do a whole educational focus on Black history. She still had French embedded but she brought it to the kids, and I can honestly tell you that the lessons and the stories she brought to the kids—you *could not* distract them.

At Downtown Core there are a number of programs and interventions that are designed to build a sense of community among students and a sense of belonging, seen as the building blocks for academic progress. As the principal said, "We spend a lot of time making the kids aware that this is their school and the ownership that belongs to that."

One teacher mentioned that school rituals—"awards and rewards and assemblies, things like that where students can actually be recognized with certificates or student of the month"—were important factors in building a sense of school community. The teachers we spoke with all mentioned a variety of attempts both within classrooms and schoolwide to create a sense of shared connection to school goals. Some of the programs described were Community Building Day, Student of the Month, Character Coupons, Social Skills Week, the Recess Program, Tribes, Ice Skating, Clown Doctors. Some of these approaches are more formal than others and more public, but their variety and diversity suggest a schoolwide emphasis on acknowledging and building students' connections to staff and to one another.

The teachers we spoke with at Downtown Core had advice for teachers across the province working with communities in poverty:

> Put this in your report: know your students. You will be successful if you take the time to get to know the kids. And if you take the time to get to know them, then you can differentiate your instruction.

Working to make the school a more personalized environment, then, was not simply an attempt to improve school discipline; it was seen as a step toward improving instruction. Although "differentiating instruction" can often seem like a vague catchphrase, teachers at Downtown Core explained how it is done:

> I have a lot of kids who are just totally different learners and if I did not accommodate them, by providing some choice all the time, I would lose them. Often times in the afternoon, I have these different tables, different groups set up where they have to pick one or two of the tables and do the activities that are there. They can choose what they want, but they're still learning, they're working and they're engaged. My other lesson is that real life experiences are important. We just finished area and perimeter and the way I taught that was that they had to be architects, they had to make the blueprints of a house.

Teachers at Downtown Core viewed differentiation as central to their practice, not peripheral. "I can't stand at the front and just teach a lesson on the board and expect they're all going to go now and do their thing. I guess there are some schools where that happens, but not here."

Conclusions: What We Learned, and What We Don't Yet Know

The study is a contribution to the ongoing literature about how schools succeed in challenging circumstances. Taking the frontline perspective of teachers telling their stories about success and struggle, it may provide a useful counterpoint to discussions of effective schooling that narrowly emphasize test scores. It also provides contextual information about a large scale process of school change as it affects schools in urban, rural and suburban Ontario.

In every school in our study, underlying schools' success at making connections, stimulating inquiry-based learning, and resolving dilemmas of social and academic need, we saw the presence of strong leadership that extended beyond the principal. Our case study participants reported that strong leadership by teachers and administrators on issues of poverty was crucial to maintaining both momentum and optimism in school change work. Examples of leadership included convening conversations about poverty and schooling, emphasizing the connection between educators' attitudes and educators' school-based change efforts, and acknowledging both successes and challenges to school improvement work. Alongside the work of a principal in fostering a network of relationships with community organizations, we learned of the work of literacy coaches and grade-level teams in setting and achieving instructional goals. This finding is consistent with a growing research literature that emphasizes multiple paths and approaches to site leadership by those in formal and informal roles (see Leithwood, Mascall, & Strauss, 2009). It may also have emerged at least in part from our chosen methodology: because our unit of analysis was whole school, we did not observe classroom instruction or interview children.

Our case study participants attributed their own school success to teaching excellence and high quality collaboration. All schools struggled with balancing concern with students' social and emotional needs with the imperative of building academic skills. One way teachers responded was by collaborating on strategies to improve instruction. Our participants all acknowledged the significance of parental and community partnerships. Schools took a variety of approaches to involving community and parents. For no school was it easy. Many respondents wanted concrete advice on how to make better connections.

This request for recommendations—the *now what?* of our research—leads us to suggest a few recommendations for different stakeholders based on our findings. Work in schools in

challenging circumstances is influenced by multiple overlapping organizational and environmental contexts; recommendations, to reflect this fact, should implicate these different levels. Otherwise, recommendations risk reinforcing the inaccurate view that schools, and the efforts of those within them, can do it alone when trying to address the impact of poverty on schooling.

Recommendations Regarding Parent/Community Involvement

Parental involvement is not the same as membership on a school council or fundraising committee. Encouraging it, particularly in communities with histories of limited positive interaction between homes and schools, will require multiple strategies for formal and informal involvement on a range of topics. We recommend that educational policymakers at provincial and school district levels support local efforts to institutionalize connections between home and school. Importantly, such efforts will require a review of policies on school-based fundraising. Given that the schools most in need of addition resources (for field trips, for arts, for sports) are the very schools least able to raise them, the province, either by design or by default, allows an inequity to continue by denying students affected by poverty the same diversified and interesting educational experiences that better off children take for granted.

With parents and communities as with children, we recommend that educators identify and actively resist deficit-based explanations for the challenges faced in daily practice in every instance. The goal is not to replace a set of negative stereotypes with a set of positive stereotypes, but instead to use inquiry to determine what changes in practice will lead to more positive outcomes in schools in challenging circumstances. Concretely, we recommend that school professionals interact with parents respectfully and with an understanding that not all

parents have equal motivation or previous experience to make positive connections easy. Taking parental engagement seriously will require ongoing self-evaluation. What school routines and taken for granteds discourage parents from connecting with the school? Are there ways to engage parents in the development of school action plans or as curriculum collaborators? These questions are useful for teachers and for administrators at all levels.

Recommendations for the Creation of a Sense of Community in Schools

Efforts to build community within schools are important for many reasons, but they come with costs (time, additional voluntary effort) and risks (possible loss of focus on the classroom level or instruction). Leithwood's study of teacher working conditions (Leithwood, 2006) includes similar warnings about teachers' "volunteer" work. Popular "no excuses" recommendations for high poverty schools often tacitly suggest that individual, entrepreneurial effort on the part of teachers and administrators is all that is needed for school improvement. Our sense of both the published literature and the data from our own case studies is that such approaches are neither feasible at the large scale nor sustainable. Supporting teachers' work in challenging circumstances may mean having others take on some of the school-based community building efforts to free teachers up for classroom strategies. The notion that more inviting schools with less anonymity and greater sense of collective efficacy are better places to teach and learn is not new. Based on our interviews and schools visits, however, we recommend that educational stakeholders become more explicit in articulating an expanded definition of what a good school is. Only with such an expansion will the kinds of efforts that we saw—to build community and, in so doing, to improve a whole set of outcomes from attendance to morale to

trust and discipline—become more likely, because only then will they be seen as *part* of the work of school improvement, not an add-on to that work.

Recommendations Regarding the Social/Academic Needs of Students

Teachers and administrators in schools in challenging circumstances constantly make professional judgments about which priorities, academic or social/emotional, to emphasize during their work. We recommend that educational leaders at all organizational levels support intentional, systematic teacher inquiry into professional practice in order to generate insights regarding which approaches and under what conditions make more sense for improving educational opportunity for students affected by poverty. One finding from our study suggests that teachers, when given opportunity, create locally responsive ways to address problems of practice. To approach their work from an inquiry stance, teachers require time, resources, expertise, professional development and learning opportunities (eg. for teaching in small schools, for teaching in schools affected by poverty, for working with special education needs, for working with specific cultural groups, etc.). For that inquiry to have an impact on practice, it must also go hand in hand with explicit equity goals for improving the educational opportunities of students affected by poverty. Inquiry for its own sake is insufficient, as is inquiry that distracts from the imperatives of improving classroom curriculum and pedagogy. Although significant insights cannot be forced, they can be supported.

Questions for Further Investigation and Reflection

We observed that sustaining site-based inquiry is not free of cost, but it can assist in recognizing local challenges, proposing responses, and embedding successful practices better

into their school programs. Also, when schools are required to articulate success, they identify strengths as well as areas for growth.

We are left with several questions for further research: What issues regarding sustainability arise over time? What could the incorporation of student voice contribute to our understanding of school success? How do schools balance their site based inquiry with a need to look outside the school for knowledge, skills, critique and other tools needed for improvement? And how does teacher learning about poverty interact with teachers' classroom practice? We also are left with a question about strategies for school improvement in challenging circumstances. While recommending that schools acknowledge that incremental improvements can be important steps—because improvements are not all or nothing—we also acknowledge that a sense of urgency is needed to change professional practice. None of the schools we visited thought they were "there" yet but all could point to important successes that grew from an intentional focus on improving learning opportunities for student affected by poverty. What are some productive ways to balance high expectations for teaching and learning in challenging circumstances with recognition of the resource, workload, and timeframe issues involved in school change efforts?

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