Elementary School Principals in Low-Socioeconomic-Status Schools:

A University-Based Research Program Designed to Support Mandated Reform

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Abstract

This paper presents a reform initiative, the Supporting Montreal Schools Program (SMSP), created by the government of Quebec to assist 184 low-SES schools in Montreal implement seven reform strategies prescribed by the government. On a regular basis, the professional team of the SMSP engages in reflection and research with universities concerning one or more of the strategies they are charged with helping schools implement or the functioning of the SMSP more generally. The present research program is part of the team's ongoing reflection on a component of Strategy 4: Professional development of school administrators and the school team. In this paper, we detail results from this initial and subsequent studies on the work of principals in low performing schools. We also describe our collaborative relationship with the SMSP team, discuss the effectiveness of the SMSP in promoting the implementation of the seven government-mandated strategies, and critique the utility of our partnership with the SMSP and our use of that program as a vehicle for linking research to practice.

In Quebec, the majority of schools with students from disadvantaged neighbourhoods are concentrated in the Montréal area, with several characteristics defining the particular situation on the Island of Montréal: a wide range of academic success rates; a wide range of graduation rates; a marked academic delay among students from disadvantaged neighbourhoods; a concentration of factors specific to the Island of Montréal , which have cumulative and combinatory effects: a higher unemployment rate, a concentration of immigrant families, numerous single-parent families, two main linguistic communities, one Francophone, the other Anglophone, a significant network of funded private schools, … . It has also been observed that a significant number of students from disadvantaged neighbourhoods experience greater learning difficulties, lag farther behind their peers academically, are not as successful at consolidating learning, and are less successful overall. Fewer of these students obtain a diploma, and they often drop out of school earlier, meaning that they can find themselves without any qualifications and with fewer job opportunities (Gouvernement du Québec, 2005). These observations on the academic performance of students from disadvantaged neighbourhoods are in keeping with those made in similar urban areas elsewhere in Canada, the United States and even Europe (Berliner, 2005; Institut national de recherche pédagogique, 2007; Levin, 2004).

It is these observations and the particular situation of the Montréal urban area that led to the creation of the SMSP in 1997 as one of the courses of action of Quebec's educational reform (Gouvernement du Québec, 1997). This SMSP is responsible for offering services to184 low-socioeconomic-status elementary schools and in particular to school administrators so that they can implement strategies viewed as essential in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Its mandate is to provide support to the three French and two English school boards on the Island of Montréal by helping them improve the success of students from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. By

implementing this program, the government recognized the unique challenges of low-

socioeconomic-status schools, particularly the educational challenges facing teachers and school

principals.

To fulfill its mandate, the SMSP identified about 180 elementary (about 57 000 students)

schools with the lowest socioeconomic status on the Island of Montréal using widely recognized

indicators (e.g., low income, mother's school attendance, etc.). These are the schools that were

selected to receive financial and professional support from the SMSP.

The SMSP proposes seven strategies that are considered to have a positive impact on the

educational paths, learning, and motivation of students from disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Because of their positive impact, these strategies are compulsory. Considering that these

strategies are large, complex and never completely implemented (new students, new personnel,

on-going professional development,…), the target schools must ensure that the strategies are

implemented gradually and in an ongoing process, while taking into account their own situation

and the specific needs of their students. Let's take a quick look at these strategies in order to get

a complete picture of this intervention (Gouvernement du Québec, 2007a; 2007b):

> Strategy 1 *Instructional interventions that promote learning and success for all*: For a
> school team, this involves acknowledging that every child from disadvantaged areas is able
> to learn and then establishing the conditions that will ensure that the child is learning
> effectively. For the team, these conditions include having an open attitude towards all
> students and their families, maintaining high expectations for these students, gaining
> knowledge and understanding of the neighbourhood in which they work, keeping
> knowledge up-to-date on best practices for learning, and for school principals, creating
> administrative practices that centre on learning for all, etc.

> Strategy 2 *Development of reading competency*: Each school team has to ensure that
> emergent reading and writing are introduced at the preschool level and that the necessary
> conditions for optimal progression of reading competency at the elementary level are put in
> place so that every student is immersed in a culture of writing.

Strategy 3 *The guidance-oriented approach*: The goal of this strategy is to have school teams introduce steps that help students assume responsibility for their own educational paths by learning to know themselves, by recognizing their aptitudes and interests with regard to vocational choices, and by developing a vision of their own future.

Strategy 4 *Professional development of school administrators and the school team*: School principals and school teams must recognize their need for ongoing professional development and its impact on student learning and must also have opportunities for ongoing professional development.

Strategy 5 *Access to cultural resources*: Given that cultural resources are virtually absent from disadvantaged areas and that, as a result, children in these areas have practically no access to cultural resources, the goal of this strategy is to have school teams and students visit cultural venues and events in Montréal to instil students with a taste for the arts and sciences and to promote visits to cultural organizations. The goal of this strategy is also to enrich education by creating links between classroom teaching, cultural objects and people involved in the arts and sciences.

Strategy 6 *Cooperative links with students' families*: Intended to bring families and schools closer together, this strategy involves school teams facilitating closer ties between school agents and family members and promoting parental involvement in children's educational success.

Strategy 7 *Cooperative links with the community*: School teams must ensure that participants from the school along with the family and other community partners (community, social, cultural, institutional or economic organizations) work together to implement the necessary conditions for students' overall development.

All target schools have to implement these seven strategies. School teams are responsible for the implementation, which is coordinated by the school principal and supported by the SMSP's professional team. These strategies are not meant to be implemented in isolation; they should rather be seen as an integrated whole serving to improve students' situations and learning processes. The reality of a school that caters to students from disadvantaged neighbourhoods is so complex that it requires a coherent and systemic intervention process. These strategies are interdependent and should be combined with the methods that are put in place to attain the objectives of the school and the objective of the SMSP, which is:

> To promote the personal and educational success of students from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, while taking into account their needs and characteristics, and contributing to the creation of a committed educational community (Gouvernement du Québec, 2005, p. 5).

To achieve this, schools benefit from the financial, human and material resources of the SMSP. In addition to basic funding and specific and additional allocations given to the schools, they can also benefit from collective services such as professional development networks, educational tools produced by the SMSP, an interregional bank of interpreters, various forms of support offered by the SMSP's professional team, as well as research and development activities in collaboration with university researchers.

On a regular basis, the professional team of the SMSP engages in reflection and research with universities concerning one or more strategies or the functioning of the SMSP. The present research program is part of the team's ongoing reflection on a major component of Strategy 4 (*Professional development of school administrators and the school team*): this strategy refers to the professional development that should be offered to school administrators. The reflection process began with the following question: what does the work of an elementary school principal in a low-socioeconomic-status school consist of exactly? It was necessary to answer this question to better understand the work of school principals in disadvantaged areas so that adequate professional development activities could be offered to school principals. As is usually the case for the SMSP, university researchers with a clear interest in answering this question in a collaborative way were called upon to work on the program. It was decided that the entire process for this research program would be collaboratively developed, and decisions would also be made collaboratively. We will now look at the research program itself by outlining the

context, describing the goals and methodology, and then discussing the results and impacts of the two studies that have now been conducted.

Context

Managing a school is a complex endeavour that requires specific competencies (Dupuis, 2004; Lapointe and Gauthier, 2005). Moreover, school leadership has been consistently cited as one of the most important features of high-performing schools (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, Waters and McNulty, 2005; Reeves, 2006). In addition, managing a school is now taking place in a context of change—change that the school principal must actively promote. As Fullan argues, not only does the school principal have to be an instructional leader, he or she will also have to act as a change agent (Fullan, 2001; 2003). Furthermore, it has often been observed that change in schools does not take place in a lasting way (Desimone, 2002; Tyack and Cuban, 1995). This is why some researchers have also advocated for change to be widespread and sustainable (Hargreaves and Fink, 2004). As a result, change is an inherent part of the school context, and principals have to both manage and promote it. But how does this demand for change affect the management of low-socioeconomic-status schools? Are these schools different to manage from other schools? Do they require different attitudes and competencies on the part of principals? Is leading change in these schools different from leading change in more advantaged schools?

Several studies have identified the characteristics of low-socioeconomic-status schools whose students were achieving at higher levels (Haberman, 1999; Kannapel, Clements, Taylor and Hibpshman, 2005; Lyman and Villani, 2004; Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll and Russ, 2004). These characteristics are common to all studies and include: a clear and shared vision of the goals to be attained; high expectations; pedagogical leadership; a clear orientation with regard to

student learning; a safe environment and a climate of openness; the collective work of teachers; communication and work with parents; a commitment from the community; improvement of pedagogical practices; and the production and use of data on the functioning of the school in order to facilitate its administration. However, we know little regarding school principals' behaviours that are necessary to develop these characteristics or the competencies and attitudes they require to manage a low-socioeconomic-status school (Haberman and Dill, 1999).

While some researchers identify specific competencies that are necessary to manage a low-socioeconomic-status school (Haberman, 1999; Haberman and Dill, 1999), others point out that not only is the school principal's leadership an important factor in students' success but that leadership itself is even more important and has an even greater impact on the most difficult and disadvantaged milieus (Chapman and Harris, 2001; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom, 2004). Others also underline the aspect of social justice and equity that should characterise the leadership of principals of low-socioeconomic-status schools (Riester, Pursh and Skrla, 2002; Scheurish and Skrla, 2003; Shields, 2010).

An important body of research comes from case studies on successful school principals (Leithwood, 2005), on successful school leadership in challenging or high-poverty schools (Jacobson,??) and on the improvement of schools facing difficult or challenging circumstances (Chapman and Harris, 2004). Leithwood (2005) reports on comparative international findings that corroborate Leithwood and Riehl's own results (2005). They showed that four core practices are present in leaders who are effective: (1) setting directions, (2) developing people, (3) redesigning the organization, and (4) managing the instructional program. Interestingly,

Leithwood and Riehl (2005) have found effective leaders exhibiting those practices even in the most challenging contexts.

Jacobson and his colleagues have also used Leithwood and Riehl's core leadership practices and conducted research on leadership in challenging schools (Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson, and Ylimaki, 2007; Jacobson, Johnson, Ylimaki and Giles, 2005; Ylimaki, Jacobson, and Drysdale, 2007). Using case study methodology, they found again and again these core practices to be present in successful leadership in US schools (Jacobson, Johnson, Ylimaki and Giles, 2005), but also in Australian and English schools (Ylimaki, Jacobson, and Drysdale, 2007) and in high-poverty schools that showed improvement in student achievement after the arrival of a new principal (Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson, and Ylimaki, 2007). Jacobson and his colleagues found that although these principals differed greatly in their leadership styles, they would all create a safe, inviting environment, set a vision, maintain high expectations, foster best instructional practices, promote professional development and provide individualized and collective support for the staff. Jacobson et al (2007) concluded that even though we understand now the core practices of effective school leaders, "we know less about how individuals acquire experience of their practical application". (p. 314). Nevertheless, they recommend training programs give consideration to how core practices apply in high-poverty schools. However interesting, this recommendation does not take into account school principals' baseline behavior, that is, where do typical principals start from to acquire these core practices. This is the main question when we are to implement professional development for school principals.

Studying improvement in schools facing challenging contexts, Chapman and Harris (2004; Harris and Chapman, 2004) found effective strategies very similar to Leithwood and Riehl's (2005) core practices and Jacobson and colleagues' effective practices: effective leaders improve

the environment, they generate positive relationships, maintain a strong focus on teaching and learning, build bridges with families and the outside community, support professional development, exert a leadership that sets a vision and clear expectations, and create an information-rich environment (Chapman and Harris, 2004). Although these strategies are all present in effective transforming schools, Harris and Chapman (2004) caution us to develop change programs for the schools that would contain the same strategies implemented in the same way. They argue that school contexts are so complex and different that programs aimed at school change should also be differentiated. The same should apply to school principals: they should not be given all the strategies described above to implement in their school. Rather, they should be allowed to develop strategies to better understand the particularities of their milieu.

This is why research on typical principals' practices should be considered. In fact this kind of research could help understand principals' professional individual needs to develop as effective leaders. Yet research with typical school principals remains limited, and it is hard to extract from the research that does exist the principles that would lend themselves to the practice and training of school administrators or, as Chapman and Harris (2001) wrote, "a blueprint for change". Moreover, there has been no research taking into account the particular context of Québec's schools and the characteristics of its low-SES schools. This is what prompted us to undertake this collaborative research program, as intended by Desgagné (Desgagné, Bednarz, Couture, Poirier and Lebuis, 2001), whereby practitioners are fully integrated into the research team. We will describe here two consecutive studies conducted in Montréal, along with their main results.

The first study

Goals and methodology

The goals of this first study are: 1) to identify, describe and document the characteristics and particularities of managing a low-socioeconomic-status school in the Montréal context as reported by principals from these milieus; and 2) to identify the professional development needs of school administrators in Montréal in order to suggest formulas for professional development. As one can see, the first goal is more of a descriptive process, given that there is not much research on the subject. The second goal is based more on development and is intended to impact directly on the professional development of school principals.

Collaborative research

This research was undertaken in collaboration with the SMSP of the MELS and the school principals that work in schools targeted by the SMSP.

Following Liberman's idea (1986), collaborative research consists of performing research "with" rather than "on" practitioners, or the school principals and the SMSP's professional team. We therefore worked with school principals to understand what exactly their work in low-socioeconomic-status schools entails. With this in mind, research data was compiled in collaboration with the researchers, the school principals, and the SMSP's professional team and was produced to shed light on a problematic educational situation from the school principals' point of view in order to delineate the components of a solution (Van der Maren and Poirier, 2007). Considering that the culture of school principals and that of the professionals who support them is often different, we believe that this co-construction establishes three simultaneous cultures: one stemming from the researchers, one stemming from the professional team of the SMSP, and one stemming from the school principals themselves. This collaboration of three different cultures meant that multiple stakeholders validated the results, which reinforced their

relevance (Desgagné, Bednarz, Couture, Poirier and Lebuis, 2001). In fact, agents from these three cultures had a say in every decision that had to be made during the research project.

To carry out the research, the team—which was composed of professionals from the SMSP and included school principals, the principal investigator, and a research professional—first identified the goals to attain and then developed the methodology, recruited principals, formed focus groups, conducted interviews, held follow-up meetings, prepared and presented the literature review on high-performing low-economic-status schools, and compiled data. Each step gave rise to decisions that were made collaboratively, which ensured that this research project was performed for and with the milieu itself. The results were analysed by the researchers and then presented regularly to the other members of the research team to obtain their feedback to ensure that the results were analysed in a relevant way.

Participants and data collection method

Forty-five (45) principals of low-socioeconomic-status elementary schools belonging to the two English (6 principals, 13%) and three French (39 principals, 87%) school boards on the Island of Montréal participated in semi-directed group interviews (focus groups). The French school principals were divided randomly into groups of five or six, which ensured that there was equivalent representation from the three French school boards in each of the seven Francophone focus groups. A group of principals from the English schools was also created. This is also representative of the French and English elementary schools with low SES on the island of Montreal whereas French schools account for 88% of the schools and English schools for 12%. Each group of principals participated in two sessions of approximately two hours and thirty minutes each with the same group.

It should be noted that one objective of the research team was to recruit 24 principals (4 focus groups) for this research project, for a non-random sample of approximately 20% of the pool of school principals targeted by the SMSP. Close to fifty principals responded to the invitation. We decided not to refuse anyone and to expand our sample, given: 1) the clear commitment of these principals to research and 2) the fact that this collaborative research activity also included a professional development component for school principals.

At the first meeting, we interviewed the participants on their work as principals of low-socioeconomic-status schools, using a framework of the major themes to be discussed (see figure 1). Essentially, the questions addressed: 1) the participants' management tasks (educational and administrative aspects) and the differences they perceive between a low-socioeconomic-status school and a school in a regular environment in terms of management; 2) their attributes (skills, attitudes, qualities, strengths, vision); 3) their perceptions of the characteristics of disadvantaged areas. The issue of differences between schools in term of management was addressed because the majority of principals in this study have already worked in other more advantaged milieus, they regularly meet with colleagues from diverse SES schools and they specifically addressed this issue, being at ease to compare their work day with their colleagues'.

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Insert figure 1 about here

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At the second meeting, about one month later, we presented the group with a summary of what was stated during the first meeting along with a brief summary of the findings of a literature review that we had performed on low-socioeconomic status but high-performing schools (Archambault and Harnois, 2006). This summary is presented in figure 2. We then

invited the school principals to give feedback on what we had presented and to make comments on the findings in light of their own answers during the first focus group. This "confrontation" was conducted in a spirit of collaboration and enabled the principals to better define their realities and to considerably enrich their answers.

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Insert figure 2 about here

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Results and impact

All focus groups where recorded with a digital audio device. The data collected in the focus groups was then transcribed and analysed for content using *Atlas.ti V 5.0* software. The results point first to four main elements that were emphasized by principals working in low-socioeconomic-status schools. Second, school principal's reactions to the presentation of our literature review on performing schools will be presented. Third, we describe interesting spin-off of the collaboration between researchers and practitioners. But let's take a look at each one of the four main elements first. Unless otherwise stated, the results presented here were agreed upon by the vas majority of principals.

Extra burden

Principals consider that there is extra burden put on them. They have to work longer hours compared to principals in regular schools; the complexity, diversity and heterogeneity of disadvantaged areas are greater than in other areas. Poverty brings many problems like : basic needs that are unfulfilled, low education levels of the members of the families, deficiencies in physical and mental health, social isolation, difficult access to physical and mental health resources, etc; a feeling of urgency meaning that principals have to solve problems now and

without delay; a feeling of the unexpected whereas principals are constantly solicited to

accomplish tasks that were not planned; the number of students with learning difficulties, that

seems much greater in disadvantaged areas; the increased work load in terms of human resources

and financial management, given the fact that low SES schools receive additional funding and

hire additional personnel that the principal has to manage; additional work to engage parental

involvement that seems so difficult to obtain in poverty areas; and the need to work with many

community partners, many of whom simply do not exist in more advantaged areas. As a

reminder, principals did compare their jobs with one another during the interviews. Many of

them had worked in more regular or advantaged schools and were able to say that their work day

was longer in their low SES school.

   Special competencies and attitudes

   Fulfilling the role of a principal requires special competencies and attitudes that school

principals described. First, they insisted on organizational skills, given the extra burden placed

on them and the ability to prioritize. The feeling of having to solve every problem and to solve

them immediately has to be counterbalanced by this competency to decide what problem or

situation is a priority and what problem can wait for a solution, in order for principals to organize

their work. By the same token, the ability to delegate tasks and responsibilities helps them to

concentrate on real priorities. Principals talked about the importance of understanding the

contextual reality of the school's milieu, particularly as it concerns poverty, and the ability to

establish relationships with people from varying backgrounds. They also need analysis skills,

problem solving skills and the ability to manage in a participatory way. As leaders, it is

important for them to establish a vision for their school and for their personnel and to act as a

change agent. There are attitudes that they find inescapable: being available and ready to listen, being committed, open, flexible and adaptable, and show empathy and respect for everyone.

Leadership for social justice

The principals emphasized the need to take on a leadership role based on social justice. Upon reflection, they acknowledged that there are misperceptions and prejudices against children and their families living in poverty. They see themselves as fighting misperceptions and prejudices in terms of the ways families live and in terms of the potential for success of all youth, for instance. They also see themselves as leading this fight against prejudices for their school team. Knowing and understanding the characteristics of disadvantaged areas and in particular of the environment of their school is viewed as a good way to fight against prejudices, so as working with parents and working with the community. Their leadership for social justice also exerts in promoting equity and not tolerating segregation or marginalization (Archambault and Harnois, 2009).

Professional development for principals

As principals have identified competencies required to manage a school in disadvantaged areas, they also identified competencies that need to be acquired. The considered knowledge and understanding of the environments of the disadvantaged area of their school and of the realities of the families of children that attend their school as an ongoing process given the fact that non of them had grown or was living in disadvantaged areas. They also needed to develop communication skills with adults, skills that are so important but never developed in their training. These skills are important to help them develop partnerships and cooperation with parents and the community so as to share the responsibility for children's learning. Even if they found it necessary to exert leadership for social justice, they acknowledged that they did not

know much about the best ways to ensure equity and justice. Finally, many principals stated that they needed training in the management of their additional budgets. All these competencies that have to be developed make a point for professional development for school principals. Participating in this study was seen by the principals as being an occasion for professional development and they asked that a network be created and further meetings be arranged.

Principal's reaction to the literature review on performing schools

Principals appreciated the summary of the literature review that we presented to them (see figure 2). This research content was coherent and sounded familiar to them. It was like a refresher course to them. Nevertheless they found themselves to be responsible for the implementation of these findings in their school and they saw this as an enormous task difficult to accomplish given the extra burden already placed on them.

An interesting finding from these reactions is that at the first meeting, only some of the principals talked about the importance of leadership for learning. They talked abundantly about their work as described before but rarely talked about learning, their impact on learning or the supervision of instruction. At the second meeting, we asked them why this was the case, given the fact that in Québec, the school reform's goal was to enhance learning for every youth and to ensure success for all of them. Moreover, the literature review we were presenting to them made it clear that in high-poverty high-performance schools, principals give priority to learning and to supporting teacher development and effectiveness.

They all agreed with the fact that learning should be the priority in a school. But some insisted on the fact that learning should not encompass only subject matters but should be broadly defined to take into account the physical, social and behavioural conditions necessary so as learning to occur. For instance, principals said that a child must feel secure in the school and

must have eaten in order to learn. Moreover, teachers must create a relationship with a child before he or she can learn. Success should also be broadly defined if we want success for all.

On the other hand, many of the principals found administrative tasks to be overwhelming. They regularly have to write reports for the school board, they have to be on many committees to ensure community involvement and they have to quickly solve problems. However, in the end, most of them deplored the fact that they had not enough time to devote to the amelioration of learning. They also contended that they should exert more a leadership for learning.

Spin-offs for the milieu

Regarding the different kinds of spin-offs for the milieu, these ranged from publications to training. For example, we produced documents based on the literature review on high-performing disadvantaged schools, including both a research version and a professional version which aimed at reaching the wide diversity of school agents. These documents are presently distributed by the SMSP and the professional versions can be found throughout Quebec. They serve as a basis for the educational projects of certain schools and are used as professional development tools for school principals and teachers. They were also the subject of presentations to school principals as well as to decision-makers of the school boards and of the MELS.

This literature review also enabled us to reaffirm the seven strategies selected by the SMSP. These strategies, which were taken from the scientific literature dating back nearly twelve years, have turned out to be relevant to today's reality. The scientific literature also confirmed their vital importance for disadvantaged schools.

The data and research findings were then integrated into the intervention orientations of the SMSP's professional team, mainly in terms of the priority given to learning, the maintenance of

high expectations for students, and the fight against prejudices against people living in disadvantaged areas.

Moreover, the principals who participated in the focus groups asked to have further professional development sessions to follow-up on these meetings. In response to this request, the SMSP created two new professional development groups for principals. In addition, pedagogical consultants and teachers are also participating in professional development groups that address the same issues as the ones mentioned by the school principals.

Finally, the data from the literature review and the research results were integrated into the courses offered by the Université de Montréal to school administrators. A new course on managing low-socioeconomic-status schools is currently being devised and tested with school principals.

All of these spin-offs support SMSP's Strategy 4 for the ongoing professional development of school principals and their school teams.

The second study

As an offshoot of the first study, the principals produced reflections on their practices, which were extensive and elaborate. But we have noticed that principals' statements did not include a description of their practices. For example, stating that managing a school is more arduous due to additional budgets and personnel does not describe the way this added burden is experienced in the principal's life. By the same token, simply indicating that learning is a priority does not describe how this priority is applied in principals' daily work. Furthermore, principals' reactions of the second meeting does not show what events, demands or choices impinge on their role as leaders for learning.

The second study was implemented to answer some of the questions the first study left unanswered. Let's take a look at the goals, methodology and some results of that study.

Goals

As in the first study, the goals, methodological tools and development of the research project are being designed in collaboration with the professionals in the SMSP, some of whom are also participating in data collection and analysis. Essentially, this second study pursues the same goals as the first one: 1) to identify, describe and document the characteristics and particularities of managing a low-socioeconomic-status school in the Montréal context; and 2) to identify the professional development needs of school administrators in Montréal and to suggest formulas for professional development. But here, instead of examining the discourse of school principals we will work with what they do, their actual behaviours. In fact, it is focused on the observation of principals' *practices* in low-socioeconomic-status schools.

Methodology

This study is basically descriptive. It is multi-method and combines quantitative and qualitative data (Archambault, Garon and Harnois, 2010). Essentially we have observed the behaviours of school principals who self-observed and we talked with them about these observations.

Participants

Twelve elementary school principals from low-socioeconomic-status neighbourhoods participated in this study, on a voluntary basis. Two of them came from an English school board and the other ten were from the three French school boards on the island of Montréal. All of them were also participants in the first study. There were ten females and two males.

Data collection method

In this study, we have used observation, self-observation (Spillane, Camburn and Pareja, 2007) and interviews. First, we observed (shadowing) the twelve principals on a continuous basis from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm for three consecutive days. Four research assistants were trained to write down everything that was happening during these periods. They were provided with an observation canvas with large categories, given that this was the first time we used observation. These categories were as follows: date, time, place in the school, person with whom the principal was working, descriptions of the task, activity or event, description of the work environment, other information. It became rapidly evident that there were so many events taking place in a principal's work day and all of them were not so explicit (e.g. phone call). In order for the research assistants to be able to categorize the event, principals were asked to tell the assistant what was happening.

Second, principals were required to self-observe using a pocket computer with a time sampling method for ten consecutive work days (three of these days are also observation days). We used with permission the questionnaire from Spillane, Camburn et Pareja (2007) and a similar methodology: the questionnaire was in the pocket computer. The computer beeped 10 times a day and each time, the principal had to answer the questionnaire (1½ to 2 minutes). The questionnaire has 25 questions with choice answers or yes or no answers and bear upon type of task the principal is engaged in, place, person with whom the principal is working.

Third, at the end of each of the three observation days, research assistant interviewed the principals in order to clarify information or to add new information to the observations. Copies of principals' day planners were also collected.

Data analysis

Data from observations were transcribed on a WORD software format and analyzed

qualitatively with QDA Miner software. Mainly, they were transformed into duration percentage

(tasks) and frequency (person, place…). Self-observation data were first transformed into

EXCEL software format and computed quantitatively into frequency percentages. Interview and

day planner's data came to complement or supplement frequency and duration data.

Results and impact

The main findings pertain to the frequency and duration with which principals perform

administrative, educational, and social tasks. Here, we have kept the self-observation measures

for the three days where there was also observation.

Frequency of the tasks

Table 1 presents these findings for each principal and also the mean ($\bar{x}$) for all the

principals. Results show that principals' tasks (mean for self-observation) are mostly

administrative (69%) and that less than ¼ of their tasks are educational in nature (21%). Social

tasks account for only 8%. Even if this research has only 12 participants, results are

astonishingly alike those from the Spillane, Camburn and Pareja (2007) study conducted with 52

principals, also from underprivileged schools. The administrative tasks accounted for 65%

whereas 22% of the tasks were educational ones, and 9%, social ones. This amazing similarity

allows us to present quantitative results in spite of our limited sample size.

If we look at each principal, we see that there are marked differences between them.

Administrative tasks range from 40% to 100% and educational tasks range inversely from 56%

to 0%. For principals P3 and P7 more than half of the tasks are educational. But for P1, P2 and

P9, nearly all of their tasks (this is the case for P9) are administrative.

Duration of the tasks

If we look at the duration measure (observation), we see that principals spend most of their time (56%) in administrative tasks while only 30% of their time is devoted to educational tasks. Here again, there are important differences between principals. Administrative tasks account for 40 to 73% of the time whereas educational tasks range inversely from 53% to 21% of the time. It is also not surprising that P3 and P7 spend more time in educational tasks than their colleagues because they had also more educational tasks in self-observation. Not surprisingly, P1, P2 and P9 are among the principals who spend less time in educational tasks.

Presentation of the findings to the principals

We then prepared individual reports of the findings for each of the principals and met also individually to present them with the findings and to gather their feelings about the findings and their commentaries about the research (observation, self-observation, questionnaire, data recorder, etc). The interesting finding here is that when exposed to their individual results, all principals deplored the fact that they did not devote enough time to educational tasks. They were surprised by the fact that there were so many administrative tasks and they spent so much time accomplishing them. Here is a translated sample of what principals said:

> I am not surprised with the findings but it's horrible. I am sad because I do not do as much educational tasks as I wish to… You have to be quite delinquent with administrative tasks… When you start working as a school principal, you don't know what is important or not, on what you can let go… For me, you do administrative tasks outside school time, between 3 pm and 7 pm… I hope I will be able to do the contrary one day: a clear dominance of educational tasks! (*Je ne suis pas surprise des résultats mais c'est épouvantable. Je suis malheureuse car je ne fais pas d'éducatif comme je le souhaiterais... Faut être délinquant avec l'administratif... Quand tu commences comme direction, tu ne*

sais pas ce qui est important ou non, ce sur quoi tu peux lâcher prise… Pour moi,

l'administratif se fait en dehors des heures de classes, entre 15h et 19h…J'espère vivre un

jour l'inverse : une nette prédominance de l'éducatif!) (P7)

I am not surprised because school principals' job is much of an administrative nature. Yes

there are discrepancies among days… It is my first year as school principal… Now I do

less administrative tasks, I see things coming, my time management is better. The sense of

urgency is less present… The first year, I wanted to respond to everything. You learn. (*Je*

ne suis pas surprise car la tâche de la direction est beaucoup administrative…Oui, il y a

des écarts entre les journées...C'était ma première année comme direction d'école.

Maintenant, je fais moins d'administratif, je vois davantage venir les choses, je gère mieux

mon agenda. La notion d'urgence est moins grande… La première année, je voulais

répondre à tout. Tout n'est pas urgent comme les gens le prétendent. Ça s'apprend.) (P8)

As we can see, principals hope to accomplish more educational tasks and sometimes it

happens as with this new school principal who learned from her first year as principal.

General discussion

In our first study, 45 school principals from low socio-economic elementary schools talked

about the characteristics of their work and the extra burden placed on them given the difficulties

of their milieu, about the competencies and attitudes necessary to manage a school in a deprived

area, about the necessity to exert a leadership for social justice and about the importance to keep

informed and refreshed by continuous professional development. One thing that came to our

attention is that school principals didn't give much place in their discourse to leading their school

for learning. It seems paradoxical given that research constantly points to "learning is the priority" as a choice exerted by low SES performing schools, and given the orientations of change taken by the educational reform in Québec that aims at making every child succeed. When we showed principals this paradox, they were first amazed, then they acknowledged that they didn't talked much about learning and that they should be more concerned with learning and instruction but found reasons that prevent them to do so: they are overwhelmed by administrative demands and do not have much time to supervise instruction and to support learning, and children need to be cared for physically and socially and not only cognitively, etc. However, a few voices were heard who said that learning was a priority and nothing else, be it administrative demands, would come to distract them from this priority. Those voices were in a so small number that we want to get back to them in a further study. So we introduced a plan in our research program to study those principals who seemed unusual but, at the same time, really convinced.

In our second study, we observed 12 of the 45 principals from the first study and they self-observed to go further in describing school principals' daily work. We found that the vast majority of their tasks (69%) were of an administrative nature and that they spent much of their time on those administrative tasks (56%), putting aside educational tasks. These findings tend to confirm what we found in the first study: while learning and instruction seem important to them, they do not have much time to devote to learning and instruction, at least not as much time as they want to. Yet, here again, when confronted to the findings, principals were surprised by the disproportion that existed between the types of tasks and many said they should do more educational tasks. In other words, although when we talked with them, principals were aware of this involuntary disproportion between educational tasks and administrative tasks, it was as if the

findings from observation and self-observation that we presented to them were worse than what they would have expected. This finding, the surprise of the principals and the realization that they should be more learning-centered is similar to the one from the first study. It is not surprising given that the principals from the second study were also participating in the second study. Nevertheless, it gives power to the idea that principals in general have a more administrative than educational attitude about their tasks at the same time that they would like to be more educational. However, when asked to identify tasks that they considered educational, they struggled to find some. So it may be not surprising that they overestimated administrative tasks in their self-observation with respect with our own observation.

Another interesting finding here is the similarity between principals' discourse and the observation and self-observation of their daily behaviour at work. By each of the three measures, administrative tasks takes more place (from twice to more than three times) than educational tasks. Why is it so? Aside from the reasons given by many principals, one could offer other hypotheses or ask other questions. For example, we met a principal who told us that everything she did in her school was educational. For her, it was not a matter of task or behaviour but of the way she approached what was happening and what she was doing in her school. She believed in education and acted accordingly. This should be a subject of a future study: how could the overwhelming attitude of the principal color his or her behaviour?

On the other hand, given their overestimation of administrative tasks, a question is do principals really know the difference between administrative and educational tasks? Or do they know what an educational task is? Moreover, one could ask if principals possess the competencies to manage their school educationally. Have they been trained to ensure an educational vision, to give directions and educational orientations, to supervise instruction, to

support professional development aimed at bringing best practices in the school? If we answer no to these questions, would not it be understandable that principals be more at ease with administrative tasks?

Our studies are for sure limited in terms of sample size, and therefore, we should be cautious with any generalization. Another limit resides in the coding of tasks; what is administrative and what is educational is still an arbitrary choice for some tasks. This pitfall has already been addressed (Jones and Connally, 2001; Noordegraf and Stewart, 2000), but we want to overcome it in forthcoming studies by the triangulation of data.

These are questions we will address in future research. In fact, we have three other studies going on. The first one consist of a re-analysis of the second study data; because there were some discrepancies among principals' behaviours, we discovered that we could identify an educational profile (2 principals) where principals exhibited more educational tasks, and an administrative one (3 principals) where principals' behaviours were more of an administrative kind. We will try to better differentiate principals' behaviours in order to delineate more precisely what each principal do or avoid doing. We will also observe more precisely what school principals do as instructional leaders and as leaders for social justice. Along with the emphasis they place on learning, this leadership for social justice was indeed considered important by principals. We will therefore refine the observation and self-observation processes to obtain more precise descriptions of principals' behaviours in terms of the priority placed on learning and the leadership they exhibit in terms of social justice.

Furthermore, we wish to compare the data that we have collected so far to the findings from other research on principals who are not from low-socioeconomic-status schools. Indeed, even if principals in our studies compared their work with the one of colleagues in more

advantaged schools, we would feel more comfortable to make these comparisons with data from

principals working in more advantaged schools.

One final point will bring us to the very beginning of this paper. It has to do with the seven

strategies that have to be implemented in the target schools of the SMSP. It is interesting to note

that even if our research program was implemented to work on Strategy 4 (*Professional*

development of school administrators and the school team), we were constantly brought to link

this strategy to other strategies of the SMSP. For example, when we discussed learning as a

priority with principals, we were directly connected to Strategy 1, *Instructional interventions that*

promote learning and success for all and indirectly with Strategy 2 *Development of reading*

competency, given that many schools have special reading programs. Talking about their work,

principals also clearly expressed the need to protect social justice in their school, to fight

prejudices and false beliefs against children, their families and their communities. Again, this

aspect of their work is connected to Strategy 6, *Cooperative links with students' families*, and

Strategy 7 *Cooperative links with the community*. So we can say that the majority of SMSP's

strategies are directly linked to our research program.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this collaboration between researchers and the education agents, school

principals and professional resources of the SMSP was fruitful for the researchers, as we were

able to advance knowledge on the management of low-socioeconomic-status schools on the part

of typical principals; what we do find in the literature is above all research with exceptional

principals. This research is of interest but it is difficult to extract from it strategies to effect

change in typical principals. On the contrary, our research enabled us to better identify

principals' needs for professional development that benefited the SMSP. Not only did SMSP

offer principals new professional development groups but they used research findings in their training. Moreover, the SMSP was able to immediately integrate the research data into the practice of its professionals and into the professional development already provided to various education agents, particularly school principals, who developed a desire for development through their participation in the research project. Finally, the researchers noted a greater interest on the part of principals to participate in research, an impact that cannot be overstated.

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Figure 1

Framework for the focus group interviews with school principals

_____

1. Management tasks

Describe managing a Low SES School

- Educational aspects
    - Curriculum, School organisation
    - School staff professional development
    - Managing Change
- Administrative aspects
    - Daily Administration
    - Financial management
    - Human resources management
    - Material resources management
- Humane aspects

How is managing a Low SES School different than other schools

How is managing a Low SES School similar to other schools

2. Principal leadership attributes (Competencies, attitudes, qualities, vision, strengths)

Does managing a Low SES School needs particular competencies

- Which ones?
- How do they differ from other or more privileged schools?

What strength should a principal have to work in a LSESS?

- Why are they less essential in other or more privileged schools?

What is your vision of a LSESS?

What are the main reasons, for someone choosing to work in a LSESS?

What advice would you give to a new principal working in a LSESS?

3. Characteristics of a low socio-economic area

What are the main characteristics of the people and of the community attached to your school?

How is your community different from other schools?

Figure 2

Summary of the literature review on performing lo SES schools

_____

Clear and shared vision

     Strong, voiced and well discussed vision

     Main focus is on learning

     Aiming to reducing socials inequalities

     Diversity are respected

School Environment

     School: a safe place

     A welcoming environment for student, staff, parents and the community

Strong focus on learning

     Orientations and direction on students learning

     Strong believe that every student can learn

     Setting high expectations for all students

     Managing practices that influence learning

     Learning is the main focus of staff supervision

     On going assessment to support student learning

     Importance is given to reading to learn

Moral, ethical and leadership for social justice

     Morally engaged (to make a difference for the students)

     Knowledge of the school environment

     Understanding the socials inequalities and the questions regarding poverty

     Rejection of false beliefs and prejudices

     To be an agent of change: flexibility, managing the unexpected

School organization that support learning

     Cycles

     School transportation

     Schedule- Calendar

Space - Time

Collaboration and team work

Staff development

Teaching and monitoring of students

Shared leadership

Collective sense of accountability

Parent partnership

Opening the school to parents

Participation of parents to their children school life

Community partnership

Developing partnership

Collective responsibility of education

Staff development

On going improvement of teaching competencies and principal leadership

Openness to change and innovation

Knowledge of the school environment and social inequalities

Table 1

Results from the second study. Percentage of duration (Observation) and frequency (Self-observation) for each category of tasks accomplished by school principals in disadvantaged areas

	Educational		Administrative		Social	
Principal	Observation	Self observation	Observation	Self observation	Observation	Self observation
P1	28	5	53	86	17	9
P2	21	4	66	92	12	4
P3	53	56	40	40	5	4
P4	20	29	64	58	11	13
P5	33	18	51	73	2	9
P6	33	-	52	-	13	-
P7	40	50	48	42	7	8
P8	24	16	73	64	1	8
P9	42	0	55	100	2	0
P10	25	27	43	50	1	15
P11	29	9	58	76	0	6
P12	23	13	68	77	1	10
$\bar{x}$	31	21	56	69	6	8