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A Montréal School for All

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Leading a School in a Disadvantaged Area

What emerges from a review of the
scientific and professional literature

(An update of themes 1 and 2 from the document of 2006)

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Introduction

This document presents the key points that emerge from the scientific and professional literature on the work of school principals in disadvantaged areas. In 2006, the Supporting Montréal Schools Program's team (now, A Montréal School for All) along with the professors from the Department of *Administration et fondements de l'éducation* of the Université de Montréal, studied the role of the school principal in a disadvantaged area. The group, as it was, agreed that there appeared to be differences between how this type of school was run with the way others were run. According to some school principals, the differences on the ground were obvious. For others, they were minimal or non-existent. Thus, the hypothesis or intuition whether there was a difference merited investigation. This, of course, led to the questions: Is running a school in a disadvantaged area different? If yes, how is it different? But first of all, what is the role of a school principal in a disadvantaged area?

Based on these questions, the group members collaborated to establish research projects aimed at defining and describing exactly what it means "To lead a school in a disadvantaged area" and in what way it is different from leading another type of school. The data that was produced was distributed to school principals and used to create support mechanisms or training that were better adapted to their needs. Other research into the subject that explores the question further is ongoing.

During the first stage of this work, a review of the scientific and professional literature on the subject was carried out (Archambault, Ouellet and Harnois, 2006; Archambault and Harnois, 2006a; 2006b). In the context of the research undertaken by the SMSP and the UdeM, the purpose of this literature review was to provide food for thought on leading a school in a disadvantaged area, and on the professional development SMSP was offering to school principals. Now, we believe that it is timely to revisit the literature on this subject to ascertain whether there has been anything new in the intervening years. This document presents these findings.

The organization of the document

The first scientific research on school principals in disadvantaged areas focused on schools in disadvantaged areas that stood out because of their high academic performance. This body of research was conducted to identify the characteristics of these schools, known as high-performing schools, and the factors related to this high performance. Next, researchers became interested in how low-performing schools in disadvantaged areas had become high-performing schools. Thus, our study focused on research that described the process by which these schools turned themselves around, and this is what this paper reports on.

This document is in four parts and each part corresponds to one of the major themes discussed below. The first and second themes on **The characteristics of high-performing schools in disadvantaged areas** and **The characteristics and the leadership strategies of high-performing schools in disadvantaged areas** have been updated. Themes 3 and 4, **The different approaches of leadership in education** and **Knowing and understanding poverty**, have not been updated, but do integrate the results from the scientific literature review of 2006. It would have been difficult to examine the work of school principals in disadvantaged areas in this document without including the concept of *leadership*, as well as the characteristics and culture of disadvantaged areas.

The key points for each theme are summarized and, rather than providing a supporting text, an overview lists of all of their elements. In this way, the document is kept to an acceptable length. In all, more than forty documents were consulted. Abstracts of readings and a complete bibliography can be obtained from: **A Montréal School for All, MELS** (Archambault, Garon, Harnois and Dumais, 2011).

Note of caution

This document presents all the elements that emerge from an examination of the scientific and professional literature on the school principal in a disadvantaged area. On this basis, it should not be confused with a recipe where every single ingredient must be introduced into the schools. School principals would soon be overwhelmed, or at least would need superhuman capabilities, if they tried to assume all the characteristics of the role and use all the *leadership* strategies presented here. Moreover, the listed elements in this document have not all been observed at the same time in all of the schools. In effect, it is not because such and such characteristics have been observed in a school that the same ones can be observed in another school, nor that they should be combined and implemented in one's own school in their entirety.

This is a working document for those seeking to improve their supervision and management practices. Again, though certain elements appear to be indispensable, the objective here is to give food for thought on what really counts in running a school in a disadvantaged area, not to present everything that must be done in a school. Rather than being the last word on the subject, the purpose of this document is to encourage reflection on the professional practice of running a school in a disadvantaged area.

The Research Team

Theme 1: The characteristics of high-performing schools in disadvantaged areas

Summary

The research shows that schools in disadvantaged areas with higher academic results (high-performing schools) often have the same characteristics:

1. The school's mission is based on the learning and success of all students. A shared priority, this mission is the responsibility of all who are involved with the school.
2. The school team demonstrates its confidence in the students' ability to succeed and lets them know that they have high expectations for them.
3. The school principal is the pedagogical and administrative leader. Observations show that school principals play a fundamental role vis-à-vis teaching, learning, and school climate.
4. All partners, such as parents and members of the community, collaborate and cooperate to support the sharing of knowledge and experience. Consequently, the school is a learning community that seeks to improve teaching practices, and to innovate.
5. The school is a safe and orderly place, conducive to learning, showing openness, respect and acceptance of differences.
6. Teaching respects the learning process which takes students' needs, differences, and their personal, cultural, and social characteristics into consideration.
7. Teachers evaluate students frequently and regularly in order to modify their interventions.
8. The school principal and teachers are experienced, know and understand the area in which they work, and are committed to doing something to change the lives of these children.

Even under difficult conditions, school principals manage to maintain the quality of teaching in the school.

They are always faced with certain challenges, constraints, and difficulties:

- A lack of knowledge about effective administrative practices or a lack of experience in schools in disadvantaged areas;
- The needs arising from poverty (food, clothing, and supplies, etc.) to which they must respond in order to mitigate, as much as possible, their impact on learning;
- The variable presence and participation of students and their parents;
- An unpredictable working environment (changes in the area);
- Difficulty in recruiting qualified teachers interested in working in these areas.

An overview of all the characteristics

Expectations for success

- The setting of high expectations is seen as fundamental to student success.
- The belief that all students, without exception, can attain high academic results; a shared belief that is put into practice on a daily basis by all those concerned.

Developing collaboration and cooperation

- Teachers and all school personnel collaborate on school objectives, teaching issues, and professional development.
- A strong team.
- Regular communications between all members of the school community and an interest in learning from one another.
- Teachers closely involved in decision-making.
- Better communication and greater collaboration with parents, school board administrators, and the community.

Priorities, standards and goals

- A clear mission, stated learning goals and objectives, and the setting of high standards for all students.
- Student learning and success: a priority and a concern shared by all, including the parents.
- The involvement of teachers and students in the success of the entire school.

Taking needs into account

- A better understanding of the family situation of students and the needs of their parents.
- The school is a respectful place, where everyone's needs are taken into account.
- Administrators and teachers make an effort and show great flexibility in understanding and meeting students' learning needs.

The school climate, the educational environment

- A safe and orderly learning environment and strong classroom management practices: key components for learning.
- An environment conducive to learning.

Partnerships with parents and the community

- An increased level of partnership between the school, the family, and the community.
- Working with parents to actively expand the mission of the school to the home.
- Parents are shown confidence and respect in establishing a genuine partnership.
- Parents are highly committed to student success.

Professional development

- Ongoing support for professional development and training.
- Training and resources are made available to teachers.

Teaching and learning time

- Increased learning time for students on specific and more difficult elements.
- Maximization of the use of teaching time.
- Increased teaching time for difficult subjects.

Reading: a priority

- A consistent, coherent reading program is in place.
- An interest in learning is developed through reading.
- Early identification of students with learning difficulties, particularly reading difficulties.

Accountability of school staff

- The school principal and the teachers are accountable for the success of the students.
- The child's success is everyone's responsibility.

The attitudes, beliefs, and the vision (of the staff)

- A great sense of responsibility on the part of the school principals and all school personnel who are highly effective and willing to move mountains for the students.
- The school, a big family: a passionate commitment and respect towards all, and that in the interest of providing a good education for all children.
- A passion for learning and for development.
- An openness to change and innovation.
- The belief that schools and the people who work in them do make a difference.
- The belief that a rapid improvement in results is possible.
- The belief that low-performing schools can become high-performing schools.
- A common vision.

Student assessment and the use of data

- The use of student data and frequent regular assessments of their progress in order to help learning.
- A thorough assessment of each student to see where they must improve, and to identify appropriate teaching strategies.

Teaching and pedagogy

- The presence of a variety of approaches and interventions.
- Research into new ways of teaching.
- Experimentation as a way of improving practices.
- Quality teaching and learning for all students.
- Culturally responsive pedagogy.
- Assessment and monitoring of learning and teaching.
- Continuous improvement of the curriculum.

Understanding and taking the culture of poverty into consideration

- The child's culture and mother tongue.
- Culturally responsive pedagogy.

The central authorities

- The central authorities support the school and leave room for flexibility.
- Support for the development of effective leadership at the school and the school board.

Theme 2:

The characteristics of high-performing schools in disadvantaged areas and the leadership strategies used

1- Characteristics

Summary

The research shows that school principals in high-performing schools in disadvantaged areas often share the same characteristics of leadership. These are:

1. A vision that commits to the success of all students
2. A passion for teaching and learning
3. Flexibility and openness with an aptitude for change and creativity
4. An unshakeable optimism, and working hard for students' success
5. An understanding of the issues surrounding poverty, and the repudiation of any false beliefs
6. A profound respect for differences (cultural, socioeconomic, etc.), which are highly esteemed for the richness they can bring
7. Authenticity, an ability to inspire-a role model
8. Significant experience in management
9. Participation (visibility) in all school activities
10. Keen observational, listening, and communication skills
11. Interpersonal skills, proactive dynamism, and caring leadership
12. A profound sense of justice, fairness, and inclusion of all.

An overview of all the characteristics

Competencies and skills

- Is competent in policy and administration
- Manages stress and copes with unpredictable problems
- Has relational and interpersonal skills

Qualities and personal attitudes

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| ○ Democratic | ○ Observant |
| ○ Worthy of trust and respect | ○ Authentic |
| ○ Motivator | ○ Experienced |
| ○ Tenacious and persevering at work | ○ Sensible |
| ○ Visionary – both in the short and long term | ○ Just, fair |
| ○ Visible, involved | ○ Humanistic |
| ○ Shows integrity | ○ Facilitator |
| ○ An example, a role model for behaviour and attitude | ○ Understanding |
| ○ Positive | ○ Shows respect for culture |
| ○ Passionate | ○ Listens to everyone's needs |
| ○ Curious | ○ Open to change and creativity |
| ○ Constantly seeks to improve | ○ Open to criticism |
| ○ Steadfast commitment to the school's mission | ○ Shares knowledge |

Beliefs and values

- Profoundly believes in the possibility of an equitable school that aims for excellence
- Believes in the ability of all students to learn and be successful; sets high but realistic expectations for them
- Appeals to moral principles and values of social justice in deconstructing false beliefs held by teachers and all school personnel

- Dismisses the deficit model for an approach based on the consolidation and acquisition of knowledge
- Believes in and has a positive attitude towards the children and their families (an approach that encompasses best practices and greater social justice)

2- Strategies

✚ Overview

The foremost leadership strategies and roles of school principals in schools in disadvantaged areas have been listed under three major categories as follows:

Learning

1. Develop a clear vision of equity and excellence and define the objectives, goals, and timelines in collaboration with the school board and the school in order to build a quality environment based on values.
2. Regularly and rigorously evaluate students in collaboration with teachers and, subsequently, re-assess learning needs.
3. Respond to the diverse financial and resource needs of teachers.
4. If needed, take stock of the situation regarding false beliefs and their impact, both past and present, in order to establish a democratic school.

Knowledge of the school setting

5. Understand the sociocultural and socioeconomic context of the area and develop empathy for the students and their families.
6. Recognize and work to break down discriminatory attitudes, values, and barriers (e.g. the sociocultural setting or genetics have an effect on intelligence; the socioeconomic environment puts a limit on the learning).
7. Adopt a personalized strategy that treats students as individuals rather than as representatives of a social group.
8. Promote diversity, adopt a democratic discourse, and do not tolerate any form of discrimination or inequality.
9. In the interest of student learning, establish a true partnership with the family and the community.

Capacity building and cooperation

10. Develop the leadership capacities of all.
11. Encourage creativity and cooperation between teachers as they develop their teaching practices.
12. Invite teachers to play an important role in developing teaching strategies.
13. Reinforce the skills of school principals and teachers through ongoing training.
14. Create a network with resource people from other high-performing schools in disadvantaged areas.

Leadership alone cannot lead to the success of all students. Nevertheless, an effective leader can greatly contribute by putting in place conditions that benefit all concerned.

Overview of all the strategies

General strategies

- Persevere in the commitment (and express this commitment) to create a school environment that is equitable, conducive to learning, and which targets excellence. This may mean that we don't always know exactly how to proceed, but that we do our utmost to do so.
- Encourage teachers to identify their false beliefs regarding social inequality, social class, cultures, etc.

- Transform false beliefs into a belief in success by:
 - Promoting a democratic school culture;
 - Adopting a teaching approach that leads to school success;
 - Persevering to attain the goal set.
- Help deconstruct the prejudices and labels attached to children and their parents, as well as the discriminatory attitudes and barriers that lead to repression, segregation, stigmatization and inequality.
- Share leadership with teachers and others involved; encourage creativity, initiative, risk-taking, and acknowledge each person's contribution.
- Make better use of the talent and experience of teachers.
- Proactively seek out solutions.
- Facilitate change in the entire community.
- Play the role of a facilitator rather than one of a traditional leader exercising power.
- Cope with the unexpected on a daily basis.
- Highlight and promote the richness of diversity – cultural and other.
- Serve children, parents, the community, teachers, and school personnel and let them know.
- Adopt a management style that constantly evolves and improves, given the process of transforming schools in disadvantaged areas is ongoing.
- Develop or co-create with school board and school personnel, a non-negotiable vision of the objectives, goals, and timelines.
- Recognize and respect the specific needs – physical, social, intellectual, emotional - of students, teachers, parents, school personnel and administrators.
- Confront challenges by setting up action research projects.
- Are authentic and morally committed leaders that initiate change in the school setting.
- Adopt a personalized strategy that treats students as individuals rather than as representatives of a social group.
- Promote inclusive practices.
- Have high expectations for all students and express them.
- Demonstrate creativity, perseverance, and persistence.
- Adopt a cooperative instead of a competitive attitude.
- Respect the professional judgement of teachers and other school personnel.
- Are innovative in getting the resources that students need.
- Are mentors, a role model that offers constructive criticism and support.
- Embrace conflicts and know that positive solutions are possible.

Strategies for teaching, learning, and educational success

- Dedicate time and energy towards improving teaching and the school, notably through pedagogical supervision.
- Make it known that no reason or excuse can be given to justify student failure or poor academic results.
- Make sure that the teaching objectives and the end-of-cycle expectations are clear.
- Prioritize learning, communicate its importance, and engage teachers and others involved in the school in collective projects aimed at improving teaching and learning.
- Get involved in issues regarding teaching and the daily activities of the school. Visit classes.
- Make sure that the specific needs of students are considered in any interventions taken.
- Make school success the responsibility of all the people involved, including the students.
- Make everyone accountable for student success: collect data regularly, analyze the results, and organize in-service training for teachers to respond to identified needs.
- Constantly motivate the teachers and students to improve learning.
- Make sure that students are properly evaluated on a regular basis.
- Collect data on student learning throughout the school year to verify the effectiveness of programs and services, to make decisions about the curriculum and teaching, and to identify students in difficulty.
- Recognize student results and achievements.
- Pay particular attention to preschool.
- Prioritize the teaching of reading.
- Give importance to language learning.

- Value cultural responsive pedagogy.

Strategies for partnership with families and the community

- Work constantly with parents to integrate them as partners in the learning at home.
- Involve parents in decisions about their child.
- Establish a strong relationship with parents across programs.
- Encourage open communication between school personnel and the community.

Strategies for understanding the school environment

- Understand the issue of social inequality, the culture of poverty, the problems stemming from them, and make sure that any educational interventions take these into account.
- Promote the professional development of staff on the issues of social inequality and the culture of poverty.
- Understand the socioeconomic reality of poverty and the environment as a whole, and forge empathetic links with students and their families.
- Encourage school personnel to get to know and better understand the people in the neighbourhood (ethnic origins, religious beliefs, values, culture, income, the level of education of the parents), and to use this knowledge to enrich their teaching.
- Improve understanding about different cultures by encouraging students to share their own knowledge about their cultures.

Strategies for collaboration, cooperation, and communication

- Create a professional learning community: develop collaboration in the development of the mission and the vision of the school, share the decision-making process, and establish professional autonomy by implementing continuous professional development.
- Give teachers time to work together in order to develop their teaching practices.
- Promote peer support and teamwork.
- Build capacity.
- Establish a school community network of students, parents, and members of the community that is based on mutual understanding and respect.
- Develop positive and respectful interpersonal relationships with members of the school: parents and children (be visible, listen, act with integrity, trust, lead by example in terms of behaviours, attitudes, sharing knowledge, inspiration).

Strategies for professional development

- Support staff members who are emerging as pedagogical leaders (participation in research teams, professional development, feedback, and capacity building).
- Encourage professional development and in-service training, and provide the necessary resources.
- Support the individual and collective initiatives of teachers, and their professional development.
- Offer teachers individualized professional support.

Strategies to develop human resources

- Engage compatible school personnel who want to work together, and who are motivated by their school's success.
- Recruit teachers who are enthusiastic about working in a disadvantaged area.
- Know how to procure special financing to support teaching and learning.
- Establish a school budget in line with the school's priorities (e.g. professional resources, training to support teachers in their work, etc.).

Support to school principals and professional development

- Build the capacity of school principals and mobilize the resources needed to develop pedagogical leadership.
- Create a network of schools having common characteristics.
- Establish a mentoring system between school principals.
- Give school principals the latitude to use discretionary power in the application of rules and to solve problems.
- Offer school principals opportunities for professional development.
- Develop school principals' abilities to interpret and make use of student assessments.

Leading a school in a disadvantaged area. What emerges from the scientific and professional literature

- Draw inspiration from other schools, including visits to high-performing schools in disadvantaged areas.
- Read up on the subject and seek out information, ideas, experiences, and then share them.

Theme 3: The different approaches to leadership in education

This theme has not been updated. The information below comes from the Archambault, J., Ouellet, G. and Harnois, L. (2006d) report.

✚ Introduction

There are several ways of approaching the question of leadership in education. These different approaches have given way to numerous writings on the subject. Waters, Marzano and McNulty (2003) reviewed the literature and listed at least some 5000 papers on leadership published since 1970. These documents are not all of the same value, as their scientific and professional quality can be called into doubt. Thus, many researchers have cautioned against this plethora of writings and the frequently hasty interpretations that can be drawn from them (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom, 2004; Reeves, 2006). Hence, in the work of Waters, Marzano and McNulty (2003), only 70 out of these 5000 writings were considered. In others, an impressive number of training programs for school principals can be found, but their value is uncertain to say the least. Without question, the concept of leadership appears to have been added in to a mixture of things, so the topic should be broached with care and nuance.

The different approaches to leadership depend on what aspects these researchers and professionals writing on the subject want to emphasize. We have chosen to present some of the more promising ones. First and foremost, however, we have chosen to present what could be considered as the dimensions of leadership.

These approaches and these dimensions are not mutually exclusive, which explains a certain amount of repetition. Moreover, this is not meant to be a question of choosing one or other of the approaches to implement in one's school, rather the objective, once again, is to stimulate reflection and to support professional development.

✚ Overview of the dimensions and principal approaches to leadership in education

Instructional leadership: the focus of the school principal is on teaching and learning. The management of administrative and human resources are complementary and used to serve the educational administration of the school.

Transformational leadership: the school principal provides opportunities for teachers to collaborate on learning (moral commitment and motivation) by establishing a common vision and goals, and by providing intellectual stimulation and individual support. Effective practices and organizational values are also defined and there are high expectations set for student success. An effective school culture is created, and structures are put in place that encourage participatory decision-making. The school principal instigates change.

Distributed leadership: this type of leadership encourages shared decision-making (often called *distributed leadership*) in order to be more effective, to support democratic principles, and to strengthen each person's capacity for leadership.

Leadership for social justice and democracy: Enacted in specific contexts, both these concepts draw upon *transformational* ideals. The dimensions that most concern leaders are: ethical and moral, community and context. This type of leadership is based on a constructivist approach, i.e. the construction of knowledge by members of the community, and the sharing of leadership. Thus, leaders facilitate the process of communication and collaboration. The dimensions of this type of leadership are:

- **The transformational dimension:** the commitment of all to the process of change, an openness to constructive criticism and insights;
- **Pedagogy at the heart of the action:** teachers must follow the adopted guidelines and organize their teaching accordingly;

- **Social justice:** the multiple aspects of inequality and inequity are appraised, the different forms of injustice are identified, prejudices and inequity are taken into consideration and, lastly, the pedagogical implications of social justice are recognized.

The moral dimension of leadership: this dimension touches on the school principal's values and ethics. According to this approach, the values and beliefs found in high-performing schools feature cultural aspects and promote inclusion, equality, equity, justice, high expectations, commitment, cooperation, teamwork, and understanding.

The interpersonal dimension of leadership: the school principal is aware of the importance of collaboration and encourages people to engage in interpersonal relationships (school principal, teachers, students, other contributors, parents). This dimension also makes allowance for change, its myriad forms, and its manifestations. Likewise, it fosters understanding and, in the search for relevant solutions, accepts that modifications need to be made on an ongoing basis.

The sustainable dimension of leadership: the main responsibility of the school principal is to implement viable and supportive conditions for cognitive, social, and emotional learning.

Leadership in the context of a school as a learning organization: the concept of a school as a learning organization is based on an approach whereby everyone involved in the system works together to share aspirations, increase awareness, and build capacity. The different school partners acknowledge their joint commitment to the future of the school and identify what can be learned together.

School principals are not only pedagogical leaders but the primary instigators of change. As the school moves towards becoming a learning organization, school principals play a pivotal role as teacher supervisors and in managing the learning process as a whole.

Theme 4: Knowing about and understanding poverty

This theme was not updated. The information below comes from the Archambault, J., Ouellet, G. and Harnois, L. (2006d) report.

Introduction

The majority of studies on schools in disadvantaged areas have highlighted the importance of knowing about and understanding poverty, or, more widely, the issue of social inequality and the role of the school vis-à-vis these inequalities. (Duru-Bellat, 2002). Several researchers have also highlighted the critical role that the school must play in combatting these inequalities.

Moreover, despite our belief to the contrary, a great many prejudices and false beliefs still exist in the schools that have been the subject of this research. The reason for including this theme in this paper is to reiterate that schools must combat these prejudices.

However, poverty and its underlying culture must be described tactfully, and care must be exercised in interpreting and nuancing the data.

Summary

Poverty can be better understood if we look at how a person in poverty copes with a lack of resources. These resources can be either financial, emotional, psychological, physical, or social in nature.

There are two types of poverty: generational poverty and situational poverty. Generational poverty is when the poverty has lasted for at least two consecutive generations. Generational poverty has its own culture, hidden rules, a system of beliefs, and a way of life. Situational poverty is caused by a particular event which results in a lack of resources, such as the death of a loved one, health problems, or a divorce. People who live in this position are often too embarrassed or too proud to accept charity and are very reticent about their situation.

In general, researchers agree on what characterizes poverty. Several mention the importance of understanding the unique situation of each student living in poverty, so that the most appropriate strategies can be implemented to improve teaching. These characteristics are:

1. A way of life having its own culture, rules and beliefs;
2. Students and their parents have little schooling. Difficulties in school, a high rate of absenteeism, low parent participation in school, additional learning needs (e.g. literacy, language), and a high dropout rate have all been observed;
3. Economic hardship places people in survival mode. People have difficulty paying for rent, food, clothes, school supplies, and recreational activities;
4. Physical and mental health problems are more common. Severe behavioural difficulties, lack of sleep, poor diet, anxiety, trauma, sadness, jealousy, anger, vulnerability, the desensitization of children, withdrawal, insecurity, lack of self-esteem, and communication difficulties can all be observed.
5. The family often lives under difficult conditions, such as single parenthood, tension, verbal violence, mental health problems, parental distress, disinterest and lack of care by parents, dysfunctionality, or abusive relations;
6. Life in the neighbourhood is often difficult and can include violence, theft, problems with drug and prostitution, in short, a higher level of crime can prevail;
7. Poverty also goes hand in hand with unpredictability, difficulty in making future plans, which leads to pessimism and fatalism, and to difficulties with making any sort of commitment;
8. Poverty is often associated with parents' lack of knowledge about community resources and local assistance, and the difficulty in accessing such resources, such as transport or scheduling issues.

The school team must address and discuss the characteristics of poverty. However, to avoid stigmatizing people in poverty or stirring up prejudices, we need to be careful about the way we look at them and in the gestures we make towards them. This approach can allow us to better understand the needs of people in poverty. However, these problems must not be used as an explanation for schooling difficulties.

Researchers have shown the importance of understanding false beliefs about education and people in poverty. Some researchers have even identified the most prevalent false beliefs about people in poverty and people of ethnic origins other than one's own. Generally, these are:

- intellectual capacity
- motivation
- language
- the importance accorded to education
- morality

Overview of characteristics

General characteristics

- Poverty: a way of life that deals with a lack of resources.
- Cannot be defined in terms of a deficit or as shortcomings (intellectual, motivational, linguistic) or by not valuing education.
- A survival situation: a response to basic needs.
- Difficulty in finding solutions, a tendency to give up.
- The feeling of being different, unfit, because of the false beliefs conveyed towards poor people.

The children's characteristics

- Attend school less often, high rate of absenteeism.
- Have less chance of completing their secondary studies and going on to higher education.
- Have school results that are significantly lower than those of the middle class.
- Have difficulty in obtaining school supplies, have few books at home and, usually, no computer.
- Have poorer health.
- Do not eat regularly and have poorer sleeping habits.
- Experience difficult family situations (tensions, violence, distress of the parents): they become desensitized and one can sense that they are burdened with worries.
- Lack of structure and support at home.
- Frequently live in a neighbourhood where violence and several types of delinquency prevail.
- Can have socioemotional difficulties, such as anxiety, trauma, feelings of sadness, jealousy, anger, or severe behavioral disorders.
- As a result of the false beliefs conveyed about them, they come to believe they cannot succeed.
- Are more open to attentive adults who are sympathetic and friendly.
- Are often interested to learn, to experiment, and to experience something new, especially when they are motivated by an accompanying adult.

The parents (and the home environment)

- Are undereducated and often have bad memories of their time as students in school.
- Can less easily support their child in school or provide guidance for their future.
- Are often single parents.
- Have difficulty communicating.
- Some do not know how to read and write. They read little.
- Are often uncomfortable about coming to school and participating in meetings.
- Their mental health is often fragile.
- Live with a great deal of insecurity and lack self-esteem.
- Have a low income and are greatly deprived.
- Live in substandard housing, with few amenities.

Leading a school in a disadvantaged area. What emerges from the scientific and professional literature

- Do not know about community resources.
- Often have few interpersonal relationships, help or support.
- Often do not venture out of their own neighbourhood.

In conclusion

The elements that emerge from the scientific and professional literature on school principals in disadvantaged areas have been presented in this paper. Once again, this presentation is a starting point for reflection and not the final word on the subject. In no way is it intended to replace the process of reflection and practice essential to professional development.

In conclusion, we have broadened our view of school principals in disadvantaged areas by simply linking these elements to the characteristics of successful schools (Archambault and Harnois, 2006).

A successful school is a safe and welcoming environment where learning is a priority and where the vision for learning is clear and shared. High-performing schools reduce inequalities and promote social justice. The school is organized around learning, and not the other way around, and teachers work together in a spirit of mutual cooperation. High-performing schools sustain relationships with parents and the community, and understand the critical importance of professional development.

These characteristics are not new. Over and over again, we have found them expressed one way or another in this paper. Furthermore, they have corresponded to the measures put forward by the Supporting Montréal Schools Program. Thus, the review of the literature affirms the Program's choice of measures and their promotion in schools.

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