Equity-Minded Principals: Leadership That Promotes Academic Achievement for Marginalized Students

By

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EQUITY-MINDED PRINCIPALS: LEADERSHIP THAT PROMOTES ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT FOR MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The general question guiding this research is: How do equity-minded principals promote academic achievement for the marginalized students in their schools? The following subquestions are addressed in this study: How do equity-minded principals understand marginalization in their schools? Why do equity-minded principals see the need to attend to the academic well-being of marginalized students? What motivates them? What strategies do equity-minded principals employ to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students? What barriers do equity-minded principals encounter, and how do they address them? What recommendations would equity-minded principals give to the district school boards and the Ministry of Education as regards to promoting academic achievement for marginalized students?

A critical perspective is used to examine the experiences of 16 principals from elementary schools who were identified through a snowball sampling as being equity minded. These principals are from the area of southern Ontario from both Catholic and public boards of education. They have been principals for at least 3 years. The literature I reviewed indicated that many principals, although they follow an equity/social justice approach to some degree, do not usually focus specifically on promoting the academic achievement of marginalized students as these equity-minded principals do. The participants in the study articulated their understanding
of marginalization in their schools, what motivated them, the strategies they used, the barriers they faced, and how they handled them.

Through this study numerous strategies that promote academic achievement for marginalized students with staff, students, and parents were identified by the equity-minded principals. I also identify critical themes: the principals’ understanding of marginalization, principals’ advocacy and school culture, curriculum, and instruction and staff as barriers or facilitators to promoting academic achievement of marginalized students.

I conclude with highlighting the recommendations the 16 equity-minded principals identified to be useful to the Ministry of Education and boards of education in their efforts to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students. I also looked at how the equity-minded leadership framework connects/contributes to the larger body of knowledge in the educational leadership field.
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CHAPTER 1: THE PROBLEM

We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far.

(Ron Edmonds, 1979, p. 23)

Statement of the Problem

This study explores how elementary principals promote academic achievement for marginalized students in their schools. The term “academic achievement” in this study means more than scores on standardized tests. It embodies striving to achieve a more equitable and democratic set of social and educational practices within schools. It is defined as the degree to which a student achieves his/her educational goals in school, allowing him/her to graduate and continue on to pursue his/her desired career.

My focus is specifically on how equity-minded principals promote academic achievement for the marginalized students in their schools. I examine how 16 elementary equity-minded principals from five different district school boards, ranging from inner-city and affluent schools, have promoted academic achievement for marginalized students in their schools.

Some students achieve higher than other students in contemporary schools. This is no coincidence. Indeed there is a pattern; students of colour, students who are English language learners, students from low-income families, and students with learning disabilities achieve consistently lower than other groups (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olsen 2001). Shields (2004) referenced researchers such as McBride and McKee (2001) and Nieto (1999), who found that “in North America, high failure and dropout rates, or over-identification of behavior problems, and placements in low-level academic programs are particularly among minoritized children” (p. 111). Shields also pointed out that Nieto (1999) and Darling-Hammond (1997) indicated that
many African American and Hispanic children in the United States find that schools, as they are currently made up, present particular challenges and often barriers to their success (p. 111).

Glaze, Mattingley, and Levin (2012) pointed out that “racialized groups tend to do less well” (p. # 112). Glaze et al. (2012) also pointed out that

if one looks at the achievement results in Toronto, Canada’s largest city, 16% of students who do not graduate from high school in the Toronto District School Board, the largest numbers are students of Aboriginal, Black (African heritage), Hispanic, Portuguese, and Middle Eastern background (TDSB, 2011; 2010). (p. 113)

Farkas (2003) also found that there was an over representation of minority and low socio-economic students in the traditional lower track of secondary school courses (as cited, in Simone, 2012, p. 2). While Cummins (2001) found that children of colour dropped out of school at a higher rate compared to other groups and they were misplaced and overrepresented in special education in larger numbers than any other groups, they were also underrepresented in gifted and advanced placement programs (Simone, 2012, p. 2) Although the most current research reported in 2012 by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), conducted between 2007 and 2012, indicated an increase in graduation rates in certain groups of students, it continued to show that not all groups are achieving the same level of success. This research pointed out that

of the more than sixteen thousand students who started grade nine five years ago, 79% had graduated, up 10% from a comparator group seven years earlier. Eighty-eight percent of academic stream students graduated on time, compared to 59% of applied-level students. Girls had higher graduation rates than boys (83% vs. 75%). Straight students had an on-time graduation rate of 82% compared to self-identified LGBTQ2S students of 69%. Students who speak Spanish or Somali had the lowest rates. (p. 1)
Although there is a body of research that has explored leadership and social justice, (Theoharis, 2007), equity and inclusion (Ryan, 2006a, b, & c), poverty and schooling (Flessa, Gallagher-Mackay, & Ciuffetelli 2010; (Portelli, Shields, & Vibert 2007), preparing principals to lead schools that are successful with racially diverse students (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004), leadership for social justice and equity focusing on preservice preparation (Brown, 2004), shaping school cultures (Deal & Peterson, 2009) and leadership in urban schools (Flessa, 2009), there is still a need to explore further how Canadian equity-minded leaders promote the academic achievement of students who are traditionally unsuccessful. For instance, the importance of instructional leadership in promoting student success and achievements has been supported by several studies (Anderson, 2007; Cotton, 2003; Fulmer, 2006; Leithwood, 2011; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004); however, the academic achievement of marginalized students is not articulated in the literature as being the major focus of the instructional leader. This study proposes to do just that. Research has clearly indicated that “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (Leithwood, Lois, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004, as cited in Flessa, 2009, p. 335). That is why in this study I want to learn how equity-minded principals promote academic achievement of marginalized students in their elementary schools. In this research study, I seek to explore the phenomenon of how equity-minded principals promote not just equity in general but specifically the academic achievement of marginalized students in their schools.

**Purpose and Rationale**

As an administrator in an elementary school, I have always been interested in finding out how principals in schools can improve academic achievement for all students, but most specifically for students who are marginalized. This study is designed to understand what school
administrators have been doing or not doing in the area of promoting academic achievement for marginalized students.

**Research Question**

How do equity-minded principals promote academic achievement for marginalized students in their schools?

The primary research question asked how equity-minded principals promoted academic achievement for marginalized students in their schools. To accomplish this purpose, the following four subquestions guided this study:

**Research Subquestions**

1. How do equity-minded principals understand marginalization in their schools?
2. Why do equity-minded principals see the need to attend to the academic well-being of marginalized students? What motivates them?
3. What strategies do equity-minded principals employ to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students?
4. What barriers do equity-minded principals encounter, and how do they address them?

**Significance of the Study**

I completed the literature review and noted that most of the literature addressing the school experiences of marginalized students was completed in the United States of America. Although we have some research completed in Canada such as, Flessa et al. 2010; Lee, 2008; and Portelli, et al. 2007, there is still a need to build our Canadian research body of knowledge addressing educational leadership that promotes a more equitable and democratic set of social and educational practices. Our educational leaders need strategies with a Canadian context they can draw from and hopefully put into practice into their own schools. My study will contribute to
the Canadian body of knowledge in this area. Second, I hope to heighten awareness about how academic achievement for marginalized students can be promoted by principals. Third, I hope to enable principals who are not seriously promoting academic achievement for marginalized students to hear directly from their colleagues about the various strategies they can use to interrupt the social inequalities that have gone on for far too long. Finally, I hope that this study will encourage educational policy makers, senior administrators, and school leaders to realize the moral obligation we educators have to provide all students, including those who are marginalized, with an education which will equip them to leave school fully prepared to lead productive, successful, and fulfilling lives. This we have to do, as Levin (2003) pointed out, “We cannot know how many outstanding scientists, writers, artists, or teachers are lost because a significant number of people are not able to obtain the necessary learning” (p. 5).

**Research Setting and Context**

The research setting for this project is in Ontario public schools. Ontario is becoming the most diverse province in Canada. On a yearly basis, it receives about 40% of all immigrants to Canada, with a large portion of those immigrants settling in the Greater Toronto Area (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2011a). The projection is that by 2036 net migration will account for 68% of the population growth in the province (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2011b).

Although studies of streaming in Canada done by Krahn and Taylor (2007) showed that visible minority students are doing better than native-born, Whites overall, many students of colour in Ontario continue to experience a low level of success compared to their White counterparts, as indicated in the research conducted by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) in 2012. This research pointed out that “the numbers confirm that schools are not graduating Black or Latin American students in the same proportion as other racial groups” (p.
This increased number of students leaving school without graduating is indicative of the systemic inequality in Ontario schools. Many students are disengaged from school due to the fact that they are discriminated against and do not see themselves, their beliefs, and values reflected in their schooling (Dei, James, Karumancherry, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2000; Kumashiro, 2002; Ryan, 2006c). I believe that as an educational “village” it is our moral obligation to come up with solutions that will change the marginalized students’ school experiences to make them positive. That is why this study will explore how equity-minded principals promote academic achievement for marginalized students in their schools.

Organization of the Study

The organization of this study is intended to present an understanding of how equity-minded elementary principals promote the academic achievement of marginalized students. Chapter One introduced the study by outlining the purpose and rationale of the study, identified the setting and context of the study, and highlighted the need to address the academic achievement of marginalized students.

Chapter Two, the review of the literature, presents the definitions of “marginalized” and “equity-minded” leaders. It examines certain educational leaderships as they relate to equity and marginalization, what is missing in them, the principals’ understanding of students’ marginalization, what motivates equity-minded leaders to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students, the strategies they use, and the barriers they face.

Chapter Three describes the methodology used in this study. This study uses a qualitative method, as I was seeking to understand the perception, knowledge, and experiences of the equity-minded principals that provide the foundation for discussion and understanding.
Chapter Four examines how equity-minded principals understand marginalization. It explores whom they deem to be marginalized in their schools and the factors that marginalize the students.

Chapter Five explores what motivates the equity-minded principals to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students.

Chapter Six explores the specific strategies employed by equity-minded principals to promote academic achievement of marginalized students in relation to staff, students, and parents.

Chapter Seven explores the barriers and challenges equity-minded principals faced while promoting the academic achievement of marginalized students.

Chapter Eight examines the recommendations the participants gave to the district school boards and Ministry of Education.

Chapter Nine presents the discussion and implications of the study. I illuminate the significant issues that have emerged in my findings.

Chapter Ten provides my personal recommendation to the district school boards and Ministry of Education, the concluding remarks, and implications for further research.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Instructional improvement requires continuous learning. Learning is both individual and a social activity. Therefore, collective learning demands an environment that guides and directs the acquisition of new knowledge about instruction. (Elmore, 2000, p. 20)

In this chapter I review the literature which addresses the marginalization of various groups of students and how equity-minded leaders try to remedy this issue through their efforts to promote the students’ academic achievement. I also examine the various educational leadership styles by comparing and contrasting their equitable practices to highlight where the gaps are in relation to promoting the academic achievement for marginalized students. These are: traditional leadership, instructional leadership, distributive leadership, transformative leadership, social justice leadership, inclusive leadership, and equity-minded leadership.

The literature review provided various definitions of the term “marginalized” and “equity-minded principals.” However, reading through the literature, there is a common thread which identifies certain groups of people as being treated unfairly and inequitably. For instance, Garcia and Guerra (2004) from the United States of America defined marginalized students as “students of low socio-economic status, and/or students from families whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differ from that of their Caucasian [sic] peers” (as cited in Simone, 2012, p. 2). Ryan and Rottmann, (2007) from Canada refer to marginalized students as “marginalized by virtue of their particular identities—frequently related to gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation” (p. 13), whereas Freire from Brazil and Macedo (1995) from the United States of America defined the marginalized or oppressed “as the minority groups that remain divided from the dominant groups along race, class, gender, language and ethnicity lines” (as cited in Simone, 2012, p. 2). However, for the purpose of this study, marginalized students will refer to race,
English language learners, students with special learning needs, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

The word equity, on the other hand, can also be defined through a variety of lenses. It can represent different meaning to different people with varied life experiences, race, and cultural backgrounds. However, in the Webster’s dictionary on line it means “the state, quality, or ideal of being just, impartial, and fair.” In the Ontario Ministry of Education (2009 b) document *Realizing the promise of diversity: Equity and inclusive education in Ontario schools: Guidelines for policy development and implementation*, equity is defined as “a condition or state of fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people. Equity does not mean treating people the same way without regard for individual differences” (p. 88). To “mind” means to watch over or to pay attention to. In this paper “minded” means mentality of principals and paying attention to equity. Thus, equity-minded leadership means a leadership style where the leaders demonstrate a mentality of promoting what is just and fair as they promote academic achievement of marginalized students in their schools.

The literature also highlights the fact that the academic achievement of marginalized students continues to lag behind their White middle class counterparts, not only in Canada but in the United States of America as well. Larson and Murtadha (2002) stated that

African American scholars, in particular, argue that the uncertainties of academic success and educational achievement for children of color highlight a need for leaders to understand Black family life and who can think beyond conventional parent and school community relationships (p. 141). They also pointed out that “many administrators assume that all children enter school on a level playing field and therefore should demonstrate the same capabilities. The reality however, is that
age-based expectations for performance have always privileged children of social and economic advantage” (p. 156). Bell (2001) also pointed out “that experience had taught us that in low-performing and high poverty schools, the quality of curriculum and instruction are rarely volunteered as significant determinants of students’ academic performance” (p. 8). Instead, the blame is consistently placed on the students’ backgrounds as a source of their academic weaknesses.

Some principals came into leadership with a calling to do social justice work (Theoharis, 2007). Leadership at the district and school levels makes a big difference in high-performing poverty schools. However, many times the equity-minded leaders’ good efforts seem to stall or come to a standstill because of educators who do not want to take on the responsibility of the students’ low achievement and failure (Berman & Chambliss, 2000 (as cited in García & Guerra 2004, p. 150). These educators hold deficit views and have deep-rooted attitudes and beliefs that the low achievement of the marginalized students can be attributed to the fault of students and their families. As far as they are concerned, the marginalized students come to school lacking the required knowledge and skills because their parents do not care about their children’s education. García and Guerra (2004) pointed out that “because these educators do not view themselves as part of the problem, there is little willingness to look for solutions within the educational system itself” (p. 3).

Furthermore, some educators sacrifice the academic achievement of marginalized students for the sake of “caring.” They believe, and rightfully so, that the basic physical needs of the students should be the focus when the marginalized students come to school. However, in doing so, they lower the academic expectations of these students. García and Guerra (2004) noted the same observation in their research. They wrote,
As we interacted with teachers over the course of an academic year, it was evident that the majority of our participants shared a deep concern for their students and focused a great deal of their time and effort in creating supporting and caring environments for them. Over time, what became clearer is that these expressions of caring often occurred at the expense of academic instruction, which led us to question how much of the students’ low academic performances, particularly on state wide assessments, was a reflection of limited academic time on task versus their learning abilities. Even when teachers did provide instruction, their negative beliefs about students’ learning potentials and families seem to have lowered their expectations or student performance as well as their response to students’ under achievements. (p. 161)

It is also interesting to note that when García and Guerra (2004) asked the participants to identify the major concerns they had in regards to student performance, resources, and programs that can be made available to help them in achieving their goals, they indicated that the responses focused on student and family deficits and a number of recommendations given centred on intervention programs that were designed to “fix” them, instead of self-reflecting on “inadequate teacher preparation, curriculum, or pedagogy as concerns” (p. 161). They also noted that the resources that reflected or supported the culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy or intercultural communication were very limited. Flessa’s (2009) study of “Urban School Principals, Deficit Frameworks, and Implications for Leadership” focused on the principals’ almost negative descriptions of the families and communities served by their schools. Flessa argued that “these principals’ beliefs are in fact aligned with prevailing attitudes about urban communities, the purposes of schooling, and what leadership can and should do in urban schools” (p. 334).
When Carr (1997) interviewed Canadian principals regarding the challenge of equity, he identified three different responses. Although they acknowledged supportive policies and diversity, they were not the least interested in implementing antiracist education. The second group was interested in the matters of equity. However, they were overwhelmed by trying to balance the more pressing administrative and managerial duties, with no time to spare to address equity related issues. The third group took it upon themselves to critically analyze the school culture and tried to level the playing field so that all students in their schools, including marginalized students, could achieve to the best of their abilities. This third group is the one I call equity-minded principals.

**Educational Leadership Styles in Relation to Equity**

From the literature I reviewed, I concluded that educational leaders can promote academic achievement for students in their schools by employing a balance of various types of leadership. For instance, equity-minded principals employed specific components from instructional, transformational, social justice, inclusive, and equity leadership to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students. A variety of leadership styles are discussed below to show how they relate to equity and where the gaps are in relation to promoting the academic achievement for students.

**Traditional Educational Leadership**

Before examining other educational leaderships, it would be best to start by looking at “traditional educational leadership” and how it relates to equity and marginalization of students. This leadership style has viewed leaders “in terms of individuals and as a form of hierarchy among people. It presumes that single, often heroic individuals are capable of influencing others in ways that make their organizations and institutions better places” (Ryan, 2006c, p. 99), while
Smith and Andrews (1989) see traditional leadership as leaders who perform the following roles: “building managers, administrators, politicians, change agents, boundary spanners, and instructional leaders” (p. 9). Such discourses highlight efficiency, control, and standardization and support the reproduction of the White culture (Dantley, 2002, as cited in Griffiths, 2011, p. 19). This type of leadership does not create favourable opportunities for equity-minded principals to promote academic achievement for marginalized students because it mainly focuses on the managerial part of leadership and maintaining the status quo. Ryan (2003) stated that most administrators are conservative in their practice (Rizvi, 1993b; Riehl, 2000). They tend to orient their actions toward supporting and conserving the system in which they work and have difficulty when it comes to challenging or changing integral parts of it (p. 159).

**Instructional Leadership**

Instructional leadership seems to be synonymous with effective school leadership. Smith and Andrews (1989) state that “how we define leadership of the school seems to determine the extent to which it is a key element in producing an instructionally effective school” (p. 15). However, it is believed that today’s effective school leadership should not only integrate the traditional school leadership duties of evaluating teachers, completing the budget and required schedules, and managing the school building, but instructional leaders must immerse themselves in all aspects of teaching and learning. Cotton (2003) indicates that effective instruction leaders are intensely involved in curricular and instructional issues that directly affect student achievement. Smith and Andrews highlight the fact that the principal as an instruction leader is expected to fulfil the following: to provide the necessary resources to enable the school’s academic goals to be achieved; be knowledgeable and skillful in curriculum and instructional
matters to be a resource for teachers; be an effective communicator in various group settings, and finally, be visible around the school to be easily accessible to staff, students, and parents. Although the importance of instruction leadership in promoting student academic achievement has been supported by several studies, such as Cotton (2003), Waters et al. (2004) and Fulmer (2006), the gap of addressing the academic achievement of marginalized students is not articulated in the literature as being the focus of the instructional leader.

**Distributive Leadership**

Distributive leadership is endorsed by Spillane (2006), and he writes that it “is best thought of as a framework for thinking about and analyzing leadership” (p. 10). Spillane (2005) states that “distributive leadership is often used interchangeably with ‘shared leadership’, ‘team leadership’ and ‘democratic leadership’ (p. 143). Spillane further argues that distributed leadership mainly focuses on leadership practice instead of leaders or their roles, functions, routines, and structures (p. 144). The leadership roles are spread among a variety of individuals; however, this does not necessarily mean that everyone’s voice, especially voices of the students who are usually marginalized, are heard. Spillane (2006) also stated that, “the lack of empirical evidence on the effectiveness of distributed leadership in promoting instructional improvement and increasing student achievement is considered a weakness” (p.149). In addition, with distributive leadership, the critical theory and its application are not referred to, and developing the whole child does not seem to be put into consideration either.

**Transformative Leadership**

Shields (2009, p. 4) points out that transformative leadership traits can be traced to Burns (1978). Freire’s work (1970, 1998) indicates that if education is not seen in these terms: transform, transformational, and transformative, it might act to deform the individuals rather than
transforming them. “Transformative leadership begins with the question of power, privilege and justice” (Shields, 2009, p. 4). William Foster (1986), one of the first writers to discuss transformative educational leadership, had the belief that leadership “must be critically educative; it can not only look at the conditions in which we live in, but it must decide how to change them” (as cited in Shields, 2009 p. 185). Quartz, Rogers, and Dantley (1991) point out that transformative leaders consider “school to be sites of cultural politics that serve both to reproduce and perpetuate the inequities inherent in gender, race, and class constructs and which confirm and legitimate some cultures while deforming and delegitimizing others” (p. 98). They argue that transformative leaders should assert a language of “critique and possibility and must introduce the mechanisms necessary for various groups (marginalized) to begin conversations around issues of emancipation and domination” (as cited in Shields, 2009, p. 112). Weiner (2003) states that the a transformative leader’s fundamental task is to ask questions about, for example, the purpose of schooling, about which ideas should be taught, and about who is successful. Critique lays the groundwork for the promise of schooling that is more inclusive, democratic, and equitable for more students. It is “anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, and responsive to class exploitation (as cited in (Shields, 2009, p. 100).

I found some empirical studies that addressed “transformative leadership” as a form of social justice leadership, which seemed to relate to the concept of equity-minded leadership. Astin and Astin (2000), for example, “believe that the value ends of leadership should be to enhance equity, social justice, and the quality of life” (p. 11). Shields (2009) points out that although their interpretation of transformative leadership may differ from transformational leadership, at least it begins with questions of justice and democracy; it critiques inequitable
practices and offers the promise not only of greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others (p. 2). Since transformative leadership links education and educational leadership with the wider social context within which it is embedded, I agree with Shields when she writes that “it is my contention that transformative leadership and leadership for inclusive and socially just learning environments are inextricably related” (p. 2). She also emphasizes the fact that social justice leaders have to be transformative by challenging and changing people’s understandings of the world and practices in schools (p. 128). Brown, (2006) in her article, “Leadership for Social Justice and Equity: Evaluating a Transformative Framework and Andragogy” also does a good job of highlighting the need for increasing awareness, acknowledgement, and action within the preparation programs; however, very little emphasis is placed on the responsibility of educational leaders to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students.

Certain groups of students in our publically funded schools do not do well in our educational institutions, and we know it and we have known about it for a very long time. However, the question school administrators should be asking themselves is: If promoting an equitable and inclusive learning environments is not part of their job, whose job is it?

Social Justice Leadership

There are many definitions of social justice (Blackmore, 2002; Bogotch, 2002; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Gewirtz, 1998; Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002 as cited in Theoharis, 2007, p. 222). The one that I chose to focus on is the one given by Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002), which defines social justice “as the exercise of altering these [institutional and organizational] arrangements by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational and
personal dimensions” (as cited in Theoharis, 2007, p. 223). Social justice leadership mainly focuses on issues that address fairness, respect, inclusion, equity, empathy, and justice to all people involved in the school system, especially students. Social justice leadership also is very much concerned about the issue of how students’ learning is affected by their social economic status, race, language, gender, physical and intellectual disabilities, as well as sexual orientation (Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Shields, 2004; Ryan 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; Brown, 2006; Theoharis, 2007, as cited in Griffiths, 2011, p. 24). Therefore, social justice leadership finds it absolutely impossible to separate social justice from their educational leadership practices. They address and try to eliminate practices that cause marginalization in schools as they focus on educating the whole child. They also believe that through providing democratic education to marginalized students, they will feel the need to participate in, and take responsibility for, their own learning (Shields, 2004, p. 124). One of the gaps I found with social justice leadership is that strategies for educational leaders to specifically promote the academic achievement of marginalized students were not highlighted.

**Inclusive Leadership**

In the Ontario Ministry of Education (2009b) document *Realizing the promise of diversity: Equity and inclusive education in Ontario schools: Guidelines for policy development and implementation*, the term “inclusive education” is defined as “education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected” (p. 90). Inclusive leadership falls under the category of social justice leadership. Ryan (2006a) identifies that “inclusive leadership is organized above all to work for inclusion, social justice, and democracy not just in school and local communities
but also in wider national and global communities” (p. 2) Many studies that focus on inclusive leadership usually tend to lean mostly toward students with physical or intellectual disabilities. Garrison-Wade, Sobel, and Fulmer (2007) write that “beliefs and attitudes that principals hold towards special education are key factors in implementing inclusive school programs” (p.119). Guzman (1997, identifies seven factors that are common among successful inclusive school leaders. Examples of these are: (a) be actively involved in the IEP process; (b) be personally involved with parents of students with disabilities; and (c) collaboratively develop philosophies regarding inclusion (as cited in Garrison-Wade et al. 2007, p. 119). However, inclusion goes beyond the bounds of students with special needs to encompass students from a variety of backgrounds associated with ethnicity, race, social class, gender, sexual orientation, language, mental, and physical ability. Ryan (2006c) writes, “Other scholars have expanded the notion of exclusion and inclusion beyond the differently-abled to encompass other axes of dis/advantage such as age, race, class and gender” (Boscardin & Jacobsen, 1997; Dei, James, Karumancherry, James-Wilson, Zine, 2002; Riley & Rustique-Forester, 2000, as cited in Ryan 2006c p. 5).

**Equity-Minded Leadership**

If all educational leaders really aspire to promote academic achievement for marginalized students in their schools, then an equity-minded orientation model needs to inform their practice. Having had other leadership models defined, I will now define equity-minded leadership. The word equity, as defined in Webster’s dictionary, means “the state, quality, or ideal of being just, impartial, and fair.” In the Ontario Ministry of Education (2009) document *Realizing the promise of diversity: Equity and inclusive education in Ontario schools: Guidelines for policy development and implementation*, equity is defined as “a condition or state of fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people. Equity does not mean treating people the same way without
regard for individual differences” (p. 88). To “mind” means to watch over, to pay attention to. In this paper “minded” means mentality of principals, paying attention to equity. Thus equity-minded leadership means a leadership style where the leader demonstrates a mentality of promoting what is just and fair as he/she promotes academic achievement of marginalized students in his/her school. Ryan and Rottman (2007) write this about equity-minded educational leaders:

> Most are not content to be idle or neutral bystanders or merely describe what they study in a clinical detached manner. They care deeply about what is happening to already marginalized groups in school and are determined to do something about it (p. 10).

It is important to note, too, as Glaze et al. (2012) contended, that “equity does not necessarily mean treating people equally. Resources, both human and financial, may need to be allocated differently to meet unique student needs” (p. 150). One might argue that the definitive goal for equity-minded leadership is to provide the best education which ensures academic success to all students. I believe that when instructional leadership, transformative leadership, and social justice leadership merge, they give rise to the framework of equity-minded leadership. “Many educators have come to believe that injustice in society, as well as in public institutions like schools, is natural, inevitable, and entirely unalterable” (Larson & Murtadha, 2002, p. 134). This is not the case for equity-minded principals who strive to even the playing field for all their students in order to help them succeed to the best of their potential. Through the lens of critical theory, they examine, question, and redress the inequities they see. They believe that injustice in our schools and communities is neither natural nor inevitable, which situates them under the umbrella of leaders for social justice (Larson & Murtadha, 2002, p. 135). They believe that promoting equity and justice through the policies and practices they enforce in schools is their
job (Larson & Murtadha, 2002, p. 135). Instead of seeing themselves as leading schools as business organizations, they see themselves as leading social institutions whose main purpose is to serve the public good (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton 1991; Tyack & Hansot, 1982, as cited in Larson & Murtadha, 2002, p. 136).

Jackson (1999) observed that equity-minded principals have a strong belief that all students can learn in spite of the unfavourable conditions of their life experiences (as cited in Larson & Murtadha, 2002, p. 141). Due to this strong belief, equity-minded principals proceed to set high expectations for all students. Lomotey 1989, (as cited in Larson & Murtadha, 2002, p. 141) indicates that equity-minded principals have “a deep understanding of compassion for the students and communities they serve.” Larson and Murtadha (2002) state that equity-minded principals recognize communities that have been marginalized in their schools and proceed to build trusting relationships with them. They commit themselves to act out of love rather than from fear. They also make decisions that they base on principles of care, human dignity, love, justice, and equity (p. 145). Theoharis (2007) states that “leadership that is not focused on and successful at creating more just and equitable schools for marginalized students is indeed not good leadership” (p. 253).

Flessa (2009) indicated in his study of urban school principals, that “when these school principals explained how their work was particularly urban, they relied on deficit conceptions of students, families, and communities whom they served to explain why their schools so predictably and depressingly failed” (p. 336). On the other hand, equity-minded principals emphasize what they can do instead of what they cannot do to promote academic achievement of marginalized students.
Theoretical Framework

All research studies are guided by a theoretical framework, and my study is no different in that aspect. The theoretical framework provides me with a structure to shape my study and the lens through which I interpret the findings. Bogdan and Biklen, (2003) state, “All research is guided by some theoretical orientation. Good researchers are aware of their theoretical base and use it to help collect and analyze data” (p. 22). Through the theoretical framework I am able to describe the significance, nature, and barriers related with a phenomenon I am exploring. The knowledge and understanding that I garner from the study are then shared with others to inform best leadership practices that in turn promote the academic achievement of marginalized students.

Critical Theory

I use critical theory to explore the phenomenon I am studying because, as Merriam (2009) states, “In critical inquiry the goal is to critique and challenge, to transform and empower” (p. 10). Crotty (1998) also states that critical inquiry is “research that seeks to bring about change” (p. 113). An example of a critical theorist is Apple (2006), who addresses issues in education and power and democratic school development, among other things. In addition, deMarrais and LeCompte (1998) write that critical theorists “view schools and classrooms as sites of cultural production, where people interact to construct meaning” (pp. 31−32). They also argue that “if those involved in the schooling process are able to resist the oppressive practices of schooling, and if critical consciousness can be developed by teachers, administrators and students, schools can become sites of social change rather than social reproduction” (p. 32).

Critical theory suits my study the best because of its effectiveness in exposing and questioning the hidden agenda and status quo of all people. It questions and highlights the
“normalization” of practices that benefit certain groups of people in society while they continue to oppress others. Through the critical theory approach, I am able to reveal whose histories, lived experiences, stories, and voices are left out or ignored in our school system and the impact this has on the learning of marginalized students. For instance, Dei et al. (2000) indicated that a critical, reflective educational practice is needed to draw attention to how the education system helps sustain “certain cultural, social, political, and economic monopolies” (p. 173, as cited in Griffiths, 2013, p. 36). Therefore, through critical theory as my lens to interpret the data, I will have an opportunity to scrutinize the various layers of our school system that impede or promote the academic achievement of marginalized students.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is a snapshot representation of the underlying research question that underpins my research study. It highlights the four subquestions that I will be exploring and subtopics of what is known about this phenomenon as informed by the literature review (See Figure 1).

Principal Understanding

Equity-minded principals believe that students are marginalized because of poverty, being new immigrants, their race, and having learning problems, among other factors. Many studies conducted by researchers such as Ryan (2006a, b, &c), Griffiths (2013), Portelli et al. (2007), Dei et al. (2000), and Singh (2010) indicated that equity-minded leaders identified the factors mentioned above as major causes of students being marginalized by being excluded from their own learning. Simone (2012) pointed out that “overwhelmingly, the staff associates academic failure with the shortcomings of the student or his or her parent/home life factors. In essence, according to staff, the reason that students fail lies outside the realm of the school or the
Figure 1. Conceptual framework.
teacher (p. 90). In the following paragraphs, I am going to expand further what each factor entails.

**Poverty**

Poverty, which is usually associated with students coming from families of low social-economic status, is believed to be a major factor in marginalization of students through no fault of their own. Many of the students come from families that are struggling to make ends meet. Glaze et al. (2012) stated,

> Children and their families who live in poverty and who do not share the dominant culture and language may come to school with fewer of the skills, behaviours, or understandings that teachers expect them to have. They may have more health problems and less access to material supports such as books or study space. They are more likely to move, change schools with some frequency. Their parents may be less able to assist them or to advocate effectively on their behalf. (p. 22)

Griffiths (2013) also indicated that some of his principal participants pointed out that they too were marginalized when they were children because they grew up in working-class homes. One of the examples highlighted is that of Nigel, whose father died when he was still very young. His family had to be forced to go on the social assistance program in order to survive. Nigel was also quite aware that because of his social economic status, he was not expected to do well at school or to continue beyond high school (p. 25). This kind of scenario is played out in many schools for students who live in poverty. Glaze et al. pointed out that “some schools that have large populations of students living in poverty have historically expected failure of their students” (p. 99). Therefore equity-minded principals understand that lowering expectations for students because they are poor is not helpful to students; it just marginalizes them further.
New immigrants

Another factor that was highlighted in the literature was that of students being new immigrants. Glaze et al. (2012) point out that The Ontario Ministry of education (2009) indicated that some new immigrant children, when they come to Canada, do not speak English and are faced with a language barrier when they come to school. Although they manage to master the day-to-day conversational fluency within about two years, they have much more difficulties catching up to their English-speaking peers. The equity-minded principals understand that these English language learners are marginalized due to the language barrier. They also understand that they have to be supported and given early interventions to help them build on their background information and experiences. That helps to tap into the knowledge they bring to the table and gives them many opportunities to practice their oral learning skills. Equity-minded principals understand that they have to be sensitive to issues that families of new immigrants face, and they extend their guidance and support to facilitate the students’ transitioning to the school community to enhance their academic achievement (p.118).

Race

Equity-minded principals believe that students who belong to racialized groups are marginalized because of the many systemic barriers and systemic inequalities that act as barriers causing them to do less well in school. The Ontario Human Rights Commission, (2004) indicated that “Black youth tend to get suspended more, are held back more, are more likely to be placed in a special education program, and are less likely to graduate compared to others with similar backgrounds” (cited in Glaze et al., 2012) p. 112. Glaze et al., (2012) also pointed out that if one looks at the achievement results in Toronto, Canada’s largest city, of the 16 percent of students who do not graduate from high school in the Toronto District School Board,
the largest numbers are students of Aboriginal, Black (African heritage), Hispanic, Portuguese, and Middle Eastern background (TDSB, 2011; TDSB, 2010) (As cited in Glaze et al., p. 113).

Equity-minded principals believe that, given the circumstances and data collected that reveal the students’ struggles in achieving acceptable levels of academic achievement, these students are indeed marginalized. They try to find different ways of trying to help these students attain academic achievement. They understand that without getting a solid education, the future for these students is bleak, as they will be faced with limited job opportunities and possible social marginalization.

Learning problems

Equity-minded principals believe that all students can learn if they are given time, support, and resources to help them achieve to their full potential. They understand that students with learning disabilities are marginalized because they do not seem to fit the mould in a school system which seems to promote the ideology that “one size fits all.” These leaders understand that the effective strategies that are used for students with learning disabilities are good strategies for all students. So they believe in providing early interventions and ongoing supports for them in order to promote their academic achievement. Griffiths (2013) indicated that “students who fall behind academically lose interest in learning and feel like outsiders in their own classrooms. Given the diversity of the learning needs, the solutions you devise for your school must also be multi-faceted” (p. 77).

Equity-minded principals understand that if these supports are not put in place, it is very easy for the students with learning disabilities to fall through the cracks.
**Motivation**

**Commitments**

Equity-minded leaders have a great commitment to equity and social justice. As a result they feel compelled to promote equitable education for students who are marginalized. Larson and Murtadha (2002) state, “Concern about inequity in education has been a rallying point for leaders whose skills, defined areas of competence, and stated life purposes are dedicated to achieving greater social justice in education” (p. 141). In addition, Theoharis (2007) states that “all of the principals felt they had a duty and a ‘moral obligation’ to raise achievement for marginalized students” (p. 232).

**Impact**

Equity-minded leaders love the students they serve. They try to make an impact in their lives by promoting an inclusive education so that all students, especially those who are marginalized, feel that they belong and are active participants in their school community. Larson and Murtadha (2002) point out that “engaging in a discourse of educational leadership and social justice that names love as an essential action, rather than as a privately held feeling, motivates many individuals who are committed to enhancing the lives of others” (p. 143). These leaders are motivated either through their personal experiences or from their family upbringing to remove systemic barriers to facilitate the marginalized students’ ability to achieve to their full potential.

**Awareness**

Others want to raise awareness regarding the injustices they have witnessed or the discrimination they witnessed themselves. Theoharis (2007) writes,

Principal Meg, who taught elementary school in a large urban area for 4 years, indicated that her commitment to social justice developed at the end of college and when she
started teaching. She spoke about noticing discrimination as she grew up, and developing a sense of fairness, but said she did not feel the need to take action until the beginning of her professional career. (p. 230)

**Experiences**

Finally, some leaders talk about how their personal experiences have influenced their commitment to social justice. Theoharis (2007) writes,

Principal Tracy, who is in his mid-30s, attributed his commitment to social justice to growing up as a part of an activist family. Ever since he was a young boy, he participated in peace and justice-work with his parents and sisters. He stated ‘being socially responsible and taking action to create a more just world’ was a passion instilled in him by his family. (p. 231)

Theoharis (2007) also writes about principal Taylor, who fled as a child from Vietnam with her parents, leaving all their possessions and family behind to come to Canada to give them a better life and education.

She asserted that her commitment to social justice came from her parents, the Catholic Church, and her experience leaving Vietnam. These forces taught her ‘to do the right thing . . . that we’re not here just for ourselves but for the good of everyone . . . [and] the whole idea of treating people with kindness and dignity.’ (p. 229)

Her life experiences solidified her passion to make a difference and to promote positive change by attending to equity and justice work as a school administrator.

**Strategies**

There are many strategies that were identified in the literature that can be used by principals to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students.
Vision

Tredway, Stephens, Leader-Picone, and Hernandez (2012) pointed out that equity-minded leaders “advocate for equitable academic civic, and social-emotional outcomes for students who have been historically underserved by school and society” (p. 30). They also “help others to navigate the system and remove or circumvent institutional barriers to student opportunity and achievement” (p. 31). In addition, McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) stated that equity-minded principals create allies with “some teachers who truly believe in equity and who are willing to stand up for, argue for, and speak out for equity” (p. 627). When an equity-minded principal has a group of educators with this same vision, the shared goal of promoting academic achievement for marginalized students can be achieved.

Equity-minded leaders create a school-wide vision that focuses on changing the culture to improve student achievement (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). They work towards eliminating discrimination, inequity, and exclusion. Riehl, (2000) pointed out that equity-minded leaders promote success for all students, especially for those students who are marginalized. In order to promote academic achievement for marginalized students, equity-minded principals create a safe environment which challenges the staff’s deficit thinking. This is accomplished through professional development. Equity-minded leaders create a climate that allows debate, dialogue, and reflection on ideas and issues of working with diverse students who differ by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language ability, or socioeconomic status (Shields et al., 2009 as cited in Simone, 2012 p. 13; Singleton & Linton, 2006). They help the teachers and support staff to understand that “minority students perform better and have more rewarding school experiences when they are in a school environment that is sensitive to their culture and experiences” (Ladson-Billings, 2007). So equity-minded leaders guide the staff to move beyond a system that
pathologizes the cultures, languages, and traditional ways of living of the notably excluded from the dominant discourses (Shields et al., 2004, as cited in Simone, 2012, p. 35). They mobilize their staff in developing a shared understanding which underpins the school’s purpose or vision. They manage to do this by creating a collaborative culture through which focused goals are agreed upon and supported by all participants. When the vision of removing the staff’s deficit thinking is accomplished, the belief that all students can achieve success takes root, and the belief of setting high academic standards for all students including marginalized ones is realized.

Equity-minded principals include the parents in the vision of the school. Tredway et al. (2012) pointed out that these leaders “systemically build an equitable school culture that values the principles of a democratic schooling in terms of both individual and collective voice and responsibilities” (p. 34). This is accomplished by analyzing the adult structures in the school community to help determine how they can facilitate the inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives which will promote the academic achievement for marginalized students.

School Environment

Equity-minded leaders create welcoming and inclusive schools (Lopez, Gonzalez, & Fierro, 2006; Riehl, 2000; Shields, 2000; Shields & Sayani, 2005, as cited in C.W. Cooper, 2009, p. 698). These principals keep in mind the various personal circumstances the students might be coming from and work together with their staff to ensure that they create a school atmosphere where all their students feel welcomed, safe, and cared for. Shields (2004) pointed out that “when children feel they belong and find their realities in the curriculum and conversations of schooling, research has demonstrated repeatedly that they are more engaged in learning and experience greater school success” (Dodd, 2000; Brokenleg, 1999, as cited in Shields, 2004, p. 122). Further, they recognize that truly inequitable system factors such as socioeconomic status,
race, and gender do not truncate students’ life chances or prevent them from achieving ambitious outcomes (Valencia, 1997, as cited in Glaze et al., 2012). Thus they try to remove the barriers and to create a safe place which would promote academic success for marginalized students. This approach is essential because it focuses on the factors over which we as educators have control (Glaze, et al., 2012, p. 9).

Theoharis (2007) emphasizes the importance of ongoing professional learning to strengthen the staff’s professional growth when he states that equity-minded principals “sought to increase staff capacity by addressing issues of race, providing ongoing staff development focused on building equity, developing staff investment in equity, hiring and supervising for justice, and empowering staff” (p. 235). Equity-minded principals build a school environment in which parents feel welcome and feel respected. They build a relationship with the parents by communicating to them in both formal and informal ways as a means of investing in ways of improving the school.

**Student Learning**

Equity-minded leaders set high standards for all students, including marginalized students, and they constantly monitor students’ performance. McGuigan and Hoy (2006) pointed out that researchers who did the study of *Gaining Ground: How Some High Schools Accelerate Learning for Struggling Students* (2005) identified a culture of high expectations as a critical component of success (p. 206). Numerous other researchers studying high-poverty schools (Craig, Butler, Cairo, Gilchrist, Holloway, Williams & Moats, 2005; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; McGee, 2004; Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2002; Trimble, 2002) also came to the same conclusion regarding the importance of setting high expectations for marginalized
students. C.W. Cooper (2009) pointed out as well that equity-minded leaders ensure systematic monitoring and follow-up of student absences with teachers, students, and parents (p. 698).

The students are also provided with the extra resources and support they need to help them to navigate a system set up according to the criteria set out by dominant culture interests and needs. Some of the strategies used are providing after-school tutoring through use of peer, parent, and community volunteers (C.W. Cooper, Allen, & Bettez, 2009; Zhou, 2003, as cited in C.W. Cooper, 2009, p. 698). This practice helps marginalized students who do not have a supportive home structure and who do not have access to computers to stay after school to get help with their homework and to use the computers to complete their homework/projects. The students are also provided with the materials they need to complete their projects, such as Bristol board, papers, markers, crayons, and so on. Although such items seem to be quite accessible, this is not the case with some students who come from families where their parents have to make a choice between putting food on the table and buying the materials needed for a child’s school project. However, as Dantley (2003) pointed out, equity-minded leaders use a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, they acknowledge that these measures (mostly standardized testing procedures) are at present the “currency” of success and they help the students to navigate this system, while on the other hand, they acknowledge the ways in which this system perpetuates inequity and strive to change the system itself.

Theoharis (2007) pointed out that equity-minded leaders, in their efforts to raise students’ achievement, examine students’ assessment data collected by teachers to monitor progress made by the students. The results of the assessment data are critically examined by the principal and staff to adjust the instructional strategies to meet the learning needs of marginalized students. These leaders not only use the state/provincial mandated standardized accountability tests, but
use their local assessments as well. Through collaboration with the teachers, they keep track of the students’ achievement growth and set instructional strategies to help move the improvement forward (p. 232). The teachers are also supported through various job-embedded professional development opportunities that provide them with a variety of instructional strategies to maximize addressing the learning needs of marginalized students.

Equity-minded principals work very closely with staff to creatively organize school events where parents are attracted to come to school to participate in the achievements of their children. Flessa et al. (2010) wrote, “If you call it a Student Showcase Night and make it student-centred, which it should be all of a sudden the support is found” (p. 15). In other words, parents want to participate in activities that showcase their children’s learning rather than activities where they are just talked to by administrators or teachers, such as in the case of the “Curriculum Night.” In such a case, they might feel intimidated and not feel able to contribute to their children’s learning.

**Instruction**

Equity-minded principals take the role of instructional leadership very seriously. They immerse themselves in all aspects of teaching and learning, working very closely with staff to monitor students’ learning. Cotton (2003) indicates that effective instructional leaders are intensely involved in curricular and instructional issues that directly affect student achievement. Among the many other traits and beliefs an equity-minded principal exhibits, Smith and Andrews (1989) highlight the fact that the principal as an instructional leader is also expected to fulfill the following: to provide the necessary resources to enable the school’s academic goals to be achieved; to be knowledgeable and skillful enough in curriculum and instructional matters to
be a resource for teachers; to be an effective communicator in various group settings; and finally, to be visible around the school to be easily accessible to staff, students, and parents.

Equity-minded principals complete the budget to address the needs of the students’ learning, especially those who are marginalized, by providing the resources, both material and human capital. The schedules are also made to address the learning needs of all students but especially those who are marginalized.

As instruction leaders, equity-minded principals communicate very effectively with the parents and community partners to promote student academic achievements. Through the fundraisers done by the school councils, some of the money collected is channeled into buying learning materials that support student learning, especially for those who are marginalized. Although the importance of instructional leadership in promoting student success and achievements has been supported by several studies such as Cotton (2003), Waters & McNulty (2004) and Fulmer (2006) the gap, of addressing the academic achievement of marginalized students is not articulated in the literature as being the focus of the instructional leaders. However, the equity-minded leaders take it upon themselves to make it a priority to promote the academic achievement for the marginalized students in their schools.

For some scholars, instructional leadership appears to be a component of effective school leadership. Smith and Andrews (1989) state that “how we define leadership of the school seems to determine the extent to which it is a key element in producing an instructionally effective school” (p. 15). However, it is believed that today’s effective school leadership should not only integrate the traditional school leadership duties of evaluating teachers, completing the budget and required schedules, and managing the school building, but instructional leaders must immerse themselves in all aspects of teaching and learning.
Parental Engagement

Equity-minded leaders create partnerships with nonprofit organizations and local businesses that are willing to contribute staff time and monetary resources that help to support mentoring programs for children from low-income families (C. W. Cooper et al. 2009; Zhou, 2003, as cited in C. W. Cooper, 2009, p. 698). Through such partnerships, parents and volunteers from the community come to the school and read with students who are English language learners or students who are struggling with reading to help them improve their reading skills. This extra boost gives the children, who are usually from low-income families and who have various learning difficulties, an opportunity to practice their reading and writing skills, which impacts on their overall academic performance, since reading touches on every subject area.

Equity-minded principals create an atmosphere which promotes building collaborative relationships between staff and parents. They forge a more authentic and equitable relationship between school and home. The principal and staff work collaboratively to provide opportunities for parents to be involved in school activities. An example of such opportunities is through monthly school assemblies where parents are invited to attend. Equity-minded principals also provide opportunities for school staff to get to know their students and their students’ families and community on a personal level, where they learn to dignify the culture of their students (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004, p. 609). McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) identified three practices/strategies that can be used with staff to promote the collaboration relationship between staff and parents to support parental engagement. These strategies are: going on neighbourhood walks, collecting community oral histories, and participating in three-way conferencing (students, parents, and teachers).
Staffs go door to door at the beginning of the school year to welcome students and parents and to distribute important information which not only establishes positive rapport between the school and the community but also begins to dismantle the negative pre-conceived notions staff frequently have about the students, their families, and their communities. (p. 610)

According to Carter (2002), research data show that the greater the family involvement in schools, the better the outcomes in terms of students’ academic performance, attendance, and attitude. Equity-minded leaders stress parent and community involvement. They promote collaboration with parents to cocreate a variety of family programs, such the literacy programs, and to get families’ input on important reform matters. They also form professional learning communities that are open to all school community members and are guided by a critical multicultural curriculum (C. W. Cooper et al. 2009; Zhou, 2003, as cited in C. W. Cooper, 2009, (p. 698). Through parental engagement, the equity-minded leaders manage to develop a positive and trusting relationship with the parents. The parents are given support through computer programs to help them develop computer skills, and English language learners are offered classes to help them to learn to read in order to be able to help their children with their school work. This practice affects the academic achievement of marginalized students in a positive way because it gives opportunities to the students and their parents to develop their literacy skills.

Barriers

Expectations

Many challenges face equity-minded leaders. One of the challenges is that the demands associated with the principalship are numerous. Theoharis (2007) points out that “the daily requirements of what is described as a ‘nearly impossible’ (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003) job,
combined with a personal belief that they can and must quickly create just schools, produced serious resistance for these leaders” (p. 238).

Beliefs

Staff members’ attitudes and beliefs act as an obstruction for the equity-minded leaders. Their deficit thinking gets in the way of helping the marginalized students to reach their full academic potential. The educators deem students with cultural, socioeconomical, and linguistic backgrounds that differ from the dominant group to be deficient and in need of remediation (Garcia & Guerra, 2004, as cited in Simone, 2012, p. 28). These educators blame the low achievement of marginalized students on the students themselves and their parents, who are seen as not valuing education. For example, Lipman (1998) highlighted that “today, explanations for lack of school success of students in general carry cultural meanings linked to race, class, opportunity and success in the United States and the role of school and teachers” as cited in Simone, 2012, p. 28). Further, some educators hold negative attitudes towards students with various learning disabilities. Theoharis (2007) quotes one of the principals in his study saying, “There are some staff who feel that having special ed. kids in the classroom disrupts the other kids. They don’t want challenging behaviors or students who really struggle academically in their classroom” (p. 239).

Organization

Another barrier stemmed from their organization, that is, the district school boards. Theoharis (2007) pointed out that “the principals discussed how resistance from their district and beyond came from unsupportive central office administrators, a formidable bureaucracy, prosaic colleagues, a lack of resources, harmful state and federal regulations, and uninspired administrator preparation” (p. 240).
Isolation

Finally, these leaders felt isolated in their efforts to promote academic achievement for marginalized students (Calliste & Dei, 2000, Theoharis, 2007). Some of their colleagues are more concerned about maintaining the “status quo” of the existing educational system, which continues to propel the systemic barriers that impede the academic achievement of marginalized students. One of the principals in Theoharis’s (2007) study states,

Some colleagues just don’t have any drive in this [equity and justice]. Take [name of the principal], that is not why he’s doing his job. He is not in for equity or social justice or educating all kids. He does not even seem to understand what equity and social justice mean in school . . . you sit around in a principals’ meeting and 30 of us are there and may be only 2 people are having the emotional struggle of trying to promote a social justice agenda. (p. 241)

Theoharis (2007) also pointed out that,

meeting resistance from these sources left the principals feeling isolated without models of how to do their social justice work, in a system not designed to support them, and working with and for people who did not share or value their social justice commitment. (p. 240)

However, equity-minded principals, despite their feeling of being isolated, continue to persevere and promote the academic achievement of marginalized students. They do this because their belief that all children can learn aligns with the values they hold so dear to their hearts.

Conclusion

What the wisest and best parent wants for his own child,
that must the community want for all its children. Any other idea for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy. (John Dewey, 1902, (as cited in Tredway et al., 2012, p. 30)

This literature has shed a bright light on the need for equity-minded principals in all our publically funded schools. Parents believe deeply that the child they are sending to us at school to educate is their very finest and their very best. It is indeed our job as school leaders to ensure that whichever child is brought to us at school is given the support and resources necessary to help him/her achieve success to the best of his/her ability. (Glaze et al., 2012) phrased it very well when they stated that “in every district, some schools have succeeded in reducing achievement gaps and are demonstrating effective practices that support all students in achieving their potential” (p. 150). That being said, leaders in general who focus on equity/social justice do not tend to focus specifically or enough on the academic achievement of marginalized students. Therefore, through pursuing this topic in my dissertation, I explored how the equity-minded principals promote academic achievement for the marginalized students in their schools.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Real education means to inspire people to live abundantly, to learn to begin with life as they find it and make it better. (Carter G. Woodman, as cited in Tredway et al., 2012, p. 60)

This chapter describes the elements of a qualitative methodology used in this study. First, I describe the qualitative research design. Second, I outline the rationale for using an interview study in particular. Third, I explain how the participants were selected, procedures taken for collecting data, and present the interview questions. Fourth, I outline how the data were organized and analyzed. Fifth, I explain the ethical considerations and limitations of the study.

Qualitative Research Design

As indicated earlier, the intention of this study is to explore how equity-minded principals promote the academic achievement of marginalized students in their schools. I believe that a qualitative research design is better suited to help me unravel the complexity of the nature of the questions I am exploring. Much information has been written on the subject of qualitative research by a number of scholars and academics, Denzin & Lincoln (2008), Creswell (2002), Merriam (2009), deMarrais (2004), McMillan and Schumacher (1993), and Patton (2002) to mention a few. Although there is not a simple way to define qualitative in regards to research, it all seems to get together when we look at its characteristics. I chose a qualitative research study because the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning. Merriam (2009) stated that “the overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience” (p. 14). Therefore, the goal is
not to gather numbers or facts that can be generalized. Instead, the reader is given an opportunity
to infer from the data what applies to his/her own situations.

I also chose the qualitative study because it takes place in a real-world situation rather
than in a laboratory. The equity-minded principals I was studying were in a natural setting where
they felt comfortable, and the findings were not predetermined, as is in the case with a
quantitative study where a hypothesis has already been determined. As McMillan and
Schumacher (1993) pointed out, a qualitative research design “describes and analyzes people’s
individual and collective social actions, beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions” (pp. 372–373).
Merriam (2009) indicated that, in a qualitative study, “the key concern is understanding the
phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspectives, not the researcher’s” (p. 14).

In a qualitative study, “the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and
analysis” (Merriam, 2009, p. 15). This suited my research purposes well because I was the
primary researcher and my goal was to understand how equity-minded principals promoted the
academic achievement of marginalized students in their schools. Therefore, the qualitative study
provided me with an ideal means of collecting and analyzing data because the human instrument
is able to be immediately responsive and adaptive (Merriam, 2009). Although Merriam (2009)
points out that the human instrument has shortcomings and biases that might have an impact on
the study, she also recommends that it is important to identify and monitor these biases as to how
they may shape the collection and interpretation of data, instead of trying to eliminate them (p.
15).

Using a qualitative research methodology provided me with a process that is inductive. I
gathered the data to build the theory instead of deductively testing the hypothesis, as is in the
case of a quantitative study. I also produced a rich, descriptive understanding of the phenomenon
of how equity-minded principals promote the academic achievement of marginalized students in their schools, by using words instead of numbers.

**Interview Study**

I chose to use a qualitative research methodology, an interview study in particular, because its attributes matched the goals that shed light on the strategies that equity-minded principals use to promote academic achievement for marginalized students. For instance, deMarrais (2004) defines an interview as “a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study” (p. 55). Through conducting the interviews, I elicited information from the participants, having a “conversation with them with a purpose” (Dextor, 1970, as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 88). I wanted to find out what is “in and on someone else’s mind” (Patton, 2002, as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 88). I chose to use an interview study because, as Patton (2002, as cited in Merriam 2009, p. 88) explains:

We interview people to find out from them the things we cannot directly observe. We cannot observe feelings, thoughts and intentions. We cannot observe behaviour that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective.

Further, an interview study lent itself best to my purposes because it allowed me to collect data from people representing a broad range of ideas. Unlike a quantitative research study which seeks to understand the phenomenon based on frequency, quantity, logical empiricism, inanimate instruments, or predetermined and structured samples, through the interview study I
used “an array of interpretive techniques which sought to describe, decode, translate, and come to terms with the meaning” (Van Maanen, 1979, p. 520 as sited in Merriam, 2009 p. 13). The interview study allowed me to focus on the process, understanding, and meaning, and I was the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. “The process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive” (p. 14).

I conducted a pilot study, which is a small version of a full-scale study, to give me an opportunity to test out my interview questionnaire and research design. However, the information I collected from those two interviews was not used in this study. I believe that a pilot study was an essential component of a sound study design. I interviewed two equity-minded principals using the interview questions. This was a valuable undertaking because I was able to test my questions. As it turned out, after the two interviews from the pilot study, I realized that I was on strong ground to move forward with the full-scale study. I also recognized that I might have to ask some more questions as the interviews went on to elicit more detailed responses and for clarifications.

Selection of Participants and Data Collection

The first criterion for participant selection was choosing principals from elementary schools whose interests and efforts are exhibited in promoting academic achievement for marginalized students as defined in this study. The second criterion was to recruit participants who have been principals for at least 3 years to ensure that they are well established in the leadership profession rather than principals who are brand new and in the midst of adjusting to their position. The general description of the participants and their professional setting are shown in Table 1.
Table 1

General Description of Participants and Their Professional Settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>School grade levels</th>
<th>Racial &amp; student population</th>
<th>Racial identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>FDK−8</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariah</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>FDK−8</td>
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<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>FDK−8</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>FDK−8</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>FDK−6</td>
<td>658</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilma</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>FDK−8</td>
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<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>FDK−8</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Catholic</td>
<td>FDK−8</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Catholic</td>
<td>FDK−8</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Catholic</td>
<td>FDK−8</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Public</td>
<td>Gr. 6−8</td>
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<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>FDK−8</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
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<td>FDK−8</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>FDK−8</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>FDK−8</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note, FDK = full day kindergarten
Gr. = grades
A snowball sampling, as suggested by Merriam, (2009) Patton (2002), and Edmonson and Irby (2008), was used. Merriam (2009) stated that a snowball sampling “involves locating a few key participants who easily meet the criteria you have established for the participation in the study. As you interview these early key participants you ask one to refer you to other participants” (p. 79). Patton (2002) also stated that “by asking a number of people who else to talk with, the snowball gets bigger and bigger as you accumulate new information-rich cases” (p. 237). Therefore, I chose to use a purposeful sample in order to select “information-rich cases to study in depth” (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993, p. 378). This is because the participants were most likely knowledgeable and informative about the phenomenon I was exploring.

I contacted, through the phone and email, the principals whose names were given to me through the snowballing method. I invited 25 principals to participate in the study. Four principals who agreed to participate in the study were secondary school principals, and one was from the adult education school, and so I excluded them. Another four agreed to participate in the study but they never got back to me when I asked for the dates to set up the interviews. Although I gave them a few more reminders, there was no response. I did 11 interviews between the months of April and July. I found that when it came to the month of June, it got harder for the principals to be available for interviews, and during the months of July to August many of them had gone on holidays. So I had to wait for five principals to come back towards the end of August before I completed the rest of the interviews.

I interviewed a total of 16 equity-minded elementary principals. These principals were from five district school boards in Ontario: two Catholic and three public. Out of the 16 principals interviewed, five were males and 11 were females, 5 were from public boards and 11 from Catholic boards. The reason I interviewed participants from 5 district school boards was
because I believed that I would be able to collect rich data which reflect strategies not only from the one or two district school boards. The teaching careers of these principals ranged from 16 to 35 years, and their experience as a principal ranged from 5 to 17 years. The type of schools in which the principals worked were of mixed incomes ranging from low income to upper middle income. The interviews were conducted face to face and lasted one hour. Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Merriam, 2009) “recommend sampling until a point of saturation or redundancy is reached” (p. 80), and that is exactly what I did. When I noticed that the responses were becoming repetitive, I decided not to interview any more participants. The following are the interview questions:

1. How do equity-minded principals understand marginalization in their schools?
2. What motivates you to be an equity-minded principal?
3. What strategies do you employ to promote academic achievement for marginalized students in your school with: (a) staff members? (b) students? (c) parents?
4. What barriers/challenges do you face when you promote academic achievement for marginalized students in your school?
5. What recommendations would you give to the district school boards and the Ministry of Education as regards to promoting academic achievement for marginalized students?

**Data Management and Analysis**

After the participants agreed to participate in the study, I sent them the interview questionnaire about a week before the actual interview took place to give them an opportunity to reflect on the topic being explored. The interviews were conducted between the months of April and August 2014 after the study was approved by the University of Toronto’s ethics review board.
The participants were interviewed in a place where they felt comfortable. They all had a say as to where and when they were interviewed. Eleven principals were interviewed at their schools, two came to my home, two at a neutral place, and one at her house. The interview questions were semistructured. The nature of the semistructured interviews allowed me to dig deeper for information if I needed some clarification. Interviews were audiotaped with the participants’ permission, and I manually transcribed them verbatim. Field notes were taken during the interviews. Several principals gave me some documents such as their school newsletters to show me how they communicate with parents in different languages and stories highlighting the equitable practices happening at their schools. They also recommended that I check out their school websites. Six principals gave me books about equity to read. I took notes on the observations I noted in the schools, such as visual images posted and various artifacts displayed around the schools. However, my only substantive data collection method was the interviews.

Tape recording the interviews ensured that everything said was preserved for analysis. It also gave me an opportunity to listen for ways to improve my questioning technique. Taking notes during the interviews gave me an opportunity to record my reactions to some information the participant said to signal to him/her about the importance of what he/she was saying. This also facilitated to pace the interview. I wrote postinterview notes as well to monitor the data collection process and to begin analyzing the information. A reliable storage and retrieval system is vital to the successful management of data. So I used a secure physical filing system at my home to manage raw field notes and hard copies of the transcripts. Computer data were encrypted.
After transcribing the data was completed, a member-checking method was followed by emailing the transcripts to participants for member check, with an invitation for them to make changes to the transcript if they had any major concerns that were factual, problematic, or inaccurate. I gave the participants 2 weeks to review and make any changes they deemed necessary. A time limit was set to help me keep the data analysis process going. Out of the 16 principals, 14 of them emailed me back and stated that the transcripts were fine as they were. Two of the principals phoned me and told me that they were happy with the transcripts and wished me good luck with the study. I organized the data from the 180 pages (single spaced) of the transcripts using Microsoft Word. I created five files that matched the interview questions. I reduced the data to certain patterns, categories, and themes. I then went on to interpret the data using “de-contextualization” and “re-contextualization.” Themes that arose were coded and collapsed into major themes. This method of “taking apart” leads to the emergence of a larger consolidated picture (Tesch, 1990). I analyzed the data by following Tesch’s eight steps he provided for consideration (pp. 142–145).

1. I read through all the transcripts carefully and wrote down some ideas that came to my mind. I used Microsoft Word to organize the data by creating five files that matched the five interview questions. I highlighted and chose portions of the answers and pasted them in the corresponding five files.

2. I reread all the transcripts again, focusing on one question at a time, and asked myself, what was this all about? I tried to find the underlying meaning, and I wrote my thoughts in the margins of the transcript as well.
3. After going through the transcript again, I arranged the similar topics in groups under major topics and subtopics. I highlighted unusual or useful quotes that I incorporated into my study.

4. I took this list, reexamined my data, abbreviated the topics as codes, and wrote the codes next to the appropriate segments of the text. I then observed the organization of data checking to see if new categories or codes emerged.

5. I found the most descriptive wording for my topics and I turned them into categories. I reduced my total list of categories by grouping topics that related to each other and drew lines between the categories to show the interrelationship.

6. I made a final decision on the abbreviation for each category and arranged the codes alphabetically.

7. I assembled the data material belonging to each category in one place and performed a preliminary analysis.

8. Finally, I recorded my existing data.

I chose a more labour-intensive method to analyze my transcript because it gave me an opportunity to understand the content at a deeper level.

Presentation of Results

A number of themes emerged from the data, and I collapsed them into four major themes that I could manage to work with. These themes included: (a) principals’ understanding of marginalization; (b) principals’ advocacy and school culture; (c) curriculum and instruction; and (d) staff as barriers or facilitators of students’ academic achievements. Huberman and Miles (1994) pointed out data analysis “contains three linked sub processes . . . data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing” (p. 429). I began the data reduction process by choosing the
conceptual framework, research questions, and instruments. However, more inductive and
deductive data reduction ensued as themes and patterns merged and were verified through the
research process. The exact nature of the data display emerged only after the process of analysis
as indicated above by following Tesch’s (1990) eight steps.

**Ethical Considerations**

This research included human subjects, and for that reason, the research commenced after
the University of Toronto ethics review board approval, which was granted on April 10, 2014 for
a period of one year (See Appendix A). The approval was renewed in April 21, 2015 and expires
April 9, 2016 (See Appendix A). The defence will take place prior to this date; therefore, the
second renewal will not be required. There were no foreseen risks for the participants in this
study, and no discomfort or stress was experienced by the participants. I explained to all
participants that the study was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time without any
penalty (See Appendix B). Before any interviews were conducted, I made sure that I explained
the study to the participants so that they were fully informed before they signed the consent (See
Appendix C). The identities of the participants were kept confidential and, to ensure their privacy
and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all participants and locations. All audiotapes,
transcripts, consent forms, and field notes are securely stored in my private residence in a locked
filing cabinet. Data stored on the computer were encrypted and are password protected. The only
person who was able to access any raw data is Dr. James Ryan, who is my thesis supervisor. All
the data I collected will be destroyed 5 years after completion of the study.

**Limitations of the Study**

One of the limitations of this study to consider is the applicability and generalizability of
the findings. The findings and results are based on only 16 individuals from five district school
boards for the same period of time. In addition, my own lens and experiences may impact the way I interpret the participants’ voices. However, every effort was made to honour the participants’ voices.

Summary

I used a qualitative research methodology, in particular an interview study, because its characteristics complemented the goals that shed light on the strategies which equity-minded principals use to promote academic achievement for marginalized students. The study involved 16 elementary principals and ranged from inner-city schools to affluent schools from five different district school boards in Ontario. The interviews were semistructured and were conducted face to face. The equity-minded principals were provided with five open-ended questions to describe and give details on how they promoted the academic achievement of marginalized students in their schools. I selected principals who were considered to be equity minded. Snowball sampling was used to identify these principals. The interviews were audiotaped and manually transcribed. I organized the data into themes.

In the following seven chapters I present the findings from the interviews. These chapters explore the following: Chapter Four: how equity-minded principals understand marginalization in their schools; Chapter Five: what motivates the principals to be equity minded; Chapter Six: the strategies used to promote academic achievement for marginalized students; Chapter Seven: what barriers the equity-minded principals face; Chapter Eight: principals’ recommendations to the district school boards and Ministry of Education; Chapter Nine: discussion of the findings of the study; and Chapter Ten: my recommendations to the district school boards and Ministry of Education, concluding remarks, and implications for further research.
CHAPTER FOUR: PRINCIPAL UNDERSTANDING OF MARGINALIZATION

While all countries endorse the principles of equal opportunity and universal rights, the evidence shows that, when it comes to opportunities for education, some people are more equal than others – the marginalized being the least equal of all. Inequalities linked to parental income, gender, ethnicity, race and other factors continue to restrict life chances and fuel marginalization. (UNESCO, 2010, p. 138)

This chapter explores how participants understood student marginalization. The principals identified the students who are marginalized in their schools and the manner in which this was occurring. These 16 principals were from five elementary district school boards, three public boards and two Catholic boards, and from schools of mixed incomes ranging from low income to upper middle income. The principals believed that marginalization of students starts way before the children enter school. They also pointed out that school has an important role to offset the barriers the students face and provide equal learning opportunities for all students especially those who are marginalized. They indicated that they are aware that schools can accentuate the barriers and perpetuate marginalization if they do not try to level the playing field for the marginalized students. The Scientific A United Nations Education (2010) report, pointed out that “marginalization in education is a form of acute and persistent disadvantage rooted in underlying social inequalities” (p. 135). The principals saw marginalization of students through the lens of social inequality and systemic barriers. They understood that the students and their parents/guardians have no control of these factors, although they greatly impact shaping their educational opportunities. These social inequalities and systemic barriers were collapsed into four major categories as follows: (a) socioeconomic class, (b) cultural background, (c) ability, and (d) sexual orientation.
Socioeconomic Class

The first social inequality identified by the principals that marginalized the students was the students' socioeconomic class. Several of the marginalized students came from families that fell in the category of low socioeconomic class. In this section, the participants talked about a) doing tasks, b) lack of life staples, c) access to valued experiences, d) lack of resources, e) poor role models, f) getting picked on, and g) associations with other students.

Doing Tasks

All the principals interviewed indicated that the socioeconomic class of their students was one of the major social inequalities that contributed to students’ marginalization. For example, Mariah, whose school has over 660 students, indicated that she has a very diverse school community and that quite a number of her students come from low income families. Many of the families in her school are in a single-parent situation, and they have large families. The parent has to juggle different jobs to try to make ends meet. As a result, the parents are not home to give the children the extra bit of help they might need to complete their school work. The older siblings are responsible for taking care of their smaller siblings and do not have time to study or complete their own school work. This impacts negatively on their learning because they do not have time to focus on their own school work, as they are responsible for helping their siblings with their school work and making lunches or meals for their young siblings. By the time they ensure that their young siblings are fed and put to bed, they are tired too. There is no adult to remind them to complete their homework or even to go to bed early if they decide to watch television or play video games. So, the cycle just continues. Over time, the children fall behind, although it is not their fault. It is not due to not wanting to learn, but they find themselves in situations where they have no control. Mariah stated:
We have many parents who are working double jobs because they can’t afford to just live on one job to support the family. We have in those situations older siblings who are caring for younger siblings. We have quite a few families where the older child will get their sibling ready for school or make their lunch, oftentimes they will even help them with their homework and that puts the oldest sibling at risk because now they don’t have the time they need for their academic success.

Mariah’s quote highlights the fact that students cannot change who they are or what happens in their homes. It is the schools and the educational system that have to work around the students to provide them every possible opportunity by levelling the playing field to enable them to achieve to the best of their abilities. So Mariah provides the students with a homework club after school.

**Lack of Life Staples**

A second cause of the students’ marginalization is lack of staples. Many of the marginalized students come from families that are struggling financially. Melissa, whose school has over 430 students and has a mix of low, middle, and upper middle income families, also believed that one of the contributors to her students’ marginalization was poverty. Many of the parents in her school are single mothers and are just trying to stay afloat financially. The lack of money acts as a stressor that marginalizes the students coming from those poor families. She stated that:

I would say it would be mainly our families that come from our lower social economic background, high number of single-parent families, most are headed by women who are on Ontario Works, disability, or have menial or low-paying jobs and are raising their children the best they can.
Families headed by single parents tend to struggle financially because they have to depend on government social assistance or jobs that pay minimum wages and are not enough to support the children. This creates a social inequality, and as a result many times the parents cannot afford to buy nutritious foods for the children to eat at home or at school. This is evident from the lunches and snacks they bring to school. Often they do not even have a lunch to eat at school, let alone snacks. This impacts negatively on their learning in school because it is difficult for a child to focus on learning when she or he is hungry. When the students who come from such families go to a school where students do not wear uniforms, other children make fun of the quality of clothes they wear and call them names such as “welfare clothes, or shoes.” This impacts negatively on the students’ self-esteem, which in turn affects the students’ academic achievement negatively because they have to fight battles to defend themselves.

Marcus is a principal of an inner-city school of 600 students. He echoed the same notion that students are marginalized because of their low social economic status, a social inequality which they have no control of. He stated:

It is a generation that is White and working class . . . We have a number of students who live in economically challenged homes, marginalized in terms of that they do not have the money at home for extras; they do not have the money for food or clothing. They are marginalized because simply they do not have the money at home.

When students come from homes where they are financially strapped, it makes it difficult to sustain the bare necessities of life many middle class families just take for granted. It is very difficult for children to focus in school when they are hungry. It is also difficult for the children to come to school in cold weather when the parents do not have money to buy proper winter clothes and boots for the children. As a result, when the weather is cold, the students cannot
come to school because they do not have the proper winter gear. If they manage to go to school with poor quality winter gear, it is again difficult to focus on their learning because they are worried about going outside at recess, where they will be cold. This impacts negatively on the marginalized students’ academic achievement.

Helen’s school is located in the poorest area in the inner city, and it has over 600 students. She believes that students in her school are marginalized by the sheer fact that they live in what she calls “cyclical poverty.” She pointed out that “a bulk of my kids’ experience is living in poverty. I deem them marginalized because they do not benefit from a stable quality of life and their needs are not consistently met on a regular basis.” These students do not have the life staples many take for granted at their disposal. This makes focusing on their learning difficult, as other more pressing matters take priority, such as worrying about having heat in the house during the winter night or having something to eat when they go home.

**Access to Valued Experiences**

Several principals pointed out that the marginalized students did not have access to valued experiences many of the middle class children take for granted. Wilma, whose school has a population of 586 students and is located in a neighbourhood of mixed incomes, that is, low, middle, and upper middle income families, echoed the same observation. She stated that the socioeconomic background students bring to the school plays a very big role in their marginalization. She noted that many of the students who come from affluent families have their every single need attended, to the point where they readily demonstrate an attitude of entitlement. She stated:

Those who are marginalized are the students who came from communities with social economic disparities. Those students face very significant challenges. Many of my
students from affluent families have far more opportunities for extracurricular activities. They are well supported at home, and they are coming with almost an attitude of entitlement. Nothing is lacking. So, in that sense they are marginalized, not from lack of concern or trying, but from lack of resources caused by social inequalities and perhaps lack of skills on the part of the parents.

Sometimes there are limits within the parents’ experiences, their realities, their family lives that do not allow them to provide the same supports at home.

**Lack of Resources**

Nick is a principal of a school with over 560 students that is located in an area with a mix of incomes ranging from low, middle class, to upper middle. He stated that one of the factors he believed was the major cause of student marginalization in his school was poverty as well. He explained that a large number of his students come from families that are struggling with poverty, and many of them are new immigrants. Many immigrants are challenged and marginalized due to low income which prevents their having access to many of the services the middle and upper middle classes just take for granted. The lack of such services, such as computers, laptops, internet access, and many more, impacts on the students’ academic achievement. Nick stated:

The marginalization to me, the greatest signs of it from a school point of view, is the lack of access to services, to programs, to recreation. All those things that you would expect a middle income family to be able to achieve, that is not necessarily the case. It impacts on housing, it impacts on education. They’re families who struggle to, for example, pay for school trips. It impacts on personal growth in the sense that, with lack of income, they are not able to access the arts.
Poor Role Models

Helen believes that the fact that these students’ parents and grandparents and great grandparents have lived in poverty perpetuated by deeply rooted social economic inequalities makes it very difficult for them to break the poverty cycle. They have poor self-esteem and do not see themselves grasping academic achievement because this is not something which is often modelled by their own families.

Henry, whose elementary school has about 480 students, believed that the area where the students live can be one of the key factors causing them to be marginalized. He stated that many of the students in his school came from a low social economic background and lived in subsidized housing, ministry or city housing. In the area they live in, they are exposed to some characters that may sometimes influence them in negative ways; that they fail to reinforce good school habits that lead to academic achievement. Henry also pointed out that this situation is not only limited to students from lower social class backgrounds. Many other students from various social class backgrounds can also be exposed to too many distractions that make the importance of school irrelevant.

Steven is a principal of a school of 379 students which is designated as a “code red” neighbourhood. This means that the school is located in a neighbourhood which is a marginalized area with high unemployment, lower educational achievement of parents, higher crime rate, and a higher school dropout rate. The students and parents at his school have many challenges in life, and these factors marginalize the students and impact negatively on their academic achievement. He concurs with Henry’s observations that the poor role modelling which the students are exposed to in their neighbourhood does not help their cause. These are systemic barriers that the students have no control of.
Getting Picked on

Sarah has a school of close to 800 students. Her school is located in an upper middle income neighbourhood. She indicated that she has observed in her school that many of the students, from low socioeconomic families get picked on a lot by the children from the more affluent families. Henry also indicated that those students from poor families tend to get picked on more by other children because they are marginalized. He highlighted his point with an example of what the students have shared with him about what was happening on the school playground.

During recesses we share green space with the city and with the nearby Catholic school, and it’s a large playground in the back. So to supervise that with three people, the area is too big. What’s happening is that kids are in unsupervised places, if you will, because there are only so many eyes for so many places. This has created a lot of unsafe places. What’s happening from there is, quote, unquote, marginalized kids or the kids that are, if you will, in a cross-way low on the pecking order, are those that are being pushed aside and getting picked on more.

Association With Other Students

Henry also indicated that students who come from low social economic backgrounds are excluded by the students from middle and upper middle income backgrounds because they are marginalized. He elaborated on how this lack of inclusion happened in his school. He stated:

The component of being accepted within the school body in terms of the schools and each other and in terms of the community at large plays a big role in how students perceive themselves. From the community perspective, there are different pockets of kids and they tend to gravitate based on their social economic status (SES) and those
bridges or lack of bridges that are outside seem to come inside into the school. I guess they hang around together based on their geography and their SES. Considering that their SES and their geography are in the housing development that’s just down the street tends to spill over in the school. This causes a lot of behaviour issues that leaves students who do not live in those neighbourhoods not wanting to associate with those students.

As a result, the students from low social economic backgrounds feel excluded, and that seems to escalate the behaviour issues that land them in trouble and affect their academic achievement. This stigmatization and discrimination cause marginalization of students that leads to poor self-esteem and low expectation. All the 16 principals interviewed indicated that poverty caused by social inequalities in one way or another played a big role in the marginalization of the students in their schools.

Cultural Background

The principals identified that the social inequalities cause students from various cultural background to be marginalized. Some teachers are not willing to change their teaching practices to accommodate students who are non-English speakers and those who come from different cultural backgrounds other than the dominant White culture.

Speaking a minority language is also often associated with low levels of education achievement. In many countries, large numbers of children are taught and take tests in languages that they do not speak at home, hindering the early acquisition of reading and writing skills. Their parents may lack literacy skills or familiarity with official languages used in school, so that the home environment reinforces learning opportunity gaps between minority and majority language groups. UNESCO (2010, p. 159)
The principals explained that cultural background incorporates the students’ race and ethnicity. The following subtopics were highlighted: (a) new immigrants and English language learners (ELL), (b) race, (c) cultural background differences, (d) misunderstanding of education system, and (e) lack of parental advocacy.

**New Immigrants and English language Learners**

Mariah believed that being new immigrants and English language learners (ELL) marginalized students who are culturally different from the White dominant culture. She stated that “we are in a very diverse community and we have quite a few students who are new immigrants. And so they have the barrier of being in a new country, they have the language barrier and oftentimes their parents are just getting to know the country and their parents do not speak English.” She gave an example of two students, both girls, who came from Iraq, then lived in Quebec for one year before they came to her school. One was in junior kindergarten and one in grade 7. They both did not speak a word of English, nor did their teachers speak a word of French. So they struggled a lot to learn what was being taught, especially the girl who was in grade 7. Mariah stated:

It was sad to see her just sit there in class as the teacher was teaching the lessons.

Although we got her an Ipad to see if she could use it to translate the notes in her language, it was not the same. You could see her thinking to herself, “What am I doing here?” While her peers were reading novels, there she was reading level-one picture books. It is very challenging for English language learners because they are conscious of themselves. It does not mean that just because they do not know how to speak, read, or write the English language that they are not smart. I know of quite a few students of mine who were ELL and have gone on to colleges and universities.
So, to alleviate their marginalization, the principal and teachers showed that they believe in them and put supports in place to ensure that they can achieve to the best of their abilities. However, Mariah stated that the school board and Ministry of Education should provide more ELL teachers and supports to the students. After all, it is not their fault that they cannot speak English.

Thomas, whose school hosts 658 students, has a small number of his students who are new immigrants and English language learners. He is quite concerned to see that he helps them learn the language in order not to fall behind. He pointed out that he thinks that any ELL students are going to be marginalized twofold; they are struggling to understand the language, and their schema and experiences are different compared to the children who were brought up in this culture. He illustrates his points as follows:

For example: As simple as farms/urban/rural in the grade 3 curriculum, they may not have experienced that from where they are from, so you cannot compare the rural and urban when they have never experienced them from where they are coming from. I think they are at a very big disadvantage. But since they can’t change who they are, it is up to us educators to build that schema for them and to give them as many experiences to many opportunities to develop that and to be on par with the English speaking students.

Race

Grace, whose school is comprised of 345 students, believes that the White dominant culture definitely plays a big role in the marginalization of students of different races, as it causes a power imbalance. She pointed out that since her school body is mostly made up of the White dominant culture, children of different races find themselves excluded by their peers and sometimes by parents and staff as well. Therefore the colour of their skin cause them to be marginalized. If there is a combination of cultural difference, different skin colour, and poverty,
the marginalization tends to get even deeper. This type of marginalization is caused by the deep-rooted systemic discrimination and stereotypes of certain groups of people. She explained:

At my school it’s a very upper middle class setting, not a lot of marginalized families. But we do know which families they are. There are two especially; one is an African family because they are different from everybody at the school based on the colour of their skin and weren’t born and raised in the area. The other is a family where the father passed away and the mother isn’t around and the children wander the area a lot; they live above a corner store. They are both different because they aren’t from around the area. Their culture at home isn’t the same as to what we are used to, so they do things that seem odd to everybody else.

When asked to elaborate on what she meant as “odd,” Grace continued that “the way they socialize is different; they are bold and inappropriate at times. They say things that shock people, which leads to someone going back at them or fighting them.” She gave as an example that “they will tell the other students that they are related to Lebron James, a famous basketball player, and they will be going to visit him soon. Things like that. But the other students will start calling them liars and a fight might break out.” She continued to explain that “although they may be saying such things to be accepted and show that they are just as important and rich as everybody else, it causes them problems and to get picked on even more.” If students are in a school environment where they are part of the only Black family in a White-dominated school, they become a target for being taunted and teased. If students do not feel welcomed or included in their school community, they feel alienated and disengaged from learning.
Cultural Background Differences

Monica, whose current school has 278 students from grades 5 to 8 and who has worked extensively in schools with many students of diverse backgrounds, believes that the marginalization of the students in her school is mainly caused by the systemic barriers perpetuated by differences between their cultures and the White dominant culture. The students in her school who are outside of what she called the “mainstream” face many obstacles because their culture is different. This is sometimes brought on by their inability to speak English. All the lessons are taught in English, and if they do not understand the language, if they cannot speak or write the English language and there are no supports in place at school to help them learn English, they will be at a loss. Without the language acquisition they will struggle through school. Monica stated, “I would say that kids are marginalized because they are outside the mainstream, which is the English-speaking dominant culture. The Canadian culture is so different from theirs, and this contributes to their having certain disadvantage, which impacts negatively with their academic achievement. A good example is English language learner (ELL) students.”

Steven indicated that cultural attitudes and beliefs greatly marginalized his students by locking them into cycles of underachieving and low expectations. These systemic inequalities manifested themselves in the following issues: families that are disengaged, students’ inflated numbers of lateness and absenteeism, and education not being a priority. He explained in detail how the school system perpetuated the disengagement of students and parents and how it led to the students’ marginalization,

Well, we have families who for whatever reasons that live in this area are disengaged, in terms of their children’s education not being a priority. This could perhaps be attributed
to the fact that school is structured in a way which does not correlate with the parents’ working schedule. For example, we have many students who arrive late, who arrive unprepared for school, and we have many students who have a high absenteeism despite frequent phone calls home, letters home, visits home, social work intervention, despite all those interventions we still have children from junior kindergarten (JK) right to grade 8 who have an extremely high absenteeism, and we are talking 40 to 50 days a year. And so again, when you look at that, who is it that is disengaged, is it the child or is it the parent? I think it’s the parents due to the fact that they don’t have the resources to organize themselves and their families in order to make education a priority.

Another group which was identified as marginalized in terms of being culturally different from the dominant White culture was the Aboriginal students. Their marginalization seems to be masked in systemic racism, stereotypes, and prejudice. Marcus believes that the stigmatization and systemic discrimination of the Aboriginals perpetuate their marginalization, trapping them into cycles of low expectations and underachievement. Marcus stated:

We also have a large population of the Aboriginals here. They can be . . . that is more hidden because of the racism and systemic biases against the Aboriginal people in this country. For as long as us immigrants have been here, it might not be overt but there is a sense of identity. We are trying to help them find out who they are and to be proud of who they are. So they might not know why they are not proud to be Aboriginal. They are marginalized because of the economics and because they are Aboriginal.

In addition, Henry states that he believes that the Aboriginal students are marginalized because the educators in general and at his school, himself included, do not know very much about the Aboriginal culture in order to better serve their learning needs. He stated:
For example, we have Aboriginal students in this school, and I am working with a particular family that has gone through some traumatic events, where the mother and father are apart. I find myself being the middle person, the mediator between them, but unfortunately I don’t understand the culture; I don’t have a firm understanding. So I am in the process of learning about that culture so that I can better service the educational needs of the students without injecting myself into their relationship and barriers that are between mom and dad.

Due to the lack of understanding of the Aboriginal Peoples’ culture, many educators find themselves educating these students from a very narrow point of view. Henry and Steven stated that educators need to educate themselves about the Aboriginal Peoples in general. Most of the materials taught in our curriculum are full of bias, and the information presented is often misrepresented. So, some educators just avoid teaching about the Aboriginal Peoples altogether. They also have a tendency to have low expectations of the Aboriginal students. They complain about their being disengaged in school and their high levels of absenteeism. However, the educators do not go further enough to try to figure out what the root of the cause could be. This lack of knowledge about the Aboriginal Peoples’ culture continues to perpetuate the marginalization of Aboriginal students.

Furthermore, Sandra, who is a principal of a social economically challenged school located in the inner-city neighbourhood with a population of 367 students, indicated that the lack of the Aboriginal students to self-identify marginalizes them. The scant information we have in the Ontario curriculum speaks volumes about how Aboriginal students are marginalized. The marginalization is also deep-rooted in the quality of materials taught about the Aboriginal people
in the curriculum. When information relating to the Aboriginals is covered in the textbooks, many times it is presented in negative ways.

As an equity-minded principal, Sandra finds ways to right the wrongs by providing opportunities for the Aboriginal students in her school to learn about themselves in a positive way. She stated,

I look for opportunities for the Aboriginal students in my school to learn about their Aboriginal heritage and instill pride in the children, thus, to promote their academic achievement. I invite elders through the school’s community partners, and they come to talk to the students at various assemblies.

She also worked very closely with her teacher librarian to purchase books and other resources such as videos that are reflective of the Aboriginal people.

**Misunderstanding of Education System**

Principals believe that there is some lack of understanding by the parents regarding how the education system operates, and this causes marginalization of some students. Some principals pointed out that the marginalization could be due to the way the school system is set up that does not fit the family responsibilities of some parents. Henry believes that this impacts negatively on the children’s learning. Henry stated that some students in his school are pulled out of school and taken back home to visit their relatives for months and months. This is done when school is in full session. Since they miss a lot of instructional time, Henry saw this as an area that needed to be addressed in order to improve the academic achievement of the marginalized students. He stated that “many students are pulled out from school and taken back to their parents’ original country, which leads them to miss a lot of school that impacts negatively on their academic achievement.”
Henry also indicated that some of his students are pulled out of school to be “home schooled.” He gave an example of one family in his school that pulled out their four children for home schooling at the beginning of the first term. The students ranged from grade 2 to grade 7. This family had been in Canada for only about six months. Midway through the second term, the parents changed their mind about home schooling their children and brought them back to school. Since parents are not required by the government to provide any documentation or assessments for the children’s work completed during the time they have been away from school, the teachers did not have any starting point to determine which stage of their learning the children were currently at. They had to do the diagnostic assessments all over again. The English language learners’ supports that were put in place for them because they were English language learners had since been removed when they left school. Everything had to be reapplied for, and it took time to get the service back in full swing. Cultural differences and the views parents had about school made it difficult for the parents to understand how the schools operated here. Henry believes that these students are marginalized because their parents do not understand how the education system works in Canada, and they may also not feel welcomed. Consequently the achievement gap for these students gets bigger and harder to close. This factor impacts negatively on the students’ academic achievement.

**Lack of Parental Advocacy**

Many principals believe that the lack of parental advocacy due to built-in school systemic barriers marginalizes the students. Although the parents may want to advocate for their children, sometimes they have difficulties to do so because of the language barrier and lack of understanding as to how the school system works here. They believe that it is the schools’ job to teach their children, as it was “back home,” and they do not want to interfere with the school.
Wilma pointed out that students who come from low social economic backgrounds are marginalized by the mere fact that their parents lack parental voice and advocacy which many affluent families have. They put their total trust in the teachers to teach their children. She pointed out:

We also have a large population of ELL children, and again the advocacy piece becomes a challenge, and the language barrier. And those families will not engage. We try with parental engagement by providing opportunities and outreach, but there is a sense of being uncomfortable which prevents them to get involved at the school level.

Wilma explained further that the parents do not want to hear from the school because they assume it is negative, as they are usually contacted when there are problems with their children. She believes that this places the marginalized students at a disadvantage when compared to their counterparts whose parents strongly advocate for their learning needs to be met. So Wilma suggested that educators should make every possible effort to contact the marginalized students’ parents on a regular basis to share with them positive things about their children and to keep them updated about their progress. That will facilitate developing a trusting relationship between parents and school.

**Ability**

The third systemic factor that the principals identified as a contributor to students’ marginalization was ability. This incorporated students of varying learning difficulties such as special education students and students with mental health issues. Principals pointed out that they believed that barriers to academic achievement marginalized many students with physical and intellectual learning problems. In this section the participants highlighted the following
subtopics: (a) mental health, (b) don’t fit the mould, (c) accessing resources, and (d) staff’s lack of skills to teach special education students.

**Mental Health**

The principals indicated that quite a few of students in their schools are marginalized because of the lack of supports and resources to help students with their mental health problems. They pointed out that this is becoming a growing and urgent concern. Wilma, for example, stated:

> Some of our children with special learning needs can be marginalized. I say that in reference to students who have mental health issues, particularly students who are challenged with behavioural difficulties, whether they are stemming from psychological needs or other circumstances, such as trauma in their lives, crisis, and challenging realities of home life. These children I would say are marginalized because they have so many barriers to success. They are fighting bigger fights in their home lives, their personal lives, and sometimes the academics falls second in priority. And the lack of resources and supports at school to help them is very concerning to me.

Melissa added that her school has quite a number of students with special learning needs, and the ones with whom they are having the most difficulty supporting their learning are the ones with mental health issues. Not only do the students have mental health issues, but they are marginalized further because their parents are struggling with mental health issues themselves due to lack of support for them as well. This is a systemic problem. As a result, parents cannot seek help for their own children because they cannot help themselves either. She states, “In my school we deal with students and adults with mental health issues and we are having a very hard time supporting students whose mental health isn’t what it should be, especially when their
parents are also struggling.” She confirmed that the systemic barriers that the parents and students do not have control over contribute largely to the marginalization of these students. Furthermore, Sandra reiterated that mental health issues are becoming quite a challenge, which is marginalizing many of their students. We have in place supports for students who have special learning needs because this issue has been addressed by the Ministry of Education and has been explored for a while. Some educators have a general idea of how to address the learning needs of students with special learning disabilities. We have a variety of supports in place to help the students with various learning problems. This is usually taken care of under the umbrella of “differentiated instruction.” However, the issue of mental health seems to be new, and its impact to students has intensified. The Ministry of Education, school boards, and educators alike are scrambling to come up with strategies and personnel to work with students with mental health issues to ensure that these students are also able to have academic achievement. However, so far the support is scant. Sandra explained:

We also have students who have issues that present themselves in the area of mental health issues. Again some of these kids are economically challenged as well. But some of the behaviours and concerns present themselves in the area of mental wellness. Some of the behaviours presented would be depression, aggressive behaviours—physical or verbal, self harm, poor self-concept, anxiety, panic attacks, and being fearful. We try very hard to find people, resources that can help us and then we can help the families of these children because some of the concerns and needs are presented in the adults as well. There are so many red tapes to navigate before we can get any help for them. This situation definitely marginalizes students.
Helen indicated that the lack of system support for the students in her school who are faced with huge social, emotional, and behaviour issues is a major factor in marginalizing their academic achievement. Before these students can focus on academic achievement, they need attention to be directed to providing mental wellness programs to help them get better. Helen indicated that “my school is the centre where a treatment program is run to address mental health issues for the students.”

**Not Fitting the Mould**

Mariah indicated that in her school they have a large population of students with special needs who are isolated. She stated that the special education students’ isolation causes them to be marginalized because they do not fit in the mould of what the teacher sees as an ideal student who sits and does what he or she is told. Some students have such severe behaviour problems that their peers do not want to associate with them in any way. Consequently, these students feel isolated. Mariah acknowledged that sometimes it is also difficult to keep one staff member to work with the child on a regular basis because the staff member will burn out. Therefore, staff members have to take turns taking care of the students in order for them to maintain their own mental health well-being. Sandra pointed out that “students with special education needs must be looked out for by all educators to ensure that their learning needs are met as well, because it can be very difficult to focus on the academic achievement when the behaviours are taking centre stage.”

**Accessing Resources**

Several principals voiced their concerns regarding the lack of opportunities for special education students to access resources that would enhance their learning. They pointed out that many of their students with learning problems would have been able to achieve better
academic achievement if they had access to assistance from an educational assistant, even if it was for half a day. They expressed how difficult it was to get educational assistants for the students who are struggling. They also indicated their concerns regarding the long waiting lists for the specialized programs many students with learning needs could access. Many students miss the window of opportunity to access these programs because they get older before a spot opens up in the program. Henry stated that he has been advocating heavily for some of his students with learning difficulties to have access to use IPads in class and the training that goes along with it. So far, only two students out of the four students have been approved.

**Staff’s Lack of Skills to Teach Special Education Students**

Henry believes that the inability of teachers to teach to the learning needs of special education students causes them to be marginalized. He specifically highlighted the students with autism. He indicated that some teachers and educational assistants (EAs) are not well versed in addressing the learning needs of students with autism. Some of the teachers do not even have Special Education Part 1 training. As a result, they do not know how to plan for the learning needs of the autistic children, and they do not know about the various strategies that can be used to address the learning needs of these students. So in many cases, these students are not integrated in a regular classroom. They are put aside in a classroom that is made up of several other students with behaviour problems which is facilitated by one teacher and one EA. These students do not get to be with their peers in the regular programs, and sometimes they are even taken out of their home school to another school. Henry indicated that these students are not marginalized because they have learning problems, but they are marginalized by a school system that cannot address their learning needs effectively. Henry stated:
Our board’s position on equity is defined as access, opportunity, and outcome. So I interpret that to be that students with autism should be provided with or should have the opportunity to have all the ability to access all the resources and all the strategies that we have in place, so that their outcome could be at par or better than people that come with a different skill set. And for me, it is also important that they stay within the four walls of school to continue into secondary school and to give them opportunity beyond secondary school.

Henry stated that as an administrator he knew that he could affect the academic achievement of the special education students. He stated: “I think I have an impact on it at this level.” He believed that providing the early interventions for the students with learning problems is the best approach to help them achieve academically to the best of their abilities.

**Sexual Orientation**

The topic of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) was only brought up by two principals from the Catholic board, Emily and Thomas, and one principal from the public board, Helen. Emily and Thomas were concerned that the stigma society attaches to people of various sexual orientations can cause marginalization of students who identify themselves as LGBTQQ. Emily expressed concerns of marginalization of LGBTQQ students at a secondary school level. She stated that she felt that teaching the students at an earlier age about such issues is beneficial to all students to minimize the marginalization of students who are oriented in that way. She pointed out “Well, I think that the issue of gay and lesbian children, putting them in high school needs to be addressed. Those are the children who are most socially acceptable to ostracize them and I think that’s really an area that needs our help.” Thomas added that he is noticing that it is not a big deal for the students in the GTA (Greater Toronto Area) to
know or work together with students of different sexual orientations from the heterosexual as it is a big deal with the adults. He pointed out that the adults are the ones who are hung up on these issues. Thomas stated:

So we’re finding nowadays that kids that are marginalized for having a different sexual orientation . . . it’s not as a big deal to our kids as it is to us adults. And why is that? Culture, skin colour, and different sexual orientation are not as a big deal to our kids as it is to us because they are immersed in it, because they live it every day . . . So I think the GTA being multidiverse is helping us to be more accepting. And when I’m talking about diversity, I’m talking about able-bodyness, sexual orientation, colour, creed—we have everything. We have kids in our school that are all that, so kids are more tolerant of one another and accepting of one another.

Emily and Thomas both believed that more education is needed in elementary schools for students to learn to be more accepting of each other regardless of a person’s sexual orientation.

Helen also acknowledged that systemic societal norms can indeed marginalize LGBTQ students. However, she attributed the fact that this does not appear to be a major issue in the elementary school because the young students are still at a stage where they are discovering their bodies, but as they get older in secondary school, then their gender orientations seem to become more pronounced. Helen stated:

In my school, except for one child who has identified as transgender, I do not have many kids who identify in terms of sexuality. I am a kindergarten to grade 8 school. So I am an elementary school. So in elementary school we do not have many students who self-identify in terms of sexual preference. We do not have a lot of issues like that, but I am always on the lookout.
None of the participants identified religion as being a source of students’ marginalization despite the fact that I interviewed principals from both public and Catholic boards. Principals Helen, and Henry, both from the public board, indicated that all religious faiths are celebrated in their schools by adhering to their board’s calendar that lists all the important various faith celebrations that take place throughout the school year.

**Summary**

In this chapter, the principals shared the information about the factors that they believed were marginalizing the students in their schools. They believed that marginalization of their students is perpetuated for the most part by the deeply rooted systemic inequalities and barriers. These systemic inequalities are grounded in social and economic structures that cause barriers and a power imbalance amongst various groups of people. However, the principals believe that the education system can do a great deal to address these inequalities that restrict opportunity for children from marginalized groups. The schools can create conditions for effective learning, and act as a vehicle for changing attitudes and beliefs that stigmatize children and corrode self-confidence, which negatively impacts the students’ academic achievement (Scientific A United Nations Education, 2010, p. 230). Although the schools’ sizes ranged from about 230 students to 800 students and they were located in low-income to affluent neighbourhoods, each principal readily identified the systemic inequalities that caused the students to be marginalized. The principals highlighted the following factors that fell under the umbrella of systemic inequalities and barriers as: (a) socioeconomic class (b) cultural background, (c) ability, and (d) sexual orientation.
CHAPTER FIVE: MOTIVATION FOR EQUITY-MINDED PRINCIPALS

Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor . . . that a child of farmworkers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another. (Nelson Mandela, 1995, p. 144)

This chapter explores why principals see the need to promote academic achievement for the marginalized students in their schools. They believe very strongly that marginalized students should have every possible opportunity to do well academically in order to give them hope, break the cycle of poverty or their negative home experiences, and help them become productive members of society. They articulated several reasons why they were motivated to help them to do so. I have collapsed them into three main themes. The themes are as follows: a) background and life experiences; b) faith and beliefs; c) make a difference and raise consciousness/awareness.

Background and Life Experiences

All principals acknowledged that their background and life experiences played a major role in shaping them to be equity minded. Many readily shared that they easily identify with the marginalized students because they too grew up in poverty, their parents did not speak English, and they themselves were English language learners. They remember how other people used to reach out and help them to have food on their tables. They remember how other children used to pick on them because of the colour of their skin, their cultural background, their ability to do school work, and being poor. They shared several stories of witnessing children being picked on, teased, and their learning needs not being met because they had intellectual or physical disabilities. Others who came from privileged backgrounds through their various education
stages, such as Master’s degree and Educational Doctorate degree, realized that the educational system the way it is was not serving the best interest of all students. They then decided to be the change agents by being equity-minded principals and promoting the academic achievement of marginalized students.

Wilma indicated that the educators’ goal is that all children reach their potential and discover their talents and abilities. She strongly believed that social economic barriers or cultural barriers should not impact the children’s academic ability in any way because equity is for all children. She acknowledged that it was of great importance to reach the marginalized children because they, above all, need an advocate. They need a voice where they may not have the supports through no fault of their own. Wilma sees herself in the marginalized students because, as she pointed out, she was one of them when her parents came to Canada. When her parents immigrated to Canada they did not speak English, just like many of her ELL students and parents. Wilma explained:

My parents were born in Italy. They are European immigrants and had a challenge of learning a new language and had the same challenges as some of our students have as far as learning a new language is concerned. Although they valued education highly in their homeland, the realities was that there were no economic opportunities and work opportunities for them. So that is why they decided to immigrate here. And even coming here, the priority was always providing for their family and the future for their family. They worked very hard to make that happen. They pursued courses in studying English to become Canadian citizens. They did everything they could to support myself and my siblings—more like what many of the parents in my school community are doing now.
Helen argued that the marginalized students’ current negative situations should not be a determining factor for how they achieve academically. She pointed out that a large portion of her students live in cyclical poverty, just as their immigrant parents lived in cyclical poverty. Also, children from single-family homes that are accessing social assistance and children whose parents did not complete high school are also living in poverty. Therefore, she believes that it is morally important to ensure that these children do well academically in order to level the playing field for them. She reflected on her own background and pointed out that she and her siblings were pretty much in the same shoes. She can relate to being marginalized because she immigrated to Canada as a child with her family from Italy. Her parents and siblings did not speak English. Her older sister had to take on the role of being an interpreter whenever matters that had to deal with school were concerned, such as teacher–parent interviews. She believed that school can provide a sense of hope so that the marginalized students can escape the sense of hopelessness they experience in their lives. She stated:

As a child I was a first generation immigrant, and my parents still do not speak English. School was important, and my older sister acted as the interpreter for the whole family. Whenever there was a school thing, she did not get to enjoy it much because she had to interpret for all of us. We grew up in a house, it was six of us. Although we lived in a house we had no money for extras, so we did not get to participate in extracurricular activities. We did not take vacations because we did not have money for that sort of thing.

Helen was also motivated because of the role modelling she received from her former elementary principal, Mrs. Shimon (pseudonym) who took it upon herself to ensure that the
students were provided with breakfast and lunch programs and many culturally rich experiences. She gave them hope. She explained:

We were never made to feel that we were poor. She brought in concerts for us. I was on the after-school gymnastic team. We had all these athletic things going on, and our school won many sports awards. Honestly, I thought at that time that they were just part of the school. So our parents thought that we just had to stay at school until 6:00 o’clock and you had to do this and that because the school provided it all. So really everything I learned, I learned from my school as a student at my school. In terms of providing for the kids, that is how I went to school myself, that is what we were given, that is what Mrs. Shimon did for us. And that is what I am trying to do for my marginalized students as well. After all, I would have been considered a marginalized child, but I am a principal now, and two of my sisters are principals as well. So I am very grateful to my Mrs. Shimon and teachers for providing us with those opportunities even when we were referred to as “a ghetto school.” I later found out that my school was the one which was tracked, and the majority of us went on to university. And that says a lot, because that was 1,500 kids in that school!

Helen could also relate to the name-calling and being ostracized because of a student’s cultural background. This also motivated her to look out for marginalized students because she personally knows how that felt. It could very easily affect a child’s academic achievement when he/she feels afraid to come to school because of fear of being picked on. So she strives to ensure that the students feel safe and welcomed. She promotes a culture where the students will feel a sense of belonging regardless of their cultural background. She explained:
I remember when we were little, people would look at me and say, “You are so dark,” and I would think . . . You know 40 years ago to be Canadian you had to be blonde with blue eyes, and to look like me meant that you were dark. And some Italians are dark, and when we are outside in the sun we are really dark. And so they would look at me and say, “uuuu your feet smell like prosciutto sandwiches.” Although these days you pay a lot of money for prosciutto, then it was a smelly dish, not an exotic dish, people would like to eat. So, when my students come and talk to me and say that “Miss you just do not understand, I just smile. I remember this one student who said to me, “Miss you do not understand because you do not come from Pakistan.” And I said to her that perhaps I do not have the same exact experience, but I have kind of walked a similar path because I do understand how it is to be and have a clash of cultures.

Helen’s life experience of having children with special education needs also played a major role in motivating her to be an equity-minded principal. She believed that providing academic achievement for marginalized children by putting the necessary supports in place for them helps them to become productive members of society. She stated:

I have four kids with special needs. I became a teacher after I had my son with spina bifida. All of a sudden teaching became very important because when I read about Stephen’s (pseudonym) future prospects when he was born, the literature talked about the school system. I knew that if the doctors can keep him alive, then it is going to be the teachers to ensure the quality of life that he has. So all of a sudden, schooling and how he is educated became very, very important. I was always his advocate as his mother. Then, as a teacher, I became the advocate for my students with any kind of exceptionalities. One of my daughters was functionally blind and profoundly hearing impaired, so she had
an ear implant, a cochlear implant, and her eyes were implanted so she can see again. But for 5 years she was functionally blind and she could not hear. She is in high school now, doing well in an academic program. Stephen went to college, and my other daughter, who also has a hearing impairment, went to university. Those experiences that I have had as a parent and as a person I think make who you are. There is that quote, “We take ourselves with us where we go, we teach who we are.” And that is what I am.

Mariah’s background and life experiences also played a big role in shaping her determination to break the cycle of poverty to avail the marginalized students with a much brighter future through promoting their academic achievement. Mariah acknowledged that being a child of an immigrant family, she remembers very well that experience. She stated:

My parents came to Canada just prior to me being born, so I did grow up in a non-English-speaking family. You could say we were a family that lived in poverty for many, many years. I remember we even had to take in boarders at the time just to help make the mortgage payments. I had to go without a lot of things that others had. I didn’t get the support at home only because of the language barrier and my parents not being familiar with the educational system. And yet despite all that, I feel that I have been given opportunities and I met with success. So I am an example of someone who was disadvantaged and rose above it and met with success.

It is extremely important to Mariah to see that marginalized students do well academically because she believes that they have potential but are at a disadvantage just as she was. That is why she proposed to put in extra supports that they need to help the students achieve their potential. She acknowledged that breaking the poverty cycle is crucial for the marginalized students, as it helps to make them productive members of society. She pointed out that a lot of
these students come from parents who don’t have a postsecondary education, who are not working currently, who are on subsidized programs, and realized that in order to break that cycle we need to ensure that these students do well academically. Without our helping these students, they are at a greater risk of falling into those traps of being marginalized as parents themselves and their children.

Thomas is of Portuguese background; his parents are Portuguese and he is a first generation Canadian. His motivation came from his cultural background experiences. Although he is White, his Portuguese background set him apart from his peers in school. He was well aware of the stigma that Portuguese Canadians had the highest dropout rate in high school in the GTA (Greater Toronto Area) in the last couple of years. He also knew that the culture of the school was not always the most important to the Portuguese culture; the emphasis was to get out and get some money to support the family. Thomas explained how the marginalization of some students based on their cultural background resonated with his own background and life experiences. He explained:

It is a struggle because there is an invisible factor you are dealing with, but there is also quote “an embarrassing factor,” you want to hide that invisible factor that is making them marginalized. They want to hide it from other people so if it is invisible and you are not sharing it you are even more susceptible to being even marginalized. For example, if you look at me you would not know that. You look at me and see a White male, right, and you would think that everything would come easy. So for me to be a Portuguese Canadian going through the education system, graduating from high school, go to the university, get my degree and get my teaching degree, and then moving into administration is something that is not typically done. I did this not telling others that I
was Portuguese, not because of embarrassment, but if I tell them they would say to me, “Shouldn’t you have dropped out? Why are you in this role?” And there are so many ELL Portuguese kids who do not have role models to tell them that “No you do not have to drop out. There are things you can achieve and things you can kind of do and be successful at. Because your diversity is an invisible factor which is causing you to be marginalized, you do not have to let that hold you back.”

Thomas concluded by stating that as educators our job is to teach all kids, especially the ones that are marginalized because of economics, race, culture, and physical or mental disability. He advocated strongly that educators must support those kids and put support structures to not only make them successful but also to remember that they are kids whose marginalization is not so obvious.

Henry’s cultural background and life experiences impacted his being an equity-minded principal also. He is a son of landed immigrant parents who came from Italy with his four siblings. They did not speak English. Although he was born here, he grew up in a household where English was not spoken. He believed that they were marginalized because they looked slightly different from the other White students. His skin colour is dark and gets even darker during the summer. The kids at school called him names such as “Paki, dago, or wap.” He stated: The scars are still there. Now, I am a principal, my sister is a teacher, and my three brothers work with their hands. Although we were marginalized due to our cultural background, we managed to achieve academically with the supports we received from some of our teachers and community. Do I blame? I choose to educate instead and reach those marginalized students and afford them opportunities to achieve academically, as I did.
Emily had the same motivator as Henry. She explained that her motivation was geared by the marginalization she endured when growing up. When she reflected on her childhood, she knew what she had to do to address the academic achievement of marginalized students. She believed that as an educator, she can influence the marginalized students by being their role model and making sure that marginalized students are not picked on. She felt that when she was in school, the teachers and administrators knew what was going on with the taunting of students who were visible minorities but they chose to do nothing about it. She vowed to herself that she would make a difference.

Well it all started from the day I started teaching, mostly because I knew firsthand what it was like to be marginalized. I grew up in the 1970s here, and my siblings and I were one of maybe three families in a very White neighbourhood and we faced a lot of racism on a daily basis for years, and there was not a whole lot done from our perspective to address it. So I always think of it in terms of that, to show the children that we are looking out for you and I want to be able to make a difference.

George attributed his motivation to his upbringing. Although he grew up as a son of Ukrainian immigrant parents in the inner city, his parents had a dream that their children would do well in education, just like many other immigrants who are coming to Canada now. Although his father had only a grade 10 education while his mother had grade 13, they believed in their children. They encouraged and supported them to do well in school. He stated, “Although, we would now be called marginalized, we managed to do well in school. That goes to show you that marginalized or not, all students can learn if they are given the proper supports, resources and time.” George lamented about the lack of understanding of other principals, educators, and society as a whole about the issues of equity. He stated:
I do not think that we have created a society where many people can be successful. We are not equitable. We do not want equity. It is just not right, and it is a travesty! How can other principals not be concerned about issues of equity? It saddens me to think that we live in the 21st Century and we are one of the most educated societies in the world, but we still do not get what is right or what is fair!

Nick also concurred that his background and life experiences played a vital role in his becoming an equity-minded principal. He reflected on his own childhood and the racism his brothers and he had to endure because they were immigrants from the Ukraine. The children in the school called them all sorts of derogatory names and made fun of them. They had to stick together in order to survive, and they learned to fight a lot to defend themselves and each other. He said that they were poor, but what helped them to achieve academically was the support they received from their tightly knit Ukrainian community. Nick stated that “the other motivator for me is that I am the son of immigrant parents. I saw firsthand and understood inequity growing up, and I’ve always believed that it’s wrong. It’s not something that should be institutionalized in any way, or supported in Canada, or in our own community here.”

Sandra also shared that her life experiences motivated her to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students. Her parents immigrated to Canada when she was young. They were very poor and had many challenges, but she witnessed firsthand that through hard work and perseverance one can influence one’s future in a positive way by breaking down the cycle of poverty and becoming a productive member of society. She uses herself as an example of that possibility. She explained:

My life experiences that motivate me is that my parents came from a different country, we started from scratch, and what I have today and my family situation is because of the
sacrifices my parents made. So again, if you take that kind of model and look at the community here, I see very hardworking people. But because of the circumstances of economic, mental wellness, or whatever, health wise, things stand in the way of these people moving forward. As a Catholic community we help engage them and support them to move forward, that makes a lot of difference for us and the people we serve. There is definitely hope for these children; we just have to put all the supports in place for them in order for them to achieve academically. With all the help I got, I did.

Monica is motivated to be an equity-minded principal because of her background and life experiences. She came from England as a child with her parents and siblings. When she was in school, there were just a handful of Black children like her, and all the teachers were White, something that has not changed much even today in Ontario schools. She understood how being marginalized looked and felt. She was determined that when she became an educator, she would educate staff members about diversity in order to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students. She pointed out that there were no Blacks in the class and she tried to fit in as best as she could. A lot of times she felt very uncomfortable when the teachers mentioned Black people because all the times they were mentioned as slaves, or minstrels, or as cannibals. As a child, she felt embarrassed and ashamed of her own people and herself. She explained:

I hated it when they mentioned that, because all the time the Blacks were presented in a negative way. I was sure that Black people had done positive things, for example, Jessie Owens, the African American track-and-field athlete who sprinted through obstacles to win four gold medals at the 1936 Berlin Olympics; Dr. Charles Richard Drew saving lots of lives with his invention of the blood bank; or Garrett Morgan, who invented the automatic stoplight which is known as the traffic light these days, and that is to mention
just a few. But that was never mentioned; only the negative things were highlighted. So as the only Black child in the classroom, you can very well imagine how that made me feel! No child should ever be made to feel embarrassed or ashamed of herself or her people. As an adult now, I have been in a lot of schools as a teacher and as an administrator, where I have seen how people who I will say are White, think of people who are Black or think of people who are poor in very negative ways. It definitely has an impact on the students. Therefore, I do what I can to work with the staff to educate them what a negative impact that kind of attitude has on marginalized students.

Therefore, Monica’s background and life experiences played as a catalyst for her to be an equity-minded principal.

**Faith and Beliefs**

Many principals identified that their faith and beliefs were an important contributor to their being equity-minded principals. They remember very vividly how their church communities worked together to reach out and help out the poor in their community. They observed as they grew up that poor people or people who are different from them were treated with respect and dignity. At their church services, they were reminded constantly to take care of the marginalized. They referred to several stories in the bible where Jesus modelled for them how to treat the people who are marginalized due to poverty, sickness, cultural differences, or other factors that caused their marginalization. They identified many individuals who are their role models in the areas of faith and beliefs that are their anchors in doing equity work.

Thomas, for instance pointed out that Jesus, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and Pope Francis are his role models. He explained that Jesus spent so much time with the marginalized. Mother Teresa worked with the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta, and the first people that
Pope Francis visited when he became pope were the people in jail, whose feet he washed. So Thomas, being a Catholic principal, very readily identified those three as his role models as he works with the marginalized students. He stated:

When I am questioned about spending so much time or supporting the marginalized kids, why are you wasting time there or why are you doing that for this student and not the other student, I think back to my role models. When I reflect on my own upbringing, my own experiences of feeling marginalized in school, feeling marginalized through my own education, and when I hear about people, students, who 20 years later are experiencing the same marginalization as I had experienced and I knowing that I have to do something to make a change. So that is why I do what I have to do. I do it because it is the right thing to do. That is what Jesus calls us to do. It is a nonnegotiable.

Wilma articulated that her motivation is driven by her strong faith and belief that all principals ought to be equity-minded principals. She stated that she is also guided by how Jesus dealt with the marginalized people of his time. Jesus believed in them, gave them hope, treated them with dignity, and promoted them to be included. Jesus also loved children from all walks of life. Wilma acknowledged that her fundamental belief is that all children have the capacity and the ability and the desire to learn, and educators have a responsibility to make it happen for them. She argued that we must remove barriers or any circumstances that are causing kids to be what we are calling marginalized, because they are no fault of theirs. She explained:

Children are born into their circumstances. And whatever the circumstances may be, we have the responsibility to break down any barriers and ensure that equity is a given.

Equity is a privilege for any children. So wherever they may find themselves, we have to recognize that they should not have to advocate for equity. So if I am seen as an equity-
minded principal, I do not see this as a compliment or differentiating me from my colleagues, because it is a given. That is what all are called to be—equity-minded principals. This is a nonnegotiable moral purpose we are called to fulfil.

Natalie based her motivation on her faith background and the way she was raised. She described that her parents were immigrants and they struggled a lot when they came to the new country. So she learned from their stories about how some people were kind, caring, and generous towards them. Those acts of kindness and generosity helped them feel welcomed and included in their new country. She acknowledged that “I believe that I am motivated to promote the academic achievement of the marginalized students because it is part of my religion. Jesus teaches us through his modelling that we have to include everyone and have empathy and a caring heart. I take that everywhere I go and in all that I do.”

Nick believed that his faith motivated him to be an equity-minded principal. He saw being a principal more of a calling than it is a job. He believed that the principal’s duty is to serve and meet the needs of every child and every family within the community. He explained:

Serving the marginalized is also value laden, based on Gospel values, driven by Catholic social teaching, namely the preferential option for the poor. I firmly believe that education is the pathway out of poverty, and without education it’s not possible. It comes down to belief. What do you believe as a principal? What does staff believe? What do the students believe? If those beliefs are in alignment, it’s going to happen, and belief doesn’t cost money, it’s a way of moving forward, and if you don’t have that belief in place it’s not going to happen. The belief for the principal, staff, and students should be that “all students can learn.”
Mariah believed that her calling as a Catholic principal played an important role in shaping her motivation to reach out to the marginalized students to ensure that they achieve academically. Being a principal in a Catholic school, she truly believed that we are all created in God’s image, that we all have potential, and that we all deserve to have the best possible supports that we can have to succeed. She argued that being disadvantaged in one way or another should not prevent anyone from being able to achieve academically. She acknowledged, “I keep thinking of our Catholic graduate expectations and truly recognize that my vocation is to ensure that these students become productive members of society, they are the stewards of our earth, and they are our future.”

**Making a Difference and Raising Awareness**

Some principals based their motivation on their desire to make a difference in other people’s lives. They are convinced that being a principal is not just doing a job but it is a calling, it is their vocation. Sandra, for instance, when she reflected on how low the level of her full day kindergarten students’ learning was when they started school in September and compared it to where they were in June, she was amazed by the growth they have acquired. Sandra was very happy to see that she was able to share some concrete evidence of how she has made a difference in the learning of her marginalized students. She indicated:

I was in the FDK class this morning, and the children were engaged in conversation. They were using math talk about the 3D shapes. That was the same classroom in October I sat in, they were crying, they were fighting, and running around doing whatever. To see the transformation of these children from the same children and same staff, is phenomenal. That is what motivates me, when I see the children from “mayhem” to being engaged, happy, and learning in an engaged, responsive learning environment. This is
where I see the face of Christ. The philosophy of our board is “each belong,” and if we cannot support them in this direction, then I really do not think that we are really supporting or providing for the marginalized. We are called to make a difference, and I believe that through my leadership, I am making a difference.

Helen wanted to make a difference in the students’ lives by addressing the way the teachers were teaching the students. She explained that she does not believe that kids should be at the mercy of the school they are at or the teachers who are teaching them. Rather, teachers should be giving them what they need to reach their potential. She pointed out that we are in the business of kids, and that should be the prerequisite of not just looking at the child as just Black or Brown and making a judgment that he is going to fail because he is from a typical Black family. She explained:

When I started at this school, our students here were low, getting 40% on standardized tests, and teachers were saying, “These are just the kids we have. You cannot expect much from them.” They had very low expectations of them. So, I told them that you cannot continue to teach the same way you have been teaching because you are going to continue to get the same results. The results we are getting are not good! So you have to shift your mindset.

Henry explained that making a difference in the students’ lives is a great motivator for him. He reflected that the impact of his first career working in jail with children between the ages of 12 and 16 left a mark on him. He believes that these children could have been kept out of jail if the issues of equity and their marginalization were addressed earlier on. He stated:

I was working with 2.5% of that adolescent population from across Canada, so they were murderers, sexual offenders, they were the worst of the worst. So they were definitely
disenfranchised, marginalized, the whole nine yards. Supporting the marginalized students to do well academically needs to always be in the front and centre for issues to be addressed and moving forward. The voice needs to be out there is what I’m trying to say. Educators must continue to keep it abreast rather than it being a check box, done, and moving on to the next piece. Well you know, we can’t come out on Monday and say equity needs to happen for students and communities, then on Tuesday we go away and we’ve done Monday’s work. The voice has to be kept alive.

Emily recalled that she wished the school system had addressed her marginalization when she was a child in school. She states that she, along with her siblings, had to endure racism which they experienced daily in school, and no principal or teachers came to their rescue. The racism was in forms of racial name-calling, being teased because of the colour of skin, and sometimes even physical abuse. She decided that as an educator she would always give a voice to marginalized students and make a difference in their lives. She states, “From the time I started teaching, I vowed to myself that I wanted to show the children who are marginalized that we care and want to be able to make a difference.” She added, “So I started teaching on the equity and inclusive education committee so that other principals can come aboard. You know even if you make a difference for one child, you’ve made a difference.”

Mariah also added that making a difference in the students’ lives motivates her to be an equity-minded principal. She stated:

What motivates me even more is on a day-to-day basis, just seeing the success stories and being surrounded by the students who come to us with almost every disadvantage you can think of, and yet they are succeeding. Their success stories as they move on to high school and postsecondary shows us that everyone can succeed given the right tools and
the right supports. Also, I’m motivated on a daily basis by the staff that surrounds me. I see how motivated they are and how hard they work and how passionate they are about making sure students succeed. The difference I see in our students, the gains they make on a daily basis surely motivates me.

Monica stated what motivates her is to raise consciousness. She believed that many educators continue to put on blinders not to see the marginalized students or blame these students for their failures. She pointed out that “I have heard teachers complaining that they do not want to have certain students in their class because they are so low or because they don’t have the parental supports or because they have behaviour problems or because they have mental issues or because they do not speak English.” She added,

I recognized that it is very important to raise consciousness in people. There is such a thing as White privilege, and there is such a thing as students not progressing because they feel disengaged and they feel totally alienated in the school system. Those same students could do very well if they were supported the way they should be. And I think it is important, because otherwise what kind of future do they have?

Nick further explained that in addition to his faith, his desire to make a difference for the marginalized students was solidified when he taught in the inner-city schools. He more than ever became more passionate about levelling the playing field for the marginalized students. He stated:

So by the time I got into administration, I’d already formulated some concepts of what needed to be done as an administrator. One of them is find ways to remove the barriers to learning so that the kids are on a level playing field and knowing that it can’t be done in isolation. I tried doing it in isolation, and it did not work. So, we always have to try to get
supports from the school community, the education community, and community at large. We strive to bring people together to collaborate or solve problems, and really collect resources to make it more achievable. And being motivated by the belief that it’s possible to, if you believe that you can impact upon the life of a student, it will happen. You just have to find a way to raise the consciousness of students, staff, and people in the community.

Raising awareness motivates George to be an equity-minded principal. However, he reflected that some boards he knew including his attempt to raise the consciousness of students, staff, and people in the community, by sending their students to third world countries to help firsthand people who are poor and marginalized. However, what puzzled him was why the same high school students are not sent to help out the marginalized in local inner-city school communities. He stated:

The irony is that some boards have missions where they send high school students to third world countries to help build homes and care for the poor people. However, when one suggests sending the same high school students to help out in our inner-city school communities, the parents would not hear of it because they are afraid to send their children to such areas. So the question is, when the students are sent to the third world countries, is it not the same thing? Is it for show or publicity? Can’t we raise awareness of the poor in our own midst? Why can’t we send the high school students to help in our poor communities the same way they help in the third world countries?

George concluded by saying that he is a great believer in the saying which states that “charity begins at home!”
Summary

All the principals identified several life experiences that motivated them to be concerned about equity issues and to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students. It is important to make a note here that I did not see a significant difference between the principals who based their motivation on faith and the ones who did not. What all these principals had in common were their deep rooted beliefs and values that marginalized students can attain high levels of academic achievement when supports, opportunities, and resources are made available to them. They believed that they too could make a difference, as many other people in their lives had made a difference for them. Some of the life experiences that motivated them were based on the negative experiences they had themselves going through school or witnessed firsthand. Many of them were able to identify with the marginalized students, and that motivated them to make a difference. They indicated that they grew up marginalized due to factors that were beyond their control, but because some people believed in them, they managed to attain academic achievement and are a living testimony that marginalized students can learn if someone levels the playing field for them.
CHAPTER SIX: PRINCIPAL STRATEGIES

Extreme and persistent deprivation in education carries a high price for societies as well as for individuals. In the increasingly knowledge-based and competitive global economy, depriving people of opportunities for education is a prescription for wastage of skills, talent and opportunities for innovation and economic growth. It is also a recipe for social division. Marginalization in education is an important factor in the widening of social and economic inequalities. Working towards more inclusive education is a condition for the development of more inclusive societies. (UNESCO, 2010, p. 136)

This chapter explores the strategies equity-minded principals employed to promote academic achievement for marginalized students in their schools with staff members, students, and parents. I describe the strategies used with staff members first, strategies with students second, and strategies with parents third.

**Strategies With Staff Members**

All the equity-minded principals who were interviewed agreed that in order to promote academic achievement for marginalized students they needed all the staff members to be on board. They identified several strategies they used as follows: (a) creating a focused and shared vision with staff members, (b) educating staff about the school’s demographic data, (c) analyzing student achievement data and monitoring instruction, (d) providing professional development, (e) providing support for staff, (f) purposeful staffing, (g) piloting programs, and (h) providing opportunities for collaboration.

**Creating a Focused and Shared Vision With Staff Members**

The first strategy identified was that of creating a focused and shared vision with staff members. The principals indicated that it was very important for all staff members to be on the same page as far as the expectations of students’ achievement were concerned. They pointed out
that if the staff members do not buy into the shared and focused goals, then it would be difficult although not impossible to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students. They stated that, after all, the teachers have the most influence when it comes to the students’ academic achievement. They recognized that they impacted students’ achievement through the influence and collaboration they have with the teachers.

Several equity-minded principals highlighted the significance of creating a focused and shared vision with the staff members. They pointed out that they had to get the staff to understand that there was a sense of urgency to address the learning needs of marginalized students. However, the staff members had difficulty grasping the fact that the students in their schools were marginalized. They believed that our educational system serves all our students fairly. Therefore, principals worked hard to promote the vision that marginalized students can achieve academically if they are supported and given enough time.

Marcus, for example, acknowledged that a lot of his teaching staff came from privileged backgrounds. One of the strategies he used was to provide opportunities for his staff to talk about issues of equity during staff meetings. He believed that staff members will never fight for kids as hard until they know and are aware of the barriers marginalized children face. His school has a significant Aboriginal student population, and he is lucky to have some Aboriginal staff members. During staff meetings, Marcus asks the Aboriginal staff members to share their experiences by speaking about the barriers and racism they encounter in their daily lives. He believes that such a strategy would make more of an impact than getting the teachers to just read about it. Hearing firsthand the issues of inequalities as lived and experienced by their fellow Aboriginal staff members makes the message real to the rest of the staff members and creates a
sense of urgency. He believes that once the staff know about the inequities, he would get 300% of their energy, not 80%. To illustrate his point he stated:

It is very shameful! We talk about the historical perspective of the residential schools because if you come from a privileged background like me I would never be aware of the atrocities that happened to them. I would think that all schools are just and fair places. If I am going to get the staff to fight for these marginalized kids, they have to understand their world and their experiences of the marginalized communities. They cannot assume that the system is fair. That is where I spend the time. I work on that. I cannot just go to the practices. There has to be a sense of urgency, and we talk about this sense of urgency with the staff all the time. Otherwise, if the kids who come from marginalized communities do poorly in academics, they are done. So there must be a sense of urgency when working with staff about the situation.

Melissa acknowledged that it was not an easy task to get the staff members to buy into the vision. Her strategy was to convince the staff members that just because the students came from an area where they are marginalized, it did not mean that they could not learn. She stated that it took her over a year to convince most of the staff members to see the need to address the learning needs of marginalized students. Some teachers were convinced that the marginalized students could not learn and as a result set very low standards for them. She highlighted the fact that changing the mindset of the teachers, to wrap their head around the fact that just because the kids come from an area, as you say, of marginalization, it does not mean that they have not been given a brain to think critically. I worked hard to get our teachers to truly believe that the students will learn because of their exceptional teaching not in spite of
teaching. So here we don’t have a choice but to make sure that we are providing our students with the best teaching strategies.

Sandra used the creating of the School Improvement Plan at the beginning of September as an entry point to get the staff to have an active role in developing the focused vision of addressing the students’ academic achievement. They collectively looked at the students who were marginalized and tried to come up with the best strategies of how best to address their learning needs. It was crucial to Sandra to ensure that everyone coming as staff/ faculty bought into this vision and committed to it. This would promote consistency, as they were all saying the same things and promoting the same approach with the children and their families. Sandra stated:

Moving from the little ones to the older children, there must be transition in there so that everyone can understand that children are going to be learning from their perspective, at their pace, as opposed to try to fit them into a mould that is perhaps artificial. So our staff members have committed to create a responsive learning environment in our classes and responsive learning environment speaks to respect, teamwork, communication, and engagement. Again, these children come from economically challenged situations, and if the staff works in this perspective together, then the kids get the same sense of support from all the staff here, and that will lead to promoting their academic achievement.

Sarah described how she gets together with the teachers before the beginning of each school year, and collaboratively they come up with what focused goals they should work on to address the learning needs of marginalized students. The first thing she does is to talk to the teachers and identify some of these students right away. She stated:

We don’t wait. Some people might have a different viewpoint on that, but if we know that students have struggled in the past, then we continue to try strategies, try new
strategies and discuss what may work. We even have discussions before classes are made, what would be the best fit with those students with teachers, so that we can achieve the best outcomes, because some teachers, for example, are better at promoting assistive technology than others, or actually using it than other teachers. So we even begin with the standpoint, what would be the best teacher for this child.

Thomas on the other hand emphasized the importance of having a vision and focused goals with staff by reminding them of the importance of their role in shaping the academic achievement of all students, but especially the marginalized students. He stated:

I remind and articulate to the staff members that everything that comes out of your mouth will be heard by the kids, will be digested by the kids, they hang on every word you say, so everything you say to the kids will influence them. So the first thing I say to the staff is of how much power they have, because it is power. What they choose to do with that power is very important because they can, in a second, crush the student or forever empower them. So the first thing I do is build that understanding with the staff. I remind them of how important their roles are and what an impact it has on the students’ academic achievement.

Nick also indicated that through the school improvement planning at the beginning of the school year, he gets an opportunity to get the staff on board to narrow down the focused and shared vision. Through reviewing and co-constructing the mission, vision, and values of their school, all the staff members get an opportunity to reflect on the importance of ensuring that all students, including those who are marginalized, achieve academically. He stated,

At the beginning of each year, during a professional activity day, I get to review with the staff what our mission, vision, and values are. In the mission it is always indicated that
we want all our students to perform to the best of their abilities and reach their full potential. We talk about how we are planning to do that. The marginalized students’ subject always comes up, and we then collectively decide that this indeed has to be our focus. So, when the staff member realizes the students’ predicament, they are more willing to make this a focus in their teaching strategies. And that is how we usually come up with our focused and shared vision.

Emily highlighted the fact that their focused and shared vision comes alive during their Catholic professional learning communities (CPLC), in which students who are struggling academically and for home reasons are highlighted. She stated:

Students who are marginalized at school by their peers are also highlighted among the staff during CPLCs, and they work with them. This gives us opportunities to focus and plan for their academic achievement.

She noted that the staff members work as a team to ensure that they collectively meet the learning needs of all our students, especially those that are marginalized.

**Educating Staff about School’s Demographic Data**

The principals highlighted the importance of educating their staff about the demographic data of their schools. They noted that many of their staff members come from middle income families and do not seem to acknowledge the fact that the students are marginalized, not because they want to be or because it is their parents’ fault. The principals realized that they had to show their staff concrete demographic data of the school before they got the message. But even with this information, some teachers still did not acknowledge the students’ marginalization. They had a mindset that marginalized students cannot achieve academically, and the principals had to work with their staff to change that mindset.
Helen explained that when she started at her present school, where she has been for 4 years now, the staff members were not aware that most of the students were marginalized, and if they were, they simply overlooked it. None of the principals before Helen has ever shared the school’s demographic data with the staff. So the staff blamed the marginalized students and their parents for their poor academic achievement. However, in order to convince the staff, Helen examined in detail with the staff the school’s census demographic data, focusing on the following areas: average income levels of the parents, how many were single parents, how many of the parents were on assistance, how many parents did not complete high school, and how many rented their places of living. She stated:

What I found with my staff when I started here was that they refused to believe that we are a “performance plus school.” They refused to accept that poverty existed in our school, which I found interesting because the designation we get as a performance plus school is based on data. It is based on predominantly census data, and this census data looks at several factors. So when we looked at the income of the families and the families we financially supported, the teachers were quite surprised.

At the beginning of each school year, Nick made a very conscious effort to present the demographic data of the school community to all staff members. The reason he did this was to ensure that all the staff members, whether old or new, were aware of what their school community looked like and where they were demographically. His goal was also to raise the staff’s awareness of the extent of marginalized students they have in their school. He indicated:

I do this through the school improvement plan, and it’s always a regular feature on the agenda for the staff meetings where there’s definitely a focus on improving curriculum instruction in the school. When I first came to the school and presented the data, it hadn’t
been done before and, when the staff saw the data, they began to realize that it’s a different school population from 10 years ago. There were higher levels of low income families and an increased number of English language learners (ELL) than they thought, and it was just setting the mindset for changing the curriculum instruction to reach more of our marginalized children.

Sandra pointed out that she believed that it was very important for the staff teaching in her school to fully understand the marginalization of the students who come to her school. Consequently, when she interviewed the new staff coming to her school, she shared information about the culture of the community and the demographic data. She wanted to make sure that they knew and fully understood what their responsibilities would entail and the commitment that would be required to support these children and their families. She stated:

I tell them about the demographic data of this community. Many of the parents here fall into the low social income category. Many of them do not have a high school diploma or education past high school and they work multiple jobs to make ends meet. You see, it’s not everyone who is perhaps willing to be committed, because it is unique in that the children will need someone who is going to be empathetic and supportive and teach them in the way they can learn.

Marcus explained that he always highlighted the demographic data of the school during staff meetings so that all the staff members are on the same page when it comes to understanding the type of students they are working with in their school community. He stated:

My school is composed of generational White poverty and working class, and I also have a large number of Aboriginal students. My staff members understand the marginalization situation the students are faced with and work together to address the students’ learning
needs. The discussions we have at staff meetings help to highlight the urgency we have to work with in order to address their academic achievement. I found the staff’s understanding of the demographic data of our school made a great impact on how they approach the learning needs of the students they are teaching.

Monica explained that she too had to share the school demographic data with the staff before at least some of them could understand that the students in their school were marginalized. Before being exposed to the data, the staff members were continually judging the kids and their parents, labelling them as lazy and parents not being interested in their children’s learning. So she used the technique of putting names on the data. She stated:

My staff members kept complaining that the students in our school were not marginalized but just lazy. They pointed out that the children were wearing designer running shoes and had iphones. They kept grumbling that if their parents are poor, where would they get the money to buy such expensive items? They kept asking that how come these parents are not interested in their children’s academic achievement. How come they don’t come to teacher—parent interviews? And questions like that. When I shared the demographic data with them indicating the level of income of the parents in our school community and their education level, they began slowly to grasp the idea that differentiated instruction is much needed to address the learning needs of these students.

Helen explained that many of the staff members in her school have come from middle class backgrounds. They did not seem to grasp the concept of what being marginalized can look like or feel like. They put the blame for the students’ poor academic achievement on the students, who they said were disengaged, and parents who did not have any care for their children’s education. The staff members were also having difficulties understanding that students who
come in designer jeans can be marginalized. She combined the use of the school’s demographic 
data and research on poverty as a strategy to get the staff members to understand the clientele 
they were serving. She stated:

I run a breakfast, a lunch, and snack programs, and they are free. The teachers were 
having a big problem, believe it or not, that it is free. They kept data on how many 
children accessed it every day, and one of my educational assistant said to me, “This 
child has been here every day of this week; you need to talk to the parents and tell them 
that they have to send a lunch with their child.” We took back a few steps and took a look 
at the poverty research, the researchers’ names escape me, but they are American. The 
board brought them to talk to us about research and poverty and how children living in 
poverty try to save face and, for staff, the biggest problem they have is that some of these 
marginalized kids come in designer clothes. All the research on poverty pointed out that 
the parents will try to save face by buying them McDonald for lunch to act like they have 
money.

So, Helen told the teachers that they have to get away from making judgments about why 
kids access the breakfast and lunch programs. For most of their students it was because they 
were hungry, and for some of the kids it was because they needed an adult to sit with, to eat with, 
and talk to. They did not have an adult at home to talk to because their parents were working 
several jobs to try to keep their homes or pay the rent. She noted that they have a large number of 
parents who have two or three jobs.

Analyzing Student Achievement Data and Monitoring Instruction

Analyzing student achievement data and monitoring instruction was another strategy 
identified by the principals. Along with their staffs, they analyzed the students’ achievement data
that informs them of diagnostic achievements, report cards, observations, anecdotal notes, and EQAO (Education Quality and Accountability Office, which is the provincial agency that designs and tests grade 3 and grade 6 students in reading, writing, and mathematics) to identify the areas where the achievement gaps persisted. That provided them with a snapshot of the information they needed to identify the students who needed early interventions to help close the learning gaps.

Many principals identified that they analyze student achievement data based on report cards, EQAO, and other grade-appropriate diagnostic assessments to help them address the learning needs of marginalized students. This is mostly accomplished during the staff meetings, divisional meetings, and at the monthly school resource team meetings. The principals also pointed out that they monitor instructions.

Steven indicated that his staff look at the data, especially at the beginning of the year and target the level one and level two students. They specifically track the students’ language and math achievement levels, and they have assigned staff members to keep track of those data. Every 4–6 weeks the teachers meet in their divisions to monitor progress and see what needs to be done, whether the teaching strategies are working or not. To ensure that he is on the same page with the staff members, he attends as many meetings as he can and, if he is unable to attend the meetings, the division leaders keep him updated.

Sandra explained that the children in her school come to the school not well prepared for school. She based these findings on the assessments they do before the students start school in full day kindergarten (FDK). She stated that “the children in poverty have less language when they come to school than children who come from middle income families or affluent families.
So the staff members who are here understand that these children are going to need early interventions in their skill base, so that they can learn.”

Nick described that his teachers and he used the student data to inform their practice and determine which students needed interventions. They put a lot of emphasis on differentiating instruction. He stated:

The marginalized child tends to be lost in the mix, and if each child was given the proper individual attention that is due, that child will improve in their learning, so it’s really important for staff to focus on that approach. One of the mantras is that sameness is not necessarily fairness. You have to take time for those who are in more need of intervention rather than dividing the time among all students equally.

Melissa explained that the reading assessments administered to their students indicated that their children were experiencing serious difficulties in reading. She stated, “From the assessments we did we knew our kids were coming in without a strong background in literacy. Many are not read to, books are not in the homes, so many of our kids have to play catch-up a little bit in terms of developing those prereading and beginning reading skills.”

Sarah, on the other hand, highlighted that before her school sets new school goals for the year, they take a closer look at their student data. They correlate the various achievement data they have accessible to them, such as report cards, diagnostic assessments completed by the teachers, and the EQAO results. She stated:

Although, the EQAO is a snapshot of what the students know, sometimes it highlights the same areas our students seem to struggle with as indicated on the report cards or by the diagnostic assessments. For example, through analyzing the data, we realized that our
students were having lots of difficulty in making connections in literacy and in mathematics; they struggled with medium and mode and making translations.

Sarah indicated that through analyzing the data available to them, they get extra support for the marginalized students by getting numeracy and literacy tutors to work with students who are below grade level and try to catch them up to close their learning gaps.

**Professional Development**

Providing professional development was also one of the strategies highlighted by the principals. The principals recognized the fact that their staff members needed professional development to keep them in tune with best teaching practices. For example, the grade 3 and 6 teachers were given opportunities to attend EQAO workshops to learn how to analyze the results and narrow down what particular strands of math, for instance, the students struggled with the most. The staff members were given opportunities to attend workshops that addressed diversity and how to address the learning needs of culturally diverse students. Sometimes professional development was site specific, provided on professional development days.

Several principals expressed that they promoted the achievement of marginalized students’ academic achievement through providing staff members with professional development. Monica believed that principals need to give their teachers effective strategies to work with students who are culturally diverse or who are impoverished. She pointed out that as a principal you should provide a safe environment for staff to have dialogue concerning issues of cultural diversity. She encourages them to see the students as individuals, not just looking at the lack of things they do not have, but looking at the strengths the students have and their resilience. She encourages the teachers to look at what they come with and then take them from where they are and use their own experiences to teach them.
Monica explained further that not only does she send the staff members to various professional development events, when the teachers come back she expects them to share their learning with the others as well as implementing the strategies they learn into their daily teaching practices. She pointed out:

You want to monitor what the teachers are teaching. You want to make sure that the curriculum that they are teaching is reflective of the students in the classrooms. For instance, if you send them to a culturally responsive workshop, you want to make sure the things they are using and the assignments they are doing are relevant to the kids. For instance, you might talk about the pioneers, but maybe that is not relevant to the kids. So if you are talking about pioneers, talk about them in a context that means something to them, since there are pioneers in other countries. The teachers then use the students’ lived experiences to ensure when they are teaching that they are using curriculum that reflects the students so the students can identify with it.

Helen pointed out that she is a great believer that teachers should be given opportunities for professional development in order to grow their mindset. She indicated that if she wants the teachers to grow their mindset, she also has to put resources in place to support them. She stated:

Critical Thinking Workshop, Garfield Gini-Newman from Toronto University OISE, came in four times to talk about critical thinking and did full-day workshops with staff. They also had workshops with the New Comprehensive Ministry Math Program 3 math program from grades 3–7. And every 2 weeks the teachers did the 4C model in math. This provided them with strategies to use differentiated instruction, which is a great
strategy to use to help the students who are marginalized to achieve academic achievement.

Natalie pointed out that providing site-based professional development allowed her staff to step out of their comfort zone and enabled them to understand more about the marginalized students. She explained that she used the invitation of the English language learners’ (ELL) parents as a professional learning opportunity for her staff. The ELL parents were invited, and they shared with staff the things they considered important in their culture. This time the parents were the experts. They were the holders of the knowledge instead of the teachers. Natalie indicated that it was quite surprising how very little they knew about the cultures of their students and parents. She stated that it was an eye-opener for all of them. This evening gave the staff and parents an opportunity to develop trusting relationships. The parents and students felt that their culture was validated, as the staff members were interested in learning about their experiences and culture. Natalie stated:

We had a large group of ELL students from a particular country and they had a night celebrating their background, and when we invited them, the teachers were kind of hesitant and I said we have to go to show that we want to learn about them. It was stepping out from our comfort zone a lot, we turned around and became the minority, but they were overjoyed and thrilled. I think it was a turning point. I think also allowing the staff to know how to incorporate things that are important to their cultures, their traditions, and to tie them into the school, into a project the kids could be working on, or something they could show in a talent show or celebrate and little family traditions or rituals that they do, and I think that opens up a lot of doors to the marginalized families and it also opens up the minds of your staff.
Henry echoed using the same strategy of providing site-based professional development. Since the school’s focus this year was literacy, based on how poorly their students have been performing on the report card and EQAO, he believed that site-based professional development would be more beneficial for the teachers’ learning and in turn the improvement of students’ academic achievement. He also saw the need for providing an ELL professional development session for teachers because their school has a large number of students whose first language is not English. After the professional developments, they combine their new learning to review the strategies they have been using to improve the academic achievement of the marginalized students. He stated:

Some professional developments (PD) for my staff are designed for academics, and this year we have been focusing on literacy predominantly. Bringing in some of the consultants from the board, and the idea is that we are, we do have a school focus of high order thinking questions and open questions. We then work towards differentiated instruction for different types of students. We bring in system support to help to move the agenda forward of differentiating for different types of students. I also invited our ELL worker to come and present at the staff meetings. She presented to the teachers about the services she provides for the school and the students. Through our school effectiveness framework meetings, we analyze the best strategies and practices we can use to reach all our learners, especially those who are marginalized.

Nick indicated that he used the staff meetings to provide some professional development for his staff. He stated that he prepared a PowerPoint highlighting the points he wanted to bring across. For example, if he wanted the teachers to be more attuned to students with special learning needs, such as students with autism spectrum, he would show them a video clip which
highlighted the strategies that have been successful in addressing the learning needs of those students. They would briefly discuss it, and he would encourage them to continue to dialogue about it in their divisional meetings. He indicated:

Other times I bring in guest speakers at our meetings that highlight the poverty issues of our students and the difficult situations they find themselves in, due to poverty. I find that this has helped my staff to open their eyes to the realities of some of our students who are marginalized. Sometimes I show them video clips that address diversity and give them opportunities to dialogue about it.

Nick pointed out that he has seen real growth in some of his teachers because, before this, they used to blame the kids for their lack of doing well in school in the areas of academics, but now they are beginning to understand that the students can achieve academically if they are given more time and the support they need.

**Providing Support for Staff**

It was also important to provide support for the staff to ensure that the marginalized students’ academic achievement was being addressed by the teachers. This translated mostly with students with special education needs, students who were English language learners, and students who had learning gaps that needed to be closed. Teachers who struggled with differentiating instruction were given support by the principals or through peer teaching or support from board personnel. The school resource team was another major component in providing the teachers with support.

Melissa explained that in order to promote academic achievement for marginalized students, she realized that she had to provide support for her staff. She observed to see what strengths they brought to the table and what supports needed to be put in place to support them to
do their job effectively. She noticed, for example, that her current grade 2 teacher was struggling teaching the grade 1 class. After she put supports in place for her, she was able to do better. She stated:

My grade 2 teacher was in grade 1 for the longest time, and I moved her to grade 2. I would say that she was one of the most difficult persons to move, to figure out where to place her, because the scores of the students in her class were very low. Right now we have been doing Dibels, an oral reading fluency assessment; it breaks down the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), digs deeper into specific areas of reading and where things are going well. Right now her students have made the most gain this year in reading, and she was my hardest. I know there is still work to be done, but with the supports in place, she is where she needs to be. When you put teachers where they need to be and are passionate and embrace that change, the students’ academic achievement blossoms.

Marcus stated that his staff members were having some difficulties with addressing the learning needs of marginalized students. He supported them by giving them a variety of strategies they could use to make sure that the marginalized students are fully included into the curriculum that helps them to be engaged. He talked to the teachers at staff meetings or individually in the spirit of supporting them. Marcus used his own teaching experiences to model for the teachers how they can interact with marginalized students to ensure that their learning needs are being met and that they feel included. He indicated that he gave every possible opportunity to students from diverse backgrounds to share with the class their experiences and cultures. If it was a student with learning disabilities or physical disabilities, he would
compliment them whenever an opportunity presented itself to make sure that they too realized that they were competent and valuable members of their class and school. He explained,

If you are talking about someone’s culture you celebrate the beauty of their culture. You go back to the child with a different culture—I go back to what I said about embarrassment—there is no embarrassment here—because they do not want you to talk about their culture, they do not want you to talk about their disability, e.g., their glasses. What is wrong with saying to the student that “you really have very nice glasses, they really look sharp.” So that the next time the student cannot do their work and are embarrassed to take out their glasses they will say to themselves, “Mr. David actually thinks that my glasses are cool,” so they will take them out and wear them. So I tell my staff that while I was in the classroom I championed the marginalized students by asking them to tell us about their culture; for example if we were talking about staple foods I would ask them to tell us about their staple food, e.g., I would tell them about myself that, “in my culture . . . my parents are from a European background and we eat a lot of bread as our staple food. What would be your staple foods?” Then we would compare the similarities and differences of the wheat-related staples, and there is richness there. So instead of being embarrassing or a kid being embarrassed by it I’ve always try to champion with them and be proud of it, be proud of who you are because that was something that I went through as a child, that I was a little bit different from the other kids in the class because my background was not the same as theirs and I just kept quiet about it, I didn’t talk about it, but I don’t think that that will help the marginalized kids.

Henry on the other hand explained how the increased numbers of English language learners and special education students have impacted on the level of support he gives to the
teachers. His teachers were stressed because they did not know how to teach these students. He explained that their ELL population had gone up by about 11%. The year before it was at 21% and this year had risen to 32%. He had to bring in consultants from the board office and an ELL teacher to help the teachers find the answers they were looking for in order to address the learning needs of these students. He brought in an instructional coach that the board provided to support the teachers as well.

Henry added that many of his teachers were having difficulties with differentiating their instructions. He tried to encourage them to realize that the onus was on them to ensure that the students’ learning needs were being met. He explained:

What I found with staff is when they ask for support for students that are not at level three they have two requests: One is to put a student on an individual education plan (IEP) and the other is to get the learning resource teacher help or the special education department help. My initial push-back on that is that the IEP you are already doing is what we would put in the IEP, so the IEP is not formalized; we don’t really need it at this point to continue with the differentiation. I use a different term for “differentiation.” I am calling it small group work. In that way I am trying to move the mindset into small group workings, whatever those groups might be, whether they are heterogeneous or homogeneous. At the same time I try to get the learning resource teacher or special education teacher to go into the classroom versus kids being withdrawn. I am hoping that promotes ownership and then that ownership, I’m hoping at some point, starts to create a larger ownership from the school point of view from when we talk about it at the staff meeting.
Henry went on to explain that at his school they have what he calls “Kid Talk.” Two or three times a week, he meets with all the staff members for about 10 to 15 minutes to have a dialogue about some of the students who are exhibiting behavioural difficulties. They focus on the child and the circumstances they live in which they bring to the table. When the staff hear what is happening in the lives of these children, they realize what the children have to deal with on a daily basis and begin to empathize with them. Henry noted that many marginalized students live in very difficult situations and marvels to see how resilient they are. He found that the “Kid Talk” has really helped his staff to be more compassionate with how they deal with the students who are marginalized. They also provided his staff with a safe place to share their frustrations and support each other. “Kid Talk” created an atmosphere of camaraderie.

Sarah explained that she supported her staff members by providing them with the resources they need before the beginning of each school year. She stated:

With staff members one of the things that I do is to prepare a binder for them in the summer so that when they come to school all the staff members have some common understandings of certain strategies, so they have research to inform practices for literacy and research to inform practices for mathematics. They also have the assessment continuum, and they also have some information on restorative justice. Sarah also indicated that the teachers are given the students’ individual education plans (IEPs) to familiarize themselves with the students’ learning needs prior to the beginning of the school year. This supports the teachers to plan ahead of time and be better prepared to address the learning needs of the marginalized students. She stated:

In order to support the teachers, they receive all of the students’ IEPs for those students that will be in their classes. They’re encouraged, before school even begins in the
summer, to read them thoroughly and, if they have any questions or concerns, to meet with my special education resource teacher (SERT) before school starts again. In some cases, we have issues with students who have an IEP and may be socially challenged. I encourage teachers to meet with the teachers who had the students in the previous year and talk with them about some of the things they may have to do about preferred seating, in terms of preserving their circle of friends. Such strategies help out with the students’ academic achievement.

Sarah also supported the classroom teachers through the Special Education Resource Team. She ensured that the special education resource team has meetings weekly. So, if a teacher is struggling to come up with strategies or ideas to address the marginalized students’ learning needs, the team can help them. They can also recommend outside resources if they cannot do it by themselves. For example, if it is behavioural, then she asks a behavioural team from the school board to come and observe the student/s and to provide more strategies for them to use to help these children.

Another approach Sandra and Melissa used was that of offering their schools to facilitate the pilot programs which would address an area of need the school had identified. They both researched these pilot programs and realized that they could help their students. They were proactive and approached their superintendents regarding taking on this initiative of piloting the identified programs in their schools. Melissa explained:

We were kind of at a crossroads in terms of reading despite the fact that we had put in intervention programs. There were still many students not reading by the time they even entered a grade 3 level let, alone grade 1. So we worked with our special education and psych departments, looking at a tier one intervention reading program that we put across
all of the primary division. My psych consultant and I went to the superintendent to try to promote and get funding to provide training for our teachers and for other schools in the board, and it is peer assisted learning strategies or PALS in short.

Melissa pointed out that although it was such an undertaking, she believed that through supporting the teachers and learning together with them, the marginalized students in her school would have an opportunity to have their learning gaps closed. She explained that the program was piloted in Riverdale board, and they took a road trip to Riverdale to see it in action. She stated:

We felt that this was something that we might use to target that, because we knew that was where we were really getting stuck. We’ve had that now here for the last two full years and are starting to see some gains. So, in terms of strategy, it’s finding those gaps and working with your board personnel and staff to find answers of why this is happening and why we can do better. But without giving them the support they needed in this new initiative, the students were stuck in their reading, and reading affects all other subjects as you know.

Sandra emphasized the fact that piloting a literacy program was a great support for her teachers. It gave them an opportunity to try out the program to see how well it can work to meet the learning needs of their marginalized students. They got all the resources for free and lots of support from board personnel to ensure that the program ran smoothly. She explained,

Piloting the FDELK (full day early learning kindergarten) program here is a strategy and a great support for my teachers. We were one of the piloting schools because, again, children in poverty, if they are just sitting somewhere at home and not being stimulated, that is part of their learning as well. We have the FDELK program here. Their sense of
readiness may not be similar to other communities, so the staff here has to understand what interventions and supports that need to be put in place to support the students’ learning at their level so that they can learn and be the best they can be.

Mariah’s approach to supporting staff is a bit different. She ensures that she gets capital resources from the board office regularly to help not only the students but staff members as well. She explained that in order to promote the academic achievement of the marginalized students in her school, she has to start addressing the learning needs of those students at a very early age. The teachers feel supported because they know that they have the support from the other resource staff they can call upon to assist them to meet the learning needs of the marginalized students. She stated:

We have a lot of resource staff that we have to employ. We currently have an occupational therapist that is stationed at our school. We have a speech pathologist that comes in three times a week. We currently have an ELL teacher two full days a week because of the high number of immigrants who are now at our school. Our ELL students are brilliant but what is holding them back now is not being able to speak English. So the ELL teacher helps them to close the language gap. We also have other resource members of the team; we have the auditory team that comes for students, and we have the LD (learning disability) team that frequently comes to help.

Mariah also indicated that they have a full-time special education teacher and eight full-time educational assistants to help these students. We have a full reading recovery, a reading resource teacher to help the students close the reading gaps.
Purposeful Staffing

The principals indicated that purposeful staffing was another strategy they employed to promote academic achievement of marginalized students. The principals moved teachers around from one grade to another in ways they believed would achieve the best results. They assigned their teachers the grades to teach based on the needs of the students and the teachers’ abilities. Some teachers had more strength teaching certain subject areas than others. Some are better teaching in the primary than they would be in teaching junior or intermediate or vice versa. So the principals tried to find the best fit for the teachers and students.

Melissa explained that she had made some shifts in staffing by putting staff where she felt that they could do the best job as professionals for their students. She had to look at what was working and what was not working in terms of programming. She explained:

For instance, our primary division and board had a kindergarten to grade 2 strategy which promotes that every child should be reading by the end of grade 1. That’s a huge challenge for us and our primary division, which I think is stuck in the mindset that number one, not thinking that the kids could learn, and number two, that things had to happen first before we could tap into their thinking. So it kind of again switched that to “no they are quite capable of being critical thinkers,” they come into school being able to have strong opinions about many things, if you talk to any 3-year-old they have strong opinions about their likes and dislikes and what's fair and not fair and are very persuasive.

Melissa added that because the teachers come with a mindset that students who come from marginalized families cannot learn, she has to work with them to change that mentality. So, she puts the teachers who she observes are strong in delivering the curriculum in a particular
division, in the appropriate grade, in which they can model for the others that indeed marginalized students can achieve academic achievement just as any other students would. She indicated that all it takes is for the teachers to believe in the children that, yes, they are quite capable of learning.

Melissa reflected on what she went through and had to do to make the system work better. She stated that, during the first year when she moved some teachers around from one grade to another, she had them in tears, thinking that she did not like them. She had to stand up in front of the staff and explain to them that this was not her intention in moving staff around. She put people where she believed they could make a positive impact on students and where she thought they would do the most good and share their gifts. She indicated:

Now I have had teachers coming to me requesting if they can teach another specific grade. So I have moved one grade 8 teacher to kindergarten and the kindergarten teacher to grade 7/8. They have the qualifications to teach those grades, and they are embracing the change. Other teachers I will not move because they are where they need to be and are happy where they are. It took a while to get people to realize that change is okay, and that is how we grow, and that mindset has changed as well. It was like if you stay put you are rewarded and punished when you are moved. Baby steps! When I did I moved the teacher who was teaching 4/5 into a 5/6, very strong teacher, I knew I wanted her in my grade 6 classroom. I moved the other one to grade 5 because she is brilliant and what a great way to have her kids ready for grade 6. That was purposeful staffing and where I needed them to be.

Nick also indicated that he had to do purposeful staffing in order to ensure that the marginalized students’ academic achievement would be promoted in certain classes. He
indicated that one of his grade 3 teachers had taught grade 3 for 8 years. She had blatantly refused to implement the new strategies that were initiated by the board in the areas of literacy and numeracy. Although they had two other grade 3 classes, she preferred to teach behind closed doors and do her own thing. This prevented the primary division from working cohesively. Nick decided to move her from a grade 3 class to a 4/5. In this case, she had to work with the two grade 4 teachers and three grade 5 teachers. Nick knew that this junior group was quite strong and they worked as a team very well. So this teacher would have no other choice but to get on board. He also moved one of the grade 7 teachers who had been in the intermediate division for 10 years down to the grade 2 class. This purposeful staffing not only provided professional growth for the teachers, but it also had a positive impact on the students’ learning.

Helen realized that the area where she needed to practice purposeful staffing was in the area where the needs of the special education students were concerned. She had to reorganize the staffing and instructional delivery model. One of her big issues was that they had a more than average number of students who are identified as exceptional students. Within 2 years after she arrived at her new school, she changed the whole model of special education delivery because they found that their students with learning disabilities, even with the resources that they were given by the board, were not meeting with success. So she opted to make it more inclusive by getting the SERT (special education resource teacher) to come in the classroom and teach with the classroom teacher. She stated:

It required a partnership which is going to work between two teachers. My best teachers are in the integrated classes in terms of exemplary practice and we did a lot of work on differentiated instruction. I worked with my intermediate teachers because they were more open to the model.
Sarah also explained that she paid particular attention when it came to the placement of her staff members in the classes she wished them to teach. She based the staffing model on the needs of the students. She begins with the standpoint of what would be the best teacher for a particular child. She indicated that they have discussions before classes are made to figure out what teacher would be the best fit with those marginalized students so that they can achieve the best outcomes. She pointed out that they put into consideration, for example, that some teachers are better at promoting assistive technology than others, or actually using it than other teachers.

**Providing Opportunities for Collaboration**

The principals indicated that they provide opportunities for staff to collaborate. This gives the staff a sense that they are all working for the same goals which promote the academic achievement of all students, especially those who are marginalized. Opportunities for teachers to meet in their divisional meetings are facilitated through planning time scheduling. Also the school resource team meets on a regular basis to address the students who are struggling and share strategies with the teachers that could better address the learning needs of those students. A lot of collaboration also happens with the school improvement team where the school improvement goals are identified. Collaboration among various teachers such as the school resource teacher, special education teacher, reading recovery teacher, coaching teachers, and teacher librarian and the rest of the teachers happens throughout the school year.

Many principals highlighted the fact that piloting programs at their school gave them ample opportunities to build a collaborative atmosphere for their staff, which enhanced promoting the academic achievement of the students. Many of the pilot programs did very well attending to the needs of their students. One of the examples given was the parent family literacy program, where the parents bring their little kids to school at a very early age. The little ones get
opportunities to develop their oral language and social skills. It also gives the parents an opportunity to develop their comfort level of coming to school in a nontthreatening atmosphere.

Helen indicated that teamwork is the foundation of their school improvement plan. There is an expectation that teachers work together to plan for school improvement. Through the use of their Catholic professional learning community, the staff members work collaboratively to come up with strategies that best meet the learning needs of the marginalized students. Helen encouraged the staff to demonstrate leadership in their teams. It is shared leadership that does not fall on one teacher or one particular grade. Helen explained:

We do a lot of data analysis at the beginning of the school year. We determine the children who are at risk who are marginalized, and we look for the indications of what could be the problem for these children—children who would potentially be achieving at grade level but are not. We have seen many instances where children are presenting with attendance issues and have put in place strategies to address these issues. We are not just looking at EQAO scores, we are looking at the whole child. So the transition planning that takes place from our FDK program into our primary department is very important, just as our primaries move into junior and junior move into the intermediate. I think all our teachers and all staff members are there to be in a supportive role because understanding of individual needs is crucial.

Helen indicated that she believed very strongly that it was very important for the staff to share best practices with each other. She stated that gone are the days when the teachers teach behind closed doors. In her school, it is very much encouraged for the teachers to share with each other the strategies that work best with the marginalized students, especially if the teacher had the child the previous year. As the students move through their school, there is a common
understanding to support the extenuating circumstances of some cases, and this can be achieved only through the established collaborative nature of the staff.

Marcus, too, believed that it is very important for the staff to be given opportunities to collaborate. He stated that he did a lot of the collaboration during the staff meetings where they discuss in detail how to better serve their school population, which is mostly comprised of marginalized students. He stated that “a key thing is that I spend a lot of time during staff meetings, giving opportunities to talk about issues of equity with the staff.” They use this time to collaborate and come up with various strategies that can help the marginalized students in the school do well in their academic achievement.

Sandra described that collaboration for her staff was highly exhibited in their faith in action strategy. Through collaboration, the staff members focus on the same shared values which promote the students’ academic achievement and well-being. She stated:

Our faith is really important for us here. Each level of learning, each class, each group is part of the Catholic learning community where we are now looking at our Catholic social teachings and our virtues monthly. So everyone is saying the same thing, again using the same language of faith. We talk the same language of faith. This month’s virtue is integrity and, as our whole school community, we will all be talking about that. In the previous month, it was respect, and all the classes spoke about that, and at monthly assemblies we talk about the values, and again it is that a sense of commitment to a particular direction and our faith that is nurturing to the children and fosters a sense of collaboration as well.

Melissa acknowledged that the collaboration of her staff was stimulated by the staff’s willingness to work as a team to try to come up with strategies to assist closing the learning gaps
of their marginalized students. She indicated that what really fostered the collaborative mentality of her staff was the fact that she was transparent, open to suggestions and new ideas, classroom visits, having conversations with staff members, learning with them, and finding support for them. She also added:

I think the most important thing for me is being consistent in the message. Not losing sight of what’s important, kind of going by that moral compass of why we're here and why we need to do things the way we do them because it's best for kids and they need to learn, because that's our job. It’s our job that they learn and develop those skills they are going to need to be successful.

Grace’s approach to collaboration among the staff is demonstrated through the mentorship program facilitated by the staff members to nurture and guide the marginalized students. Grace pointed out that “what I’ve challenged my staff with every year is to pick one child, to mentor. I don’t tell them particularly who to pick, but it’s interesting they do always pick the child who needs it and just try to be that significant other for them, and show you care, and maybe that will help them succeed.”

George highlighted that the collaboration in his school revealed itself in the staff’s embracing and practicing the “Leader in Me,” *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey. They believe that when the students develop their self-worth, academic achievement will naturally fall in place. He stated:

The most logical thing is that the more education you have, the more opportunities you have in life, but I do not totally agree with this statement and it could be controversial and not make sense. That is why we do the “Leader in Me” *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, because I do not really believe that if you are going to gain confidence it is going
to happen because you are academically successful. Academic success comes when you have inner confidence and believe in yourself. So at our school we collaborate by making sure that our students learn and practice these 7 habits daily.

Helen described that much of her staff’s collaboration was highlighted when she reorganized the school differently from the students going to the special education resource teacher (SERT) to the SERT going to work with the students in their own classrooms. She explained how the collaboration unfolded.

The programs never meshed, so we were fragmenting the curriculum as opposed to integrating the curriculum. So I did away with the small, self-contained classes and I took the SERTs and put them into the classroom. This meant that I reorganized my school differently. So I have a lot of combined classes. I have a 7/8 split, I actually have three 7/8 split classes as opposed to grade 7 and 8 classes. We did totally 7/8, 7/8, 7/8 and put the identified students in one class. So you may have 10 identified students in a class, but you would have two teachers in the room. The SERT was there for math and language and for science or geography/history so the geography/history is integrated with the language block and for science is supported by the SERT too.

Helen explained that the students got more support in the totally integrated setting where they remained in their classes and the SERT came to work with them. The teacher and the SERT collaborated by planning the lessons together and differentiating their instruction to ensure that they reached the learning needs of the students. The students also got to learn along with their peers without being pulled out of the class, which boosted their self-confidence.

Finally, Emily claimed that much of her school’s collaboration happened mostly during the Professional learning communities (PLC). Emily pointed out that “during our PLCs we
highlight those students who are struggling academically and for home reasons which I would consider marginalized.” Her staff members worked collaboratively to come up with various strategies they can use to ensure that these students’ academic needs are addressed.

**Strategies Used With Students**

The principals highlighted a number of strategies they employed with students to promote academic achievement for their marginalized students. These strategies included the following: (a) creating a welcoming, safe, equitable, and inclusive school environment, (b) setting high standards, (c) advocating for students, (d) providing resources and other supports, (e) providing opportunities for leadership and student voice, and (f) collaborating with community partners.

**Creating a Welcoming, Safe, Equitable, and Inclusive School Environment**

Several principals mentioned creating a welcoming, safe, equitable, and inclusive school environment as a strategy. They all considered that to be the starting point. They felt that it was very important because, if the students do not feel welcomed, safe, or included, it will be very difficult for them to learn. They created a school learning environment where all the students, especially those who are marginalized, felt that they belonged and were valued as contributing members of the school community. If students feel welcomed, safe, and have a sense of belonging, they will engage in their learning, which affects their academic achievement in a positive way.

Melissa, for instance explained that when she came to her current school, the first thing she did was work on the school’s safety and working conditions. The staff and students did not trust each other. The staff would constantly talk about students as “these kids” and “these parents” in a disapproving tone. The inside of the school was also run down. The police had a
constant presence at the school to intervene with safety issues. So she knew that she had to change all this by building a caring and supportive school culture. She stated:

I believe I came into a building that was not safe for kids and students and support staff. We had many students who were disengaged and, when you have many students who are disengaged, then you have behaviours that come out that can potentially be unsafe. So we really needed to work on safety and to develop the mindset of the staff. I think more importantly of the students that they are worth the effort, that they are capable human beings that can be successful. I would hammer that home pretty much every day, and when I would have students in my office it would be, “You’re better than what your behaviour is showing. You are better and you are worth the effort.” Changing the mindset of the students has taken a long time.

Marcus worked diligently with his staff to create a welcoming and safe environment for the students in his school, many of whom are marginalized. They have a large student population of Aboriginal students. By holding himself and everyone accountable, he ensured that they had opportunities within the curriculum and the way they practice for their students to feel safe, a sense of belonging, and included. Since they have the Mohawk language in their school, sometimes O Canada is played in Mohawk instead of in English. They also have Mohawk words of the day. They collectively created a school culture that fostered hope for the students and made all students understand that they believed in them and are worth it. He explained:

We have three languages in our school, English, French, and Mohawk. I only impact the students indirectly because I only impact them through staff. Without working with staff first, you can never reach those students, and you have to find opportunities to believe in them. So when I am contacting parents about a difficult situation, if I have to send
someone home, I’m making sure that I believe in the child. Children need hope even when they mess up. We are not here to be judgemental. It is important for students, especially those who are marginalized, to know that someone believes in them even when they mess up, because all kids do.

So, as a principal, Marcus makes sure that he models that to staff and students through his words and actions. He is respectful to all staff members, students, and parents. He does this through using respectful language when talking to staff, students, and parents. He uses the intercom through morning announcements to send messages to the students that they are valuable and worth it. He constantly reminds them that they can be anything they want to be and he along with the staff are there to support them. He interacts with the students during recess to ensure that the students are comfortable with him and they can approach him with any concerns without being afraid. He believes that the students should always be made to feel that they are safe, welcomed, and believed in.

Wilma stated that her leadership revolves around setting a welcoming tone and safe environment where all students feel that they belong. She believes that learning will not take place if students do not feel safe or accepted. She explained that the first goal in their school planning is to look not so much at quantitative data but at qualitative data to figure out what kind of tone they are setting in their school. She stated:

I expect the staff to be welcoming and compassionate and to have an understanding of individual needs and the family needs of the community we serve. Our students need to feel welcomed, safe, and that they belong, especially those who are marginalized. So we try to promote a welcoming and caring school environment because that is the root. The
children need to feel safe. They need to feel valued, and I think that this is the foundation before learning can take place.

Sandra stated that it was imperative for her to make certain that all the students have a sense of belonging in their school, and she strived daily to send that message to the staff and students through the morning announcements, the monthly assemblies, and daily interactions. On a daily basis, Sandra and her staff members act as role models by showing respect to all adults and students in the school. She stated:

My board’s mantra is that “Each Belongs” and I completely believe in that. I make sure that creating a welcoming, safe, and inclusive school culture is the norm here. I believe that once the marginalized students feel comfortable, accepted, and someone takes the time to teach them the way they learn, they will be successful. So, we make sure that all children are welcomed and supported in a safe way.

Thomas highlighted the significance of creating a welcoming school environment. This was exhibited throughout all the activities that took place in the school. One of the examples he highlighted to make his point of how his school created an equitable and inclusive school culture was through the delivery of an inclusive curriculum where all students feel validated. He illustrated his point by using the example of an Asian student and his own childhood experiences. He stated:

If a teacher teaches lessons showing an interest and appreciation of other cultures’ foods, the students of that cultural background will feel validated. For example, if a child who is of an Asian background brought in sushi, they would not be embarrassed, they would be proud, as we are saying that “this is really good and I would like to try it.” Sometimes we are brought up in these areas where everyone is of the same culture and you are not
diversifying, seeing only food from the same culture. A curriculum taught from the lenses of equity and inclusiveness helps the students to develop that appreciation for similarities.

First of all, we’re not all that different, we’re quite similar, but then we can also appreciate each other’s beauty. So instead of being embarrassing or a kid being embarrassed by it, I’ve always tried to champion with them and be proud of it, be proud of who you are, because that was something that I went through as a child, that I was a little bit different from the other kids in the class because my background was not the same as theirs and I just kept quiet about it. I didn’t talk about it, but I don’t think that will help the marginalized kids. So, I tried to share that with teachers.

Helen articulated that creating a welcoming, safe, equitable, and inclusive school environment is the fibre which holds her school together. She confidently stated:

Believe it or not, I think the school is actually a very good example of how to live in a diverse society in a way that respects and appreciates all cultures, backgrounds, traditions, and religions. Within that background of Brown, Black and White, we also have a percentage of kids who are Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, and Christian backgrounds. So the children identify without a problem with their religious backgrounds as well, and we celebrate all of them.

Helen also recalled that before she came to this school there were some practices that were not equitable and inclusive that she had to get rid of. She highlighted some examples of the inequitable practices. For example, students used to be overcharged to purchase an agenda book. Although the school bought each agenda at a cost of $4, the students were charged $8.50. The students who did not have the money for a field trip, they were left behind. She explained:
So I told them that if the child cannot afford to buy the agenda for $8.50, they can get one for $5.00 and to stop overcharging, and the ones who could not afford to pay for one to give them the agenda anyway. This was a hard sell to teachers and educational assistants. They could not understand why the kids would be given free agendas. Luckily, now they are all paid for by the school, so that problem is solved, but it took a good 6 to 7 months to work this through to make them understand that you do not keep asking for the money if the kid does not have the money. The bulk of the students brought in the money anyways, and the others brought in a loonie or a toonie, and we started to realize that kids do not take advantage, parents are not taking advantage, and in most cases kids didn’t really have.

Wilma indicated that she made it very clear to her staff that none of the students should be excluded. As for the trips, teachers were asked to remind the kids to bring in the signed forms if they did not have the money, and the students were encouraged to speak to the teacher in private if they did not have the trip money. Sometimes the teachers would send the students to Wilma because their parents had asked them to talk to her about the trip money. In that case, she would just initial their forms and they were allowed to go on the trips no questions asked.

Helen also indicated that there was a practice before she came to this school that the students who did not pay, for example, when they have “Mad Science” (a science interactive program presented in schools for students from kindergarten to grade 6), they would be excluded and sent to another class because they did not have the money to pay to participate. So she stopped that practice. When they had a school dance and some children did not have a toonie for the DJ, she allowed them to participate. She stated that “I want all the students included in the activities regardless of their social economic backgrounds. Money should not be a barrier.”

Another exclusive practice which Helen had to get rid of to ensure that her school is equitable and inclusive was to integrate the special education students in the regular classrooms. She explained,

So for our special need students we changed the model to an inclusive model, so I do not have a segregated math and language facilities anymore. So the special education teachers can still work with small groups for instruction in terms of, e.g., guided reading groups, and other subject areas and it does not have to be students who are identified. The SERTs had to recognize that they do not only teach students with special learning needs but we teach all students. So, the classroom teacher has to work in partnership with the SERT to plan together to meet the learning needs of our special education students and those who are struggling academically.

Further, Helen described that diversity is a part of their school identity and it is celebrated and it is important to her that all students feel included. They adopted the philosophy of celebrating everything based on a calendar put out by her board indicating all dates with significant faith days. She explained that every day on the PA in the morning when there is a significant faith day, they announce it and talk about the significance of celebrating it. For example, at the beginning of Diwali or Ramadan or Christmas, they talk about why it is a special day for the people who celebrate that faith, and they wish them a happy celebration. She stated:

We do not indoctrinate, but we celebrate. We celebrate everything we know to celebrate, such as Eid and Eid Al Fitr. We don’t do the Mendhi, we will just share some food, for the Diwali we do a tea, and for Christmas we set up a Christmas tree. We try to validate everybody in our community’s background and their experiences and realities that they bring to the school.
Mariah explained that she paid particular attention to the pictures and images posted around the school. She made sure that the images were reflective of the students in her school. She also worked very closely with the teacher librarian to ensure that they purchase books and resources that are reflective of the student body. So when students from different backgrounds go to the learning commons, they have access to books and videos in which they feel included. She stated:

It is very easy to exclude others than it is to include them. That is what has been going on for a long, long time, and it is wrong! So, I make a conscious effort to make things right. Whenever I am purchasing pictures and posters to be displayed in the school, I make sure that they are representative of the diversity of students in my school. If you come to my school you will see a good representation of the student body. Children of various backgrounds and different physical abilities are represented. So, staff and students feel validated. I think it is very important for every student and parents to feel included and welcomed. It gives them a sense of belonging.

Finally, Natalie described that to validate students in her school who were English language learners and from various cultural backgrounds, she would invite special guests from various cultural backgrounds to talk to the students. She brought in Aboriginal storytellers and dancers to share their culture with the students. She invited a Filipino singing group to come and perform for the students and an African Canadian author to share his career and interests with the students. She believed that it is very important for the students to see people from their own cultural background being celebrated and for the students from the dominant White culture to understand that people from various cultural backgrounds are great contributors to our communities and country. She also thinks that giving students people who they can talk to in
their language is important. She stated that when she brought in people that were involved in their society that had an impact outside of the school, the students liked that because then they thought that they were giving some credit to their own background and historical roots.

**Setting High Standards**

The principals indicated that setting high standards for the students was a nonnegotiable strategy for them. Many marginalized students have been exposed to individuals from home and school who have ingrained it in their brains that they are not smart. Unfortunately, some teachers, through stereotyping and prejudice, have also had it ingrained in their brains, that students who are poor, Black, English language learners, immigrants, Aboriginals, with learning disabilities, or with behaviour problems will never do well in academics. As a result, they lower the standards and do not give the students opportunities to work to their full potential. However, the equity-minded principals believe that all children can learn if they are given the time, support, and resources they need. They make sure that their teachers understand this belief as well. Therefore, through monitoring instruction, they keep a closer look to ensure that high-standard expectations are in place and are being practiced.

Monica explained that in order to change that negative mentality,

> you put high expectations for them so you don’t just think that because they come from a background where they may be culturally diverse or economically deprived that they can’t achieve. You make sure that you are setting just as high a standard as you would for any other affluent community. If they need support to get there because they do not have the same advantages other communities may have, then you provide it for them.

Monica explained that marginalized students should be given the extra resources, such as providing a homework club where they can have a safe place to complete their homework, and
be provided with personnel to help them with completing their work. She also pointed out that she obtained tutors from her board that come and work with her students who are marginalized during school time to help close the learning gaps.

Wilma said that setting high expectations for staff and students was one of her nonnegotiable standards she sets. She recognized that the strategies she used for staff sometimes were the same as for the students. She pointed out that many of the strategies are overlapping or are in sync, whether they are for staff, students, or parents. She stated that “high expectations are something that I would have for staff, students, and parents. We need to maintain high standards so that the children can aspire to excellence. I think once we start to lower the standards, then the children are not going to set the bar high for themselves.” She believes strongly that educators need to help the marginalized students realize their potential. She thinks that if staff invests time in getting to know their children, that could be accomplished.

Sarah highlighted the fact that in her school, setting high standards for all students, marginalized students included, is the norm. She explained that “we want to make sure that for the marginalized students, the expectations are the same for them as for other students. If we don’t have high expectations for all, then we’re not going to achieve our goals and we are doing a disservice for our students.”

Helen set high expectations for staff as well as students. She believed that all students can achieve if they are given enough time and resources. She acknowledged that if the playing field is levelled for marginalized students, they are able to attain academic achievement. She explained by giving the evidence of such success she had experienced with marginalized students she had been working with over a period of time. She stated:
In the two schools I have been at, my kids have always done very well academically. In my last school where I was for 7 years, at the 5 years mark we kept making slow but steady progress with our students and ended up moving from being the 40% standardized test school to winning the Betty Stevenson Award. They did very well and moved on to university and college. I was able to track those kids because I was there for such a long time. I am still in the same area, and 10 years later a lot of my students moved on to postsecondary education. That is a direct result of the things we put in place for them. The biggest success we have when we look at the data is how well our special education students did. When they went to high school our goal was 16 out of 16, meaning that these students would achieve 16 credits by age 16 by the end of grade 10.

She indicated that all but one student achieved that goal. She was very proud to acknowledge that the success rate of the students with special learning needs was equal to the rest of the students in the main stream on the standardized tests. This was made possible because high standards were set for the students and supports were put in place to help them meet the expectations.

**Advocating for Students**

Advocating for students was one of the strategies that were highlighted. Many students face many barriers in their lives or have been through very difficult times such as wars, violence, poverty, mental health issues, parents’ separations or divorces, and so on. Others have various physical and intellectual learning disabilities. Others are having difficulty in learning due to language issues, and others are being marginalized because of their cultural backgrounds. The principals made it their personal aspiration to advocate for those students to ensure that their learning needs are being met.
Nick shared his experiences of advocating for the marginalized students by highlighting the programs they had to put in place to support the learning of their students. In the area of literacy, for example, they found that 75% of their children came to school with inadequate oral language. The data showed them that oral language is income related, and the higher the income, the higher the level of oral language. So, a lot of the kids who were coming into their school were marginalized by low income, so they saw the need to have strategies in place in order to deal with it. He advocated for the students to the board office and asked for tutors to assist the students. They addressed this issue immediately in the kindergarten years to prevent the gap from widening throughout the grades. He explained:

It’s all about closing gaps with the kids. The way that we did it at our school is through a board program where tutors were hired and worked one on one with the children to improve their oral language and pretest and posttested to make sure the kids were on track and followed up later to make sure that they stayed on track. My point is, if you set high standards for the marginalized students, make sure that you follow through with putting supports in place to assist the students in accomplishing academic achievement.

Marcus indicated that he worked very closely with parents, especially those with children who have special education needs. He wanted them to know that he has the best interest of their children. Advocating for these students was very important to him because he wanted them to achieve to the best of their abilities. He stated:

I am advocating for students all the time at the board level and with the teachers. I also work with the parents. I make sure that the parents know when they talk to me that I believe in their child, I have hope for their child, and the school has hope for their child. I make sure that I am listening to what the parent tells me about the child as well.
Wilma highlighted the importance of advocating for the marginalized students because she believed that if the principals do not advocate for them at best of times, no one else would. She explained, “For me equity is for all children, and I think it is really important to reach those marginalized children because they above all need an advocate, they need a voice where they may not have the supports through no fault of their own.”

Helen indicated that advocating for the marginalized students was part and parcel of her responsibilities. She indicated that some parents had had negative experiences with their special education children and were apprehensive to get them identified for fear that they would get banished from the school or get ostracized. So they had refused to have their kids identified. As a result, the students were not getting the help they needed to attain their academic achievement. She observed with dismay that some teachers were not taking responsibility for students with special learning needs. Helen had to advocate for these students to ensure that they got their IEP status because, without having one, they would not get the help they needed, especially when they moved on to high school. To ensure that the parents allowed their children to be identified officially, she changed the delivery model from the withdrawing model to an inclusive model, where students with IEP were fully integrated in the regular classroom. Once the parents saw that it was an inclusive model and their kids were not sent away or banished to another school, they were more accepting of the identification and the SEA (special equipment amount) equipment for students with special education needs that came with it, that is, assistive technology. Helen explained:

When you are identified, it opens up more opportunities in terms of the support for the kids. So it took a lot of working with the staff and students for them to see that. Even the SEA equipment, I had to fight with people to get them to do claims, believe it or not,
because they did not want to bother. They would say things like, “Why are we spending so much money for these kids when they are not going to use it?” I have 600 students in my school, and 85 SEA claims were put through in these three years. These are equipments and programs like Kuzwell, and Laptops, you know, depending on what the kid’s needs are.

Helen emphasized the fact that advocating for the marginalized students is crucial to ensure their academic achievement.

**Providing Resources and Other Supports**

The principals indicated that they provided resources and other supports to ensure that the marginalized students’ academic achievement needs are being met. Examples of the resources provided for the students were in forms of professional personnel such as occupational therapists, speech pathologists, social workers, English language learners’ teacher, and special education teacher, to mention just a few. They also provided the students with a variety of arts programs and various technological supports such as computers.

Providing nutrition programs and extracurricular activities were strategies that were deemed necessary by the principals to promote academic achievement for marginalized students. Many of the students came to school hungry, and in order to help them be focused on their learning, various nutrition programs are provided not only for the marginalized students but for all students who might need it that day. It is an inclusive practice so that the students do not feel singled out that they are the marginalized ones who need to be fed. Examples of these nutrition programs are: breakfast nutrition program, nutrition snack program, and lunch program. Some students also get to take food home on the weekends through the program called Food for Kids.

Another aspect addressed is providing marginalized students with opportunities for
extracurricular activities. Many of the marginalized students cannot afford to be part of the organized sports. However, their physical education component has to be addressed as it ties in well with mental health development. Therefore, the principals make every possible effort to make extracurricular activities accessible to the students in forms of sports, homework clubs, arts clubs such as music and dance, and many others.

Melissa stated she depended on various board personnel to ensure that the learning needs of marginalized students were being addressed. She outlined how that worked.

We have a lot of resource staff that we employ. We currently have an occupational therapist that is stationed at our school. We have a speech pathologist that comes three times a week. We currently have an English language learners teacher (ELL) two full days, because of the high number of immigrants who are now at our school. We have the auditory team that comes for students, the learning disability (LD) team that frequently comes to help, a full-time special education teacher, and eight full-time educational assistants to help these students. We have a full-time reading recovery and learning resource teacher to help the students. We also have after-school homework clubs that we offer to students because a lot of them are not getting the supports that they need at home.

She stated that they also provide a snack program three times a week because they noticed that some of our students were coming to school hungry and having a lot of difficulties staying focused on their work. Some used to fall asleep. Once they started to provide a snack program, they noticed a big improvement in the students’ focusing level, and their academic achievement improved tremendously.

Wilma indicated that she depended heavily on her staff that facilitates a number of programs for the students, such as the breakfast program. There was a great need for the
breakfast program because many of their students came to school hungry. Sandra, on the other hand, had several programs in place to promote the academic achievement of the students not only directly but indirectly as well. Some of the programs are as follows: breakfast and snack programs, early learning centre (day care), physical literacy, arts program, drumming circle, Summer Program, and after-school programs such as homework club and various sport teams. She explained,

Some of our kids are not eating properly, so we have a breakfast program and snack program. We have children with allergies, and we try to support them as well. So all children are welcomed and supported in a safe way. We have also been involved in the physical literacy pilot so that the children have a sense of calmness, a sense of confidence in how they move. Some of our children, especially boys, have to move more regularly in order to attend to what they are learning.

Sandra indicated that they had an early learning centre (day care) which provided child care for babies from 18 months old to 14 years of age. If children in poverty do not speak English at home, she believed that it is critical to bring them in the school setting early to engage them with supportive learning opportunities from intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual perspectives. She hopes that all those things will bring the children to a level playing field so that they can learn. During the school year, Sandra uses a variety of after-school sports and arts activities to engage the students. She highlighted some of the programs she used as follows:

We have a dance club, cheerleading, basketball skills, and hockey team. We provide all these activities to engage our students and get them to come to school. Once these kids are engaged, they do come to school, and the attendance is getting better. These sports are
done during and after school. The talent show has also been very effective in drawing in
the kids because they want to be part of it, they want to belong.

Sandra’s school not only supplied academic supports during the school year, it also
provided programs during the summer to complement the academics. She explained,

We have a focus on the youth program here in the summer to encourage the kids to
participate in physical activities. In order to give them support for their academics, we
also have to give them support for the “whole person”: the physical, the mental, the
spiritual, intellectual, social, and emotional supports.

Melissa described the various programs she has implemented or organized to ensure that
they build a good relationship with the students, parents and community partners. She
acknowledged that these programs helped the students tremendously to remain engaged in
school.

We have an after-school Y program, not only for the kids but for parents too. It is free
and it is five days a week. It’s like a free child care from 3:30–5:30 p.m. There was
nothing in this building when I got here for the kids for after school until we got the Y
programming. The Y does the summer camp. It was in our building for 3 years but
moved it last year because it was too hot as we do not have air conditioning in this
building. This year we had Y on Wheels come to provide different sports over the lunch
hour to our students in grade 6–8 (e.g., zumba and kick boxing). We also brought in the
bookmobile that comes as a stop here every Monday, not just for the kids but for the
parents and community.

Melissa also indicated that many of the students in her school have attendance issues that
prompted her to restructure their day schedule quite a few times in order to meet the learning
needs of their marginalized students. She found that she still has to restructure the day, as the attendance issues remain. She has also tried several incentives to get the students to get to school on time. She worked very closely with the public health nurse and social worker to address the attendance issues. She also has school awards/draws that are given out for any sort of acts of kindness, for example, opening the door for someone else, improved work habits such as completing their work on time. Every Friday, names of the students are drawn and awards are given to students who have been punctual and who came to school every day. She explained:

We went from a traditional day to a balanced day the second year I was here because the kids were out at lunch for an hour wandering around the neighborhood. We did not really like that. We have two 40-minute breaks now, and students can, if they wish, go home at second nutrition break, but at least it is short, it is just 40 minutes. We also changed our day where the bulk of the learning is in the first two instructional blocks, not that phys. ed., music, and all those things are not important, but we have scheduled math and language in the first two blocks of instruction. However, we are changing it again because we have many students who have issues with punctuality, coming late. For next year, another strategy we will be using is to have a shorter block in the morning and have the one 20-minute block midday when most of the students will be in the school at that time.

Melissa acknowledged that recognizing and celebrating students’ achievement helps promote their academic achievement. Since she introduced the idea of awards, she has noticed a substantial improvement in students’ academic achievement. She explained:

We have a monthly awards assembly, they never had one before I came here, where we recognize their achievement through the students’ monthly awards. For our grade 6, 7,
and 8 students who have achieved excellent or good on their learning skills and plus academic achievement, anything 75% and above, we invite them and their parents to a wonderful buffet breakfast right after each report card is given. The gym is crowded with kids and parents. They want to be invited to this Breakfast of Champions. This really motivates the kids.

Melissa pointed out that no one talked to many of the marginalized students about how to go on past high school. So in order to fill this gap, she encouraged her middle school teachers to talk to students about high school and beyond high school. She also encouraged them to explain to students the purpose and relevancy of what they were teaching and why the students had to learn it. That way the students would have a clear picture of where it leads them or what could be happening for them if they do well academically. She believes that it is important for the students to see the future possibilities.

George explained how they teach the students about leadership skills using *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey. He stated:

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Teach students to set goals and learn how to monitor them. Teach them the effective tools, such as how to use the agenda book correctly and effectively to help them to be better organized . . . If the Ministry is telling us that the learning skills are the most vital—well our students have what are called leadership data binders, where they track their own personal and academic goals.
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George explained that each student in their school has a binder which has all the learning skills listed. In September, each student sets the goal they want to achieve in each category. They list the strategies that will help them to achieve that goal. For example, a child might set a goal to get excellent in the responsibility category. The child will then list the strategy necessary for
him/her to achieve that goal. One of the strategies could be as follows: I will complete my work and hand it in on time. So, at school the staff is showing the students how important that it is to set goals and strive to achieve them. The students are made accountable for their learning, but they are also aware that the staff is always there for them to help them monitor their growth and to give them the support they need to achieve their academic goals.

Helen highlighted the fact that she needed to change the delivery model of special education and ELL students to an inclusive model in order to support their learning needs. This meant that the students did not have to be in segregated math and language facilities anymore. The special education teachers and English language learners’ teacher went to the classroom to work with the students. She indicated that their main focus was on the older students who are identified as stage 1 and 2 by the Ministry of Education. They mainly focused on these students because Helen was quite aware that the older they are, the more they are at risk until they acquire the language they need. She explained further:

In the daily timetable, I schedule a drop-in hour at the end of the day when the kids come to the ELL or special education teachers to work with them individually. The ELL teacher also works with the classroom teachers to help them with differentiating their instruction to accommodate the ELL student, for example by giving them graphics, survival language, and showing them how the stages look like. Once they start to acquire the language, unless there are academic concerns, we find that they do well academically.

Helen pointed out that many of the students came to school hungry and there was a great need to feed the children first before any academics could be addressed. Therefore, now the school runs breakfast, lunch, and snack programs. Once the food issue was under control, Helen realized through observing the students that a homework club was much needed to support the
marginalized students in her school. Although her school finished at 3:15 p.m., she noticed that some students were still hanging around by the time she was leaving school at around 5:00 p.m. After talking to the children, she realized that they did not want to go home as their parents were still at work. There was a time gap between the time school ended and up to around 4:30 p.m. when the kids would be alone at home. Helen explained:

I saw a great need of introducing a homework club. Parents can apply to have their children come to the homework club. We run it Monday to Friday from 3:15 p.m.–4:30 p.m. I staggered the EA schedule so that they get to work for 1 hour after the bell, and on alternative Fridays we run a movie night. We purchased the movie licence and we run a movie night for kids who could pay just to cover the cost of the licence, and if they cannot pay, they come anyway. So the kids feel like they are watching a movie, and it goes until 5:30 p.m. So the parents have an opportunity to go do their shopping because they do not have money to pay for babysitting. We ask the students to sign up ahead of time to make sure we make arrangements for enough supervision. I get up to anywhere from 75-120 kids.

Helen pointed out that those opportunities given to students provide the parents with extra time for them to go shopping and buy groceries while the kids get the supervision they need. It helps out the kids because, when they go home, their parents are back from work and, if not, they do not have much time to wait before their parents come home.

Helen also indicated that summer learning for marginalized students is a key component of promoting their academic achievement. She pointed out that some of her students go to a summer institute, which is a 6-weeks program and focuses on literacy and numeracy. The program also has a recreational component. Although there is some fee charged to the children to
attend, the children who cannot pay are identified by their home school principal and they are given bursaries so they do not have to pay. She indicated that the kids really need it and it supports equity and inclusivity. Providing such opportunities to the marginalized children levels the playing field for students who are not able to pay the way some others can.

Steven indicated that not only do they have several support resources in place for the marginalized students to support their academic achievement, they also have a range of sports programs to supplement their physical development. All these activities are geared to promote student engagement and to get the students to like coming to school. He pointed out that he met regularly with his staff to monitor how students were progressing and which students still needed support. It is hoped that these efforts will improve the students’ attendance. He stated:

We have a full-time reading recovery teacher. We have tutors in the classroom specifically for literacy and math. We have our identification of level one and two students in kindergarten, in grade 1, and in grade 2 who receive extra help from our educational assistants through a computer program called Success Maker. We want them to come to school, and we want them to stay in school. For example, we have intramural sports that run throughout the year which teachers organize. We have a midmorning snack nutrition program, a homework club where we offer a grain product, a cheese product, and a fruit product daily to our kids should they want it. We serve about 100 kids. We hope that when their bellies are full they can concentrate better.

Nick’s situation was a bit different. He indicated that it was next to impossible to provide after-school extracurricular activities/sports for his marginalized students because the majority of them were bussed to school, and to curb that problem he looked for community partners to partner with to help him out. He explained that many of the marginalized students do not have
opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities because many of these activities, such as various sports, cost a lot of money they cannot afford. He stated:

I partnered up with a city program called Y on Wheels. The physical education instructors come to school during lunch recess and do various physical activities with the students. I also provide nutrition snacks three times a week to any students who need it. I believe that if we provide physical activities and nutrition to our marginalized students, we provide them with opportunities to be more engaged in school, have better concentration, and that would boost their academic achievement. I also ensure that the students are provided with tutoring to try to close those learning gaps.

Monica described that one form of resources she provided for the marginalized students was buying the school reading materials that were reflective of the students’ diversity. She stated that this was important to her because she wanted the students to feel included when they see themselves reflected in the curriculum. She explained:

For our library we basically revamped all of the stuff that was old and we went to bookstores to buy multicultural resources. Teachers were able to choose from a very diverse range of resources, and they were actually excited about it. I encourage, even at a grade 7 and 8 level, picture books, because a lot of times kids really get a better sense of enjoying different cultural resources when they can see pictures, and again, novels that are very diverse. So definitely in terms of the resources in the library, the books and films are reflective of the diverse backgrounds we have in our school.

Sarah pointed out that the strategies as outlined in Learning for All and other Ministry documents to use for special needs students, are also the best strategies for the rest of the class to promote academic achievement. So she encouraged her teachers to look at it from that point of
view and support the students that way. She also used co-op students, teacher candidates, and volunteers to support the students and teachers in the classrooms. Those strategies help to promote academic achievement for marginalized students. She explained:

We have an ELL teacher who comes in to support the students. For the ELL students, we make sure that they have a buddy, and the teacher monitors that closely so that if they have any concerns or questions they can talk to them. Sometimes teachers pair up the student with another student in the class who speaks the same language. This is good, especially for the first few weeks and months, so that they can help them, working on their English, especially in the social setting, on recess or any of the breaks, to give them some of the language skills they’re going to need to negotiate friendships and things like that. It is very helpful to the child if someone else in the classroom does speak their language so that they can answer maybe some of their pertinent questions.

Sarah added that for the students who are marginalized because they are poor, they have strategies in place to help them out. She described that in her board any child cannot be denied any trip or any sort of extracurricular activity because they can’t afford it. Although it’s a sensitive conversation, the principal or teachers talk to the parents to see how they can support them. The principal or classroom teacher sends the note home with the child so that the parent can sign the form and return it in an envelope. This is done secretly so that none of the other children are aware that this kind of support is taking place for that child.

**Providing Opportunities for Leadership and Student Voice**

Many principals identified providing leadership opportunities and student voice as one of the strategies they use to promote academic achievement for the marginalized students. This is mostly accomplished through student councils. They survey the students to get a clear idea as to
the climate of the school. Is the school safe, welcoming, equitable, and inclusive? They use the information provided by the students to improve the school’s climate. Leadership is demonstrated by students being mentors of each other, peer mediation, and leading morning prayers and announcements and throughout the day. Also students are recognized for their achievements through monthly awards assemblies where students are given opportunities to present skits, songs, and so on that may reflect a particular message that they are trying to bring across, for example, of kindness, bullying, and so on.

Melissa stated that through treating students with respect, they have seen a big improvement in the students’ behaviour. When she first came to the school she noticed that the relationship between the staff and students was very strained. The behaviour issues she had to deal with on a regular basis were frightening. The students did not exhibit any sense of belonging. As Melissa puts it, “it was kind of an us and them mentality,” but that attitude is gone now because over the years they have provided kids with a lot of leadership opportunities. She explained:

We have listened to them and what’s important to them. So we have kids involved in all kinds of things now. They are helping run the French Cafe, we had some students take on a leadership role in fundraising for their year-end trip the grade 8s did. We had office helpers, announcement crew, and “Me to We,” and we have a mentoring EA that works with boys in each of the grade 7, 8 classes. We had Master Chef Sunnyside, and they picked a dish that they cooked throughout the year, and it was just like Master Chef. There were six of them on a team and they planned it, cooked it, and presented it, and we got a chance to taste it and judge them, and it was amazing; that would have never happened 5 years ago. One of the grade 8 boys stepped up and said, “before we say
anything I want to thank Mrs. Vayalmuka (pseudonym) for all the support she has given us.”

Melissa thinks that it is a mutual respect for each other that they have developed. She thinks that this relationship has made a huge impact in creating a positive school climate, which has in turn affected the increased academic achievement at the school. She indicated that her suspension rates have dropped to a record low, the numbers of students being sent to the office have declined, and their EQAO scores have increased substantially to the point where they received an award to recognize their achievement. She also noted that the majority of her intermediate students achieve an average of over 75% on their report cards, something that had not been accomplished here before.

Wilma also indicated that, through providing a variety of programs in the school, she was able to provide opportunities for student leadership and student voice. She asked the students, through surveys and a suggestion box, to give her some feedback as to what they wanted to see happening at school. Also, through student school council, Wilma was able to gather the information and discuss it with them to strategize how they can promote student leadership and voice. Now they have several programs in place to do just that. It is not the students who have the highest academics or students who are popular, but all students are welcomed, trained, and involved. They promote and develop children’s talent and skills through the various programs made accessible to students. The students are given a voice and opinion regarding what is happening in their school. She pointed out:

I promote student voice, and promote student leadership through different programs, for example, peer mentoring, juniors and intermediates are trained to be lead recess leaders, and student council are involved in the assessment of the school climate. I gave them an
opportunity to give me some feedback about the celebrations and where they think the
gaps are of what they think our school should be like. I then challenged them to go into
their peer community. So they did some discussions at the class level and then gave me
some feedback. So I think this is critical for academic achievement.

Wilma believes that this is an area where they can reach the marginalized students who
do not have a voice in their homes or do not have advocates. It gives them an opportunity to be
involved in leadership at the school level. They learn skills that they can transfer to other areas of
their academics such as setting goals, being organized, articulating their needs, meeting
deadlines, working in a team environment, sharing ideas with others, being creative, and
advocating for oneself. They also develop self-confidence that positively impacts their learning.

Thomas explained that as a leader he likes to lead from the periphery. He stated, “I don’t
like to lead from the front, and what I mean by that is that I like to develop the leadership skills
in my teachers and students.” He elaborated on the various opportunities the students had for
leadership and student voice such as leading everything from announcements to the morning
prayers. The students run and organize the intramurals for the younger kids. Thomas’s school is
new, and he used this as an opportunity to create a welcoming attitude by using student
leadership. They created a system of using team colours or houses where the older students
support the young ones. It is a buddy system which fosters appreciation for one another. The
older students take on the responsibilities of ensuring the well-being of the young ones, and the
young ones feel that they are safe. He explained:

Since we are a brand new school, we have had to build a community which is welcoming
and promotes a sense of well-being. We separated students into four teams, purple, green,
magenta, and brown, with the older kids supporting the younger kids, from grade 6 all the
way to kindergarten. We have intramural activities. Anytime the students participate, their team gains points. So if we have 11 grade 3 students participating in outdoor soccer, they will get 11 points for their team. So it has nothing to do with winning, it has nothing to do with who is better, it has to do with participation, and that fosters teamwork and it fosters appreciation for one another. We are trying to embed a welcoming attitude.

Thomas thinks that it is important to develop trustworthy relationships between the young students and the older ones because the kids feel a lot safer and you empower the older kids to be leaders in their school by having them help the younger kids. This creates a safe and welcoming school culture where students are comfortable to learn. They feel safe and are engaged in their learning rather than being worried about being bullied by the older kids. The older kids also feel good about themselves, so they can focus on their studies without distractions.

Helen indicated that through the student council, students are given opportunities for leadership and student voice. She stated that:

Students lead our morning announcements and are major contributors by giving me ideas of how I can improve the school or what types of extracurricular activities they would prefer to have in the school. Some older students in grades 7 and 8 plan and run the intramurals, with of course the supervision of teachers. Through the student council, the students present issues that they want to have addressed.

George explained that, besides the student school council, his students have many other opportunities for leadership and student voice. He stated that “our students are taught about the Leader in Me: The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. We have found that when the students learn the 7 Habits and start to apply them in their daily lives, their academic achievement has
been impacted in a very positive way. We have seen great academic gains from our marginalized students.

Monica added that she encouraged marginalized students to take active participation in the leadership opportunities given at school. She believed that it helps them to want to achieve, to improve themselves, and become more confident. She pointed out that “if they are not included, they kind of withdraw and just think it’s not for them. You want them to get a really good sense that they matter and that they fit in and their voices matter.” Monica believes that the school becomes a place of refuge for the students as opposed to a place from which they just want to escape. She pointed out that, if the students are going to do well academically, we certainly want them to be in school.

Collaboration With Community Partners

Finally, the principals pointed out that collaboration with community partners is a very important strategy they used to help with promoting the academic achievement of their marginalized students. They collaborated with various organizations such as Taste Buds, Food for Kids, Sears, Home Depot, Staples, YMCA, Police, Rotary Club, Kids Cops and Computers, and Credit Unions, to mention just a few. Through those community partners, the principals are able to support the learning needs of the marginalized students, thus levelling the playing field for them.

Steven identified several programs that are made available to the students. His school collaborated with community partners on a large scale, and all the programs provided to the students are free. He explained that it takes some leg work and advocating for the students to get these programs in place. These partnerships that have been established provide a safe place for the children to stay before and after school. The homework help and other programs offered are
very beneficial, and they contribute a great deal to the marginalized students’ well-being and academic achievement. He stated:

We have a Y on wheels program run daily by YMCA members from 4:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. offered to students from grades 1 to 6. The students are offered free homework, craft activities, physical education, and snacks. A number of our students are involved in the Oxford community center, which is offered daily from 3:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. and is absolutely free. It also provides homework help, tutoring, crafts, snacks, physical education, and swimming. One of the local churches sponsors free before-and after-school day care for children in kindergarten to grade 5. The kids are dropped off at the local church by their parents/guardians at 7:30 a.m. We have a worker who in the morning walks the kids at 8:15 a.m. from the local church to our school and then after school at 3:00 p.m. walks them back to the local church. They are there till 6:00 at night.

Steven acknowledged that at the school they also have a breakfast club from 7:30 a.m. till 8:30 a.m., and it is open to all students from surrounding areas regardless of whether they are Catholic or from the public school. He stated, “It’s free and it’s a full breakfast: cereal, eggs, toast, and meats. So it’s well balanced, and there’s a variety of fruit and dairy products on a daily basis. We serve about 100 students daily.” Since students in his school do not have opportunities to play organized sports, he also partnered up with local sports organizations to offer sports such as hockey and basketball for specified periods of time, say 6 to 8 weeks, to the students. He stated that “these activities are very good for our marginalized students. It helps to develop their self-worth, thus promoting their mental well-being, which impacts their academic achievement. They focus better in school and develop a sense of belonging.”
Helen pointed out that she made it her priority to take the time to connect with several community partners because she knows that the marginalized students in her school can use the assistance the community partners give them. She has partnerships with Sears, Home Depot, and Staples. They give the school knapsacks and supplies for the kids. So at the beginning of the year, they have the supplies for the children who need them. She also partnered with the Rotary Club, which donates a lot of food for their breakfast and lunch programs. She collaborates with several other community partners to facilitate some of the functions that take place at the school, such as their fall and spring galas. She explained:

We engage our community partners, like our high schools, Catholic and public. Police officers are always involved; the kids get to see the police officer as a friend and a resource, not something to be afraid of, and provides an opportunity for the community to get to know them. All of this costs me very little money. All you have to do is take the time and speak to your community partners like the Rotary Club, and take the time to go to places like Food for Learning and ask for the grants, because the money is there. It takes 5–10 minutes of your time. Some of my colleagues will say to me, “I do not have time to do that,” and I say to them, “How do you really expect children to learn when they are hungry!” If we talk of levelling the playing field for our students, no child is going to learn if he or she is hungry, because they are sitting and their stomachs are growling and they are passing out, falling asleep, and we have seen this. So if we feed them, that is half of the battle!

Marcus indicated that he involved members of the community by inviting them to come in to talk to students and staff. He explained:
We have a lot of members of the Aboriginal community, elders coming to meet with staff and work with the students. It is specific to which your children are. So when I was a principal in another board, I had representatives from different communities come in and work with children and work with staff.

Sandra added that “in order to promote academic achievement for our students we have a drumming circle for our children with Aboriginal heritage. Some community partners come and help us with the drumming circle. The children are learning about their dance and song and storytelling.” She explained that the academic achievement for the marginalized students is also promoted through the arts which are facilitated by their community partners. She stated:

Children have been involved in learning about musical instruments since grade 1, and in grade 2 they get to choose an instrument. Instructors come and teach them how to play the instrument. So we have: keyboards, violins, guitars, and flutes, and children are learning to use these instruments here. The music lessons are given by the music instructors from our community partners during the school day, and the students take the instruments home to practice. The instruments are collected at the end of the school year to have them tuned and have them ready for September. Again, giving the children an opportunity to express themselves through the arts is amazing for our kids. Otherwise they would not have had an opportunity to play a musical instrument. So, this is another opportunity for the kids to indirectly promote their academic achievement.

Sandra also indicated that she partnered with her local university to assist with the students’ academic achievement. She explained:

Making partnerships with universities near our community is one way to find advocacy for our community and our children’s academics. Engaging our students with nearby
colleges so that our kids go to see the pathways programs, the trades program, engaging in those experiences helps us bridge the barriers of challenges. Usually our families do not have access to these experiences. So when we expose it to them and invite them to take part of it, then we break down the barriers for them.

Helen noted that providing affordable child care for the marginalized students in her school was a very much needed service, as many of them were going to empty homes after school because their parents were still at work. She explained:

I partnered with the Boys and Girls Club last year. They come Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. They do not come on Fridays because I cannot have them for five days since they do not charge the kids and they are there until 6:00 o’clock. So if parents work later than 4:30 p.m., they ask us to identify those kids who need it the most. So we give them a list of kids and those are the first ones they take who we know need to be in the program and for social and emotional reasons or who do not have supervision or that they cannot afford to put them in clubs. Boys and Girls Club are really good. They do team sports, homework clubs, give them a snack, and two or three times a year they get tickets for the Blue Jays/Raptors games and get a bus and take them to the games. They get funded from the United Way and organizations like that, so it is all free for the kids.

Nick acknowledged that collaborating with community partners has served his marginalized students very well, as a lot of the activities did not come out of Ministry of Education funding. He indicated that poverty is not an education issue, it is a community issue, and he believes that it is important that the community be involved in the solution. He explained:
One of the key strategies that we use to employ to ensure all these programs and services are going to actually occur in the school is forming community partnerships. Through community partners we are able to offer our students classic music concerts, visual arts experiences, and dance programs combined with physical activity classes. We are able to provide a nutrition snack program three days a week funded by our community partners like Taste Buds and Teachers’ Credit Union. We also partnered up with “Food for Kids” a charitable organization which provides food for our marginalized students so that they can have food to eat over the weekend. The food is delivered to the school on Friday and we discretely give it to the students because we try to protect the students’ dignity so other students do not know about it. All these programs are put in place in our efforts to support the marginalized students’ well-being, thus, their academic achievement.

Nick pointed out that currently there is a lot of focus on technology tools for students. However, he has concerns regarding the inaccessibility of technology to the marginalized students. He saw it as a factor that can widen the achievement gap for the marginalized students who do not have access to technology at home. He believed there is more to having access to technology for marginalized students. He saw it as being about social justice and fair opportunity. He highlighted his concerns that if the marginalized students do not have the opportunities of having readily the technology tools their peers from middle and upper middle income families have, we could be recreating the Matthew effect, where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. He believed that he had a moral obligation to find community partners he can collaborate with to make it accessible for those students. He found a charitable organization that can sell refurbished computers to the families at a very affordable price. If they could not afford to buy one, they would lend them the computer to use at home during the school year. He stated:
In general, I have a huge concern with technology. People see it as moving students forward, and technology is wonderful, but when the children cannot access technology at home, or the most current technology there is, all it does is increase the diversity gap, the income gap, and again, instead of bringing students closer and levelling the playing field, it serves to divide students within the school community. So it’s very important that the school has an ability to make sure that all the kids in the community and families are being served through adequate technology and equal access to that technology.

Monica felt the same way about the inaccessibility of technology to marginalized students. In order to curb the problem, she partnered up with community partners. She explained:

I partnered with a program called Kids Cops and Computers this year, and we were able to get 18 personal computers for students. Kids Cops and Computers were able to get kids to have their own computers or a laptop.

She explained that although students had to do stuff such as attending leadership sessions, the program was well worth it. There was also a little award ceremony where the computers were conferred on them. She stated that such programs help to level the playing field for these students.

**Parent Strategies**

The principals identified three main strategies they used with parents to promote academic achievement for the marginalized students in their schools. They were as follows: (a) creating a welcoming and inclusive school culture that promotes parental engagement, (b) working collaboratively with school council, and (c) advocating for marginalized parents and listening to their voices.
Creating a welcoming and inclusive school culture which promotes parental engagement was a forefront strategy used by principals for the parents. The principals knew that many of these parents are not very comfortable with the school system. Some have had bad experiences they had to go through as children during their school years. Some might think that because they did not do well in school, then their children will not do well too. Some others just cannot make it to school activities because they are working several jobs. So the principals created a welcoming and inclusive school culture where all the parents would feel included. The principals found different opportunities to invite the parents to come to school by hosting a variety of activities, such as parent/teacher BBQ nights, fall and spring galas, and various other celebrations.

The principals highlighted working collaboratively with school council as one of the strategies they used to promote the academic achievement of not only the marginalized students but all students. Through the school council, they managed to get funding for buying extra books for students to take home daily to improve their reading skills, to pay for trips for marginalized students who would not otherwise be able to participate, to bring in guest speakers addressing some need the parents might have such as raising resilient children, cooking healthy and economical meals for their families, navigating the internet and cyber-bullying, and so on. Through the school council, many of the school council members work as volunteers at the school, helping out with the nutrition programs, reading to students who are struggling, and working with students on math computer programs such as Success Maker. Again, this gives the principals an avenue to help close the achievement gaps of marginalized students.

Principals indicated that advocating for marginalized parents and listening to their voices was a strategy they used to reach out to the parents. Many of the parents are not very comfortable
with how the school system works because some of them are new in the country, some have language barriers, some did not have a positive school experience during their own school years, and some cannot afford to get enough food or school supplies or clothing for their children, and others are working several jobs to make ends meet. As a result, they do not want to or have no time to get involved in the school. The principals emphasized the fact that in this case they have to be their advocates in getting them into various programs to assist them and their children and to keep giving them hope for themselves and their children. They also teach them how to advocate for themselves and for their children. They believe in the saying which goes like this: “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” They listen to the concerns of the parents because in many cases their voices are not represented, and they help them out as best as they can.

Creating a Welcoming, and Inclusive School Culture that Promotes Parental Engagement

Several principals identified that one of the strategies they used with parents was to ensure that they created a welcoming and inclusive school environment that supported parental engagement. They stated that this was a vital component in making sure that the parents felt comfortable to come to school and be involved in their children’s school life.

Monica explained that some parents may not have a major comfort level with the school system, especially if they are not Canadian and comfortable with English. They may not feel comfortable coming in and relating to educators. Others may have had negative experiences during their school years.

Therefore you have to bridge that gap by making them feel welcome, and not looking . . . a lot of times educators think that “they don’t care.” So I make sure that we create a welcoming and inclusive school environment. When the parents come in they can see
several welcoming signs written in various languages. I also make sure that I display pictures and posters that are reflective of our diverse school population. So they feel included in the school community.

Henry indicated that one strategy he used to make parents welcomed and included was through communicating with them to keep them well informed about what was going on at school. He used a variety of communication methods such as newsletters, emails, phone calls, and posters. Since his school community is quite a diverse base, on their cultural backgrounds and languages they speak, he now has the newsletter accessible electronically. He stated:

I have moved my newsletter from a paper copy to an electronic copy to try to promote the idea that if you speak in a different language, then you would hit the drop-down box, choose your language, and that would translate the newsletter into your language you can read. That’s an equity piece. The other one is when you walk into the main foyer, there is a welcome poster that the board has put out that says welcome in all the different languages that we have. That’s the first thing one sees when they come into the school. I want all parents to feel included.

One of the strategies Helen used to make parents feel welcomed and included was derived from a parents’ survey she sent out to see what parents were interested in. She also invited the parents to come to have tea with her—Tea with the Principal.” The purpose of this was to find out how they can help the parents in their school community. She indicated that she believed in the research which tells us that “if you engage the parents, you engage the kids.” If parents could learn along with their children, then that would be half the battle. They could have them engaged and work in partnership, and that would engage the kids too. She partnered with Continuing Education to facilitate adult classes at her school. Helen explained:
We had about 20 parents, all moms, and a lot of them single moms, and what we found out about our community is that most of our moms who are recent immigrants were living isolated, because they were alone and did not know how to access the services. So we brought in people from our Reception Centre, people who could speak their language. We asked them to translate information in that language for us, and what they asked for was to have adult classes offered to them at the school where their children attended school. So when they drop off their kids for school and then attend school themselves, it would be easier, rather than dropping off the kids in the morning and going home and staying home isolated all day.

Helen went on further to elaborate on how this inclusive practice has played out. She explained:

So by November of 2013, we had our classes up and running when we partnered with Continuing Education. We started an English class which was offered for 3 hours for five days a week in the morning, and we did the same in the afternoon. So if they could not come in the morning, they could come in the afternoon and pick up their children at the end of the day. The morning class started when the kids got dropped off, and the afternoon class ended when school ended.

Helen stated that from the school survey they also learned that another set of parents, who were first generation immigrants and were single mothers, did not graduate from high school. They wanted to graduate because they could not get a job without their high school diploma. Helen added:

So we introduced the GED, which is the equivalence to the high school diploma program. They get credits towards obtaining their high school diploma equivalence. That started
after Christmas of 2013, when we partnered up with Adult Education. They come in Monday to Thursday, and hopefully they will be able to graduate soon and get their equivalence. The computers are also open to people in the community as well. They also told us that they wanted programs such as cooking on a budget, so we brought in a chef after school.

At Helen’s school they hold a variety of school functions to make the parents feel welcome and included. One of the functions she highlighted was the gala, which is held twice a year, in fall and spring. All the parents and their kids get dressed up and get to come into the school and have a wonderful dinner. She highlighted how the gala brings the community together.

We decorate the gym, the parent volunteers get in touch with businesses in the community and they donate all these things, and it certainly feels like you are sitting in the middle of this elaborate dinner hall. The only way you know it is a gym is because it is not air conditioned. We charge $5 per family just to cover the cost of the food. Our students do some performances, or we get some other volunteers to do some entertainment, or a band will play, so it really promotes a community feeling, and a very inexpensive community feeling. This is the third year we have been doing this gala, and it speaks to that whole community of feeling welcomed and included in your school. Some food is donated; parents volunteer to make the food—one parent made sushi on the spot—it was vegetarian because we have fish allergy in the school. Some parents donate samosas, chapattis, loti, prosciuttos, and several other varieties of foods. Different cultures donate some food. It is really a great way to celebrate our diversity and cultures.

The parents sign up with the committee to state what and how much food they will
bring/donate. A lot of them feel that it is their way of giving back, giving something in return to the school. It is really a great feeling. I don’t know how to describe it.

Nick explained that he has used a variety of parents’ sessions such as a welcome back barbeque, curriculum evenings, and the sessions that were specifically geared to an interest of parents. He explained that “it could be of interest to the immigrant community in particular to put it out there to the community, to invite the parents to come and get involved and have a voice. It might look like getting parents who might not normally be involved in school council work.”

Wilma acknowledged that in order for the parents to be involved in the school, in the learning of their children, they have to feel welcomed and included. The activities have to be nonthreatening and inviting to the parents. She observed that many parents were engaged especially if the activity was being facilitated by their children. She highlighted some of the activities that engaged their parents.

I have tried to engage the parents through various activities. This year we had a Wellness Summit Evening run by the students. Parents were invited to come with the students to be part of the training circuit. The training was provided by the students and community stakeholders, e.g., public health nurses. We had a good turnout. I find if you present the activities in a nonthreatening way and children are involved, many parents come if there are opportunities for their children to be involved. Some parents get intimidated when we take it from the approach of the curriculum. If you are just giving out data and information, not all parents will come; it is not their comfort zone. So I find that the draw is usually having them participate in something that involves their children, because they want to be there to see what their children are doing.
Wilma further explained:

This year we changed the format of our opening welcome night; the tradition has been very informal, you come in and BBQ something of that nature, but I wanted to stretch the limit a little bit. So I proposed, and it went very, very, well. We turned open house into our very first Curriculum Fair. So very early in the year we highlighted all the work that was happening in school. We did some displays and had students presenting their work at various stations, and I found that a nice nonthreatening way for parents to come in and see all the good things that are already happening by the beginning of year. By October we had some beautiful curriculum-related artifacts on display for parents to see the progress their children were making in school. They did not have to wait for parent–teacher interviews to find out how their children were doing in school. I think it is important for them to see the progress of what the students are making and their growth and demonstration is in the work and not in so much in the report card all the time...The presentations were a combined effort of the students, staff, and community stakeholders.

**Working Collaboratively With School Council**

The principals highlighted working collaboratively with school councils as one of the strategies they used to promote the academic achievement of not only the marginalized students but all students. Many of them were successful to this end, while a few had some bumps working with their school councils to improve student academic achievement. Through the school councils, the principals managed to get funding for buying extra books for students to take home daily to improve their reading skills, to pay for trips for marginalized students who would not otherwise be able to participate, to bring in guest speakers addressing some need the parents might have such as raising resilient children, cooking healthy and economical meals for their
families, navigating the internet and cyber-bullying, and so on. Through the school council, many of the school council members work as volunteers at the school, helping out with the nutrition programs, reading to students who are struggling, and working with students on math computer programs, such as Success Maker. Again, this gives the principals an avenue to help close the achievement gaps of marginalized students.

Thomas explained:

The parents are here all the time, which I appreciate. At the parent council meeting nights, we have up to 60 parents attending. Our council has 14 strong individuals including the teachers. The parents are very involved and attend many of the functions provided at the school, such as monthly assemblies, stations of the cross, and mother’s day craft. For example, when the classes did a mother’s day craft or activity or tea, we had about 95% parent participation. So parents’ school council support anything that I want to do to support the kids. I share with them about the kids that are marginalized and how we want to make everybody feel like they belong. I get their support and we move forward, e.g., supporting economically marginalized kids, or bringing in a cultural speaker to support the kids, or buying resources in which kids are going to see themselves in.

Thomas explained that his parents’ school council supported buying the culturally relevant materials to support all students and ensure that all their students feel that they belong and are valued. He took me to the learning commons and showed me how the various inclusive materials were displayed for easier access to all staff and students.

Mariah pointed out that the Catholic school council supported the students through various monetary undertakings and volunteering their time towards various school functions and
academic-related initiatives. They encourage parents to use their expertise, time, and energies to help the students of the school. In doing so, Mariah manages to address the needs of marginalized students in her school. She explained:

   Each year when we meet with the Catholic school council, they ask us for our areas of need. If we notice that our need is to boost the literacy scores of our students, they will also support that. For example, they have purchased books for classrooms, books for our book room, and they have run book drives for students as well. So they try to support us financially as well, and they try to volunteer within the school quite a bit. For example, our nutrition program currently has about 12 parents who come in to volunteer each week or each day. So through the school council, we also have parent volunteers who come in and read with students and volunteer in the classrooms. We have one parent volunteer who is very proficient on the computers working with primary students on the Success Maker math computer program.

   Melissa’s take on the school council was through the lens of parental engagement. She used the parental voices through the school council to come up with a variety of strategies that will promote parental engagement within the school. She explained:

   We also try to engage the parents through the school council to find out what they want. We bring in guest speakers. For example, they wanted to learn about how to prepare healthy, economic meals. We partnered up with a church next door and brought in a dietician for four weeks, and the attendance increased with each session. Activities such as these nutrition sessions allow the parents who would not usually come into the building to come in and engage with the school.
Sandra highlighted the fact that the parents are their partners in promoting the academic achievement of marginalized students. They want what is best for their kids and for their kids to have a voice. So the parents are very supportive of whatever initiatives the kids want to be involved in. She explained:

Parents are our number one partners. In our community, it is a partnership between home, school, and parish. Through the Catholic school council, the parents lead us in the areas they want to go forward with and get their voices heard. A good example is when the Catholic school council planned a math night where a variety of math games were played e.g., cards, math games on smart boards, board games, and active games where the students played with their families. This was to support the math curriculum and engage students and encourage them to take risks. The games provided many opportunities for problem-solving skills. The grade 7 students were the leaders of the evening.

Wilma recognized that working collaboratively with the school council pays its dividends when promoting the academic achievement of marginalized students. She communicates clearly to the school council, addressing the areas of students’ academic achievement, the strengths, and where the gaps were. She explained:

We meet regularly with the Catholic school council and maintain open communication with our parents. I always report to the parents about the celebrations and the EQAO data. We work with the school council to determine the needs of the school. Sometimes they offer insights about the needs of the school. I often invite staff to dialogue with parents to see if there are shortcomings in our resources the school council might support through fundraising. They are also very understanding that I have very complex ideas of social economic reality. They will support when I need to supplement the academic
resources and the library resources. They have been very generous in supporting children in terms of extracurricular activities. We allocate some of our fundraising money to some families that would otherwise be unable to participate in extracurricular activities.

Nick also hailed the collaborative relationship between the school and their school council. He stated that, “through the funds donated by our school council, we have been able to purchase smart boards for all our classes. These smart boards do not only benefit the marginalized students but benefits all students.”

Marcus, although he recognized the importance of the collaborative nature between the school and school council, indicated that usually the marginalized parents’ voices are absent from the school council. So Marcus encouraged the principals to see beyond those who are represented on the school council and to find ways to ensure that the voices of the marginalized students’ parents are represented and listened to as well. He also indicated that in many schools he has been at, it had been usually the same parents who are on the school council year in and year out. This sometimes discourages other parents from joining the council as they feel intimidated by the ones who seem to know so much about running the councils. He explained:

Parents need to have their voice heard, especially those from the marginalized communities, because they do not tend to be on the parents’ councils. You can have, let’s say, at a school of 200 and have five parents on parents’ council where they were voted on election. Sometimes, they are just acclaimed. You can say that I am a democratic principal. No! That is weak democracy. Democracy and equity are not always in the same bed, because if I am a democratic principal and encounter any issues of inequity, I am going to find out whose voice is not being heard, who is marginalized in the community, and just that they are not on the parents’ council, and did not get voted in, does not mean
that your school has an equity focus. People think that democracy and equity are words that are aligned, but they are not. In many schools, democratic structure in terms of parent involvement allows us to ignore issues of equity. We could be saying to ourselves such things like—Well you know what, parents did not show up to the meeting, if they were interested, they would show up. So that allows me to feel good about myself. Ah . . . I am such a good principal. Hey . . . whoever wants to be here shows up. Now I can ignore issues of equity because I am democratic and democratic and equity to me is similar. But it is not, it is completely different.

Although Grace wanted to collaborate with the school council, she indicated that she ran into some difficulties to get them to support her when it came to supporting the learning needs of marginalized students. She stated:

In my case, I have found the affluent parents to be difficult, because these parents have such a huge sense of entitlement. Because I tried to help this child who is marginalized, I have had a parent accuse me saying his son doesn’t matter to me because he does not have the right colour of skin. They have accused me of only liking the marginalized children because I actually want to help them. These parents seem to think that it is the children’s fault for them to be poor. But you know what? That does not discourage me, because the staff members and a few parents are very supportive of the marginalized students.

A few other principals also echoed Grace’s observation. They stated that some council chairs were very difficult to work with. One council chair, for example, thought that she was the principal of the school. In the previous years she was given the liberty to call all the shots. She was under the impression that the principal could not make any decisions that had to do with the
school or the students’ achievement without consulting her and getting her approval first. This caused a lot of difficulties for the principal because the chair started to talk very negatively about the principal in the school community in her efforts to destroy her reputation. For example, she refused to support buying books for the reading program, stating that those should be provided by the board. She refused to support the grade 8 graduating class trip because she stated they should do their own fundraiser. Although the council chair thought that she knew much about how the school was run, she knew very little, and she became quite an obstacle. Instead of communicating and working collaboratively with the principal, she just repeatedly called the superintendent of education and trustee of their school. She also instructed a few of the other parents to do the same. So in this case, the council chair, instead of working in partnership with the principal to promote academic achievement of the students, was as a barrier.

**Advocating for Marginalized Parents and Listening to Their Voices**

Principals indicated that advocating for marginalized parents and listening to their voices was a strategy they used to reach out to the parents. Many of the parents are not very comfortable with how the school system works because some of them are new in the country, some have language barriers, some did not have a positive school experience during their own school years, some cannot afford to get enough food or school supplies or clothing for their children, and others are working several jobs to make ends meet. As a result, they do not want to or have no time to get involved in the school. The principals emphasized the fact that in this case they have to be their advocates in getting them various programs to assist them and their children and to keep giving them hope for themselves and their children. They also teach them how to advocate for themselves and for their children. They believed in the saying that goes like this, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” They
listen to the concerns of the parents because in many cases their voices are not represented, and they help them out as best as they can.

Marcus explained that it is very important for him to continue to advocate and listen to the voices of parents of marginalized students. He stated that many of these parents have had unpleasant experiences in school and have developed a sense of hopelessness. He said that it was very critical for the principals to listen with an open mind to parents of marginalized students, although sometimes the criticism could be hurtful. Sometimes, as hurtful as it feels, they are saying the truth that has been muffled for a long time. They need to be heard, and principals have to follow up with making a difference and trying to right the wrongs instead of thinking that their point of view or their way of doing things is the only right way. He stated:

So, it is important to spend that extra time as a principal with those parents to listen and energize that hope that their child can make it and why. And being open to hearing about some negative things about how the school is operating. Let me give you an example. A few years ago a parent came in, and I was principal, and said that the school is a racist place, and I was not defensive. When I was younger I would have been defensive, but I said, “You know what? Let me hear what you have to say, maybe I just do not know it.” She was really taken back. I told her to explain her view so that I can understand where she is coming from. She talked about how we approached a situation and she had felt that the school did not listen, but her tone changed in the end because she was now working with me. When I was younger, I would have said that “Oh no! The school is not racist,” but now I said that maybe I am. Maybe you could teach me. Let me understand what you are telling me.

Marcus continued to elaborate on his point of view. He stated:
As a principal I have to be open to hearing, “Guess what? Your intentions are good does not mean that your actions are supporting marginalized children.” I can have good intentions, but good intentions are never an excuse for bad consequences . . . So as a principal you have to be open to how the school can improve. So am always open, and sometimes it can be hurtful because I thought I was doing a good job, but it is not about me, it is about me in meeting the needs of the kids . . . So being open to it, being open to criticism from the parents and that they trust you enough to say that “you know that your school is not doing things differently.” I have to understand it. It does not mean that they are always right, but parents must trust the school, and there is not a lot of trust.

Marcus explained that he listens very carefully to parents because some of them have been marginalized themselves. So he believes that these parents are in a better position to let him know what the school needs to do for their kids in order to minimize or eliminate the marginalization and to help them achieve to the best of their abilities.

Monica noted that it is important to talk to parents of marginalized students. They usually tend to stay away from dealing with the school, perhaps due to the negative experience they had while in school or because they tend to believe that the school is an institution just like other institutions, where their voice will not be heard. Sometimes when they try to get their voice heard, they are misunderstood and labelled as “loud, rude and disrespectful.” Monica explained:

So it is very important to have meetings with them where you discuss what it is they want from the school. Try to get them as involved as possible. At the same time, you also, on their behalf, may have to advocate for them for certain things they may not be aware of. For instance, a lot of times they are unaware of the programs that they can get their kids in to make them more successful, through special education, or through a homework
club. You may be able to advocate getting computers, like for instance we have a program called Kids, Cops and Computers, that’s something we advocated for this year.

Steven stated that he advocated having a parent family literacy centre facilitated in his school. This service is geared to parents of marginalized students. Since the majority of his school population is Portuguese, they even hired a Portuguese-speaking worker to address the language barrier. He also made sure that all the information sent home is translated, so the parents will be well informed. Steven stated:

To engage our parents and listen to their concerns, we also have twice a week a Portuguese liaison worker, and she is here twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays all day, and her job is to help me to communicate with our Portuguese community. So she makes phone calls for me, translates my letters, she does interviews if I need parents to come in.

Helen also noted that having a parent family literacy centre was indeed a blessing for the parents in her school community, and having an open-door policy encourages the parents to come and talk to her when they have any concerns. She pointed out:

We also have a parent family literacy centre at my school. We only have five sites, and I advocated to our board to put one of the sites at my school. It is good that the children start coming to school when they are little, and their parents come to my office and ask me questions. It is kind of nice to have that open-door policy, you do not have to have a meeting to come to my office, if I am there I will talk to you, the worst is that you will have to wait a few minutes. My secretary used to send them away because that was the practice before. If you want the parents to feel safe, they have to be able to come and talk to you when they have a concern.
In addition, Helen explained that she usually volunteered her school to be a site of many of the services provided to parents, especially those who are themselves marginalized. She realized that many of them do not have transportation to go to further away sites. She explained:

We have a lot of workshops here. We run Triple P. Parenting (Positive Parenting Program) a program that gives parents simple tips to help them address problems of family life. I always volunteer to have it in my building so that the parents do not have to go far, and most of them we will try to do in multiple languages, e.g., if we do a “Snuggle Up and Read”; we try to do it in different languages so that if parents cannot speak English it does not mean that they cannot access it. Luckily enough I have staff that can speak the predominant languages at my school. I have several Punjab speaking teachers and Hindi and Ardu, and I can access the board to come and help us too. So if we run a workshop we try to run three different sessions at the same time, so if you want to access it in one language, then you can do so.

Nick noted that the parents had to be made aware of the many resources and supports the community has to offer. He stated, “There are community supports out there to work with students who need help, but many parents are not aware of them. So as a school community we have to make an effort to inform the parents and to develop relationships with those community groups.” He added that absenteeism can impede the marginalized students’ academic achievement, and the parents have to be encouraged to realize how important it is for their students to attend school regularly. He pointed out:

Attendance has to be looked at a lot more closely, and it’s not just dealing with those students who are showing large numbers of absence but also just to promote the concept that being in school is important and will help your child’s learning. For example, we
give a pizza party to the class with the best attendance, but at the same time giving the students and the parents a message that attendance is critical to academic achievement.

Again, with parents we have a very diverse population in our school, and wherever there is an opportunity to connect programs in the community to our families, it’s important for the school to get involved with that connection. For instance, we have settlement workers for those who are newly arrived to Canada, or for the Aboriginal community groups addressing the Aboriginal population in the school.

Sarah stated they reach out to parents who are struggling with poverty by making them aware that the school can help them out when they have some difficulties paying for certain things such as field trips, uniforms, school supplies for the students, or even providing food for the children. Sandra pointed out that through her advocacy for the parents she often hosts the summer programs at her school to give the parents and students easy access to them. She explained:

The children are involved in literacy, and the parents are also involved in this. The parents come in the morning for the activities. They have a read-aloud story together, and from there the parents go do an activity on computers and the children will go do activities in their class. The whole point is to help the children retain learning over the summer. So they can come back to school in September and be at the level ready to go further as opposed to having lost academic stamina and starting from scratch in September. Students are from grades 1–3, levels 1–2, and it also gives the parents an opportunity to work on their computer skills, a much-needed skill that might help them get jobs to take care of their families.
Sandra added that through community partnership the school was able to advocate for both students and parents to be given an opportunity to promote physical activities through cycling. She explained:

One family in our community donated bikes to inner-city kids, and our school falls under that category. However, the advocacy piece came in because the bikes are not only for the children but the parents too, because if we are creating a change in the cycling, we want it to be family based, not only children based. In other words, we are not just giving poor kids bikes. Rather, we are working together with the family to encourage cycling, which is active living, which is going to help them with their learning and promoting their academic achievement. It also gives an opportunity for the parents to do fun activities with their children. Many of our families would not have been able to buy the bikes for themselves and their children.

**Summary**

The equity-minded principals identified a number of strategies for staff members, students, and parents to promote academic achievement for marginalized students in their schools. Most of the strategies addressed the staff members, followed with strategies for the students. The parents had the fewest strategies cited. While I was doing my analysis and writing, I noticed that some principals used certain strategies others did not use. For example not all principals piloted new programs, and not all principals provided nutrition programs. Some principals used rewarding academic achievement of students with 75% average and above as an incentive to promote academic achievement in their schools. Other principals indicated that this approach can serve to further marginalize students who are struggling. On the whole, I tried to honour the voices of all the principals by highlighting the strategies that worked for them,
because what might work for one principal may not work for the next principal due to the nature of the school’s location, school culture, or the political nature of their schools.
CHAPTER SEVEN: BARRIERS

Between the nearly and the utterly lies a small space that leaders enlarge with beliefs—beliefs about what children might accomplish, about how schools might function, about what accountability might really mean. (Joseph McDonald, 1996, as cited in Tredway et al., 2012, p. 68)

This chapter explores the barriers that the 16 equity-minded principals faced while promoting the academic achievement for the marginalized students in their schools. Barriers and challenges are the obstacles the principals encountered when promoting the academic achievement of marginalized students. The principals identified several barriers, which I collapsed into five major themes. They are as follows: (a) staff mindset; (b) resistance to change; (c) students’ home environment; (d) parents; and (e) distractions and resources.

Staff Mindset

Many principals indicated that when they mentioned deficit thinking they were referring to the unwillingness of their staff members to acknowledge that the root causes of the problems for students from marginalized families could be stemming right from the current school system. Instead, the teachers tend to put the blame on the students, their families, and communities. As a result, they have a mindset that children from low social economic backgrounds, racially different, English language learners, or who come from culturally diverse backgrounds cannot achieve academically.

Monica identified the deficit thinking that some staff members exhibited as one of the barriers she confronted. Some teachers complained constantly that marginalized students can never learn and decided not to waste their time differentiating instructions for them. Some
teachers have a mentality that marginalized students do not have the capability to learn, and they show that they are sorry for them by lowering their expectations of them. She explained:

I would say deficit thinking was a big barrier. And I would say, that some teachers came along but others really still didn’t get it; you would hear them say “These kids . . . these parents . . .” That was a huge thing, because they really didn’t think these kids could achieve. So if they can’t achieve, then it is okay to have low expectations or to water down the expectations and it’s okay to not spend extra time supporting them, and that is the mentality. I’m not going to waste my time, they are never going to get anywhere anyways, so what’s the point.

George noted that he encountered the same deficit approach exhibited by many teachers in his school. He articulated clearly the fact that deficit thinking played a very big role in crowding the staff’s perception of marginalized students and what they are capable of achieving. He stated:

When some of these staff members come to work, they have their own colour of glasses. They come with a certain way of seeing the world, and that certain way of seeing the world is translated into “This is how I see these students: Why aren’t they achieving at a higher level as the others? Why can’t they understand this? They are lazy. Their parents do not care! They are going to end up in jail anyway!” As a result, they then lower their expectations for these marginalized students. And that is a big barrier to break down.

Thomas echoed the same point George highlighted regarding staff’s deficit thinking. He pointed out that this deficit thinking translated into ignorance in the staff’s understanding of the marginalized students’ life experiences, their stories, and culture. All the teachers in his school were White and from middle class backgrounds. The majority of teachers in his school have also
been there for 15 to over 20 years. So they wanted things to be done in exactly the same manner as they have always been done. They claimed that that was all they knew. This kind of attitude does not serve the learning needs of marginalized students well at all. He stated:

Ignorance, or what you might call deficit thinking, is always the biggest one. They believe the students can only do this much because that’s what past practice has been in that class or that school. Lack of experiences obviously! When a teacher is stuck in a school for 20 years it’s the same cycle, and they keep coming back to that cycle, because once you get caught up in the cycle it’s kind of hard to break out of it. So sometimes teachers need to move, need to go somewhere different. This might help to change their perspective.

Natalie pointed out that staff members who have a deficit attitude came with preconceived biased ideas of marginalized students and they failed to engage them. Hence, the students were able to sense their attitudes towards them almost immediately. Natalie shared her observations about the teachers who exhibited a deficit view and students’ response to them. She stated:

Sometimes it can be staff, because they don’t understand the marginalized and can’t meet or address their learning needs. I find the kids who are marginalized have a very good sense of who’s genuine and not genuine. I saw that when new people came in to supply or LTO (long term occasional) teachers; they could pick them out better than anyone else can, and they would come to me and say those teachers don’t care about us; they don’t care about kids. They knew almost instantly. I just found that as something that really stood out, and it was almost like they had a sixth sense about where someone’s heart and mind were when it came to the marginalized.
Resistance to Change

Many principals indicated that one of the significant barriers they met was some staff members’ resistance to changing their teaching practices. These staff exhibited what could be termed as “mind stagnation.” Melissa pointed out that some staff members were quite adamant to not change the way they have been doing things because they did not see the need to change. She stated, “I still have some teachers who do not quite buy in, and just do it, not because they believe is the best thing to do. They do it because they are complying. I have had some teachers to whom I had to directly say that this is what you have to do and do it by this time and by this date.”

One of Helen’s major barriers she experienced was to change the mindset of some teachers from the staff when she tried to create an inclusive model for the special education needs students to be integrated in the regular classrooms. She narrated her experience with some staff’s resistance to change.

I introduced a more equitable and inclusive—an integrated model approach, because the teachers’ belief was that the kids just can’t do it. I worked with my special ed. teachers for 2 years, and after the 2 years, if I did not see any change, I would take them out of special ed. Having those courageous conversations, and that can be a barrier because many administrators tend to hide because they are afraid of having a grievance. So I would tell the staff that at the end of the day, “I am the principal and this school is my responsibility” and that “you can come along and enjoy the ride where we have a shared vision” or when all is said and done, “I can help you to get a transfer to somewhere else.” But most of them are still here, although I have moved a few which I don’t think that my mindset and their mindset meshed. Having those conversations with staff who wanted to
continue what they have been doing and saying that this is not what it used to be here does not sit well with me. I am going to my fourth year and I still have about four of them that say to me, “When so and so was the principal . . .” and I tell them that “Well, I am not so and so and we are not going back there. If you choose you can leave and go find so and so and go back to that kind of school.”

Monica pointed out that she experienced resistance in getting the teachers to teach curriculum that is more culturally responsive. The teachers did not want to do it because they would complain that it is more work to go and get other resources. They saw it as an “add on.” They just felt more comfortable teaching the Anglocentric curriculum as prescribed by the Ministry of Education. The teachers were not interested in the multicultural curriculum approach which was made to be inclusive for marginalized students. She continued to explain:

They resisted because they didn’t want to change the way they teach. They didn’t know how to be more inclusive, they didn’t know how to be more equitable. So, it was like it was a lot of work for them to take in. And sometimes people have been teaching for a long time, so it’s just resistance on the fact that they do not want to change. They don’t want to do anything different. As far as they are concerned, it is not really about what the children’s learning needs are, it is about them and how to make teaching easy for them. They do not see colour. All they see are kids. They are trapped in the belief that “all children learn the same way and that one size fits all.” They are like, why do I have to change; they would be complaining about the workload, so more extra work to learn how to do different things, wondering can’t we just do things the way we always been done. They carry the mentality that “If it is not broken why fix it?” But the fact of the matter is the education system has been broken for the marginalized students for a very long time!
George highlighted the point that staff was and still is one of the biggest barriers he had to face because of the things they choose not to do. Some teachers in George’s school did only the basic requirements of what their job entailed nothing more. He indicated:

Staff is the greatest barrier. It is what they do not do. How can you come to an inner-city school, start at 8:20 a.m., take every break—15 minutes, your 50 minutes at lunch, and leave at 2:55 p.m. and want to work in an inner-city school? How can you do that? So if you say that you went into teaching because of the children and you chose to come work in an inner-city school when you know that these students are marginalized and do not have the same opportunities, e.g., extracurricular activities, e.g., sports, music, dance, etc. If they really cared about marginalized students, how can they not reach out to help to try to even the playing field?

George continued to explain that he has a few teachers who have bought into the vision of going that extra mile to help the marginalized students to improve their academic achievement. He stated:

I have a few teachers who give of themselves over and over again. They give up some of their breaks to give the marginalized students extra assistance to try to close the achievement gaps. They also coach various sports clubs, despite other teachers pressuring them not to do so, because they know that the marginalized students do not have the same opportunities for extracurricular activities. These teachers get it. They want to be here, whereas, for the other teachers, it is just a job, nothing more.

Helen indicated that the barriers she experienced were with staff, not with children. She indicated that some teachers do not want certain students in their classrooms. They do not want to teach some students because they don’t fit the mould of the “good” students. For a few other
teachers, teaching was not about the kids, but it is about them. These teachers came in 15 minutes before the bell and run out at the bell at the end of the day. She stated:

I had a teacher who told another teacher when they were doing class lists for next year’s classes that “I do not want so and so and so in my class.” They are friends. I told both of them that “We don’t only teach the kids we want. We teach kids that come to our door. The parents send us the best they have in their lives. So we can never say that these kids are not good enough for us to teach!” Out of the 35 staff, my barrier is five of those teachers who refuse to buy into our school’s shared vision. And if I could get rid of them, I would.

Helen explained to the teachers that it is easy to teach kids who come to school well fed and average; those children will learn despite what teachers do. But it is those children who learn in spite of them on whom they make the most impact.

George pointed out that some staff members resist the changes meant to improve the academic achievement of students because they have been teaching in a certain way for a very long time. He stated that “they do have their own prejudices and biases because business has been done this way for so many years, and although George is the so-called change agent I will survive him when he leaves.”

Sandra also indicated that sometimes she faced the challenge if there is change in staff to replace a teacher who had bought into their shared vision. Since she has no input as to which teacher to pick, sometimes she ends up with a teacher who resists the change in his/her teaching practices to address the learning needs of the marginalized students. This greatly impacts negatively on the students’ academic achievement. She explained:
Another challenge is when we have change in staff, for example replacing a teacher who is on maternity leave, and they replace them with a teacher who does not buy in our vision. This creates inconsistency. And because of the union, we do not have much say in which teacher to choose from as it is based on seniority. So sometimes we are given a teacher who is not well suited for our school community. Such teachers only want to work here because it is just a job for them, nothing more. It is just about what is good for them, not about the children they are teaching.

George also echoed the same challenge of not being able to choose the teachers who suit the needs of their school community. The new staff at the inner-city schools sometimes do not want to adapt to the school’s mission of promoting the academic achievement of marginalized students. He stated, “The problem is that I cannot choose the staff members that come here, because some people should not be here!” Mariah also indicated that, when she opened a new school after two schools were amalgamated, she had limited say as to which staff members would be on staff of the new school. It was all decided at the human resource level based on seniority. She stated:

You are always going to have some staff members that are not on board. I think the first year that we were together we had a lot of staff that came from different communities, so it was difficult for them to accept the fact that the parents did not communicate with them or sign the agenda to make sure the students were doing the homework. There was a lot of frustration and blaming the students and parents for the students’ struggling in school.

All principals wanted to have a say in choosing the staff members who they think are most suited for the learning needs of the students in their school. They also indicated that some staff members are on board while some take the resistance to a higher level, and that is why they
find them as one of the biggest barriers because they cannot just transfer them to another school. They have to continue to try to get them on board, and they said that it is not easy and can be nerve wracking.

Parents

Another barrier identified by some principals was that of parents. Some parents have a sense of entitlement and believe that everything should revolve around their own children, and any efforts given to help out the marginalized students are met with criticism. Although many parents can be supportive, a few resist. Grace stated, “If I give or do anything extra for the marginalized children, I am met with jealousy and questions of ‘why not my child’ from the parents, the entitlement. Grace added that one of the parents asked her, ‘Does my son need to have dark skin before he can get any help from this school?’

Wilma pointed out too that some parents as well as students come to school with a sense of entitlement, and they have a hard time to grasp the fact that children who are marginalized need a little bit more support compared to those who have more. She stated, “Many of my students from affluent families have far more opportunities for extracurricular activities, they are well supported at home, and they are coming, I have to say, with almost an attitude of entitlement.” So when she has to pay for the marginalized students to go on trips, get them to get computers to use at home, and so on, some parents challenge her decisions.

George indicated that in his school he had the most challenges from parents from the middle class who do not want their children to associate with children from low income families. He stated:

They are always complaining about the children’s behaviours, such as that they are rough, use inappropriate language, or that they are dirty. But this is not the case. These
children are very appreciative and just need a little bit of guidance and tender loving care rather than being shunned. I have been trying to create a culture where every student feels valued.

Henry indicated that not only did the middle class parents exclude children from low income families, they also shunned children who spoke other languages or new immigrants. He explained:

There is a very clear line of demarcation in the parents. Some parents of middle class income express prejudice towards people that struggle with the language and that live in low income housing and are from low social economic backgrounds. So they struggle with the low income housing so much so that a few parents decided to leave the school with their children. I guess from their point of view they associate children from low social economic backgrounds and low incoming housing as having bad behaviour and cannot be around their “good” children. So that impacts the school on many different levels. That’s a big barrier.

Marcus pointed out that the parents’ attitude towards school can be a barrier. He explained that some parents had a very negative experience in school and believed that they are not smart. As a result they believed that their children are not going to be smart as well. These parents see themselves negatively, and the same attitude rubs off on their children, who begin to believe that they are destined to be incompetent in school as well. He stated:

Changing the mindset of parents can be a challenge, reaching the child and parent that their child can make it. That your child can make it in society, that there is hope for their child. I liken it to a house that has been painted 40 times and every layer of paint has been issues of oppression and prejudice. One of the things I am trying to do is scrape those
away to try to come to the core—your kids are going to make it. What you have been through and what you are going through now is unjust but, guess what, I cannot control that. However, I believe in your kid and he/she is going to make it. But scraping away all those layers of painting of all those experiences, it is incredibly challenging, if it has been generation after generation. And it applies to all skin colours, and I don’t know if I have always reached them.

Monica pointed out the barrier she faced was parents’ resistance to getting involved in school. She said that the reason could be because they had negative experiences during their school years. She acknowledged that although parents wanted their children to improve academically, sometimes they did not seem to be comfortable to be active participants in their children’s learning. She pointed out that some students who are marginalized are supported by putting in place several early interventions which need parents’ help to reinforce the concepts at home. However, when they send the work home, it is not completed consistently. It is hard to make much progress if the child does not get help at home. She explained:

The only resistance is only if it entails that the parents get involved and do stuff. That is the resistance, because they may say I’m at work, or can’t do it, or it’s the school’s responsibility. They want to see their kids improve and they want to see their kids achieve, but then sometimes they just want to leave it to the school to do. So sometimes it is hard to get them to do anything. There are a lot of roadblocks put up there.

Steven indicated that parental engagement in his school is one of the challenges he faces. He explained that the majority of the Portuguese parents in his school community have a language barrier, and the grandparents are the primary caregivers. They, too, do not speak
English, which makes communication very difficult. Although the school provides interpreters, the parents are not available to come to school for meetings or any other school activities.

Well, one is, and it’s true for this community, it’s the lack of parental engagement. That’s a struggle and that translates into, again, habitual lack of punctuality and high absenteeism. The students, again, when we have that lack of kids, who miss 30–40 days of school, there’s a learning gap. Year in, year out, there is a learning gap. And another challenge is language. Another barrier is we have a huge Portuguese community who are hard workers with multiple jobs, and their primary care for their children are usually grandparents in our neighbourhood, so the parents themselves are not available.

Melissa indicated that one of the challenges she encountered was working cooperatively with some parents of students who have special learning needs and behaviour issues. Some parents have lots of difficulty coming to grips with the fact that their children have learning disabilities or mental issues. When it is suggested that the students get help from a school social worker, the parents refuse to sign the papers. They think that their child does not need the help or that they will be ostracized by the other students. The parents also refuse to seek medical help from their medical doctor, psychiatrist, or psychologist, stating that they use natural interventions to help their children’s mental health and behaviour issues. Others think that if their child seeks medical intervention, they will be put on medication, and they are against that. In the long run, as the child gets older without getting any medical help, the problems escalate from bad to worse to worst. Hence the learning gaps get larger and larger, making it difficult to close them. However, she also pointed out that the ways in which the school system labels and then devalues the children needs to be re-evaluated as it also causes them to be marginalized.

She stated:
Sometimes barriers could be parents who are having a hard time accepting that their child is struggling and have difficulties. Others cannot accept the fact that their child’s behaviour issues are causing barriers in their learning. Rather than getting them the help they need, they blame the child’s behaviour on other students and staff. So when you have your parents on board and able to see things the way you see them, it makes it easier to program and to provide supports, but when you have some parents who, for whatever reason, throwing their own barriers up, that makes it difficult. The child’s academics are negatively impacted. On the other hand, when the school system labels the children, it also causes the students with learning difficulties to be marginalized.

**Distractions and Lack of Resources**

Many principals indicated that the principal’s responsibilities encompass so much that the demands it places on the principals are unrealistic. Principals have distractions coming from all sides within the school, dealing with difficult staff members, difficult parents, and students. This is time consuming, to be putting out fires constantly. They also pointed out that the large volume of emails they have to respond to on a daily basis can also be overwhelming and a big barrier. They stated that the emails are coming from everywhere to the point that they cannot keep up with them, and the majority of them demand an immediate response or else. So the time that should have been dedicated to monitoring instruction is spent on responding to emails. They find that although they respond to the emails as much as they can during school time, they still have to spend a good chuck of their personal time at home responding to the school-related emails. They stated that putting out fires and emails are indeed great distractions.

Melissa described:
This job pulls you in all directions. Sometimes those pulls get to the point where you cannot go into the classrooms or when you are pulled a great deal of time out, especially here, where they are quite a few issues with CAS (Children’s Aid Society) or police. They take up enough of your time that you don’t get what you want to get to. Because I think it is important, particularly in areas here, that these students get our full attention, but sometimes we cannot give it to them, and this is not from lack of trying.

She also pointed out that lack of resources for the students can also pose challenges. She explained that sometimes they have students who need interventions to help them close the learning gaps, but sometimes they have to wait for up to 2 months or sometimes longer before they can get any resource personnel, for example, a reading recovery teacher, learning resource teacher, special education teacher, and an educational assistant to work with students. She also explained:

Not having enough resources to support the students with various learning needs can be a barrier as well. Although we may have resources available, but how we use them and how we are trained to use them, having the support that is needed in a timely fashion is critical and sometimes because of procedures or processes, changing staff. There have been times when we had to wait for, say, an EA (education assistant) and resource staff, and it makes it difficult.

Wilma echoed the need for more human resources as one of the barriers with which she is faced. She indicated that they do not have enough support staff to meet the learning needs of their students in a timely manner. Some of the students completely fall into the cracks because there is not enough money to hire more support staff. She explained:
There are also barriers in terms of support staff. Some of our special education students could use an educational assistant to help them. More help would be appreciated from our social workers’ department, but they are stretched so thin. The same goes for the mental health care professionals, and public health nurses, and access to psychologists. And again our attendance counsellors are the social workers, and that limits what they can do for our students with attendance issues because their cases are getting heavier and heavier. I find that we are doing a lot of outreach instead of focusing on academics.

Wilma highlighted the barrier of marginalized students not having access to rich resources provided by the Ministry of Education. She indicated that many of the Ministry’s educational supports for students are via technology. Unfortunately, a large group of students in her school come from families who do not have computers in their homes because they do not have money to pay for cable to get the internet service. So students cannot access at home programs for homework help such as E-Math, Success Maker, and Prodigy. She stated:

We have fantastic supports in place in terms of supporting children learning at home and extending through homework, but we tend to focus on technology, and technology is a powerful tool for our students. But when I look at some of my marginalized children, I have to ask myself that all of these websites and Ministry supports are wonderful to those children who have access, the reality is some of my marginalized students who have potential and great intellectual capabilities, they do not have the access at home to a computer or a computer with internet . . . So really our technology goals with children are still limited to a school day for some of those marginalized families, because if they do not have the means to go to the library where they can access the technology tools, they are at a disadvantage.
George, Emily, Sarah, and Nick named the union as a distraction which is a big barrier. They raised their concerns that they do not have a say as to which staff members get assigned to their school, since the hiring practices are based on seniority. Some staff members have been in the school for so long that they are in a state of “stagnation” in terms their teaching practices. It is evident from the way they teach that they are just going through the motions of teaching. They give students photocopied worksheets to work on which require answers that are easy to mark, their lessons are mostly teacher directed, children sitting on the carpet for extended times listening to the teacher, giving students crossword puzzles, pictures to colour in, math completed without allowing students to use manipulatives, refusing to do guided reading on a daily basis, and the reading and writing workshops are completely ignored or partly followed, depending on the teacher’s comfort level. In mathematics, the three-part math lesson is ignored, replaced with worksheets that require right or wrong answers for easier marking. The questions they ask the students require very low levels of thinking to answer them. Unfortunately these teachers are protected by their union, making it difficult to move them or even discipline them. So they continue to cruise on. It makes it quite difficult for the teachers who are excellent at what they do because, after preparing the students so well, when they go to a teacher who has lost the passion for teaching, the students fall behind once again.

This makes it a barrier for the principals because the union makes it difficult to transfer such teachers. George pointed out:

The unions are not about kids. Because if they were, they would put into consideration about who get hired at some schools. Our students are marginalized. They need teachers who want to be here to serve the learning needs of these students, not teachers who are here because it is just a job.
Melissa concluded by stating that “not only does the union and union expectation act as huge barriers, but some teachers’ misunderstanding of their collective agreement creates challenges as well. Some teachers feel that they are working for the union, not actually for the board.”

Emily, Nick, and Sarah pointed out that starting in September without having permanent classroom teachers is a big challenge they faced. This situation, which we never had to face before, was created by the Ministry of Education and the union. They voiced their frustrations by sharing stories to illustrate their point. Sarah stated:

In September, I had five classes that had to start with supply teachers. The reason was that supply teachers who had more seniority were on vacation. So when the principals did the interviews in late August, we could not choose the teachers to come to our school because we had to wait for those senior supply teachers who were on vacation to come back to be interviewed as well, as per the union and Ministry regulations.

Nick and Emily started the year with three classes without permanent teachers. They filled those classes temporarily with supply teachers. They stated that this was what was happening throughout their board. Nick pointed out, “Can you imagine the effect this has on the students, especially the junior kindergarten and other primary classes? The impact is huge on students to start the first couple of weeks of their academics with a revolving door of supply teachers.”

Another distraction highlighted by several principals was the fact that they had to be pulled out of school for several various professional developments. Natalie indicated:

The challenge is that at the beginning of September I find that it was very difficult for me and other principals to focus on the students’ achievement because we were being pulled
in all sorts of directions. We are doing interviews for the vacancies in our schools and at the same time being pulled out to attend various meetings and attending various workshops. This extends right through the school year, where we are finding that we are being pulled in all sorts of directions to attend various board committees during school hours and even after schools.

Natalie acknowledged that, as much as she wanted to monitor the instructions taking place in the classrooms, the amount of time spent being out of her school created a big barrier for her which interfered with her obligations of being the instruction leader.

**Summary**

One of the biggest barriers identified by the principals that hampered their efforts of promoting academic achievement for the marginalized students was the staff’s mindset and deficit thinking. Many of the staff members exhibited little understanding of the marginalized students’ lived experiences. As a result they did not seem to understand why they had to change their teaching practices to meet the learning needs of marginalized students. The staff’s belief was that marginalized students could not learn no matter what. They blamed their lack of academic achievement on the students and their parents.

Parents were also highlighted as distractions because some exhibit a sense of entitlement, making it very difficult to deal with them. Others had negative school experiences and do not feel comfortable engaging with the school. The principals also indicated that they spend a lot of time putting out fires and answering a multitude of emails. Unions were also identified as a barrier to principals’ work because of the resistance they cause, especially in the area of transferring teachers.
CHAPTER EIGHT: RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARDS
AND MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Reaching the marginalized will take a concerted effort to tackle the interlocking
structures of disadvantage that limit opportunity. (Scientific A United Nations Education,
2010, p. 186)

This chapter examines the recommendations the principals believed that district school
boards and the Ministry of Education should heed. The principals identified several
recommendations, and some of them intersect both the district school boards and the Ministry of
Education. The recommended subtopics are as follows: (a) curriculum; (b) EQAO; (c) staffing
model; (d) resources and funding model; and (e) professional development.

The principals pointed out that the curriculum needed to be updated to reflect the 21st
century diverse student population we have in our schools, because it is too Anglocentric now.
They also questioned the validity of continuing to use standardized tests such as the EQAO in
schools. They wondered how such tests address the learning needs of marginalized students. All
principals expressed their concerns regarding basing the criteria for hiring staff on seniority
alone. They indicated that this staffing model did not work to the advantage of meeting the
learning needs of their marginalized students. They also highlighted the need for the funding
model to be differentiated to allow the schools to be funded according to their needs rather than
basing it on the number of students in a school. Many principals stated that although they
appreciated the Ministry of Education giving them funds for professional development, it would
be more practical if the teachers were not pulled out of the school all the time for professional
development. Sometimes teachers find it more beneficial to stay at their schools and be provided
with job-embedded professional development on site.
Curriculum

The principals pointed out that the curriculum as it is now is too Anglocentric and it needs to be more inclusive. The principals indicated that the topic of how the curriculum stands now has to be revisited by the Ministry of Education (2009b). They shared their concerns that even though the Ontario Ministry of Education put out the document on *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools* in 2009, it is not being consistently followed. Some teachers have never even heard of the document. There is no accountability for it. They pointed out that the curriculum is not inclusive; it does not reflect the diversity we have in our schools, boards, and province. They see this as a big problem because this current curriculum reinforces the staff’s deficit thinking of blaming the marginalized students’ lack of academic achievement on the students and their families. The majority of the teachers just keep teaching a curriculum that they are comfortable with and they do not make an effort to plan lessons that include marginalized students. They believe that such a curriculum is not engaging to marginalized students, as it does not reflect their lived experiences for the most part. Monica stated:

The curriculum is way too Anglocentric. It has been like this for so many years. But because to me the government, that is their perspective they don’t really have to include anybody else. So it then leaves it to teachers that are more equity minded to have to go out to find other resources and have to go out to try and piece-meal the curriculum, which is really just focused on one perspective. So I think if it was more inclusive, then it would support the teachers to teach in a more inclusive way. It would include students that are marginalized so they would feel more included. I think school would become for them a place where they enjoy being as opposed to a place they would feel alienated.
Marcus also indicated that the existing curriculum needs to be modified to be more inclusive. He stated:

You can also modify the curriculum to make it more inclusive, and that will come through understanding the children you are serving, listening to their histories, and understanding what is going to engage the children. But modifying the content of the curriculum to support their histories and cultures of their families you are serving is very challenging and very time consuming, but it works every time.

Henry also believed that Ontario students needed an inclusive curriculum. He recommended strongly to the Ministry of Education by stating:

To the Ministry of Education I would say without trepidation, with 100% conviction, to remove, blow up, get rid of the European-centric curriculum and move towards a much more multicultural, integrated curriculum that focuses much more on a skill set that students need versus an expectation that has its roots in what I would consider to be a very European thinking.

Henry continued to explain why he believed that the curriculum should be more inclusive. He used the example of pioneers to illustrate his point. He questioned, “What purpose does a student need to understand pioneers? I understand that history is important, but there is also the history of many different cultures that can be presented. The question is why just the pioneers?” He believed that the study of the history of cultures, the cultures that we have at the school, would be more beneficial and inclusive to students of various cultural backgrounds. He indicated:

I love Merriam Small’s quote. He says that “Google gives you answers but Google does not teach you how to think,” and so that would be the concept of having the curriculum
and the skill set of how to teach children how to think, how to disseminate the amount of information coming their way versus a specific expectation of a cultural bias, such as pioneers.

Melissa’s recommendation to the Ministry of Education was that it has to revisit how the curriculum is presented. She stated that the way the curriculum is presented now is in a “silo” and recommends it to be in a more integrated manner. She highlighted the fact that the subjects are taught to the students in isolation. They rarely show a connection to one another. She explained,

The Ministry needs to look at how the curriculum is presented. They revised the geography curriculum; they revised the social studies curriculum, and the science curriculum. Mind you, although they have revised those subject areas, they still revised them in those particular silos. I think, in terms of the Ministry of Education, they should really look into getting into the cross-curricular connections. For example, when you look at mathematics where it is still number sense and geometry, measurement, data management, where in reality when you are giving a child a rich problem to solve it should bring in all of those things because they all work together, not in isolation. That is engaging for kids. It promotes and develops critical thinking skills, which our kids need.

George and Marcus questioned what really makes academic achievement. Their concern was that much emphasis is placed on literacy and numeracy, and other subjects are not given the same value. They recommended that the Ministry of Education revisit their curriculum focus. George explained that their focus is literacy and numeracy, but not every student has an interest in literacy or numeracy. He stated:
In many boards, we do a rotten job of the arts. Although they have some arts in the classroom, but we have such talented students far and beyond in the arts but we do not promote it . . . In elementary school the arts are certainly not promoted at all, so our students who are gifted in that way do not feel valued or worthwhile. Because they are told that you are only valued if you are good in literacy or numeracy. What about the other subjects, e.g., geography, history, science? Students should feel valued even if they are not good in literacy and math because they are strong in other subject areas that are not valued in our school system. The Ministry of Education seems to only focus on the EQAO scores in math and literacy. So, academic success seems to be based on how well a student is doing in those two subjects, and if they fail one or the other, they cannot graduate from high school. This is quite a concern. So to address this concern, we give out monthly awards to recognize students who are doing well or improving in other subjects other than just literacy and numeracy.

Marcus also recommended that the Ministry expand the definition of academic achievement to encompass not just literacy and numeracy. He explained:

We really need the definition of what academic achievement is. It is more than reading and writing and math. It has to have an inner sense that the students can make it. I would want the Ministry to give me a clear idea that academics can also encompass self-esteem to overcome all obstacles. Because you could be reading and writing above grade level, but deep down you believe that, man, I am not going to make it in this system because of the things I have going against me. So a clear definition in more explicit teaching of how historically systems of oppression have worked within society and making this a diligent discussion with all staff in every school in the province.
Marcus explained that he believed strongly that a dialogue should be encouraged to take place in all schools in the province to discuss how the school system has oppressed some groups of people while privileging others. As the school system is now, the focus of academic achievement is focused on two subject areas: math and literacy. If students are not good in those subjects, then their future is bleak. So he argues that all educators should develop this awareness that there is more to academic achievement than test scores.

**EQAO (Education Quality and Accountability Office)**

Although the principals recognized that the EQAO is a snapshot of the students’ learning, they were quite concerned about how the test is administered, pointing out that “one size does not fit all.” The principals indicated that methods of teaching and practices of student assessments have changed over the years. Inquiry-based learning and collaboration are much encouraged in classrooms. Students can be assessed through various other methods such as acting out skits, poetry, singing, video presentation, drawing, painting, and creative writing. They do not necessarily have to use paper and pencil to assess their learning as it is done with the EQAO. They recommended that perhaps all students should be given an option to choose what method works best for them to complete the EQAO. Melissa, for instance, pointed out that the way the EQAO testing is administered posed a concern for her. She stated:

> I think as we are in the midst of the EQAO testing now, although we have assistive technology now for the students, but we still test our children for the most part with paper and pencil. I think that this has to change because that is not how we teach or how we engage kids or they are used to sharing their learning with others.

The principals also questioned why the assessments are limited to just literacy and numeracy. They wondered what happened to the assessment of other subjects that are part of the
students’ curriculum. How do those students who shine in other subject areas ever get to show that they are levels 3 and 4 based on the provincial standards? Melissa explained that the EQAO promoted teaching subjects in isolation. She stated:

We are starting to engage the students more with use of technology, making cross-curricular connections through inquiry. So, I see a curriculum that might look quite different in terms of expectations for communicating. So for example, you have a writing curriculum that is a little out of date for some of our students who might not only be for students who are marginalized. We are talking about student engagement. Does the curriculum keep pace with what engages our kids in terms of communicating? Is our curriculum which is “siloed” keep pace with teaching kids critical thinking and collaborative inquiry that crosses curriculum boundaries?

Henry, on the other hand, recommended that the Ministry revisit the number of subjects taught in the elementary school. He indicated that they are too many for one teacher to be quite competent in all of them. Teachers in elementary can be seen as “multifaceted.” Perhaps, the teaching should be organized in such a way that teachers teach subjects they are strong at, as done in the secondary school panel. They argued that it is hard to get a teacher who does not feel confident in math and expect him/her to teach math as well as another teacher who is and feels good at teaching math. He explained:

I mean that there are just too many subjects at the elementary level for a teacher to have a firm grasp of, that in and of itself promote a focus on literacy and numeracy as EQAO does. It marginalizes, if you will, from a subject point of view and a cultural point of view the sciences, the arts, all of them, and physical education, and pushes them to the
extreme at the expense of those to move the agenda forward for numeracy and literacy and for, again, the EQAO. This is an area the Ministry has to reconsider.

Monica wanted the Ministry to reconsider why they continue to do the EQAO. From the data that have been collected for the past 10 years, it appears that the students’ EQAO achievement has either come to a plateau or declined. This in spite of the money spent on it. They recommend that the money spent on EQAO should be rechanneled into schools to hire more teachers and support staff to help students close those learning gaps. She stated:

I understand about the accountability. But do we still have to continue the EQAO despite the fact that for the 10 years it has been administered the data shows that there has been very minimal improvement? Why keep doing the same thing over and over again while you are getting pretty much the same results, if not worse? Administering the EQAO is a very expensive undertaking. Knowing what we know now from all the data that has been collected in these past 10 years, is it not about time that the Ministry channels some of the money from the EQAO back into the schools that really need it? This will help to provide the much-needed resources, both human and capital, to those students who are marginalized to help bridge the achievement gaps that have been identified over and over in the past 10 years? Support these kids, because it is not that they can’t learn, but some of the times they have gaps in their learning or they didn’t get the support they needed when they should have gotten it, like in kindergarten.

Monica indicated that she thinks that it is really important to provide early interventions to students who exhibit learning gaps while they are in young grades rather than waiting until they are older because, as they get older, the learning gaps tend to widen as well.
Sandra also recommended the Ministry take a hard look at the effects the EQAO has on some students. She shared her school’s and students’ experiences with the EQAO. She pointed out the EQAO was a problem for the students at her school because some of the students do not have the life expertise or connections to the problems, word problems, and stories on the test. She gave an example of a story that had to do with a sport or game called “fencing”. The children in her school had never heard of or seen “fencing.” Needless to say, since they are struggling readers to begin with and have no connections to the story, they told her that they just guessed at the answers. Sandra also indicated that staffs’ resistance to change is mirrored in how the EQAO is administered. The concept of “one size fits all” replicates itself in the EQAO practices just as the same practices are played out in some classrooms. Some staff members continue to disregard differentiated instruction to meet the learning needs of the various learners in their classroom. English language learners, gifted students, or students who are struggling in other areas are all taught in the same way, given the same work, and assessed in the same manner. In the end, the staff members blame the students for their lack of academic achievement. Although EQAO has tried to bridge this gap using technology, still some of the EQAO content has no connection whatsoever with their students. She stated:

We just celebrate that the fact their children are completing, they are happy, and feel that they have done their best. We have come a long way from when the kids were crying and not wanting to do the test to the point where they write and complete the test and feel good about themselves. I am telling you the saying is true, I hope the Ministry realizes that one size does not fit all.
**Staffing Model**

The principals recommended that the Ministry of Education and the boards get back to the table with the unions to revisit and restructure the staffing model which is based on staffs’ seniority. They pointed out that the staffing model that they currently have that is based on seniority has become a barrier that prevents them from addressing the learning needs of their marginalized students. The principals highlighted the fact that this seniority hiring model does not consider equity for students. They pointed out that some of the students come from very challenging home situations and need staff members who care about the whole child, not the ones who walk in and leave the school at the bell. Although they think that seniority is part of the conversation, they still feel that there must be some flexibility, because children are not a commodity. They articulated that they are not running a factory with a bunch of products, but a school with real, live students who have various learning needs. They recommended that the Ministry of Education and unions should reconsider that the learning needs of the students should supersede just a black-and-white template that is strictly based on numbers and seniority. They do not believe that it is the best way to best address the needs in a school community.

Wilma acknowledged:

In my school I see the challenge of staffing model that we have can sometimes be a barrier. I understand it is a systemic issue because it is around contracts and we currently staff with a seniority model, and while that can be beneficial in some cases, I think there are circumstances where the needs of a particular school or particular community are not always served by a strictly seniority model. It is a challenge as an administrator, if you know, if you recognize that a particular group of students needs a teacher or educational assistant or whatever support staff with particular skill set, I feel that we are now locked
into a position where we cannot seek or recruit those individuals that are tailored to the needs of our school community. If we want to differentiate learning for all students, especially our marginalized students, then differentiated instructions, differentiated skill sets must be available in a staffing model.

Sandra indicated that, as an administrator, she believed that she had no voice as to what staff members get assigned to her school. If she has a job opening at her school, she is obliged to consider five people who are on top of the seniority list, and many times she cannot choose any of them because she can tell from the interviews that they are not well suited for the students’ learning needs at her school. However, many times her “arm is twisted” so to speak, and she just picks anyone, although she knows that trouble is looming at the end. She stated:

Because of the union, we do not have much say in which teacher to choose from as it is based on seniority. So sometimes we are given a teacher who is not well suited for our school community. Such teachers only want to work here because it is just a job for them, nothing more. It is just about what is good for them, not about the children they are teaching. In the end it is our students who suffer the consequences. This practice has to change. It is just not right!

Nick also recommended that something needs to be addressed regarding the hiring practices of staff. He explained:

From the board level, and also from the provincial and union’s level, I think there’s a need to really, to seriously look at this as an issue, not an issue to be negotiated but one to be agreed upon . . . my preference would be preferential hiring to meet the needs of that community because it’s very specific, and again, it’s achievable when, in our experiences, I have found that when someone from the Aboriginal community works
with Aboriginal students, there’s a, obviously, there’s a knowledge that adult has in moving those children, it moves you forward. However, when it comes to teachers, administrators, EAs, there’s no such preferential hiring practice at the local level, and until there’s a contractual agreement with the province for that to take place, it cannot take place. And that’s not an opinion; it’s got to happen if we are concerned about meeting the learning needs of all our students, especially those who are marginalized.

Nick added that the diversity of the students must be reflected in the staff. He stated that it is absurd and a great shame to go to a school and there is not a single person of colour on the entire staff in schools where most of the students are not White. What the principals can’t figure out is, “Why then is it so hard for the boards and Ministry to understand this concept that students of colour need to be reflected on staff so that they can have someone or some people to identify with when they are in school?” Just as it is important for students from the dominant culture to have role models, it is just as important for students of colour to have role models. The goal is for all students to do well academically, not some students. Therefore the principals pointed out that the Ministry of Education and all boards of education have a moral obligation to make sure that this happens. Burying their heads in the sand will not make this injustice go away.

Since we are in the 21st century, our words must match our actions and provide hiring practices that are equitable and serve the learning needs of marginalized students.

Nick stated:

Again, for boards that have more diverse communities, it’s important that diversity be reflected on staff; my parents notice those things. When they don’t see their ethnic community reflected within the school board or within the school, they take notice of it.

Again, it comes back to building up trust levels, and building connections with the
community, and to validate the visible minority students that they are welcome and valued in their school community.

Sarah stated that equity hiring practices should be put in place in order to address the marginalized students’ needs and to serve the common good. She stated that it is an equitable and inclusivity issue for the marginalized students—students of colour. She would like to see children of colour reflected in the staff of her school because when they thought about some of the neighbourhoods that the children grew up in, there is no one in their neighbourhood that is a teacher to identify with. They may not even know anyone who had gone on to go to teacher’s college. She strongly believes, if we truly want all our kids to attain academic achievement, we must provide them with role models who are reflected on our staffs. However, right now it is not happening because the problem is compounded by the seniority staffing model. Although the principals have identified the problems, the solutions they are recommending are not linked because the union and Ministry of Education are working in contradiction of the principals’ recommendations. Sarah indicated:

We’re telling them to achieve higher things, you know, do they see, if they’re a Filipino student, do they see themselves reflected in the staff? We keep talking about equity and being inclusive. You know, we say that one of the things that engage the children is if they see themselves in the books that are provided, in the textbooks and in the fiction and nonfiction. I do think that it’s an important part that we should be hiring staff that reflects the students in our school communities. So I recommend that for the sake or best interest of our students that the boards, unions, and Ministry of Education get back together and reexamine this hiring model.
Emily had a similar message to send to the Ministry of Education regarding the inappropriateness of seniority-based hiring practices. She stated:

What the Ministry has to understand is that seniority does not equal excellence. And I cannot staff the school, right now. I have a class empty; it's day two in a 7/8 class, not a good combination because I have kids that are not getting under way, straight away with their work, and that is because one of the most senior people who had applied for that position for me declared that she was on holidays and cannot come to be interviewed. So I have to put my hiring on hold, and this is happening throughout our board. Many classes are still empty, without permanent teachers. I have teachers who would be happy to be in there, but because I haven't had a chance to interview her, I can't make a decision. That to me is not the best practice for student achievement, and in this province, based on the hiring rules and regulations that we have now, we're not working for students, we're working for teachers, and we're not even working for our best teachers.

**Resources and Funding Model**

The principals indicated that the way schools are funded should be differentiated. After working in schools in communities with different social economic circumstances, Monica realized that in order to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students, schools should be funded according to their needs. The principals believed that more money needed to be provided to support students in schools that are struggling. It was recommended that the funding model should not be based on the theory of “one size fits all.” For example, a neighbourhood that is very wealthy should not need as much support in terms of resource teachers as one that is really struggling. In affluent schools many students do well because their lives are reflected in the curriculum. The principals questioned why a rich school and a poor school are given almost
the same resources. In poor schools, students who are two years behind are unable to get into the resource class because there are not enough teachers in the school to provide that service.

Mariah wanted the Ministry to simplify the application process for the various grants, they offer to schools. Her school is a very needy one. She finds that, as much as she wants to apply for the various Ministry grants, she is unable to put in the time needed to complete the application forms. She pointed out:

I know that the Ministry offers many grants. My recommendation to the Ministry of Education, having had applied to many of those grants, would be simplify the process. I know that I have very determined staff, and actually parents even on our school council, who support the cause and will go through the process of filling out those grants. I have also been at other schools where staff and or parents have given up because the application process was too difficult. It is wonderful to offer these supports, but simplify them to make them more accessible to more schools; thus more students would benefit.

Nick recommended that the Ministry of Education should provide an overall strategy that directly addresses the marginalized poor, and it should make this a priority. He stated:

I know there is an Ontario poverty strategy, and there are certain aspects of equity that were dealt with in that strategy. I’ve heard it’s being revamped as we speak, but there’s really been nothing from that strategy that’s flowed from the education ministry that reflects in it a real attempt to work with and help marginalized poor. There might be programs and services, grant monies available to do those kinds of things through the Ministry, but there needs to be an overall strategy that addresses the marginalized poor.

Nick continued that the Ministry should pay particular attention to how the money is distributed and ensure that the money is used for the purpose it was meant for. He recommends
that the Ministry hold the boards accountable to spend the money on the items the funding is
given for. He explained:

I know there’s a real push right now of enveloping the learning opportunities money for
the Aboriginal education. Most boards will use portions of that money to provide
programming in other areas. At a provincial level, my thing is, the Ministry has to take a
really hard look at how money is distributed to boards, and for the allocations to be more
realistic. As a principal I deal with special needs students within the schools, and it’s
certainly possible that students with special needs can be marginalized because of their
lack of accessibility to services. However, when you pay attention to special needs and
provide resources and funding, good things happen for those kids. I’m saying the same
thing for the poor marginalized students. The ability to accomplish this is already built
into the funding model, but it’s not being implemented that way by the boards.

Sarah and Wilma recommended that the Ministry and boards provide more resources for
marginalized students with special learning difficulties and for mental health and wellness. She
indicated that one special education resource teacher (SERT) is not good enough for a school
with a population of over 800 students. Most of their time is spent on completing paper work,
juggling supervision schedules for EAs, because many EAs call in sick on a regular basis which
seems to be a systemic issue that can be attributed to their workload. This leads to always being
short-staffed and the SERT has to fill in.

Sarah indicated that one of the things they need to provide is more SERT staff; they have
one for a school of 820 students. And as soon as there’s EAs (educational assistants) away, the
SERT has to continually be called out. She explained:
He’s either doing paper work or having to put out fires because there are absences in the school, and he’s having to cover them, whether it’s actual supervision coverage or help in the classroom itself. Right now it seems to be that we’re constantly short-staffed with the EAs, and that always causes a ripple effect in the school. Every morning we seem to sort of have a meeting about who’s away and how we are going to fill those gaps. It just doesn’t seem like a good way to run the school on a long-term basis. So I recommend that the Ministry of Education gives some more funds to address the learning needs of our marginalized students, especially those who have learning disabilities.

Wilma acknowledged that mental health issues and wellness are becoming a reality at a very fast pace and that the schools cannot cope on their own to address them. She called upon the Ministry of Education to release funds that provide health professionals to be accessible into the schools to deal with these issues. She has a school of over 550 students, and her school community is very needy. She finds that with the one SERT they have in their school and a couple of EAs, they are not able to provide the support resources they may want to their students with special needs and mental health issues. She pointed out that there is also a stigma attached to students being seen by a social worker. She recommended therefore that the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health work together to see what would be the best strategies for the students to have access to social workers. This will help to prevent the most marginalized students from falling through the cracks when their parents refuse the social worker services for fear of being stigmatized. She stated:

We must perhaps revisit our community supports and look at different models of supporting, because often when social workers are called upon there is reluctance on part of the families due to the stigma attached seeing a social worker. Also, there is a need to
address mental health issues and wellness in our community, but accessing psychologist, paraprofessional, medical professionals is very limited. A lot of our children are taking on a lot of challenges impeding their learning. I recommend that the Ministry consider a way of funding the boards to address these burning issues. This will definitely help the academic achievement of our marginalized students.

Henry recommended that the Ministry of Education and the boards should work together to figure out a way to have a mental health worker or a social worker or a child and youth worker in each school. He believed that this practice would be beneficial to students who are facing the many mental health challenges on many different levels. Helen concluded by recommending that the boards and Ministry of Education differentiate their resources based on the schools’ needs. She stated that “if the students are not achieving academic success, it is not because they can’t; it is because we have not done our job well this far!”

**Professional Development**

The last recommendation the principals identified was that of professional development. They recognized that they preferred professional development where they stay at their schools rather than being pulled out all the time. Marcus pointed out that “the Ministry should give us funds that provide release time for professional development for staff, which is site specific with an action plan tied to academic achievement. We should have discussions in all schools about how to support marginalized students.”

Thomas, on the other hand, recommended that professional development that addressed diversity should be provided in schools in the province for all staff. He acknowledged that in many schools diversity takes the back burner. This leaves the staff, students, and parents of colour disillusioned. They don’t feel like they belong as their cultures, life experiences, and
stories are not validated. Since the majority of the teachers and support staff are from the White dominant culture, perhaps many of them are not in tune with the other various different cultures. That is why he saw the need for all teachers to be trained in how to be inclusive of all learners in their classes. Through providing professional development that addresses issues of diversity, it is hoped that the teachers’ understanding of diversity will be enhanced. In turn, all students from the various cultural backgrounds will benefit from the knowledge they learn about other peoples who may be different from their own culture.

Emily added that each board should be held accountable for ensuring that staff is provided with professional development addressing diversity at the school and senior levels. She pointed out that many staff members are still stuck in their perception of students, basing the students’ ability on their cultural background or skin colour. Emily stated, “There should be a diversity committee at each school that educates the student body about issues that relate to diversity. The curriculum which reflects diversity should be considered the norm in each classroom and in each school.”

Natalie acknowledged that staff members should be encouraged by the Ministry and boards to educate themselves more in the area of diversity in order to understand the marginalized students and be better able to serve and address their learning needs. She believed that all teachers should be encouraged to learn more about diversity, just as they are encouraged to learn more about special education. She also indicated that all administrators should be mandated to have at least parts 1 and 2 of the diversity courses, that is, if they even exist, just as they are required to have special education parts 1 and/or 2. She also believed very strongly that educators in senior administration positions must definitely be required to have a specialist in diversity, just as they are required to have a specialist in special education. She pointed out that
many of the senior administrators she has worked with are not well versed in issues that address
diversity. They don’t seem comfortable talking about diversity issues either and, as a result,
diversity issues are given very minimal priority in schools. She stated:

I think that every school has a different balance of marginalized students. However, I
believe that people should go and spend a bit of time at the schools that are very, very
needy. This will help them to learn about the marginalized, especially those who are
marginalized because they are poor. I think it is part of our work with God. We have to
strive to learn and see what other people go through in life. I think that opens up so many
parts of our lives; it opens up many doors, and it just gives you a different view of why
we’re here and what we’re meant to do. It helps the educators to develop empathy for
those who did not have it already. All staff should learn to appreciate diversity and be
more compassionate to students who are marginalized, be it because of their race, cultural
background, sexual orientation, new immigrants, English language learners, those who
have special education learning needs, or those that are struggling with mental health
issues.

George, on the other hand, recommended that each board should have an administrator
whose job is to address and educate the staff in that particular board about diversity. He noted
that in many other boards the role of a person who addresses diversity is assigned to people who
do not have a background in education. He gave an example of his friends’ board which has
diversity embedded with the person whose profile is “keeping a respectful workplace.” This
person has never been a teacher and has no understanding of how to implement an inclusive and
equitable curriculum in a school. He deals only with equity issues that impact the staff, not the
students. He explained how things are different in his board:
We do have a principal of diversity in our board, and she’s been very supportive. It is very helpful to us to have a go-to person. Part of their role is to infuse diversity into much of what we do. Some of the examples are that we have diversity guest speakers, both facilitated by the board, and two others are led and put on by our families of schools. We have multiple opportunities provided for us. This is what should be happening in all boards, but I am not sure that it is really happening.

Helen concluded by recommending that the Ministry of Education and boards follow up with the initiative they put in place in regards to creating equitable and inclusive schools. She pointed out:

All the talks we have heard about accessibility by 2015, equity and inclusive education and social justice, we do not see it in practice. It is not translating into practice. She quoted Jim Ryan (2009) saying that “social justice and education have not naturally been partners.” It is true we do not always partner education necessarily with social justice. As much as we practice social justice, we still have many inequitable practices in our schools. This still needs to be addressed.

Wilma added that increased professional development is vital to promoting the academic achievement of all students, but especially marginalized students. She stated that “increased funding for professional development for our staff should be enhanced rather than being cut back, in order to build capacity. The better our teachers are equipped to meet the learning needs of marginalized students, the better chances our children have to achieve academic achievement.”
Summary

Chapter Eight has explored the recommendations that were given to the Ministry of Education and district school boards by the equity-minded principals. The principals highlighted the need to update the curriculum to be more inclusive of all students from various cultural backgrounds. They recommended that the Ministry of Education reassess the validity of administering the EQAO standardized test to students when they already know that certain groups of students continue not to do well on those assessments. The principals were also quite concerned about the hiring practices being based strictly on seniority. They indicated that such hiring practices were not serving the needs of their marginalized students and recommended that they be amended. They recommended that resources and funding for schools should be based on the school’s needs rather than on number of students, because some schools are quite affluent and their needs for the resources and money are not the same as the school which is located in an economically struggling neighbourhood. Finally, they suggested that they would prefer to have professional development initiatives held at their home schools rather than going to a central board office.
CHAPTER NINE: DISCUSSION

The time is now to provide the strongest advocacy for equity if we are to break down barriers to success for students in our schools. (Glaze et al., 2012, p. 175)

One would argue that it is common sense and rather critical to our country’s future to provide our marginalized students with a high quality education and opportunities to achieve to their full potential. As a nation we have so much wasted talent because we ignore the learning needs of many of our marginalized students. We fail to put in place the supports and resources needed to ensure that they do well academically and not fall through the cracks. The evidence suggested, however, that marginalized students continue to struggle academically. The question we should be asking ourselves is, why is it still allowed to happen? The findings in this study demonstrate that there are some equity-minded principals who are making a positive change by taking the initiative to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students in their schools. This study focused on elementary schools because, if any impact is to be made, it should start at the beginning of the marginalized students’ school career. They need a solid foundation before they move on to high school.

These equity-minded principals used a variety of strategies to promote the academic achievement and well-being of marginalized students by ensuring that the students are engaged in their learning through a “curriculum of life”. Portelli & Vibert (2002) pointed out that, “we often use the term ‘curriculum of life’ to refer to curriculum that is important, relevant and engaging for students, curriculum in which students’ worlds are a source of rich and serious curriculum” (as cited in Portelli et al., 2007, p. 27). In this chapter I will examine the five major themes that emerged from the study. First, I examine the principals’ understanding of marginalization. Second, I explore the importance of principals advocating for the marginalized
students. Third, I examine curriculum and instruction. Fourth, I look at how these principals were inspired to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students. Last, I investigate how staff members could be barriers to the promotion of academic achievement of the marginalized students.

**Principal Understanding of Marginalization**

The principals in the study demonstrated a clear understanding of the causes of marginalizing for their students. They stated clearly that these are things over which students and their parents have no control. Although they acknowledged the obstacles their marginalized students faced, they also believed that it does not mean that these students cannot learn and achieve to the best of their potential. They believe that education is very important to marginalized students and that is why they focus their energies in promoting their academic achievement. This quote below from the Scientific A United Nations Education (UNESCO) (2010), *Education for All Global Monitoring Report: 2010: Reaching the Marginalized* captures the essence of the principals’ beliefs:

The interaction between marginalization in education and wider patterns of marginalization operates in both directions. Being educated is a vital human capability that enables people to make choices in areas that matter. The lack of an education restricts choices. It limits the scope people have for influencing decisions that affect their lives. People lacking literacy and numeracy skills face a heightened risk of poverty, insecure employment and ill health. Poverty and ill health, in turn, contribute to marginalization in education. So does the fact that the marginalized have only a weak voice in shaping political decisions affecting their lives. (p. 136)
Poverty was identified as one of the barriers that can interfere with the students’ learning if supports and resources are not put in place for the students. So instead of blaming the students and parents, they attempt to remove the barriers to create conditions that will be conducive to ensuring academic achievement for the students. They have several programs in place to support the students. They have programs such as breakfast, lunch, and snack programs that tend to the nutrition needs of the students. The food is accessible to all students so that none of the children feel centred out. They also provide after-school extracurricular activities such as homework club, and various sports activities in their efforts to promote the academic achievement of their marginalized students.

The reason they care so much about promoting the marginalized students’ academic achievement is referenced to in the Education for All Global Monitoring Report: 2010: Reaching the Marginalized as follows:

Getting a good education can create a virtuous circle of life chances. There is extensive evidence that education improves prospects not just for earnings and employment but also for health, civic engagement and social mobility (Lochner, 2004; Machin et al., 2006). Conversely, low levels of education are associated with entrenched employment disadvantage, restricted social mobility and a wide range of social problems. When individuals and groups emerge from education systems with low levels of achievement, they and their children face a heightened risk of marginalization in many aspects of their lives. Education systems provide a mechanism for offsetting social disadvantage, but when opportunities and outcomes are skewed they can reinforce social divisions.

(UNESCO, p. 155)
So these equity-minded principals do everything they can to ensure that the marginalized students in their schools are provided with every possible opportunity to promote their academic achievement.

Other factors highlighted were racial, cultural, and linguistic differences. The principals articulated, just as Glaze et al. (2012) stated, that “while school cannot control the background factors that can have an impact on student achievement, they can control the factors in the school that can help the children to achieve to their potential” (p. 95). The principals indicated that those who are racially, culturally, linguistically different, sometimes got teased or ostracized by their peers, and that can affect their academic achievement. *The Education for All Global Monitoring Report: 2010: Reaching the Marginalized* also acknowledged that:

Racial and ethnic minority groups experience some of the most severe education disadvantage, which can be traced to deeply engrained and often centuries-old patterns of cultural discrimination and stigmatization. Low educational achievement reflects the durability of these patterns, interacting with social and economic inequalities to perpetuate social exclusion. (UNESCO, p.157)

To combat these problems, the principals created a school environment in which all the students felt safe and welcomed. They believed that this was very important to promote the students’ learning, because, if they are afraid to come to school or become disengaged, then they will not have a fair shot at achieving to their full potential.

Ability was another factor that was identified as a major cause in the students’ marginalization. They acknowledged that some students have learning problems that act as a barrier to their academic achievement. They are also firm believers that “one size doesn’t fit all.” Gregory and Chapman (2002) state:
No one would ever say that all students are the same. Certainly no teacher or parent would tell you that. Yet in schools we often treat students as if they were, even though all those faces look different. We sometimes put them through the same hoops, even though we know it isn’t making a difference for all of them. Experience as well as the research we now have about the human brain tell us that students are different, that they learn differently and have different likes, preference and needs. (p. ix)

The principals pointed out that, as indicated in the Ontario Leadership Framework, (2013), the “principal provides resources in support of curriculum instruction and differentiated instruction”; they monitor constantly to ensure that differentiated instruction is happening in each classroom. Differentiated instruction provides the students a variety of options that help them reach their full potential. The principals indicated that some learning needs are a little easier to solve because they can get the necessary resources in place, such as using an educational assistant to work with the students with special learning needs, getting students the technology they need to help them learn, or providing specialized programs to help the students close the learning gaps. For the gifted students, enrichment work and programs are provided to them to meet their learning needs.

However, they also noted that some students are marginalized because of the mental health problems they are dealing with and the difficulties that are involved to get them the help they need. The agencies that would be able to help the children do not necessarily work together, which makes it difficult for the school and parents to navigate the health system to get the students help. The principals stated that this seems to be an area where they are struggling. They indicated that, although this seems to be a growing problem, they do not have much information about providing the students the assistance they need. Further, they pointed out that they are
learning and seeking services for their students as best as they can. One of the documents one of the principals referred to is called the Ontario’s Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy that was initiated by the government of Ontario in 2011. It is a 4-year strategy and is now supposed to be in year 4. It is stated in that document that “the first three years of the Strategy are being led by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care” (p. 2). At the time of the interviews, none of the principals have been in-serviced about this initiative, and 15 of them did not even know that the document existed.

The last systemic social barrier highlighted by three principals was that of sexual orientation. Although two principals pointed this issue to be a concern, all three principals acknowledged that in elementary school the problem of marginalization is not as pronounced as it is in secondary school. This might perhaps explain why the other 13 principals did not highlight it as a concern. In a study conducted by Singh (2010), William, one of the participants who is gay, stated:

> I had a great experience in school up until grade 8 and then I moved, started a new high school with nobody I knew in terms of friends, and that’s the age when you sort of come into your own sexuality, around 13. I always knew I was gay. I may not have had the language to talk about that but when I hit high school everybody else seemed to know. And, you know, it was just hell for four years of being in high school in a rural community in southern Ontario. (p. 169)

William’s experiences are well reflected in an excerpt from Glaze et al. (2012). It states:

> Some students come to school fearful that they will not be accepted. Some are picked on or ridiculed because of their differences. For example, many students who are gay,
lesbian, or transgendered face challenges in successfully completing their schooling. There is much evidence that schools, especially secondary schools, can be hostile places for non-heterosexual students, who may be subject to bullying, or other forms of social isolation. (pp. 47–48)

Emily, Thomas, and Helen believe that it is very important to educate our students and staff members about diversity, which includes sexual and gender identification so that when the students go to secondary school they are already aware of the facts and understand that teasing, calling names, bullying, or physically abusing others because of their gender orientation among other things is not acceptable behaviour and would not be tolerated. All principals emphasized the fact that it is crucial to create a school environment where all students, including LGBTQ, feel welcomed, safe, and valued. Students need to feel safe emotionally and socially. This is important so that the students can focus on their academic achievement rather than focusing on dropping out of school due to lack of acceptance.

**Principals’ Advocacy and School Culture**

As the main institution for fostering social cohesion in an increasingly diverse society, publicly funded schools must serve all children, not simply those with the loudest or most powerful advocates. This means addressing the cognitive and social needs of all children, with an emphasis on including those who may not have been well served in the past.

(Fullan, 2003, p. 3)

The principals in this study had a firm understanding that in order for the marginalized students to achieve academically, it is important to provide them with an equitable and inclusive education. “They believe that teaching tolerance, understanding, and respect is a nonnegotiable part of creating an effective school culture” (Fisher, Frey, & Pumpian, 2012, p. 9). They
referenced the Ontario Leadership Framework (2013) and Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Schools Guidelines (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014) as guides they follow to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students. For instance, it states in the Ontario Leadership Framework (2013) that “the principal treats people fairly, equitably and with dignity and respect to create and maintain a positive school culture” (pp. 13–14). Therefore, they promoted a school environment in which all students felt safe, welcomed, respected, valued, and included.

These equity-minded principals advocated for marginalized students due to their belief, as Ryan (2003) indicated, that promotion of school community relationships provides an important medium to foster inclusiveness. Ryan (2006a) indicated that educating the whole school community about inclusive issues is important because administrators, teachers, students and parents, particularly those in more diverse settings, generally know too little about each other, about exclusive practices such as racism and how to approach and implement inclusive practices. (p. 12)

So, the principals set about recognizing who the marginalized students were in their schools and what systemic factors were causing their marginalization. They were able to articulate and maintained their focus on equity in their dialogue and actions. They became the voice of the marginalized students within the school, school board, and community. Ryan (2010) highlighted the fact that administrators in his study: “Promoting Social Justice in Schools: Principals’ Political Strategies” indicated that they often found themselves in the position of having to persuade others to go along with their equity initiatives, and so they had various techniques to convince school or
community members of the value of equity programs and prompt central staff administrators to support a policy initiative or give them much needed resources. (p. 24)

Through their advocacy, they were able to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students, figuring out how to find ways around the system inequalities in order to eradicate obstacles that were blocking student academic achievement. They understood that some practices and ideas exhibited by many educators can unwittingly lead to the preservation of inequalities whereby the educators become ‘gatekeepers of the status quo’ and ‘sorters and selectors rather than advocates’ which leads to upholding social and academic inequity. (House & Martin, 1998, p. 284)

Not only did the principals advocate for marginalized students, they also strove to instill the skills to advocate for themselves and others in the future. They believed, as Freire (1973) pointed out, “advocacy becomes a life skill that fosters a strong sense of agency and ‘other directness. It becomes a powerful strategy to engage people and to enliven their critical consciousness” (Freire, as cited in Glaze, et al., 2012, p. 175). Munck (2005) also stated that the marginalized must be empowered so that they will be able to gain confidence and develop skills to control their participation, contributions, and ultimately, their own lives. Participants need to see this as an active process where change is generated not from ‘without’ but from ‘within.’ (as cited in Ryan, 2006a, p. 7)

Although they all faced staff’s resistance to various degrees, the principals were able to curb and respond proactively to issues that presented as deficit thinking. The principals realized that many of their staff members did not see or seem to understand the negative effects their beliefs had on the students’ academic achievement. They agree with the Education for All Global Monitoring Report: 2010: Reaching the Marginalized when it states that “even experienced
teachers need training to challenge attitudes to the marginalized and to equip them to teach effectively in classrooms with children from a diversity of backgrounds” (UNESCO, 2010, p. 198). Valencia (1997b) “found that educators have assumed that failure of students was naturally attributed to the students’ racial or cultural ‘inferiority,’ their language, low SES, their parents’ low education, and their perceived lack of interest” (as cited in Simone, 2012, p. 3). Valencia (1997a) added that “teachers who operate through a lens of deficit thinking are conditionally practicing an approach that ‘blames the victim’” (as cited in Simone, 2012, p. 3).

The principals provided students with early interventions and resources to support them in their classrooms and school community. Not only did they provide supports for students in the classroom, they ensured that students had access not only to other resources that supported academics in isolation, but resources that nurtured and developed the well-being of the whole child. Once they identified the students’ needs, they went on to build alliances and tap into the will of the community members to support the students’ learning. These resources were highlighted by the principals when they provided various nutritional programs to ensure that the children were fed. This helped by removing the obstacle of hunger that might otherwise have been interfering with the students’ ability to stay focused in class. They also solicited volunteers from the community to read with struggling students to improve their reading skills, to which Glaze et al. (2012) refer.

The principals worked very closely with their staff members, those who had bought into the vision, and community partners to provide students with extracurricular activities in the form of various sports programs, such as hockey, basketball, soccer, and volleyball. Fredricks and Eccles (2006) wrote:
There is a growing body of research in leisure studies, sociology, sports psychology, and adolescent development demonstrating the beneficial effects of participation in extracurricular activities. Activity participation has been positively linked to academic outcomes, including grades, test scores, school engagement, and educational aspirations (H. Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). Other research has documented a relation between extracurricular involvement and psychological outcomes, such as higher self-esteem and lower rates of depression (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Mahoney, Schweder, & Stattin, 2002), (p. 698)

These programs provided opportunities for marginalized students to promote their physical activity, physical literacy, and overall well-being. This in turn helps to promote their self-esteem and confidence and helps them to stay engaged in school. They also provided arts programs. For example, Nick and Sandra made sure that their students were provided with musical instruments and music lessons throughout the year by the community partners. They also partnered up with various community agencies that provided tickets for their students to attend various musical concerts. These programs were offered to the children free of charge, as the majority of the parents could not afford to pay. These principals recognized that arts education supports all areas of the curriculum. “For example, students engaged in the arts improve in reading, math, and science, and in abstract reasoning and spatial skills. Their self esteem, self confidence, self motivation and cooperation improve. The arts encourage creativity” (Glaze et al. 2012, p. 187).

In the Ontario Leadership Framework (2013) it states that: “The principals provide equity and access to opportunity and achievement” (p. 13–14). So these equity-minded principals also
advocated for the children through community agencies to get items such as free or subsidized computers. They were quite mindful that despite the fact that technology could enhance student learning, it could also be the new divide widening the gap between the haves and have-nots. So they made sure that the students who did not have computers at home had access to the ones at school. Oftentimes, they volunteered to have a variety of pilot programs facilitated at their schools. For example Sandra piloted the full day kindergarten program and the family literacy centre at her school, because she knew they would be provided with more materials and funds. They used those materials and funds to subsidize further the needs of the marginalized children, such as paying for educational field trips, paying to bring in speakers or presenters from various cultural backgrounds, and to buy much-needed resources such as reading materials for the students.

Another component of advocacy these principals paid attention to was that of students’ attendance. They are quite cognizant that attendance is one of the critical factors that impacts on students’ academic achievement. All of them kept close tabs on the marginalized students’ attendance. They would call home frequently to check with the parents if the students were not coming to school. Principals such as Natalie, Steven, and Henry would go to the students’ homes and bring them to school. Helen also offered her school to be used as a centre for adult learners so that the parents can attend school at the same time their children are at school to give the parents an opportunity to get their high school diplomas or equivalence. They also disciplined students, especially those with behaviour problems or mental health conditions, with dignity.
Curriculum and Instruction

In every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to other eyes as mine see it. (Michalangelo, 1475–1564, as cited in Sharratt & Fullan, 2012, p. 41)

The principals made it very clear that when marginalized students are expected to function in a school system designed for the dominant white-middle class culture, it becomes a challenge for them. It is not fair. They believe that student achievement should not only be restricted to academic achievement but should encompass student engagement, student voice and student well-being. They strive to change the current school system by promoting an equitable and democratic set of social and educational practices within their schools.

In the Ontario Leadership Framework (2013), it is stated that: “the principal sets high expectations for learning outcomes and monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of instruction” (pp. 13–14). Therefore, equity-minded principals committed to creating a culture that fosters high expectations for all students, including those who are marginalized, and for staff. In the Ontario Ministry of Education document: Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation (2014), it is also clearly stated that “an equitable, inclusive education system is one in which all students, parents, and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected, and every student is supported and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning” (p. 5). It goes on to state:

Equity and inclusive education aims to understand, identify, address, and eliminate the biases, barriers, and power dynamics that limit students’ prospects for learning, growing, and fully contributing to society, . . . and in reaffirming the values of fairness, equity,
and respect as essential principles of our publicly funded education system, the Ontario government’s equity and inclusive education strategy helps to ensure that all students have the opportunities they need to fulfil their potential. (p. 8)

The principals referred to these two guidelines to achieve this by working collaboratively with their staff to ensure that students who were struggling were identified right away and early interventions were put in place for them and ongoing support was given as needed. Although some staff members were noncooperative, the principals worked closely with the staff members on the school improvement team and the special education teacher. They made sure that the struggling students were identified quickly to give them the supports they needed and those that were identified as gifted received the learning programs suited to their learning needs. The areas of intervention were well articulated in the school improvement plan that is put together by the principals and the school improvement team. They made sure that all the staff members, not just the teachers, understood that student academic achievement was a task that would be achieved collectively regardless of personal feelings or opinions. Therefore, the school improvement plan was co-constructed from all staff’s input and, once the document was finalized, it was shared with all of them, parent school council members and community partners.

Principals also ensured that the instructional time was maximized by reducing the number of interruptions during the day as indicated in the Ontario Leadership Framework (2013, pp. 13–14). For example, they promoted a balanced literacy program that consisted of daily read-alouds, shared reading, guided reading, and writing, modelled writing, and independent reading and writing. The importance of helping the students to develop strong literacy skills, especially those who are marginalized, was highlighted by all the principals. For example, Marcus emphasized the fact that if the children who come from marginalized communities cannot read
effectively and do poorly in academics, they will struggle in their adult lives. The principals indicated that having good reading skills is crucial, especially for marginalized students, because if they go to high school with poor reading skills, they usually just give up even before they get started. When they give up on high school, odds are that they will continue to be trapped in cyclical poverty, as Helen called it, and/or get into trouble with the law, as Monica pointed out. They also kept the parents informed on what the students were learning about through school newsletters which are also posted on the school website for easier access by parents who have computers. They believe that this form of communication gave the parents an opportunity to help their children with their homework or by providing them real-life experiences that connect to what students are currently learning about in school.

That being said, the principals made it very clear that it is also very important to understand that it is not easy to engage the parents of marginalized students. Griffiths (2013) states that

the challenges of including all parents/guardians can be more daunting since many do not belong to the dominant culture, and so have experienced lifetimes of marginalization, oppression and exclusion. For these reasons we cannot evaluate a parent’s commitment to school based on how many times the agendas we send home are signed, how many phone calls are returned, how often the parent/guardian attends school meetings, events or interviews. (p. 81)

Principals Mariah, Helen, and Melissa gave concrete data evidence highlighting the students’ academic evidence they based on the report cards and EQAO standardized scores. Before these three principals came to their current schools, the students in these schools, especially those who are marginalized, performed very poorly on their report cards and EQAO
tests. Since they came, they have seen slow but steady improvement on the students’ report card achievement and EQAO scores. For instance, Melissa’s, Sarah’s, and Helen’s schools won awards to recognize the improvement of academic achievement that has been accomplished despite the increased numbers of marginalized students in their schools.

However, other principals such as Monica, Nick, George, Sandra, and Henry were questioning the validity of the EQAO testing, especially in relation to the many English language learners and newly arrived immigrant students in their schools. They stated that it was not fair to those students to write a test written in a language they cannot read or understand. The UNESCO, (2010) *The Education for All Global Monitoring Report: 2010: Reaching the Marginalized* made the same observation. It stated:

> Speaking a minority language is also often associated with low levels of education achievement. In many countries, large numbers of children are taught and take tests in languages that they do not speak at home, hindering the early acquisition of reading and writing skills. Their parents may lack literacy skills or familiarity with official languages used in school, so that the home environment reinforces learning opportunity gaps between minority and majority language groups. (p. 159)

And some communities do not want those students to come to their schools for fear of lowering their school’s EQAO scores. In a study Wang (2012) conducted, he found that some of his participants (principals) had the same observations. He stated:

> And within the community, when we originally had the boundaries changed, that brought more of the kids from the lower social-economic group. There was a huge backlash from the working community. They did not want those kids in our school, because our EQAO
scores were going to fall, because we would have too many English language learners. (Paula). (p. 69)

In order to ensure that the curriculum was delivered effectively, the principal made some adjustments to the delivery model of the special education program from an exclusive one where the students were pulled out of the classrooms to an inclusive model where the students with special needs remained in their classrooms. Although their curriculum program was modified or accommodated, they remained in their classrooms and learned along with their peers. Griffiths (2013) stated:

Instead of withdrawing special education students from the general classrooms, special education teachers can visit them there. Consistent with the emphasis on team teaching and collaboration, special education teachers can work together to develop appropriate programs and deliver these to students. (p. 79)

So, the focus was then placed on differentiated instructions for the students who were struggling. The teachers who were having difficulties differentiating instructions for the students were given support by bringing in central staff to give them site-based in-services to bring them to speed. Griffiths (2013) and Tomlinson and Allan (2000) also indicated that “differentiated instruction is a vital classroom strategy for including all students” (p. 78).

Principal George acknowledged that much emphasis is placed on students’ leadership development through using *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey’s leadership model. The students are taught to set their learning goals and take responsibility for tracking how they are achieving those goals. These equity-minded principals concur with James (2007) and Solomon (1992) when they acknowledged that all students must be able to envision themselves in positions of power in society and must be given the skills to realize their potential as leaders in
positions of influence. They believed that there can be negative repercussions if students go through school feeling powerless and marginalized, because this feeling often leads to lack of motivation, a sense of inadequacy, and school failure. The equity-minded principals shared a similar perspective as Portelli et al. (2007) that “curriculum is not only, or indeed even primarily, the objectives contained in a teachers’ guide or ministerial resource package, but rather a way of helping students bring their lived experiences together with the official curriculum in the classroom.” (p. 27). Therefore, they focus on a curriculum that promotes social responsibility that speaks to students’ lives, that relates to their daily lived realities and that empowers the students to develop dispositions and ways of thinking that are necessary to clearly and critically interpret their world (Portelli et al. 2007, p. 27). The principals believed that students are most engaged and attain academic achievement when teachers use strategies that make strong connections to their lived experiences.

Another aspect equity-minded principals promoted was a curriculum that was culturally relevant to students from culturally diverse backgrounds and students at risk. The principals strived “to provide the marginalized students the safe opportunity to share their narrative, to tell their story, and start writing the next several chapters of the person whom they aspire to be” (Fisher et al., 2012, p. 9). The purpose for this is to ensure that there is a connection: what the students are learning at school and their lived experiences. The principals echoed the same perspective Griffiths (2013) highlighted when he stated:

Culturally relevant teaching (CRT) practices will help teachers to meet the learning needs of the diverse student population. The goal of this pedagogy is to increase academic achievement (Howard 2003, 196), but I would argue further that CRT also enhances student self-esteem. In CRT, the teachers incorporate the various cultures of their
students into the curriculum planning and delivery (Milner 2011, 69). Students then see themselves reflected both in the curriculum and the pedagogy. (pp. 78–79)

The principals are quite aware that most of the textbook content was written from the White people’s point of view, where history has had a tendency of being distorted. For example, the early explorers, such as Christopher Columbus, are still being taught in elementary schools as great heroes for discovering America. However, the fact that Columbus was a crook, thief, and killer of many Aboriginal peoples is underplayed or left out altogether. Knockwood (1992) wrote,

We sang songs in honour of Christopher Columbus who discovered America. Apparently our ancestors had been “discovered” by this white man who was lost on his way to find spices. . . . Nothing was taught about Native philosophy or our rights to the land of our ancestors. No one told us that the Hurons shown scalping the missionaries in the textbooks wanted their children to learn and keep their Native spirituality and their own land. (pp. 51–52)

These principals believe that students from various cultural backgrounds and students at risk of school failure usually experience a sense of being disconnected from the content they are studying, classroom and library resources, because they feel excluded. This cultural disconnect often leads to poor self-esteem, discipline issues, and poor student outcomes (Bazron, Osher, & Feischman, 2005, as cited in Glaze et al., 2012, p. 70). The disconnect and frustrations students from various cultural backgrounds might encounter are well demonstrated in an episode which happened between an Aboriginal girl, Cherly, and a White male history teacher, illustrated below:
That morning, her teacher had been reading to the class how the Indians scalped, tortured and massacred brave white explorers and missionaries. Cherly’s anger began to build. All of a sudden, she had loudly exclaimed, “This is all a bunch of lies!” . . . the teacher came and stood by her desk. “They’re not lies; this is history. These things happened whether you like it or not.” “If this is history, how come so many Indian tribes were wiped out? How come they haven’t got their land anymore? How come their food supplies were wiped out? Lies! Lies! Lies! Your history books don’t say how the white people destroyed the Indian way of life. That’s all you white people can do is to teach a bunch of lies to cover your own tracks!” (Culleton, 1991, p. 57)

This quotation showed some of the frustration felt by some students in the school who come from culturally diverse backgrounds. Unfortunately, many times these students will not be brave enough to say anything of this nature or make such a scene for fear of the disapproving reaction from their peers and school administration. Therefore, they sit there quietly and take whatever is given or said to them, wondering when it will be over. They feel powerless, angry, or sometimes ashamed of themselves. They become disengaged and start acting up, and then they are blamed for behaving badly. That is why the equity-minded principals believed that it was so important to highlight in the curriculum the numerous contributions of various cultural groups to science, math, language, philosophy, and much more. One thing that can close the achievement gap is to highlight the legacies and knowledge of different populations. Thus, they provide new ways of knowing for staff and students to see people of all races, abilities, and class groupings as capable people.

In order to further promote culturally responsive teaching, the principals provide teachers with classroom materials such as books, posters, and videos that reflect various students’ cultures.
and backgrounds. They also make sure, as indicated by Mariah, that images displayed in the
school are reflective of the students’ cultural backgrounds. It was quite evident in the schools I
visited when I went to interview the principals that diversity was much valued, as was evidenced
by the pictures and various quotes that were displayed around the school and in the classrooms.

Furthermore, in order to help their staff members get a better understanding of the
various cultures in their schools, the following principals: Helen, Natalie, Wilma, Marcus,
Sandra, Steven, Monica, Thomas, Henry, and Nick provided professional learning opportunities
for them by inviting members of the community to share information about their cultures and
traditions. They also provided opportunities during staff meetings for staff to have a safe place to
dialogue issues relating to equity and diversity. The principals believed that it is very important
for the staff to learn about equitable practices, as such opportunities help to develop the
individual’s critical consciousness. Ryan (2006c) indicated that developing critical consciousness
in stakeholders is vital (p. 113). This is central to creating a long-term sustainability of the equity
mandate even after the principal who was equity-minded moves on to another school. It provides
the staff with opportunities to understand their students’ lives and combats the deficit model
mentality the staff usually exhibit where they attribute the students’ failures to their “internal
deficits or deficiencies” (Valencia, 1997a, p. 1).

In addition, the principals made connections with the community partners and through
their boards to provide interpreters for parents who are English language learners to
communicate with the teachers to ensure they are up to date with their children’s academic
progress. Also, the newsletters were translated into various languages reflective of their school
community. Others have their school websites set up in a way that the parents can translate the
newsletter posted on the school websites by just pressing a button to choose the language they
speak at home. All these strategies were used to promote a curriculum and instructions that are reflective of the school body.

**Inspirations for the Principals**

All the principals were inspired to be equity-minded principals because of their life experiences and some through their Master of Education and Education Doctorate programs. They firmly believed that all students can achieve academically if they are given time and supports. The majority of them acknowledged that they could identify with the marginalized students because, at one time or another, they went through experiences similar to those these students were going through. Many of them identified themselves as immigrants or sons and daughters of immigrants. They are the first generation here. For them and their parents, Canada was a new country, and the life as it was lived here was different from their old country. The Anglo-Saxon curriculum content that reflected the culture of the upper and middle class income families did not necessarily reflect what was happening in their own homes. The languages spoken in their homes were different from the English language, which was the formal language of instruction. Many of them spoke Italian, Portuguese, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and different languages from India, to mention just a few. Singh (2010) indicated similar experiences for herself when she stated that “much of my lived experience in high school was chaotic and unfathomable to most of my educators; my lived reality was disjointed from the curricula and I could not have cared less about how others constructed me” (pp. 10–11). Since the principals’ parents did not speak English, they needed to be their parents’ interpreters whenever any school actives took place, such as teacher–parent interviews. Even then, the parents did not have much engagement with the school, mostly because they did not know how the school system worked in
Canada. They had their trust in the principals and teachers, expecting them to do their best to help their children do well in school.

Students who are marginalized today have the same story many of these principals experienced but this time played out by different players. Bernal (2002) states, “Although students of color are holders and creators of knowledge, they often feel as if their histories, experiences, cultures, and languages are devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal educational settings” (p. 106). Bernal illustrated the point further using the following quote from one of the students:

I have to say that I think my high school was pretty discriminatory because I feel that I wasn’t tracked into a college program and I think I had the potential to be. Except because I was from the other side of the tracks, no one really took the time to inspire me. . . . I had a high school English teacher who had asked us to write an essay. And I had written it about the death of my sister. And when she gave it back to me, she gave me a D. And she said it was all wrong. And I just couldn’t get how she was, first of all, insensitive, and then second of all, criticizing me on an experience she didn’t have and that only I could write about. And so that’s when I think I started to feel the discrimination, almost in the way, I guess in the expectations of what you talk about or what you don’t talk about in school. And what’s academic and what’s not academic. (Angela, a graduating Chicana college student). (p. 106)

Nowadays, many students come from the Philippines, Africa, Iraq, China, Poland, Colombia, El Salvador, Afghanistan, Serbia, Pakistan, and many other Arab countries, to mention just a few. Many of these children are new immigrants or they are the first generation, just as many of the principals in this study were. Many of these children are English language
learners, and their parents speak their mother tongue at home, which is certainly not English. These principals have a good sense of what struggles they have to endure in order to be caught up in their learning. They strongly believe that they can attain academic achievement if supports and resources are put in place to scaffold the students’ learning by meeting them at the level they are at, to help close the gaps, just as theirs were closed by some equity-minded principals and teachers who believed in them.

Principals understand what barriers the students are faced with on a daily basis because they went through them too. Many of them remember the name-calling, the teasing, and sometimes physical beatings from other students because they were “different” from what was known to be the norm in school. Their cultural background was different, their skin colour was darker than what was expected, their hair colour was darker than what was expected, they spoke English with an accent or not at all, and their eye colour was not blue, the colour which was expected to be the norm. Many of them had to learn to fight to defend themselves and their siblings. Griffiths (2013) also shed a light on how childhood experiences of the participants in his study heavily motivated them to promote equity for marginalized students (pp. 19–20). Singh (2010) highlights the physical and verbal abuse many of the marginalized participants in his study had to endure and how it motivated them to be equity minded (pp. 167–171).

Another factor that inspired these principals to be equity minded was the injustices they saw in school. Even at their young age, they could notice that some students were treated better than others by the teachers and administrators. Some students were called upon more than those from various cultural backgrounds or those that were deemed to be poor. This echoed the research which was conducted in the primary classroom which confirmed that middle class children are treated differently than are lower class children. One of the examples given takes
place during “sharing time,” when children are encouraged to talk about themselves. It was observed that teachers over and over again tend to give middle class children feedback to improve their self-presentation skills, while their counterparts from lower class children were not given any feedback to improve their skills. (Bernstein 1970; Labov, 1972; Rist, 1970, as cited in deMarrais & LeCompte, 1998, p. 14).

These principals, as children, also watched helplessly as they saw and heard their teachers calling students from different cultural backgrounds by racial slurs. Helen recounted how one teacher in grade 5 made fun of her friend because he was Italian. He called him “Prosciutto head” in front of the whole class. Her friend felt humiliated and hated being Italian from that point on. She silently vowed that, if she ever became a teacher, she would never allow any of her students to be made to feel ashamed of who they are.

Furthermore, one principal shared the story of how recently he overheard two teachers in the staff room using racial comments when talking about students of the Iraqi origin. They said, “Those three tall guys remind me of the three towers in New York. We should call them “the 3 Ts.” He said that he called them into his office and went ballistic. He was very disappointed that educators can be so cruel as to use such racial comments towards students who, above all, are entrusted in their care. It brought about unhappy memories for him because that sort of behaviour was just ignored during the time he was growing up. He stated, “I used this as a teachable moment. When I was through with them, they are now the police for any other teachers who exhibit such behaviour.”

Principals indicated that some of the students they grew up with had their names changed into an English version by the school system. Sarah gave me an example of some of her friends’ names that were changed as follows: Ewa became Eva; Alicia became Alice; Yohana became
Joanna; Tavin became Kevin, and many more. Sarah stated that she was very keen to ensure that the students’ names are preserved as they are supposed to be. Whenever she hears a teacher or students calling the children with a different name other than their original name, she reminds them not to do so. She did not want what happened to her friends and what happened to the Aboriginal children to occur to these students under her care. Thus, many of these principals teach their staffs about matters that address cultural backgrounds and creating culturally responsive classrooms and school culture.

Some principals were inspired by their role models, such as parents and other people who have promoted social justice through working with people who are marginalized (Griffiths, 2013; Singh, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). Many grew up observing the acts of kindness, the empathy shown to people from different walks of life, and the fairness their parents showed them when dealing with others. Some cited Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis as inspiration to them. Jesus Christ was also highlighted as being an inspiration to many principals because he spent most of his life reaching out to the marginalized in society. They believe that they too can make a difference in other people’s lives by giving marginalized students hope and by creating a school culture in which they feel safe, included, and valued.

Two principals, Monica and Marcus, were of the belief that success in education and society was based on merit, which our educational system seemed to perpetuate. After taking their Doctor of Education program, they learned in their studies that, this was not the case. “One need only look at the undisputed summit of the pyramid of economic, political and legislative power in Canadian and US society to understand that the wealthiest, and most influential, Canadians have traditionally been from White, European families” (Carr, 2006, p. 6). The stories they shared with their colleagues during class discussions and the equity-related research
articles and books they read confirmed for them the perpetuation of inequality that continued to exist in our educational system. Equipped with this knowledge, these principals try to teach others about the systemic inequalities in order to inspire them to make a difference for the marginalized students by promoting their academic achievement (Griffiths, 2011, Ryan, 2003).

**Staff as Barriers or Facilitators**

How can we understand why so many children do not learn what the mainstream schools think they are teaching unless we can get “inside” the learners and see the world through their eyes? If we do not try to do this, if we continue to use the mainstream experience of reality as the perspective, we fool ourselves into believing that we are looking through a window when instead we are looking into a mirror. (Purcell-Gates, 1995, p. 6)

Principals faced many barriers, but one that was highlighted as the greatest stumbling block was that of the resistance of some staff members (Griffiths 2013; Singh, 2010). For many staff members, the notion of eliminating deficit thinking challenges the mindset of an entrenched culture, and in some cases, leads them to admit that what they have been doing as educators has been misguided and marginalizing. (Muhammad, 2009, as cited in Simone, 2012, p. 203)

The principals categorized the staff members they worked with in their schools in four groups. The first group consisted of staff members that were the facilitators. They bought into the vision of improving the marginalized students’ academic achievement right away. They worked collaboratively with the principals. They took on leadership roles of leading their divisions that are, primary, junior, and intermediate. They facilitated the division meetings and shared willingly with their colleagues their new learning and various culturally responsive strategies they used. They also saw the need to make a change in the school culture and in their
teaching practices to promote the academic achievement of the marginalized students. They attended willingly the professional development dialogues the principals organized for the staff. In these professional development sessions, the staff had opportunities to dialogue with each other in a safe environment to reflect and critique their thoughts and practices in relation to marginalized students. The facilitators embraced the new learning willingly and with enthusiasm. On the other hand, for the resisting groups, it was like pulling teeth for them to attend these sessions and to participate in the much-needed conversations that would help to break down the deep-rooted assumptions and prejudices that affect how the marginalized students are taught and treated in schools.

The second group resisted change in a very subtle way. Hultman (1995) called this group “passive resistors” (p. 16). They would make it look like they were going to use the strategies; however they did not follow through. They just continued to do their own thing as they have been doing all along. Other educators know how to use the language of inclusiveness, which stays only on the basis of just words; their actions, if observed carefully, did not match. In other words, they knew the right things to say, but they did not “walk the talk.” The principals stated that these staff members are more difficult to deal with than the ones who are outright defiant, because they make them think that the agenda is being moved forward while in the meantime it is being sabotaged by just maintaining the status quo.

The third group resisted by flatly saying no to all the strategies and initiatives that were collaboratively brought forward by their peers. Hultman (1995) called this group “active resisters” (p. 16). These staff members caused a lot of stress for the principals. They were rude to the principals, they would argue with them, and their negative attitude created a toxic school environment. Nick explained that they exhibited a negative attitude during staff meetings when
the principal was trying to explain the vision and the possible strategies or trying to elicit ideas from staff members. During the staff meetings they kept watching the wall clock or their watches, checked their cell phones, and had their own side discussions while the principal was talking or when the other staff members were brainstorming some ideas. As soon as the one hour of the meeting was up (according to their union regulation), they would pick up their stuff and leave, whether the meeting was finished or not. They bullied or manipulated other staff members who wanted to buy into the vision or tried to cooperate with the principal. They would discourage them and also talk negatively about the principals among staff members, parents, and community at large to try to undermine them. So in order to avoid being put under the gun, other staff members chose not to comply. They closed their doors and continued teaching the way they have always done.

Sarah stated that one of her teachers was so resistant to changing the way she was teaching that she ripped many of the language learning resources to pieces and threw them in the garbage. Another staff member, who saw what happened, told Sarah about it. Sure enough, they found two big garbage bags full of expensive students’ and teachers’ literacy resources.

In addition, this teacher would sit at her desk and read newspapers instead of teaching the students. Although she had quite a few students who were struggling in her class, she was not interested whatsoever in assisting them. She just left them to the educational assistant who was in her class to plan their lessons and to teach the students. So the notion of promoting academic achievement for marginalized students did not interest her at all. Despite the efforts of the principals to bring in central staff to do in-services for their site-based professional development, they continued to follow the same teaching practices that have not served the marginalized students now and in the past. Steven gave an example of one of his teachers who was focused
only on teacher-guided lessons. The grade 3 students are always sitting on the floor in a circle, day in day out. When they are sitting in their seats, the teacher gets them to do cursive writing or write a journal, which he never corrects either. Steven has tried to talk to the teacher, but apparently it is like talking to a wall. This teacher is set in his ways because previous administrators had never confronted him on these teaching techniques. Although he has had courageous conversations with such teachers, the only way he could take them out of his school is through a transfer process, which seems to favour the teachers in any case. This teacher has been at this school for 9 years.

The fourth and last group was sitting on the fence; they could go either way: to embrace the change or to follow the active resistance group. However, all the principals acknowledged that they were aware that “resistance can arise during every phase of the change process and from a variety of predictable and sometimes unpredictable sources. Only a naive leader would anticipate no resistance when undertaking educational change” (Duke, 2004, p. 191). All that being said, the equity-minded principals continue to believe, as Fisher et al. (2012) pointed out, that a culture committed to student learning must be equally committed to the learning of teachers. An environment that provides thoughtful support for the young people in the building would ultimately not be able to sustain its efforts without nurturing the adults as well. A tremendous cultural shift is required if educators are truly to see themselves as lifelong learners. (p. 163)

So, they do not get discouraged; they keep focusing on the marginalized students’ academic achievement. Despite the negative attitudes they encounter from some staff members, they continue to teach, be role models, and provide the staff professional development to
promote capacity building. They are quite aware that developing others as indicated in the Ontario Leadership Framework (2013) that a principal “engages staff in professional learning” (p. 11) is very important and they strive to do so. Fisher et al. (2012) state that although it may be easier to do a lot of things yourself, you can’t do them all, and it is not in the best interest of the organization if you try. We have to share responsibility with our coworkers and provide them all with the support they need to reach the next level of performance (p. 162).

So, the principals do not give up; they keep finding creative ways to engage the teachers to continue to develop them with the goal in mind to help marginalized students to attain high academic achievement.
CHAPTER TEN: CONCLUSION

You must be the change you wish to see in the world. (Mahatma Gandhi, August 8, 1942)

This study is for all elementary principals. From my own experience as an immigrant, parent, student in the Ontario school system, teacher, and administrator, I understand how critical it is for all principals in elementary schools to promote the academic achievement of all students, including those who are marginalized. Students are marginalized in school because of social inequalities and systemic barriers over which they have no control. They cannot change their economic status, cultural background, race, sexual orientation or ability. These factors that cause the marginalization of the students are built into the educational system, and unless the principals take it upon themselves to try to do something about the barriers that prevent the students from being able to perform to the best of their abilities, the marginalization will continue.

Educators keep highlighting the fact that students need to be given a voice (Griffiths, 2013). As a matter of fact, there are a few examples of student leadership initiatives in literature that go so far back as Mackin (1996), Lee and Ursel (2001), and Leisey et al. (as cited in Critchley, 1999). However, the students have been giving educators signals that speak louder than words, although they have chosen to ignore them to the best of their abilities. When a person is sick, in order to diagnose what is ailing him/her the doctors try to identify the signs and symptoms so that they can narrow down what is causing the problem. The marginalized students have given us plenty of signs and symptoms in the form of poor attendance, being disengaged in school, doing poorly in school, getting into trouble at school, choosing not to complete their work, or being silent in school. Yet instead of the school system looking deeper into their school structures, curriculum setup and delivery, it turns outwards and put the total blame onto the students and their parents. Many educators come from middle class families and are from the
dominant culture around which the curriculum revolves. Some have difficulties acknowledging the fact that perhaps the root cause of students being further marginalized in school could lie within the school itself. Principals possess a lot of power to influence the staff members in their schools as regards to promoting the academic achievement of marginalized students. However, each principal has to first identify the stereotypes and biases that reside within her or him. After combating them, then they can move forward to make a change in others. Whatever the principals do, they have to lead by example, not by just talking about what needs to be done, but by doing it themselves.

This conversation or dialogue has been going on for a long time now. However, because the educational system still remains embedded in the Eurocentric mentality and beliefs, it seems that the equity-minded principals continue to run into walls. The staff members they try to move forward to create an equitable and inclusive school culture, some of them, continue to dig their feet deeper into the ground, their nails screeching as they are being pulled forward to drop their “mind stagnation” mentality to replace it with a mind growth which sees all students, yes, including those who are marginalized, as capable to achieve high academic achievement. Giroux (1997) recommended that educators should understand what the relations of culture and power in society are based on. However, if educators neglect to realize how these relations influence to reproduce the existing inequities within the school system, that will only undermine the present educational efforts by the equity-minded principals who are trying their very best to make a difference for the marginalized students (p. 130).

All the principals in this study stated that they strongly believe that they have a moral obligation to make sure that marginalized students feel that they are part and parcel of their schools. Through working collaboratively with their staff members, they continue their efforts to
ensure that the students are given the resources and early interventions they need to help them close the learning gaps. The relationship they build with the community partners has also been very beneficial to the students. A variety of strategies were identified by the equity-minded principals that can be used to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students. Perhaps not all strategies will work in all schools, but principals can choose the ones that would work within their school culture and make a difference in the lives of the marginalized students. If we believe in our students, they too will in turn believe in themselves. However, if we keep telling them that they cannot do it, the self-fulfilling prophecies will certainly become a reality.

When I was growing up in Uganda, I was made to believe that I was indeed smart. My parents and teachers believed that I could make it in school. It was hard work, I have to admit, but I worked as hard as I could and was able to graduate as a teacher. However, when I came to Canada, the story changed. All of a sudden I was told that I was not that smart after all. My education was devalued, and I had to start from scratch. It was a struggle for me to know what I was capable of doing and being constantly reminded that, “No. You can’t do it!” I hit so many brick walls, and if I did not get a visible bruise on my head, I definitely got a bruise internally. Wherever I applied to continue my studies, it was a flat “No.” I kept all my rejection letters because I knew later on I would use them as proof to show how the school system definitely marginalizes some people while favouring certain groups of people. I had two choices: to give up and give into the system or to fight and prove to the system that I am indeed quite capable. So, I chose the latter. I kept saying to myself, “Yes I can!” Barack Obama (2008) must have heard the waves of my silent screams back then when he came up with the slogan, “Yes we can!” Here I am today, a principal completing this research exploring how equity-minded principals promote the academic achievement for marginalized students. I wanted the equity-minded principals out
there to realize that they are not alone in doing this very noble work and their efforts indeed do bear fruit.

Further, I hope to motivate principals who have not yet considered tackling this initiative of promoting academic achievement for marginalized students. I encourage them to give it serious thought, reevaluate their preconceived beliefs and values of marginalized students, and join their fellow principals in making a difference in these students’ lives. In doing so, they can prevent more students from falling through the cracks and help them blossom to realize the greatness they were meant to be.

**Implications for Practice**

I explored the phenomenon of how equity-minded principals promote the academic achievement of marginalized students by interviewing 16 principals. Although this was a small number of participants, I believe the following recommendations can assist the principals in the study and hopefully many more who are concerned about the academic achievement of marginalized students.

**Ministry Recommendations**

First, the Ministry of Education should work collaboratively with boards of education to revise the existing middle class Eurocentric based curriculum to make it culturally relevant and reflective of the rich diversity which is the fabric of our country, Canada. All students have a right to see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Further, the richness of our diversity should not be taught in pockets such as during “Black History Month”; rather, it should be embedded throughout the curriculum, K−12. It is important for the Ministry of Education to understand and send the same message through our curriculum that diversity makes us stronger. The Ministry of Education should also work collaboratively with the boards of education to
ensure that the strategies indicated in the *Ontario Leadership Framework* (2013) and *Ontario Ministry of Education* (2014) *Equity and Inclusive education in Ontario schools* documents are being implemented by all principals to facilitate promoting academic achievement for all students, especially those who are marginalized.

Second, the Ministry of Education should consider all the recommendations put forth by the equity-minded principals as indicated in Chapter Eight. However, I would like to reiterate that the Ministry of Education must revoke the “hiring practices” as stipulated in Ontario Regulation 274/12 and allow teachers to be hired based on the needs of the schools not on staff seniority. All students deserve to have role models, and the marginalized students are no exception. Staff should be reflective of the diversity of the student body. It is indeed the right thing to do.

Third, the Ministry of Education should consider asking universities to provide Diversity Additional Qualification courses Parts 1, 2, and 3, making them available to principals and teachers to take for professional development. They should also make it a requirement before one is hired as a principal to have at least Parts 1 and 2 of the Diversity Additional Qualifications and Parts 1 and 2 of Special Education Additional Qualifications. I believe that this is important because we need administrators who are knowledgeable about the factors that marginalize students and have a firm understanding of how to influence their staff to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students. In addition, the Superintendent of Education and Director of Education should also be mandated to have Specialist in Diversity and Special Education courses. I believe that if the people on top had an awareness of the marginalization of students that is happening on a daily basis in our schools, they will honour the moral obligation we all as educators collectively carry and put in place the resources and supports that promote the
academic achievement of marginalized students and hold all stakeholders accountable in removing the systemic barriers that marginalize the students.

Fourth, the Ministry of Education should work with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to make sure that preservice programs provide teachers with the knowledge about diversity and the root causes of marginalization, and equip them with strategies they can use to promote the academic achievement of students who are marginalized. The principals indicated that many new teachers were very ill prepared when they came to work with marginalized students. This will make it possible that the teachers come prepared with the pedagogical knowledge needed to teach students from diverse cultural backgrounds, social economic backgrounds, and various ability levels.

Fifth, the Ministry of Education should work collaboratively with the Provincial government to raise the minimum wages as this will alleviate the poverty which causes the marginalization of many students and their families. The principals also recommended that the Ministry of Education work with the Provincial government to review the police carding policy. They indicated that the carding policy based on individuals’ race is a systemic barrier that must be stopped because it degrades and marginalizes students and their parents.

Last but not least, the principals recommended that the existing funding model based on per pupil must be revised. They recommend that the Ministry of Education provide the resources and monetary funds based on the schools’ needs.

**Board Recommendations**

First, the boards of education should relentlessly continue to raise their concerns of how problematic the Ontario Regulation 274/12 “hiring practice” is in terms of ensuring that the right staff members are hired to suit the specific needs of the schools. All boards should make every
possible effort to hire staff from diverse cultural backgrounds in all departments, such as
custodians, early childhood educators, educational assistants, teachers, principals, and
superintendents. It is very beneficial for marginalized students to see that people they can
identify with can actually work in a school setting as well.

Second, the boards should work collaboratively with the Ministry of Education to ensure
that each board has an equity officer who will be responsible to monitor that equitable education
is being provided to all students, but especially the marginalized students. It is a step in the right
direction that the Ministry of Education provided a document entitled, Realizing the Promise of
Diversity: Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (2009b). However in many schools
the document continues to sit on bookshelves, collecting dust. There is no monitoring from the
Ministry of Education to make sure that the strategies indicated in that document are actually
being implemented. So, if each board had an equity officer, they could follow up with the
accountability piece, reporting back to the Ministry of Education. They can monitor the hiring
practices to ensure that visible minorities are reflected in all areas of the boards’ staff population
to provide role models for marginalized students. The equity officer would be responsible to
work collaboratively with principals to organize professional learning opportunities in the area of
diversity for all staff in the board as well as ensure that resources that are inclusive of
marginalized students are available in all schools. The professional learning should be ongoing in
every school and should focus on enhancing teacher knowledge as it relates to the promotion of
academic achievement of marginalized students. Each school should have a staff diversity
representative who would work as a conduit with the equity officer and the school diversity
team. Social justice and responsibility should be taught to all, staff, students, parents and
community at large. The boards can also create an online tool which all teachers can access to
share resources they have created to support diversity. I believe that this structure would promote capacity building so that all schools are on the same page in their efforts to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students. After all, as Martin Luther King Jr., once stated, “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is ‘What are you doing for others?’” Others in this case symbolize the marginalized students.

Finally, the boards should work collaboratively with community partners to ensure that the community members are seen as agents of change who can enrich the education program through providing various services in the schools such as volunteering and providing various resources to subsidize the schools’ needs, thus, enhancing the academic achievement of marginalized students.

**Implications for Future Research**

It takes a village to raise a child. (African proverb)

In this study I have explored how equity-minded principals promote the academic achievement of marginalized students. The findings shared by these principals can be used by the Ministry of Education, boards of educations, principals, teachers, and all people who work in the education system to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students. We all have a moral obligation to do this. As Fullan (2003) pointed out, it is indeed a moral imperative of school leadership. It is a nonnegotiable. We have too much talent left unrealized because we are so stuck in what is driven by the so called “tradition.” We know very well that “tradition” usually benefits some and penalizes others. What is deemed to be a tradition by some can be very oppressive to others. There is some research done in the areas of equity and social justice which involves principals by researchers such as Ryan (2006a), Theoharis (2007), Flessa (2009), Portelli et al. (2007), and Griffiths (2013). However, I still believe that we need more Canadian
content to continue to inform how we can forge forward with promoting the academic achievement of marginalized students and to build our body of literature on this topic.

Second, we need to learn about how superintendents of education, directors of education, and trustees promote the academic achievement of marginalized students from their positions. There is a literature gap pertaining to these areas. Further research to pursue these gaps would be very beneficial to inform all educators on how to use the best strategies to promote academic achievement for marginalized students.

Third, it would also be very beneficial to hear from the marginalized students: their thoughts and experiences from our Ontario and Canadian elementary schools. I am sure they have a multitude of stories and experiences to share with us that will inform our teaching practices to further enhance their academic achievement.

Fourth, we can also explore the practices of other equity-minded principals in other provinces and countries to add to the number of strategies identified by the 16 principals who participated in this study. It is hoped that the more strategies we have at our fingertips, the more we can choose from to improve our school practices and reach out to the marginalized students and enable them to reach their full potential. As educators, this is a moral obligation we signed up for.
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Appendix A

Ethics Board Approval and Renewal Forms

PROTOCOL REFERENCE # 30137

April 10, 2014

Dr. James Ryan

OISE/UT: LEADERSHIP, HIGHER AND ADULT EDUCATION OISE/UT

Mrs. Marie Lourdes Ssemanda

OISE/UT: LEADERSHIP, HIGHER AND ADULT EDUCATION OISE/UT

Dear Dr. Ryan and Mrs. Marie Lourdes Ssemanda,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, "Equity minded principals: Leadership that promotes academic achievement for marginalized students"

ETHICS APPROVAL Original Approval Date: April 10, 2014

Expiry Date: April 9, 2015

Continuing Review Level: 1

We are writing to advise you that the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics Board (REB) has granted approval to the above-named research protocol under the REB's delegated review process. Your protocol has been approved for a period of one year and ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your current ethics approval. Note that annual renewals for studies cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry.

If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,
Annual Renewal Approval Letter – Protocol Reference # 30137

April 21, 2015

Dr. James Ryan

OISE/UT: LEADERSHIP, HIGHER AND ADULT EDUCATION OISE/UT

Mrs. Marie Lourdes Ssemanda

OISE/UT: LEADERSHIP, HIGHER AND ADULT EDUCATION OISE/UT

Dear Dr. Ryan and Mrs. Marie Lourdes Ssemanda,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, "Equity minded principals: Leadership that promotes academic achievement for marginalized students"

ETHICS APPROVAL Original Approval Date: April 10, 2014

Expiry Date: April 9, 2016

Continuing Review Level: 1

Renewal: 1 of 4

We are writing to advise you that you have been granted annual renewal of ethics approval to the above-referenced research protocol through the Research Ethics Board (REB) delegated process. Please note that all protocols involving ongoing data collection or interaction with human participants are subject to re-evaluation after 5 years. Ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.
Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your protocol. Note that annual renewals for protocols cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry as per our guidelines.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible. If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Wakefield, Ph.D.

REB Chair

Dean Sharpe

REB Manager

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS

McMurrich Building, 12 Queen's Park Crescent West, 2nd Floor, Toronto, ON M5S 1S8 Canada

Tel: +1 416 946-3273 Fax: +1 416 946-5763 ethics.review@utoronto.ca
http://www.research.utoronto.ca/for-researchers-administrators/ethics/
Appendix B

Informational Letter to Participants: Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

The Title of this research project is: Equity-Minded Principals: Leadership That Promotes Academic Achievement for Marginalized Students.

For my dissertation, I am exploring the phenomenon of how equity-minded principals promote academic achievement for marginalized students in their schools.

The nature and purpose of the research is:

1. How do equity-minded principals understand marginalization in their schools?
2. Why do equity-minded principals see the need to attend to the academic well-being of marginalized students? What motivates them?
3. What strategies do equity-minded principals employ to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students?
4. What barriers do equity-minded principals encounter, and how do they address them?
5. What recommendations would you give to the district school boards and the Ministry of Education as regards to promoting academic achievement for marginalized students?

Your part in the research, if you agree, will consist of participating in a face-to-face interview of about one hour. During the interview you will be asked about your interpretations of how an equity-minded principal you promote academic achievement for marginalized students in your school. As the interview proceeds, I may ask questions for clarification or further understanding. My part will mainly be to listen to you as you speak about your views, practices, and experiences. I will write brief notes during and right after the interview to help me remember the surroundings of the interview. I may request a follow-up discussion via telephone or email to clarify aspects of the interview.

Complete confidentiality of the interviews is guaranteed. Any audiocassette recordings of the interview will be only be done with a participant’s written consent. A copy of the guiding interview questions will be provided to you in advance. All participants’ names and location affiliations will be kept strictly confidential. Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym. The interviews will be conducted at a time and place convenient to you. You may at any time withdraw from the interview process.

Potential benefits you might derive from participating are that: Since I will be sharing major aspects of my preliminary analysis with you, you will have the opportunity to provide feedback and an opportunity to contribute to the understanding of how equity-minded principals promote academic achievement for marginalized students in their schools.

If you have any questions about this study, please call me at (905) 388-2608 or email me at marie.ssemanda@utoronto.ca

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Marie L. Ssemanda
Ed.D. Candidate
Appendix C

Participant Consent Form

I agree to participate in the study exploring the phenomenon of how equity-minded principals promote academic achievement for marginalized students in their schools. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can leave the study at any time and with no undesirable consequences.

The following points have been explained to me:

1. The purpose of this research is to determine my insights on the topic of how equity-minded principals promote academic achievement for marginalized students in their schools. Specifically the objectives of the study are to explore:

   a. How do equity-minded principals understand marginalization in their schools?
   
b. Why do equity-minded principals see the need to attend to the academic well-being of marginalized students? What motivates them?
   
c. What strategies do equity-minded principals employ to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students?
   
d. What barriers do equity-minded principals encounter, and how do they address them?
   
e. What recommendations would you give to the district school boards and the Ministry of Education in regards to promoting academic achievement for marginalized students?

2. My participation involves a one-hour interview, which will be audiotaped and transcribed.

3. The researcher does not foresee any risks to me for participating in this study, nor does the researcher expect that I will experience any discomfort or stress.

4. All of the data collected will remain strictly confidential. Only people associated with the research will see my responses. This consent form will be detached from the transcript and stored separately. My responses will not be associated with my name; instead a pseudonym will be used. The audiotapes, transcripts, and field notes will be destroyed 5 years after the conclusion of the research.

5. The researcher will answer any questions about the research either now or during the course of my participation in the study. If I have any questions or concerns I can address them to the researcher, Marie Ssemmanda at 905 388 2608.

____________________  ____________________________  ______________
Participant’s Printed Name  Participant’s Signature  Date

Marie L. Ssemmanda, Researcher
Appendix D

Questionnaire

1. What is your understanding of marginalization in your school? Who is marginalized, and how are they marginalized?

2. What strategies do you employ to promote academic achievement for marginalized students in your school with: i). Staff members? ii) Students? iii) Parents?

3. What motivates you to be an equity-minded principal?

4. What barriers/challenges do you face when you promote academic achievement for marginalized students in your school?

5. What recommendations would you give to the district school boards and the Ministry of Education as regards to promoting academic achievement for marginalized students?