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# How elementary school principals in an Ontario school board use resiliency strategies to manage adversity in their leadership

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Graduate Program in Education

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Education

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to gather, examine, and define school leadership ‘adversity experiences’ of elementary school principals in an Ontario school board. This qualitative study examined how principals use resiliency strategies to manage adversity in the course of their school leadership. Lastly, the study examined supports, professional learning, and/or programs specific to the Ontario context that exist for principals experiencing adversity.

The purposeful sample was fifteen elementary school principals and one superintendent of education. They were interviewed one-on-one using semi-structured questions during the winter 2016. Those data were analyzed using a modified form of constant comparative analysis and then triangulated with documents obtained from the school board.

Findings indicated: elementary principals’ work-related adversity is challenging; may be day-to-day, chronic, or crisis events involving staff, parents, school communities, and the system; may be stressful to principals, but not always seen by them in a negative light; resiliency strategies that principals use help them bounce back and thrive, may be learned, and contain elements of collegial support, an optimistic disposition, and physical activity; many supports for principals to lead and manage amidst adversity and develop resiliency exist but principals may have their own unique and individual needs; relationships with their school board and superintendents may or may not be seen as supportive by principals, and supports may or may not be accessed.

Several conclusions emerged: because of their complex and demanding roles, elementary principals experience a variety of adversity experiences with several stakeholders; collegial relationships, optimism, and physical activities are fundamental resiliency strategies; school boards and superintendents should play an increasing role in supporting elementary principals with adversity experiences and their development of resiliency; principals need opportunities to meet with their colleagues and discuss adversity experiences in formal and informal ways in which they feel safe and respected;

principals need opportunities to develop their resiliency strategies and investigate professional learning, tailored one-on-one and group based supports, and/or programs to manage adversity and develop resiliency; and boards need to investigate supports available for principals and create an accessible means by which principals can locate and use this information.

**Keywords**

Adversity, resilience, Ontario Leadership Framework, principals

## DEDICATION

For my parents Sharon and Robert Zeisner

For my husband Lennie Boyd

For my past, present, and future school communities

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>ADR</b>	Alternative Dispute Resolution
<b>ARC</b>	Accommodation Review Committee
<b>EFAP</b>	Employee and Family Assistance Program
<b>ECE</b>	Early Childhood Educator
<b>EI</b>	Emotional Intelligence
<b>EQAO</b>	Education Quality and Accountability Office
<b>IEP</b>	Individual Education Plan
<b>OLF</b>	Ontario Leadership Framework
<b>OPC</b>	Ontario Principals' Council
<b>P</b>	Principal
<b>PQP</b>	Principals' Qualification Program
<b>REG 274</b>	Ontario Regulation 274/12 "Hiring Practices"
<b>S</b>	Superintendent
<b>SO</b>	Supervisory Officer
<b>TERT</b>	Traumatic Events Response Team

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### How do lobsters grow?

A lobster is a soft, mushy animal that lives inside of a rigid shell. That rigid shell does not expand. Well, how can the lobster grow? As the lobster grows that shell becomes very confining, the lobster feels itself under pressure and uncomfortable. It goes under a rock formation to protect itself from predatory fish, casts off the shell, and produces a new one. Eventually that shell becomes very uncomfortable as it grows. Back under the rocks and the lobster repeats this numerous times. The stimulus for the lobster to be able to grow is that it feels uncomfortable. I think that we need to realize that times of stress are also times that are signals for growth and if we use adversity properly, we can grow through adversity. (Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski, 2009)

While I realize that a school principal is not a lobster, I look to this quotation to highlight the opportunity that principals have to grow through adversity. The idea for this research originated when I thought I was a “bad” leader, before I had considered re-framing my negative experiences as opportunities to grow. I am an elementary school principal, and had experienced difficulties in my role that I attributed to my own performance. I thought I was a failure, a poor leader, and not deserving of the position because of the toll day-to-day responsibilities was having on me. From my years in this doctoral program and through my extensive research into leadership, however, I have discovered that I was neither a bad leader (Kellerman, 2004) nor a failure. What I had experienced, and continue to experience every single day as a principal, is adversity in the role.

Being a school principal is hard and requires a set of leadership capacities to overcome everyday obstacles that can make leaders feel like a failure *or* may make them stronger - if they use strategies to overcome those challenges. As Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski suggests above, leaders have the opportunity to grow through adversity. Seligman (2006) suggests that being optimistic is a strategy for handling adversity. Employing effective strategies to overcome the trials and tribulations of the role is often referred to in many different types of literature as being *resilient*.

This study is a result of the passion that I have developed for being a school leader and, more specifically, an elementary school principal. This dissertation, for me, has been one that represents resiliency: accomplishment and strength found through confronting adversity. This dissertation is an ode to my educational leader colleagues and any other leader who has felt like a failure to know they can recover and perhaps grow through adversity. I want leaders and aspiring leaders to understand they will face difficulties, that like the lobster they will feel uncomfortable in their role, but they must develop and/or maintain a set of resiliency strategies in order to “grow”: to move forward to be effective for the students and communities they are leading.

This study attempts to provide a realistic view of the position of the principal and to demonstrate the excitement and challenge that comes with the role. My primary goal for this research is to minimize a situation in which any educational leader who is “trying to do the right thing” to ever feel like a failure. This thesis has been written to be read by anyone, in any role, and see themselves in it. I want the reader to be able to comprehend the data and, more importantly, use the strategies and stories shared by the participants to enhance their own leadership capacities.

I realize that investigating leadership resilience and adversity could have traveled down numerous roads, including emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, stress, grit, and burnout. However, I have chosen to keep my focus narrow in order to shine a focused light on adversity in order to show that resiliency is at its core. As such, the study is loosely sociological and not psychological in nature, but it recognizes the direct links to adversity and resiliency so some references to psychology literature are used.

As with the lobster analogy, adversity may create times of stress that can signal growth, but improving leader resiliency to that adversity should be of importance to all those in education, particularly at a time when fewer individuals are interested in becoming principals. I hope that the findings and conclusions encourage more teacher-leaders to seek the position of principal, give those in senior administrator positions a reason to reflect on the leadership role of principal, and assist organizations to think about revisions to their leadership programs. The role of elementary school principal is

both complex and hard, involves adversity, requires resiliency strategies to conquer the adversity, and benefits enormously from the supports of boards of education to provide safe, respectful professional learning opportunities to support greater resiliency amongst school leaders.

### Problem Statement

With the work of leading teachers, ensuring student safety, and communicating with parents among its various duties, over time the principal's role has become more demanding in response to societal changes and school reform efforts (Pounder & Merrill, 2001). As Giessner and Knippenberg (2008) describe, "Leaders will sooner or later inevitably find themselves in a situation where they are associated with a failure to achieve group or organizational goals, and leaders' abilities to maintain followers' endorsement despite such associations with failure would seem critical to their continued effectiveness as a leader" (p. 14). Leaders often face difficult circumstances that may have little or nothing to do with anything they themselves created or can influence; consequently, sufficient understanding and preparedness for the job perhaps requires being meaner and tougher than what novice leaders may first imagine (March & Weiner, 2003). March and Weiner (2003) suggest that school-based leaders must be ready for difficulties, hard work, making tough decisions, and experiencing unpopularity in their roles. School leaders who experience such examples of school leadership adversity need to demonstrate resiliency for their staff, students, and school community. Lastly, Boss and Sims (2008) remind leaders of the need to "step back" from a situation and look at it objectively to identify what was learned from the situation. In their research on school leadership, the authors shared effective adversity coping strategies that focus on the positive aspects of life and identification of aspects of the job that leaders are able to do well.

For the purpose of this study, prior studies have provided examples of the research-based approach that this exploratory case study in an Ontario school board context hopes to further develop. Pankake and Beaty (2005), for example, shared data from two separate studies regarding experiences vital to the success of twelve female school administrators in Texas who discussed their leadership experiences in regard to

resiliency. Based on the findings from their studies, the authors argued that experiences and developing ways to deal with difficult situations appear to contribute strongly with the ability to develop self and in turn, lead others. Due to the nature of their work, school leaders are experiencing complex demands of their time, skills, and emotions in schools (Mulford, 2012). Leithwood (2012) posits that the possession of resiliency is among the most important criteria in the recruitment and selection of leaders. Five years earlier, Kusy and Essex (2007) suggested that mistake recovery is the new needed leadership capacity, and successful leaders use mistakes as key ‘resume builders’ to improve organizations as well as their own careers.

Reflective practitioners know that life-long learning is crucial in leadership development and modeling life-long learning for their colleagues and staffs is equally vital. This research aimed to make a valuable contribution not only to established bodies of research on resiliency in school leadership but also to the practitioner contexts of Ontario school boards. This leadership-based approach to managing adversity complements evidence-based psychological resources, which make significant contributions to developing leaders’ capacity for responsible risk-taking, as this strength makes an especially large contribution to leadership success (Leithwood, 2012).

#### Purpose of the study

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to gather, examine, and define school leadership ‘adversity experiences’ of elementary school principals in an Ontario school board. This qualitative study examined how principals use resiliency strategies to manage adversity in the course of their school leadership. Lastly, the study examined supports, professional learning, and/or programs specific to the Ontario context that exist for principals experiencing adversity. The information gathered is intended to offer powerful learning opportunities for boards in Ontario and the Ontario Principals’ Council (OPC) so that current and aspiring school leaders could be provided with learning in the area of leadership adversity and resiliency. Based on the findings and recommendations of this study, boards and the OPC have an opportunity to examine their current supports, professional learning, and/or programs available to their leaders and aspiring school

leaders in the area of resiliency to better support leaders as they respond to, help ‘manage’, and proactively anticipate future school leadership adversity.

A secondary purpose of this study was to make a modest contribution to succession planning by encouraging current and future leaders to reflect on adversity and resiliency. Giessner, Knippenberg, and Sleafos (2009) reiterated the importance of knowing what factors contribute to leadership and what influences their attributes because looking at “this attribution process might help leaders, followers, and organizations to better understand and respond to performance information” (p. 450). For example, organizations need to help educational leaders better understand and further use the emotional intelligent capacity of resiliency as a key for school leaders’ success. Bumphuis (2008) agreed and shared that resiliency enhances one’s life and leads to fulfillment that can develop over a lifetime, especially in the face of adversity. Glickman (2006) also focused on the positive aspects of examining adversity, she stated “learning from another, looking at research, and sharing our own failures and successes, so that we can learn to move more directly toward success” (p. 689).

School boards in Ontario are facing a leadership pipeline that is “drying up”: “principal shortages have been reported in Ontario and in other parts of the world, while current forecasts for the future are not encouraging” (Pollock et al., 2014, p.6). Many teachers are not seeking formal school leadership positions and a shortage in the number of individuals applying has caused an increasing number of vacancies in the principalship (Geocaris, 2004). By holding a mirror up to the adversity experiences of their current leaders, and show their resiliency strategies, I hope to help Ontario school boards attract and retain high-performing school leaders who are healthy, happy, and able to continue to build their resiliency-throughout their careers.

Grounded in and extending established research on adversity, this exploratory research attempted to shift the dialogue on *school leadership adversity* to one of *resiliency* or success by degrees. This holistic, single-case study’s unit of analysis was elementary school principals’ resiliency strategies to manage adversity experiences in an Ontario school board. Different from leadership ‘failure’, leadership adversity is, in

broad terms, often defined as those external difficult events that may be unpredictable or not triggered by the leader. Adversity requires a set of leadership capacities to overcome and endure examples such as; disappointments, unexpected or catastrophic outcomes, poor performance, accidents, financial losses, and scandals (Hino & Aoki, 2012). The study aimed to show how strong leaders reframe difficult situations from resulting in either success or failure to one that is more nuanced and more agential. It promotes focusing less on how the adversity is impacting the person, and more about how the person is actively responding to the problem. Discussing adversity with a focus on resiliency may have leaders thinking more critically about their approach to leadership challenges as a set of productive strategies and practices to confront adversity and aims to set criteria for formal and informal evaluations of leaders' work.

#### Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following operational definitions will apply to the common terms used in this research.

**Adversity** – “disappointment, unexpected or catastrophic outcomes, including poor performance, accidents, major financial losses, and scandals” (Hino & Aoki, 2012, p. 365)

**Assumptions** – “any important fact presumed to be true but not actually verified” (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2014, p. 569)

**Delimitations** – “characteristics selected by the researcher to define the boundaries of the study. The researcher makes conscious exclusionary and inclusionary decisions regarding the sample (including such information as geographic location), the variables studied, the theoretical perspectives, the instruments, the generalizability” (Baltimore County Schools, 2005, p. 1)

**Failure** – “a shortfall, evidence of the gap between vision and current reality. Failure is an opportunity for learning-about inaccurate pictures of current reality, about strategies that didn't work as expected, about the clarity of a vision” (Senge, 2006, p. 143)



**Leadership** – “the exercise of influence on organizational members and other stakeholders toward the identification and achievement of the organization’s vision and goals” (Ontario Leadership Framework, 2013, p. 5)

**Limitations** - “an aspect of a study that the researcher knows may negatively affect the results or generalizability of the results but over which the researcher has no control” (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2014, p. 573)

**Management** – “processes and procedures that keep the organization running smoothly” (Ontario Leadership Framework, 2013, p. 5)

**Resilience** - “being able to recover from, or adjust easily to, change or misfortune, and being able to thrive in challenging circumstances” (Ontario Leadership Framework, 2013, p. 22)

### Research Questions

This exploratory case study was guided by the following research questions.

1. What school-related experiences do elementary school principals define as school leadership adversity (forms, types, and levels of intensity)?
2. What resiliency strategies do elementary school principals use to manage adversity in their school leadership?
3. What supports, professional learning, and/or programs specific to the Ontario context exist for principals experiencing adversity?

### Significance

This research hopes to contribute to understanding and recognizing school leadership adversity and, more importantly, resiliency strategies to manage it. Understanding adversity and resiliency is vital to the development of leaders because it may offer “insights into the way successful leaders use positive and negative situations as learning opportunities and the strategies they implement in addressing adversity” (Pankake & Beaty, 2005, p. 175). School leaders need to understand that they are not alone in their struggles with adversity in school contexts. As researchers in one study described, “hearing the blues stirs chords of memories among those who have attempted

leadership in similar settings because they capture recurring important, and often unpleasant features of administrative life in academic organizations” (March & Weiner, 2003, p. 6). However, Allan (2014) argued that looking at failures and the tough times of others is precisely one of the best ways for leaders to overcome and learn from their own shortcomings.

Indeed, Pankake and Beaty (2005) suggested that often it is adversity or failure incidents that leaders endure which usually make them stronger. Information about the experiences school leaders perceive as vital to their development can be helpful to one’s understanding of resiliency. Planche (2013) argued that it is critical that leaders become resilient in order to focus on the core work of schools – learning. Planche (2013) described resilient leaders as those who appear to have resources which make it possible to regroup, reframe, and refocus. Such information can also offer insight into the ways school leaders use negative situations as learning opportunities and the strategies they implement in addressing adversity (Pankake & Beaty, 2005).

Given the positional primacy of principals’ roles in leading schools, school boards need to recognize the types of support needed for their leaders during times of adversity. Failure can often be viewed as part of the learning process, and to be successful, education leaders must learn to use failure as a tool and not a roadblock. Allan (2014) defined failure as a “growing opportunity that is necessary for growth” (p. 5). Williams (2013) suggested that failures help build resilience and character and that it gives insights about work; it enriches experiences, and tests emotional intelligence which potentially then adds to knowledge and skills. School boards support their leaders by providing them with structured opportunities to reflect on their challenges and reframe “failures” as opportunities for learning and building resiliency.

Principals are faced with many such “growing opportunities.” For this research, principals were chosen because school leadership is particularly difficult due to the complexity of their work (Mulford, 2012) and the diverse capacities required in order to be successful at their jobs (Christman & McClellan, 2008; Pankake & Beaty, 2005). A study by Pollock, Wang, and Hauseman (2014) on the changing nature of principals’

work found that principals indicated there is little support available to assist them in dealing with the emotional toll and daily rigors of a principalship. By focusing on how principals understand adversity and resiliency in their leadership roles, this study could help Ontario school boards and the Ontario Principals' Council examine their current support and development opportunities for their school-based leaders, and perhaps make recommendations for further programs.

### Assumptions

Certain assumptions ground and affect the inferences drawn in this study on principals' adversity experiences and resiliency strategies. I have assumed that there is link between adversity and resiliency, and that while the kinds of adversity they face is the same or similar, school principals manage adversity in a variety of ways and use a variety of strategies. Although grounded in research described in greater detail in Chapter 2, I assumed that resiliency is one effective response to managing adversity.

Although participants in this study defined adversity and resiliency in different ways, it was assumed that principals who use resiliency strategies are more resilient than those that don't use any strategies. I further assumed that principals who utilize resiliency strategies are more effective at managing adversity, which can take different forms and be understood in different ways, depending on the principal. While participants need not have a clear understanding of resiliency in order to be able to use resiliency strategies to confront adversity effectively, those who have a clear understanding of what resiliency means to them are more likely to use resiliency strategies effectively.

In terms of the study itself, I have assumed that participant responses are generally reliable: each individual participant demonstrated honesty and sincerity while participating in this research although each participant's recollections and understandings would be shaped and limited by their own particular perspective.

Each participant confirmed that they read and understood the parameters of the informed consent document. Additionally, I assumed that all participants voluntarily

consented to all parameters of their involvement in this study, and that the volunteers would fulfill their obligations under the study was completed.

Interview questions were developed based on the assumption that resiliency is learned but that deep reflection and analysis is often needed to discover the learning.

Additionally, I assumed that programs, professional learning, and/or supports existed for principals to develop resiliency. I have assumed that resiliency is observable and relatable, but acknowledge that there are individual differences in terms of how observable responses to resiliency manifest in daily leadership practice. Lastly, I assumed that resiliency or aspects of resiliency can be measured, but acknowledge that there is no single consistent measurement tool for that process.

#### Limitations of the Study

Several limitations to this study should be noted. This qualitative study was designed to focus specifically on a set number of participants who work in the identified school board. Therefore, generalization to large numbers was not a goal of this case. A further limitation is that the participants were not a random sample but volunteers to a recruitment email and their motivation for participating in the research is not known. A limited time frame to conduct the research may have shaped the results.

Although it was assumed that participants would give honest responses, another limitation was response bias or, in other words, the inevitable limited knowledge, capacity for reflection, and honesty of the research participants. Next, some participants may forget the specific details of an “adversity” situation they described; however, the importance in this study rests more on the lessons and perceptions gained from their experiences (Nestor-Baker & Hoy, 2001, p. 95).

Also, while some literature exists to help place failure in a positive light (Glickman, 2006; Kerfoot, 2001; Klie, 2009; Spitzer, 2005), participants have very different definitions of the concept of adversity and resiliency. The anticipation of response differences – namely participants’ various understandings of the difference

between adversity and failure, required that the study ask participants for clear definitions to delineate failure from adversity.

More broadly, the study included societal reflections eight months prior to the commencement of the interviews in which the school board and principals experienced a “work to rule” that included work parameters associated with teaching unions. Additionally, I have reported participant responses and as an objective investigator to the best of my ability. However, I acknowledge that separating my own experiences as a principal from my role as researcher was challenging at times, potentially contributing to my perceptions, interpretations, and judgment.

#### De-Limitations of the study

Several delimitations to this study should be noted. The time frame for gathering the information and data was limited by the time constraints and requirements of the thesis. Next, purposeful population sampling is identified as delimitation, as only elementary panel administrators in an Ontario school board were invited because there are a greater number of elementary administrators to draw from and exclusion was secondary principals or those principals who were retired. Also, the method was a delimitation because the study only used semi-structured interviews as an instrument in order to solicit deeper reflection. Additionally, the topic of focus is a delimitation because while emotional intelligence may be a term seen throughout research in this area, the study literature focused specifically on resiliency-led research.

#### Summary

In this chapter, a research problem was introduced that focused on school leadership adversity and the need for leaders to have resiliency strategies. It described how principals in schools must be resilient to manage the volume and nature of demands on them including constant student learning needs, parent demands, staff complexities, and school board requests. It further described how, as the shortfall of administrators in Ontario continues to grow, preparing these leaders for success is even more critical for schools boards. Boards of education and leadership development programs need to address the need to discuss adversity and develop resiliency strategies to sustain and

retain quality leaders. Additionally, the purpose of the study was described along with the significance, definitions, assumptions, and limitations.

In Chapter 2, a comprehensive discussion of literature on adversity, resilience, and supports for leaders through challenging times is presented. Chapter 3 explains the exploratory qualitative methodology for the study. The data collected from the study are reported in Chapter 4 as findings sorted by interview question. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings with distilled answers to the three research questions. Chapter 6 offers a conclusion in terms of reframing the concept of leadership adversity and resiliency as it relates to school leaders, and the need for more organizational, even governmental, responsibility to manage those challenges in the future.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

This literature review investigation illuminated elementary school principals' resiliency skills suggested to manage adversity in their school leadership. Resiliency is important in the school sector because the role of elementary school principal, as well as the educational environments in where they lead, continue to change rapidly. Principals must have knowledge, skills, values, dispositions, and practices to meet consistently the extremely high expectations of them from all their stakeholders. Further, they must simultaneously be able to tackle the predictable and less predictable aspects of day-to-day school life.

Relevant literature revealed numerous themes (Farmer, 2010; Garcia, 2005; Leithwood, 2012; Mulford, 2012) and trends (Friedman, 2002; Kusy & Essex, 2007; Pollock et al., 2014) associated with the complex nature of school leadership in terms of adversity, resiliency, and claims about how to develop the capacities of school principals to adapt and perform in the face of both opportunities and difficulties.

This literature review will describe the complexity and demands of principal roles; the types of adversity that principals face; the need for resiliency in school leadership roles; defining adversity and resiliency; and developing resiliency in leaders. This chapter will also provide a theoretical framework that draws from relevant theories and models of resiliency.

#### The job of principal is complex and demanding

Growing literature on the subject indicates that principals' roles are intricate and difficult due to a range of reasons which include dwindling resources and increased paperwork, increased public criticism, the number of students with special needs, more complex demands by parents and teachers, and ageing or under-resourced facilities (Culbertson, 1976; Day, 2014; Farmer, 2010). March and Weiner (2003) argued that educational leaders typically anticipate hard work, making tough decisions, and

experiencing unpopularity. However, principals also must be ready for such difficulties as the challenges posed by the indifference of some students, resistance of particular staff who want individual and/or collective autonomy, and board members with their own agendas that require implementation at the school level. March and Weiner (2003) suggested leaders will face difficult circumstances, which will frequently have little to nothing to do with anything the leader created or can dramatically influence. Administrators, such as school principals, are commonly neither prepared nor 'trained' to face a tougher and perhaps meaner, job than earlier years; those who would lead should understand this prospect and be prepared! Garcia (2005) noted that because school districts have dramatically downsized support that historically was provided from consultants, assistant superintendents, and other staffs, principals are more commonly feeling overwhelmed and alone.

Further factors as to why the role is extremely demanding are found in numerous studies. Davis (1998) used a telephone survey with ninety-nine California public school superintendents to investigate why principals 'fail' at their jobs. The study listed the reasons why the role of principal is demanding because "even the most skilled and experienced principals run the risk of failing in their jobs as a result of actions, events, or outcomes over which they may not always have direct control" (p. 2). Pollock et al. (2014) in their study of elementary and secondary school principals in Ontario through an on-line survey and focus groups found "the principalship has become so structured and rooted in compliance that there is little room for principals to demonstrate professional judgement or autonomy in their daily work" (p. 3). Further, Maulding, Peters, Roberts, Leonard, and Sparkman (2012) completed a study using mixed-method surveys with forty eight P-12 school administrators and indicated that school leaders need to be resilient in order to adapt to the intense and dynamic environment over which the formal school leader has limited or no control.

#### The job of principal has adversity

In his study on burnout in school principals, Friedman (2002) used a self-report questionnaire containing two scales: a burnout scale and a role pressure scale. Eight hundred and twenty-one elementary and secondary principals participated in the study.



The findings showed that burnout was affected by pressures stemming from teachers and parents, and to some extent, from work overload and students. Teaching and administrative experience or the size of school made no significant differences to the principals' reporting of burnout.

In a study by Pankake and Beaty (2005) in Texas that considered six successful female principals and six successful female superintendents and their stories of resiliency, twelve women administrators were interviewed asking about overcoming adversity and dealing with mistakes or setbacks they experienced in their professional and personal lives. Pankake and Beaty indicated that collecting the stories of school leaders allowed for an analysis to identify what experiences, characteristics, relationship, and supportive conditions contributed to their resiliency. Their findings led to a list of strategies the leaders used to overcome adversity along with the relationships and community resources that exist. Perhaps not surprisingly, Pankake and Beaty felt the development of resiliency for the women began long before they were educational leaders; experiences in their early lives offered them opportunities to deal with adversity.

Kusy and Essex (2007) listed seven critical leadership mistakes, or 'failures', that aligned with Friedman's pressures include failure to: use staff talent, align goals with strategic initiatives, accurately assess political dynamics, assess readiness level for a given assignment, use information effectively, create a work environment where staff communicate openly, and to bring the right talent to the organization. These 'failures' and pressures were acknowledged by Patterson (2007) who predicted the life of a principal was not going to get any easier and, in fact, would become more difficult. Hence, given the sheer volume of work and who is asking something of them, principals must consider what they are going to do to work within the reality of school leadership adversity.

#### The job of principal requires resiliency

Leaders must have a set of leadership approaches for dealing with tough situations and some resiliency strategies are more effective than others. Farmer (2010) suggested that school leaders need healthy coping mechanisms such as a positive mental outlook

and attitude, a balanced exercise program, a healthy diet, trust, and open communication. As well, Farmer argued that leaders can practice taking time away from the immediate problem to renew their energy and to increase their chance of overcoming adversity; leaders can link positive thoughts and purposeful actions to their personal missions. Lastly, Farmer shared that a supportive professional network such as an effective mentoring program that allows for reflection and dialogue serves as a healthy coping mechanism and builder of resiliency.

Patterson (2007) outlined ways to become a resilient leader: accurately assess current and past reality, be positive about future possibilities, remain true to your personal values, maintain a strong sense of self-efficacy, invest your personal energy wisely, and act on the courage of your convictions. The Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) (2013) suggested school leaders draw upon the personal leadership resource of resilience to effectively enact leadership practices. Specifically, the OLF (2013) detailed that school leaders expand and strengthen their personal leadership resources over time “provided they have opportunities to grow and are supported by districts that are committed to leadership development (p. 7). The OLF (2013) defined resilience as “being able to recover from, or adjust easily to, change or misfortune...being able to thrive in challenging circumstances” (p. 22). Kusy and Essex (2007) listed strategies of reinvesting, redirecting, repositioning, reinventing, redesigning, releasing, and revamping to recover from leadership mistakes. Day (2014) also referred to the need for resilience, “to lead at one’s best over time requires everyday resilience. It is an essential quality because of the variety, intensity, and complexity of the worlds which principals inhabit” (p. 641). Day’s study of twelve successful principals who work in challenging environments in England found several indicators of resilience including being able to: rebound, plan, reflective, persistent, optimistic, and make and maintain supportive relationships.

Another potential reason for school leaders to be resilient is to model a positive way of being for their staff. “Follower resilience” growth was reported in a study by Harland, Harrison, Jones, and Reiter-Palmon (2005). They investigated which type of leadership style would or would not be positively associated with the development of

follower resilience. Harland et al. utilized a questionnaire with one-hundred and fifty part-time Masters of Business Administration (MBA) students to evaluate the relationship between leader behaviour and follower resilience. Harland et al. found participants who mentioned their leader as a positive factor in dealing with a difficult situation exhibited greater resilience than participants who did not. Harland et al. identified five types of leadership behaviours that would be associated positively with developing followers' resiliency strategies and titled these as: attributed charisma, idealized influence, inspired motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Harland et al. concluded with identifying three leadership behaviours which would negatively influence the development of resiliency in followers as: management-by-exception-active, management-by-exception-passive, and laissez-faire leadership. These types of leaders modelled avoidance-coping responses and therefore did not model proactive problem-solving and planning that correlate with the development of resiliency.

Maulding et al. (2012) found a strong correlation between resilience and leadership success. In particular, they listed six themes which emerged from their data: relationship building, vision, collaboration, communication, strategy, and passion as skills and functions that their participants listed as critical to their success. Nishikawa (2006) also identified the importance of elementary principals being resilient in their school leadership work:

Resilient leaders are more effective and have a greater positive impact on their organizations because of their ability to withstand and persevere during trying times. For leaders truly committed to living and working at high levels of effectiveness and sustainability, having a deep understanding of the principles of resilience and the disciplines of high performance is essential to success (p. 21-22).

Following this theme, Kerfoot (2001) summed up the need for resiliency in leaders by stating that "leadership is not a retreat; it is advancing in the face of adversity. The path to greatness travels through adversity because adversity stretches our capacity for great capabilities, much as physical training makes our muscles strong to perform better" (p. 292).

Sharing the findings of his multi-site, qualitative case study describing the ongoing success of ten educational leaders in New Zealand, Notman (2012) found four influential intrapersonal factors impacted positively on principals' leadership behaviours: their physical, mental and intellectual well-being, their levels of resiliency; and critical self-reflection. Regarding the personal characteristic of resiliency, Notman identified all the principals as being resilient because they believed in their ability to make a difference for students, established positive intrapersonal relationships, and established purposeful community and parent relationships. Furthermore, they all had the ability to bounce back from adversity, develop new skills, cultivate creative ways of coping, and grow stronger (Milstein & Henry, 2008).

Further attributes of effective leadership required during critical incidences were found in Smith and Riley (2012) who identified leadership skills essential in times of crisis as: the ability to cope with and thrive on ambiguity; a strong sense of being able to think laterally; a willingness to question events in new and insightful ways; a preparedness to respond flexibly and quickly, and to change direction rapidly if required; an ability to work with and through people to achieve critical outcomes; the tenacity to persevere when all seems to be lost; and a willingness to take necessary risks and to break 'the rules' when necessary. Also, Lane, McCormack, and Richardson (2013) explained that organizational leaders who embody resiliency will be able to manage current crisis and notably, build capacity for dealing with future disturbances because education resilience has two separate concepts: the capacity to absorb and withstand interference in addition to the capacity to adapt, modify and change when demanded.

In a study reported earlier, Pankake and Beaty (2005) found the strategies women administrators use to overcome adversity fall into three categories: individual differences, relationships, and community resources and opportunities. However, five strategies were identified as actions to address adversity: having a unique area of expertise to be of value to the organization, looking for mentors, supportive efforts provided by their families, seeking answers through reflection, and refocusing on the reasons for entering education. These cohere with Patterson (2001) who identified five leadership strengths for moving

forward personally and professional in difficult times: be positive, stay focused, remain flexible, act rather than react, apply resilience-conserving strategies.

### Factors impacting resiliency

Hindering the development of resilience is a matter canvassed by Kumar (2014) who identified three key traits that obstruct the development of resilience as being personalization, permanence, and pervasiveness. Kumar indicated the enemy of resilience is learned helplessness. The concept of learned helplessness was established by Seligman (1972) who studied the behavior of people when faced with events in their control. Seligman believed that not only do humans face events that they can control by their actions, but they face many events where they can do nothing at all. Seligman found that uncontrollable events can significantly debilitate people and may produce passivity in the face of trauma, the inability to learn that responding is effective plus emotional stress or depression. Therefore, investigating the sources of principals' adversity (controllable or uncontrollable events) and their reactions to the events may be critical for their development and eventual success.

Further hindrances to the development of resiliency are burnout and stress. Nishikawa (2006) labeled the inability to cope with developing resiliency as "burnout" due to high levels of stress from day-to-day situations of roles, workload, pace, and interpersonal conflicts. Friedman's (2002) study mentioned earlier discovered principals who felt that their leadership was challenged or rejected were highly stressed for protracted periods and eventually burned-out, leading many to a possible change of career:

At some point, principals learn that they cannot possibly live up to their own performance expectations regarding their various tasks. They become frustrated, exhausted, and feel unaccomplished, in other words, burned-out. Some consider abandoning teaching or school administration while others soldier on and learn to bear the burden imposed on them by their work (p. 230).

Rees, Breen, Cusack, and Hegney (2015) provided a perspective on the potential to learn from workplace stress. They claimed that understanding the factors that impact employee stress is essential in the development of initiatives that may positively impact

upon stress levels and potentially reduce the negative outcomes. Rees et al. (2015) described resiliency as mediating workplace stress in occupations high in “compassion fatigue” which is described as a type of burnout that has been found associated with caregiver stress and thought to occur as a result of providing ongoing empathy and compassion to others but neglect of one’s own self-care (p. 2). Interestingly, Rees et al. (2015) suggested that some individuals may find stress motivating and the experience may elicit feelings of personal satisfaction and accomplishment.

Christman and McClellan (2008) looked at resilient women administrators in educational leadership programs. A computer-based qualitative questionnaire of seven women administrators was developed by Christman and McClellan to identify resiliency ‘markers’ and components, their descriptions of difficult situations, along with their reflections, and suggestions to improve leadership programs. Although the study was focusing on identifying whether gender norms and traits played a role in responses to adversity and the development of resiliency, the authors concluded all leaders needed to adapt and transform their identities as leaders in the face of adversity. Their research identified ten key components and markers of resiliency such as perseverance, appreciating and valuing people, and role model for others, needing to succeed, support from others, optimism, having a voice, and tenure.

#### What is adversity in school leadership?

The need for resiliency by school leaders is partially due to various types of adversity experiences found in the role. For example, Farmer (2010) suggested that school leaders face adversity not as an outcome of natural disasters but “frequent challenges result from politically positioned individuals in competition for scarce resources or power” (p. 2). Forty years ago, Culbertson (1976) identified four sources of adversity as: declining enrollment, diminished resources, loss of confidence, and accountability and assessment. Further, Culbertson stated that adversity can be seen as a transition state and a preface for change. Furthermore, he declared “adversity tends to generate many immediate demands and immediate responses” (p. 256). That sense of immediacy is echoed in a recent study by Smith and Riley (2012) who stated leaders may face school crises and labelled them as: short term, cathartic, long term, one offs, and

infectious. Smith and Riley identified the five features of a school crisis which involve; a wide range of stakeholders; time pressures requiring an urgent response; little warning; high degree of ambiguity of cause and effects; and, they create a significant threat to the successful pursuit of organizational goals. Bernier (2015) outlined the phrase “significant adversity” to describe major events but focused on the collection and accumulation of the daily minor incidents that exhaust principals as “tiny paper cuts” that principals must “become positively adaptive to those little situations that add up can help make the big stuff easier” (p. 8).

Another form of adversity was offered by Begley (2008) who used the term “dilemmas” (p. 36) to describe conflict situations that principals encounter. Specifically, he presented information under the description of “themes or context of dilemmas” and “sources of dilemma” (p. 37). Begley described these dilemmas or conflict situations as experiences where consensus cannot be achieved rendering the traditional notion of problem solving obsolete. He stated administration must now be satisfied with responding to a situation since there may be no solution possible that will satisfy all. In 2004, Begley conducted a pilot study of principals’ perceptions and responses to moral dilemmas encountered in their role. Data were collected from a sample of principals in Ontario, Canada, and Pennsylvania, USA using a survey and follow up interview. The study identified themes including: system policies that were rigid and negatively influenced the principals’ autonomy, desire to do what they perceive is right for students, conflict with parents, community members, and dealing with incompetent staff. Begley’s sources of dilemmas were described as conflict with organizational policies, between personal moral positions and those of the profession, and those which were interpersonal/intra-personal.

While various causes or sources of adversity have been identified in the literature it is noteworthy to recognize the level of intensity of school leadership adversity can be found somewhere between a crisis or a significant event to a moral dilemma and/or minor event.

### What is school leadership resiliency?

Various successful practices and factors associated with building or evidencing resilience in school leaders are found in the literature. Nishikawa (2006) used a survey questionnaire plus follow up interviews with twenty five elementary school principals finding that colleagues, superintendent, and support of family are critical to thriving in the face of adversity. Patterson (2001) declared that “a significant difference between resilient and non-resilient leaders is how they chose to handle the defeat” (p. 18).

From Allison’s (2012) research into leaders’ personal happiness and the extent to which they find their work meaningful, she found through a web-based inventory that leaders who rate themselves high on a personal happiness scale also scored as ‘incredibly resilient’ (p. 79) when asked to rate themselves on various qualities related to leadership. Alison listed practices of resilient leaders as: engage in personal renewal, stay optimistic, blunt the impact of setbacks, cultivate networks before challenges hit, and see patterns and use insight for change.

Lastly, the need to be positive and have the opportunity to feel supported was found by Bernier (2015) who listed factors of resilience: emotional awareness, optimism, flexible and accurate thinking, empathy and connection, and self-efficacy and Harvey (2007) listed being positive as a factor that fosters the development of resiliency but she also mentions physical health, adequate sleep, and positive stress control.

A variety of definitions of resiliency and what some leaders do (or do not) recover from adversity is found in literature. Carney and Parr (2014) defined resilience in education settings as “coping with life’s disappointments, challenges and pain. To be resilient, we need to believe in our own strengths, abilities, and worth. Resilient traits include flexibility, empathy, realistic action, planning, listening, and problem solving skills, self-confidence, optimism, a sense of humor, and an ability to develop effective relationships, manage emotions, and make social contributions” (p. 1-2). The OLF (2013) associated with Carney and Parr (2014) to the extent that sharing optimism and managing emotions as examples of effective personal leadership resources for school leaders was concerned. Garcia-Dia, DiNapoli, Garcia-Ona, and Jakubowski (2013)



framed resiliency as “resilience is one’s ability to bounce back or recover from adversity. It is a dynamic process that can be influenced by the environment, external factors, and/or the individual and the outcome” (p. 267). Ledesma (2014) also identified bouncing back as a trait. “Resilience is defined as the ability to bounce back from adversity, frustration, and misfortune and is essential for the effective leader” (p. 1). Kerfoot (2001) stated “adversity builds leaders if they have the capacity to reframe the event into a learning experience” (p. 292). Lastly, Nishikawa (2006) used the term “thrive” to describe high-performing and resilient leaders as those that in the middle of pressure and change, practice thriving and not just surviving when faced with multiple demands. “Thriving is characterized by a growth experience as a result of the adversity, and the individual demonstrates strengthened resilience after enduring hardship” (p. 28).

Another element uncovered by Day (2014) when he researched twelve successful school principals was that principals needed to be resilient themselves in order to build and support others’ capacity and capabilities to be resilient. “Vulnerability and risk, academic optimism, trust, hope, and ethical purpose are the key resilience qualities and responsibilities of successful principals” (p. 652). Day (2014) also introduced the term “everyday resilience” which describes the day-to-day events that consume school leaders. Studies by Bishop (1999) and Mulford, Edmunds, Kendall, Kendall, and Bishop (2008) recognized the importance of principals being both trusting and trusted by colleagues, whether based in schools, boards, or ministry positions. Resilience therefore is a necessary quality in “extreme adverse circumstances” such as a physical or emotional trauma resulting from a conflict and shorter term, smaller, daily events.

#### Developing resiliency in leaders

A variety of methods and reasons regarding the development of leaders and/or organizations preparing leaders to build resiliency was found in the literature. For example, using semi-structured interviews with six head teachers, Steward (2014) found first time headteachers are the most vulnerable school leaders. Further that their workload is an issue which has a negative impact on resilience. Allison (2012) suggested using leadership coaching as a vehicle to develop resilience and asking powerful questions to help leaders better understand their circumstances during coaching sessions.

And finally, relationships with mentors or others in their personal and professional lives were identified in Pankake and Beaty (2005) as a key strategy to overcome adversity. The authors claimed that almost all their participants identified a family member, teacher, minister, or collegial mentor as providing an environment of care or nurturing for the leader.

Although not involving a sample of school principals, Arnetz, Nevedal, Lumley, and Backman (2008) study used educational sessions followed by ten weekly two hour small group sessions consisting of relaxation and imagery training for their police recruits resulting in significant less negative mood, less heart rate activity, and better police performance. Bandura (2009) noted the value of having supportive organizations to develop resilience in their leaders. “Organizations that provide their new employees with guided mastery experiences, effective co-workers as models, and enabling performance feedback enhanced employees’ self-efficacy, emotional well-being, job satisfaction, and level of productivity” (p. 181). Bandura further explained the need for a supportive environment. “Resilience must also be built on training in how to manage failure so that it is informative rather than demoralizing” (p. 185). Training is also mentioned by Konnikova (2016) who suggested people can be trained to better regulate emotions by teaching people to think of stimuli in different ways. Reframing events and experiences in positive terms can lead to positive changes in well-being and work performance.

#### Reflective practice by school leaders

A need for reflective practice was found by Lyons and Murphy (1994) who conducted surveys with twenty five school principals in the United States. They found principals needed to have the opportunity to discuss their own leadership practices, failures, and successes of various efforts in an environment free from fear or threat where they receive encouragement and support. Schachter (2015) declared that it will not be easy to look closely at your mistakes or failures because the ego gets in the way. Nonetheless, Schachter encouraged leaders to seek feedback on qualities like open-mindedness, listening, empathy, and humility which would allow for the best thinking and ideas to rise to the top. Boss and Sims (2008) found that emotional regulation can complement self-leadership to enhance the process of recovering from failure. As well,

Boss and Sims found that the most salient cognitive strategies to help move people toward recovery are managing beliefs and assumptions, and engaging in positive self-talk. It can therefore be helpful to be reflective and take a step back from the situation and attempt to look at it objectively.

Frequently, there were studies that explained the importance of social opportunities to develop resiliency and manage adversity. For example, Kumar (2014) explained that connectedness is a key attribute to resilience. “Resilient individuals see connections and accept help from others who care about them. They reciprocate this support and try to help others in times of need. Belonging to social groups that are mutually supportive helps build resilience” (p. 3). Despite the importance of connectedness, Pollock et al. (2014) found that when principals were asked about strategies to cope with an emotionally draining day 74.6% indicated “talking with colleagues” as their strategy but only 18.4% of principals reported having high or very high levels of interaction with other principals (p. 26). This gap between strategy and opportunity could lead to a conclusion that principals do not have the opportunity to spend time talking with other principals. Organizations providing these social opportunities for principals were found in Ledesma (2014) who stressed a key factor in building a leader’s ability for resiliency were to ensure a social network of support in times of need. Nishikawa (2006) earlier had found that leaders needed to have access to trusted peers and colleagues, have time to reflect and collaborate with professional peers and colleagues, and transformational development opportunities that demand less social isolation and more collegial partnerships.

Having a variety of perspectives from others is also helpful to school leaders. Patterson (2007) insisted that principals cultivate a base of caring and support during tough times. Patterson claimed that the life of a principal is a lonely place to be particularly during stressful times but that resilient leaders surround themselves with trusted confidants who they can turn to during these troubled times. Further, Patterson noted that in order to get a full picture regarding the reality of leadership, seeking multiple perspectives, not just the perspectives of the people who see reality through one

lens may be painful at first but will help prepare a more resilient response and develop a higher tolerance for ambiguity and complexity.

### Organizational support for resiliency

Organizations can support their school leaders through a variety of opportunities. Nishikawa (2006) found districts can support their administrators in numerous ways: positive climate of trust, recognize and celebrate successes, have clear expectations and professional learning, encourage involvement of superintendents, and support principals' autonomy and decision making in schools. In their study, Pollock et al. (2014) suggested that principals should receive support to manage the stress and emotional toll found in their work from organizations such as the principals' school board, school councils, and principals' professional associations. Steward (2014) in her study in the United Kingdom listed six practical steps in which the government and society should create a climate of support for headteachers: raise the profile and value of emotional intelligence, have resilience as a topic in leadership development programs, develop a new approach to promoting well-being, provide coaching for headteachers, and guard against the impact of constant and rapid changes in policy.

Further research on organizational support was found in Luthans, Vogelgesang, and Lester (2006) who noted that organizations must develop both proactive and reactive programs to develop resilience in their employees. Smith and Riley (2012) stated that school systems should use scenarios from actual school based crisis in interactive on-line modules. However, Christman and McClellan (2008) found in their study using computer based qualitative Delphi technique of women administrators that the participants are of two minds: it can be taught or it is personality or a character trait. Such a finding revealed that some principals do not believe professional learning would be useful support. Nonetheless, Steward (2014) indicated that resiliency had grown through the experience of doing the job and recommended paying greater attention to the importance of developing resilience in leadership development programs and making use of techniques such as meditation, mindfulness or awareness and learned optimism was worthwhile.

Another learning opportunity for school leaders to develop resiliency was found in Seligman (2006) who stated that the main tool for changing the interpretation of adversity as negative is disputation and argued to challenge negative beliefs which are distortions of reality. Optimism can be learned by “learning a set of skills about how to talk to yourself when you suffer a personal defeat” (Seligman, 2006, p. 207). Seligman outlined the use of “ABC” in which an adversity is identified, beliefs are interpreted, and the consequences are recorded. Once ABCs are listed, the process of disputing can begin by looking at evidence, alternatives, implications, and usefulness (p. 220). Seligman argued that changing mental responses to adversity can be learned and it helps people to cope with setbacks much better. Similarly, Benard (2014) stated,

We are all born with innate resiliency, with the capacity to develop the traits commonly found in resilient survivors: social competence (responsiveness, cultural flexibility, empathy, caring, communication skills, and a sense of humor); problem-solving (planning, help-seeking, critical and creative thinking); autonomy (sense of identity, self-efficacy, self-awareness, task-mastery, and adaptive distancing from negative messages and conditions); and a sense of purpose and belief in a bright future (goal direction, educational aspirations, optimism, faith, and spiritual connectedness) (p. 1) .

Therefore, resilience is not a genetic trait that only a few possess, but an inborn capacity for self-righting, transforming, and change (Benard, 2014).

Interestingly, a sense of internal and external factors was found in Ledesma (2014) who described the variables of resilience. The internal variables were defined as self-factors, personality factors, or individual resources. These factors appear to have a significant impact on how a person interprets and handles these situations. Other internal factors included thoughts, response, action, positivity, and being in control of one’s surroundings along with optimism, empathy, insight, and perseverance. In her research on resilience in leadership, Ledesma (2014) found the key external variable of resilience is relationships. Individuals who have handled difficult situations the best were those who had a close confiding relationship during the trying times and acknowledged the significance of the relationship in their ability to be resilient.

### Theoretical frameworks and models

Emerging from the literature is the research-grounded view that resiliency can be developed through exposure to adversity. Resiliency theory has been researched across many disciplines such as psychology, psychiatry, human development, change management, medicine, and eventually in the field of educational administration (Ledema, 2014). Historically, resiliency theory grew through numerous psychological longitudinal studies of young people. The foundational study cited often in resiliency literature is Werner and Smith (1992) who reported the findings of a Hawaiian community after studying their children for 30 years. The study began in 1955 looking at children who were designated to be at high risk due to the reproductive and environmental risk factors of perinatal stress, poverty, daily instability, and parental mental health problems. But, surprisingly, Werner and Smith found that one third of all high-risk children displayed resilience and developed into caring, competent and confident adults despite their problematic development histories. The authors identified protective factors in the lives of these resilient individuals which helped to balance out risk factors at critical periods in their development such as: being socially responsible, adaptable, tolerance, achievement oriented, strong bond with a caregiver, involvement in a community group, and being a good communicator (Richardson, 2002; Emily Werner, 2016).

In research about the metatheory of resiliency, Richardson (2002) shared that whether resilient qualities are learned or part of one's genetic nature is a common debate among helping professionals but is clarified in resilience theory. Richardson is the Director of Health Behaviour Laboratory in the Department of Health Education at the University of Utah. Richardson first published the *Resiliency Model* (1990) which captured the primary understanding of how people can thrive through adversity and continues today researching the creation and efficacy of unique skills and techniques to help individuals, families, organizations, and communities to be more resilient (University of Utah, 2012). Resiliency theory is described as "the motivational force within everyone that drives them to pursue wisdom, self-actualization, and altruism" (Richardson, 2002, p. 309). Richardson stated that people possess selective strengths or assets to help them survive adversity. Specifically, the characteristics have been referred

to as protective factors or developmental assets. Many professions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to ensure their members are resilient because of their intensified work demands and the often volatile nature of work settings.

While resiliency theory and inquiry got its start in psychology and with studying children, Richardson (2002) explained that waves of resiliency theory have been seen through the years in multiple academic disciplines. For the purposes of this study and for those in education, agreement is found with Richardson (2002) who encouraged embracing resiliency and resiliency theory which prompts helping professionals to search for individual strengths and nurture them. The author concluded that “the resiliency process is a life-enriching model that suggests that stressors and change provide growth and increased resilient qualities and protective factors” (p. 319).

Richardson’s (1990) earlier work identified a “resiliency model” which conceptualized individuals passing through challenges, stresses, and risks then becoming disorganized, leading them to reorganize their life, learn from experiences, and surfacing stronger with more coping skills. Most importantly, the authors who were writing regarding leadership resiliency in schools, stressed the importance of support through adversity. They explained, “resiliency is not just about developing our individual capabilities. It is also about developing resiliency-supportive environments. There is a direct relationship between how supportive our environments are and how resilient we feel and behave” (p. 16).

The development of resiliency is further explored throughout the literature. Pankake and Beaty (2005) argued that resilience is developed. The authors noted that literature on resilience in children offers insights on how resilience evolves and some significant developmental points in the process. Konnikova (2016) indicated that the cognitive skills that underpin resilience can be learned over time and creating resiliency where there once was none. According to Konnikova, training people to change their explanatory styles from internal to external i.e. bad events are not my fault, global to specific i.e. this is a small event not a massive one that indicates something is wrong with my life, and from permanent to impermanent i.e. I can change the situation rather than

assume something is “fixed” made people more successful. This aligned with Richardson’s (2002) position who claimed resiliency theory is not a problem-based theory such as a grounded theory because, while it has originated through studying the characteristics of survivors living in high-risk situations, everyone has the capacity to be resilient. Bennis (1989) agreed and believes the development of self, voice, and mind is a process that begins at birth. Much development of the self, voice, and mind may be determined by the individual but they are also heavily influenced by personal background and environmental factors.

Further research explored the development of resiliency and its effects on the lives of humans. For example, George Bonanno is a professor of clinical psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University and is known for introducing the controversial idea of resilience to the study of loss and trauma. (George Bonanno, 2016). Bonanno (2008) stated that resiliency is a commonly called upon feature of adulthood rather than uncommon as had been proposed by earlier researchers. Resilience is a fundamental feature of normal coping skills as manifested by seeking social support from others, moving forward with life and accepting your circumstances with hope (Garcia-Dia et al., 2013). In referring to several studies involving personal loss or exposure to violent and life threatening events, Bonanno (2008) indicated that the vast majority of individuals who have experienced these events do not develop depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. He claimed,

Large numbers of people manage to endure the temporary upheaval of loss or potentially traumatic events remarkably well, with no apparent disruption in their ability to function at work or in close relationships, and seem to move on to new challenges with apparent ease (p. 101).

Bonanno outlined a number of distinct types or pathways of resilience. The personality trait of hardiness, high self-esteem, repressors (those that tend to avoid unpleasant thoughts, emotions, and memories), and positive emotion and laughter are predictors of adjusting and social relations.

Ledesma (2014) highlighted three resiliency models that describe the mechanisms for the impact of stress on quality adaption. First introduced by Garmezy, Masten, and Tellegen (1984), they include the compensatory model, the challenge model, and the



protective factor model. The first model, the compensatory model, sees resiliency as a factor that neutralizes exposures to risk. Numerous compensatory factors include: perceiving experiences in a positive light, ability to gain other people's positive attention, strong reliance on faith, optimism, direction or mission, empathy, determination and perseverance. An illustration of the compensatory model was found in the study referred to earlier by Werner and Smith (1992) whose study in Hawaii concluded that the characteristics that helped young people be resilient were: an active approach toward solving life's problems; a tendency to perceive or construct their experiences positively, the ability to gain other people's positive attention; and a strong reliance on faith to maintain a positive view of a meaningful life (O'Leary, 1998).

For this research in terms of examining school leaders' adversity experiences and their ability to be or become resilient, the challenge model (Garmezy et al., 1984) provided for interesting reflection. Garmezy et al. (1984) suggested that risks that are not too extreme enhance a person's ability to adapt and prepares individuals for the next challenge. O'Leary (1998) helped school leaders recognize that challenges, difficulties, and role stressors may actually enhance their leadership. She identified that "moderate levels of stress, however, provide a challenge that, when overcome, strengthens competence. If challenge is successfully met, it helps prepare the individual for the next difficulty"...but sadly "If efforts to meet the challenge are not successful, the individual may become increasingly vulnerable to risk" (p. 428).

The protective model of resiliency is different from the compensatory model or the challenge model in that it operates indirectly to influence outcomes (O'Leary, 1998). A third model exists: the protective factor model (Garmezy et al., 1984) claimed that there is an interaction between protection and risk factors which lowers the probability of negative outcomes and lowers the exposure to risk. This model indicated that the protective factors foster positive outcomes and healthy personality characteristics despite difficult life events. The protective factors identified include: emotional management skills, academic and job skills, ability to restore self-esteem, planning skills, life skills, and problem-solving skills.

## Conclusion

A variety of literature exists that examines school principals, their work-based adversity, and useful resiliency strategies. The literature review discussed numerous viewpoints on the role of school principal and the knowledge, skills, values, dispositions, and practices needed to manage school leadership adversity and resiliency. As well, the literature discussed various leadership perspectives concerning adversity and resiliency attributes with the numerous evidence-based ways to develop those capacities.

Overall, research literature related to school leadership adversity and resiliency clearly identified that adversity exists for principals, that the role requires resiliency for principals to effectively manage their schools, and that organizations need to promote the development of leadership capacity so that leaders may not just survive but thrive. Having optimism and supportive relationships are found to be vital resiliency keys to leaders' success.

Taken as a whole, the literature showed the variety of detailed definitions that exist for adversity and resiliency, and included some research that has stood the test of time. One gap in the literature at this point concerns the fact that relatively few investigations exist on the types of leadership adversity facing school leaders. The literature provided a continuum description of the types of adversity experiences school leaders may face from somewhere between a crisis or a significant event to a dilemma and/or minor event. Whether the adverse situation is a constant one such as dealing with an excessive workload, or a critical incident, these situations require certain dispositions and other capacities to be possessed by principals in order to manage the stress associated with the problems.

While the literature provided attributes of successful police resiliency training, missing is any work describing a successful professional learning program for educational leaders or aspiring school leaders to develop their resiliency capacities. This study could address that gap by provide a clear rationale or framework for a professional learning program rooted in research and need for opportunities for school leaders to talk to other school leaders about adversity experiences and in particular, what types of

learning formats would provide success for school leaders to manage adversity and develop resiliency.

This literature review informed this research by providing a framework of relevant previous studies on the topics, and valuable strategies to develop resiliency such as talking to other principals and being optimistic. Therefore, the literature positioned my study to contribute knowledge to the field of managing school leadership adversity with resiliency strategies. It is hoped that this study will be an impetus for further discussions on how school boards can support their leaders who undertake the complex role of elementary school principal through, for example, an effective leadership development program that includes aspects of resiliency development.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

This section outlines the research questions, design, methods, and procedures used to collect and analyze the data. Further it describes the challenges in conducting this study.

#### Purpose of the study

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to gather, examine, and define school leadership ‘adversity experiences’ of elementary school principals in an Ontario school board. This qualitative study examined how principals use resiliency strategies to manage adversity in the course of their school leadership. Lastly, the study examined supports, professional learning, and/or programs specific to the Ontario context that exist for principals experiencing adversity. This information will hopefully provide insights for boards in Ontario and the Ontario Principals’ Council (OPC) so that current and aspiring school leaders can be provided with learning opportunities in the area of leadership adversity and resiliency. Of concern is that school boards in Ontario may be facing a leadership pipeline that is slowly drying up (Pollock et al., 2014). By examining the adversity experiences and resiliency strategies of some of their current leaders, Ontario school boards may be better positioned to attract and keep school leaders who are healthy, happy, and effective throughout their careers.

Another early influence in the preparation for this study was Glickman (2006) who focused on the positive aspects of examining adversity stating that “learning from another, looking at research, and sharing our own failures and successes, so that we can learn to move more directly toward success” (p. 689). Bumphus (2008) noted that resiliency enhances one’s life and leads to fulfillment that can develop over a lifetime and is especially helpful in the face of adversity. Giessner et al. (2009) also reiterated the importance of knowing what factors contribute to leadership and what influences their attributes because looking at “this attribution process might help leaders, followers, and

organizations to better understand and respond to performance information” (p.450). For example, we need to help leaders better understand and further use the emotional intelligence skill of resiliency as a key for school leaders’ success.

In broad terms, this research attempted to conceptually shift the scant dialogue on school leadership adversity to one of principals’ incremental success by degrees. Reframing difficult situations in which there is either success or failure to one that is more nuanced, and one that is more agential is preferable. This study is less about how the adversity is impacting the person, and more about how the person is actively responding to the problem. Discussing resiliency can get school principals to think about it in light of themselves and other colleagues, for example. Such a chance for this leadership reflection could ultimately have a positive impact on principals and their work.

#### Research questions

This exploratory case study was guided by the following research questions. Interview protocols (Appendices F & G) aimed to collect data in response to these broader questions.

1. What school-related experiences do elementary school principals define as school leadership adversity (forms, types, and levels of intensity)?
2. What resiliency strategies do elementary school principals use to manage adversity in their school leadership?
3. What supports, professional learning, and/or programs specific to the Ontario context exist for principals experiencing adversity?

#### Methodology - qualitative

This research was nested in an exploratory case study that relied on a qualitative design. The qualitative data gathered were used so that new information and/or new ways of seeing phenomena could be shared. Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2014) argued that qualitative research differs from quantitative research in two distinct ways. Firstly, qualitative research often involves the collection of narrative over a period of time. Secondly, qualitative research collects data (as much as possible) in a naturalistic setting which is in contrast to quantitative research that is often conducted in researcher-

controlled conditions. In particular, Yin (2014) stated that the qualitative method of case study contributes to our knowledge of individual, group, and organizational related phenomena and that it is a common research method in education. Gay et al. (2014) agreed, explaining that “the central focus of qualitative research is to provide an understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants” (p. 16).

Case study research is the preferred method for this study because the main research question is attempting to answer a *how* question. The researcher has no control over the behaviour events, and the focus of the study is in a natural not controlled setting. Yin (2014) also argued that ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions can be gainfully pursued via case study research. Further, this study allowed for the features of a case study inquiry to spotlight the multiple sources of evidence, with data converging in a triangular fashion, and some theoretical suggestions exist to guide data collection and analysis. The research used a qualitative design to collect, analyze, and interpret data because education involves complex human interactions and rarely can it be studied or explained in simple terms (Anderson, 2010). This holistic, single-case study’s unit of analysis was elementary school principals’ resiliency strategies to manage adversity experiences in an Ontario school board.

More specifically, this research is using an exploratory case study design which investigates distinct phenomena of a specific research environment (Yin, 2014) and, provides the researcher with flexibility and independence with regard to the research design as well as the data collection, as long as these fulfill the required scientific criteria of validity and reliability. This form of case study is often used as the beginning step of an overall explanatory research design exploring a relatively new research question that has either not been clearly identified, and formulated, or the data required for a hypothetical design have not yet been obtained (Mills, Durepos, Wiebe, 2010). Mills et al. (2010) noted that exploratory case studies are generally distinguished by the absence of early or any hypotheses and identifying these is often the actual purpose of the study.

Using case study methodology, Christman and McClellan (2008) provided an example of the type of phenomenon referred to by Mills et al. (2010) in exploratory case studies. Christman and McClellan's original assumptions surrounding women in educational leadership positions dramatically changed once they completed their data collection and analysis revealing that "we believed that our extraordinary women in higher education administration would reveal how women can make it in leadership roles. This is what we expected, but it was not what we got" (p. 4). The authors reminded researchers to be careful not to evaluate data too quickly using socially constructed norms. These moments of reflection are what this research hoped to discover from educational leaders in the Ontario school board and give voice to their experiences and strategies.

Punch (1998) explained while some styles are distinctive, there is no one perfect design in research, designs may overlap, in whole or part, with other designs. This research studied how different people experience the world around them by having participants tell the stories of how they live. School leaders sharing their adversities stories fall into at least two of the types of narrative research forms that exist: personal accounts, life stories, and personal narratives (Gay et al., 2014).

### Method

In order to gather data associated with school leaders' experiences surrounding adversity and resiliency, during the winter of 2015-2016 the researcher conducted semi-structured, one-to-one, audio recorded interviews with fifteen elementary school principals and one superintendent of education responsible for the supervision of elementary school administrators in one Ontario school board.

Semi-structured interview protocols (Appendices F & G) were chosen for this study because it allowed for all the participants to be asked the same questions within a flexible framework. During the sixty minute time frame allotted for each interview, the participants were asked to reflect on their experiences through open-ended questions. Then, in keeping with the purposes of semi-structured interviews, further questions were determined by their responses. For example, the question: "How much time per week do

you spend confiding with an influential person?” could, depending on how it was answered, be followed by, “How do you communicate with that person?” Details were obtained by asking for examples. In this way, the truthfulness of the study was increased by the collection of data that were rich with participants’ explanations and analysis of events (Dearnley, 2005). Finally, for the purposes of document perusal, and triangulation, data were compiled about supports, professional learning, and/or programs available for leaders to develop their resiliency and the leaders’ perceptions surrounding the usefulness of the supports and the responsibility of the development of resiliency in leaders.

### Ontology, epistemology, and research practice

Ontology is one’s view of reality (Mack, 2010). It describes the world, including its properties, relationships, and claims about reality. It models the reality, how people make meaning, and the ways that reality can be captured and understood. Relatedly, epistemology is the study of knowledge, which includes how we can know the world and the nature of truth, and the nature of knowledge. Grix (2004) explained that the word *epistemology* is derived from the Greek words *episteme* (knowledge) and *logos* (reason), and therefore focuses on the knowledge-gathering process. Grix clarified the difference between ontology and epistemology by stating that “ontology is about what we may know, then epistemology is about how we come to know what we know” (p. 63). Together, the assumptions that ground ontology and epistemology form a paradigm (Mack, 2010), which is a structured way of looking at the world that informs research design.

Mack (2010) identified three distinct and separate paradigms that when taken as a whole, most or as a group, underpin educational research: positivist, Interpretivist, and critical. While positivism typically aims to prove or disprove a hypothesis and relies on empiricism and the scientific method, and the critical approach embodies different ideological philosophies and explains political agendas, interpretivism emphasizes the ability of individuals to construct meaning and the researcher’s role to attempt to understand participants’ experiences and/or perceptions. This, latter this paradigm acknowledges that knowledge is subjective and constructed in multiple ways by different



people in different contexts. Multiple perspectives shape incidents, and knowledge is gained through from particular situations and personal experiences to create a theory.

Taking an Interpretivist approach, this case study research looked to examine human meaning through detailed accounts that go beyond perception (Bakker, 2010). Bakker stated “interpretation adds something in order to try and make sense of what we see or hear” (p. 491) and he encouraged researchers to grasp the totality of the situation or process. Gay et al. (2014) defined interpretive validity as “the degree to which a qualitative researcher attributes the appropriate meaning to the behaviour or words of the participants in the study and therefore captures the participants’ perspective” (p. 573). Mack (2010) described the role of researcher in the Interpretivist paradigm as being to “understand, explain, and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants” (p. 8). Mack found advantages with this approach as emphasizing the ability of the individual to construct meaning and advocating for the need to consider human beings’ subjective interpretations and their perceptions of the world. Limitations to this approach include: abandoning the scientific method that often results in generalizable findings, establishing only locally created theories, and relying on subjective rather than objective forms of data collection. Nonetheless, Interpretivists still take a potentially credible stance when analyzing the data collected and bracketing their assumptions by looking at the data thoroughly to inform the researcher about what is going on in the environment instead of relying solely on the researcher’s own preconceptions.

Raddon (2012) provided a model to differentiate between the positivist’s view of the research process and the Interpretivist’s view. The Interpretivist’s view of the process has multiple cycling back points to the research design, instrument, and questions. The positivist’s “explaining” view of the process moves from a central question to design, to data collection, to interpretation etc. and uses a stock of theory and established methodological standards using universal principles and facts. In contrast, the Interpretivist’s “understanding” view pushes for further data collection during analysis or reformulation of the research questions, which allows for an unveiling of individual interpretations, meaning, motivations, and values.

The Interpretivist paradigm is useful to investigate resiliency because, as Angen (2000) explained, this form of research is connected to real-life context and is well situated to inform practice. This research was intended to discover how resiliency is used, developed, and understood by elementary school principals. Angen (2000) explained that the Interpretivist paradigm goes beyond the individual researcher and “unfolds into the future as the interpretation is taken up by the community of practitioners” (p. 388). Importantly, Angen explained that it potentially plays an ethical role by moving beyond present understanding of (in this instance) resiliency to some new, generative understanding. The Interpretivist paradigm is useful to understand how principals make sense of resiliency because it acknowledges complexity. It also seeks to understand and, in a sense, not conclude because it provides an offer to continue the conversation and to take the discourse in new and more productive directions (Angen, 2000).

Cohen and Crabtree (2006) explained that the Interpretivist paradigm is useful for the researcher to gain a better research-based understanding of resiliency of principals because what we know is always exchanged within cultures, social situations, and relationship with other people. The authors explained that this method enables dialog to occur between researcher and participant in order to collaboratively construct a meaningful reality.

This study attempted to involve a deeper questioning of method and methodology in order to not be limited to the “simple signs” but to worry “about meanings behind the meanings” (Bakker, 2010, p. 492). An Interpretivist paradigm shaped the methodological approach to this study because it relies heavily on naturalistic methods such as interviewing used to gather the data and as Angen (2000) asserted “understanding, therefore, cannot be separated from context” (p. 385). Borrowing from Angen’s assertion that an Interpretivist stance assumes that what we know of reality is socially constructed through our experiences with the lived world, this research relies on interview data in which school leaders reflect on and learn (via that reflective process) from their actual work experiences. Finally, since the researcher is an elementary school principal, this study demonstrated the “transactional or subjectivist epistemology” because the

participants were also elementary school principals and in the Interpretivist paradigm, the researcher and object of investigation are connected such that who we are and how we understand the world is a central part of how we understand ourselves, others and the world. (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006)

### Context

The Ontario school board chosen for this study has over 130 elementary schools and considered a large school board in the province. The fifteen principal participants equates to approximately 11% of the total number of possible elementary principals in the school board. The term “approximately” is used because some elementary principals in the school board do not work at a school location but are instead located at the district office. In those situations the individuals may hold positions of additional responsibility at the system level but maintain their elementary principal designation. Inclusion criteria for interviewing elementary school principals in any position or location allows for current and future leaders to aspire and learn from their peers, particularly when, as Spitzer (2005) noted, “good leaders always take responsibility for failure at whatever level in the organization they occupy” (p. 6).

Because of the researcher’s elementary school principal position, cooperation from the participating board led to assistance with garnering volunteer participation and support for this research because of their interest in its findings. Dearnley (2005) reflected on the ethical implications of carrying out an investigation within her own organization while Smyth and Holian (1999) suggested that researchers who examine their own organization can offer a unique perspective because of their knowledge of the culture, history, and people involved. The authors stated it is concerned with questions that cannot be tackled through traditional forms of research. The focus is on changing and enhancing both the organization in which the researcher works and the researcher's practice in that organisation. Smyth and Holian (1999) acknowledged the potential problem of researcher credibility, both within the organization and at the point of reporting research findings. The authors described this situation as an “insider research” (p. 1). Commitment to being credible was maintained by complete transparency of the research process, being open and collaborative, and recognizing the research goal to give

a voice to the participants. “Insider research” raises the potential of biases that implies data could be distorted by subjective interpretation. To inoculate against this, Dearnley (2005) used the term “reflective researcher” (p. 21) and reframed the opportunity, suggesting:

That engaging in reflexive activity directly and openly makes it possible to turn the potential problem of subjectivity into an opportunity. From this perspective, it is held that personal reflection allows the researcher to identify with the participants, and is thus more able to understand the views of the participants (p. 21).

Therefore, since I am a researcher and an elementary school principal, I strove to take this approach as well.

Taking into consideration that adversity experiences shared by the principals may elicit deep emotions, Newman and Kaloupek (2004) believed there may be potential benefits to participate. The authors stated that subjects who experience strong emotions do not appraise their participation as negative and the authors confirm that emotional distress can be understood as an indicator of emotional engagement with the research project and not as an indicator of harm. Newman and Kaloupek listed benefits to participants who participate in research studies in which they reflect on difficult life experience. Those benefits include, but are not limited to: learning insight, reducing stigma, breaking silence, fostering valuable relationships, gaining resources, feeling worthwhile, kinship with others, and altruism. The semi-structured interview in this study provided an opportunity to explore common and unique questions with participants (Gay et al., 2014). The interviews required significant time to complete, confirm participants were satisfied with their statements once they had reviewed transcripts, and undertake analysis. As noted earlier, the interviews were limited to fifteen principals and one superintendent, as well as document perusal (documents or resources mentioned by participants during the interviews) for triangulation purposes such as: emails, pamphlets, workshop invitations, professional resources etc. that they use or mentioned contributed to their development of resiliency or management of adversity.

## Procedure

The data collection instruments for this study were semi-structured interview protocols (Appendices F & G) used with the fifteen principal participants and one superintendent of education. Punch (1998) noted that the semi-structured interview is used as a way of understanding the complex behaviour of people without imposing any categorization which might limit the field of inquiry. The interview allowed for asking specific questions surrounding participants' leadership adversities and the factual information of the events; questions regarding the participants' strategies to deal with adversity; and knowledge and opinions from the participants on professional learning, programs, and/or supports available to leaders to develop resiliency strategies. A period of up to sixty minutes for each interview was determined to be respectful of the busy professional lives of principals.

The data collection for this study began with an email to all school board's elementary principals November 17, 2015 from the school board's research and assessment department as part of a weekly administrator's e-newsletter. The email shared the recruiting email information (Appendix C) asking for elementary principal volunteers who wish to participate to contact the researcher at her university email account. Once the researcher was contacted by a volunteer participant, a letter of consent was forwarded by email from the researcher for the participant's review. Conscious that school leaders in this board are often called upon to be part of numerous research studies, the researcher had hoped for a target of fifteen principal volunteers and it is noted that twenty-two administrators contacted the researcher to volunteer but once the fifteen interviews were scheduled and completed, no more volunteers were approached or recruited.

A superintendent of education was sent the recruiting email information (Appendix B) once identified from the school board's website as a superintendent responsible for the hiring and training of elementary principals. Their interview was obtained as an opportunity to seek information and views from a person responsible for multiple school leaders and perhaps have further knowledge on principals' experiences due to their board of education position allowing for a wider lens of schools and school

leaders' challenges. Once they agreed to participate, a letter of consent was forward by email from the researcher for their reviews.

Once a signed letter of consent was signed and returned to the researcher from a participant, a time and place that best suited the interviewee was scheduled in order to potentially make them feel relaxed and at ease. The volunteers were telephoned or emailed using the university email account to schedule their location and time and remind them that they would be audio recorded for their interview. Each principal participant was assigned the identifier P1, P2, P3 etc. from the order in which they were interviewed and the superintendent was assigned S1. All the participants were current employees of the Ontario school board and the participants were interviewed between December 2, 2015 and January 29, 2016.

Managing the reliability, trustworthiness, and interpretive validity of this study was completed by focusing extensively on taking detailed field notes, accurate audio recordings, and member checking, i.e. having the transcribed audio notes reviewed by the participants for accuracy in order for the researcher to confirm an accurate interpretation of the participants' words. Interpretive validity is defined as "the meaning attributed to the behaviours or words of the participants" (Gay et al., 2014, p. 344). Maxwell (1992) stated,

Qualitative researchers are not concerned solely, or even primarily, with providing a valid description of the physical objects, events, and behaviours in the setting they study; they are also concerned with what these objects, events, and behaviours mean to the people engaged in and with them (p. 288)

Guba and Lincoln (1981) provided a list of strategies to ensure validity of qualitative research during and after data collection: use peer debriefing, collect documents, do member checks, establish structural coherence, collect detailed descriptive data, develop detailed descriptions of the context, establish an audit trail, practice triangulation, and practice reflexivity (p. 83). These strategies were facilitated in this study and are outlined below. This study falls under a the realm of research in which Gay et al. (2014) observed is a highly personal and intimate approach to educational research,

and therefore demands a high degree of caring and sensitivity on the part of the researcher.

#### Data collection process

The data for this study were collected in three ways. Firstly, semi-structured, one-on-one, audio taped interviews were completed by the researcher with fifteen elementary school principals in one Ontario school board. Secondly, a semi-structured, one-to-one, audio taped interview was completed with a superintendent of education responsible for the supervision of elementary administrators in the same Ontario school board. Finally, any documents referred to during the interviews by the participants were sought and gathered by the researcher directly from the Ontario school board on programs, supports and/or professional learning for their administration to develop resiliency and manage school leadership adversity. All the participant interviews took place between December 2, 2015 and January 29, 2016 at various schools or personal residences located throughout the Ontario school board.

The interview questions (Appendices F & G) asked by the researcher explored school leadership adversity experiences and perceptions of how adversity has enhanced or affected leadership practice; school and learning community; strategies learned and utilized now in role; and lessons learned. The semi-structured interviews provided data for content analysis techniques used to locate key words and common themes and patterns among the stories shared during the interviews. Gay et al. (2014) stated that interviews can provide interviewers the opportunity to explore and probe participants' responses to gather a lot of data about experiences and feelings. Having a set of questions prepared is suggested, then the researcher should guide the conversation around who, what, where, when, why, and how. Most importantly, these conversations examined attitudes, interests, feelings, concerns, and values more easily than through other research methods such as an observation.

Probing questions were used during the interviews as appropriate. As found in Merriam (2001), probing participants during interviews is acceptable because it is

difficult to predict how participants will answer a lead question. The probes allow for questions, comments, and follow up to a question already asked.

The audio tape recorded data from the semi-structured interviews were confidentially and professionally transcribed for easy reading and analyses. However, re-listening to the audio recordings numerous times provided the researcher the opportunity to add details to the participants' interview protocol sheet capturing further 'observations' from the interviews i.e. length of pauses before answering a question, sighing, laughing, and questions asked to the researcher. These 'heard observations' added to the visual observations made on the protocol sheets during the interviews while the participants were responding to questions. All this observable data allowed for further clarification during the data analysis process to more fully understand the participants' perspectives during the interview and supports the emotional nature of the topic and ways in which principals respond, feel, and communicate their thinking about adversity experiences.

Once transcribed, the transcripts were personally forwarded to the sixteen participants for the confirmation of accuracy of their transcript with a three week return window provided. Seven participants returned their transcriptions to the researcher with edited corrections. The original transcription documents were saved in a secure location and new edited versions were updated with the participant requested changes; those files were then printed and used for data analysis. The data were then analyzed using coding for links, comparisons, themes, vocabulary, and patterns in the participants' responses: however, Punch (1998) reminds researchers that qualitative data can fall anywhere along the structured continuum and therefore themes and a structure of the data emerge during analysis.

An email from the researcher's university account to various department leaders and/or administrators (Appendix H) at the Ontario school board was sent to request documentation referred by the participants (during the interviews) about supports, professional learning, and/or programs to develop their resiliency or manage school adversity. The department leaders and/or administrators emailed various documents back



to the researcher for use in data analysis. The school board's website was also searched for documents and supports for principals.

### Data Analysis

Using a modified version of constant comparative analysis (Glaser, 1965), the participants' answers to each question from the interview protocol were compared question by question with other participants while examples of the kinds of strategies utilized were sorted and displayed. Using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) systematic approach to code the qualitative data, open coding was used to generate initial concepts from data, then axial coding to link concepts into conceptual families, and finally selective coding to formalise relationships into theoretical frameworks. The superintendent's responses and the documents from the board were then added to compare and contrast the principal responses. Yin (2014) argued that if the case study researcher can build a compelling narrative through the 'classic way of presenting evidence', the readers will be informed and engaged.

Triangulation of the interviews was ultimately achieved through the addition of documents on programs, professional learning, and/or supports that participants shared regarding the school board's support to leaders experiencing adversity and/or to develop resiliency strategies. As soon as the transcripts were confirmed by the participants and edited, open coding began. The first coding pass began with highlighting of all the proper nouns found in the transcripts in which the participants referred to a document, course, book, or resource etc. "Triangulation is used often, in which different sources of data pertaining to the same question are used to verify consistent findings" (McMillan & Wergin, 2002, p. 11). All of this tangible evidence referred to or shared during the interviews was sought directly from school board personnel and/or from their website to analyze resources such as: course outlines, pamphlets, books, professional publications and/or any other documentation aligning with the principals' stories of adversity.

Lastly, a semi-structured, one-to-one, audio recorded interview (Appendix F) was completed with a superintendent of education responsible for supervising elementary school principals in the Ontario school board. The superintendent participant was asked

about their perceptions surrounding principals' use of resilience strategies to manage their adversity and/or their knowledge and usefulness of programs, professional learning or supports available to current or aspiring leaders in their school board. Being the supervisor of multiple elementary school leaders allowed for the superintendent to possibly provide data from a variety of examples to insights as to how adversity affects principals from a board perspective i.e. sick time, community complaints, internal and external supports required. The superintendent's data were coded with the same open coding framework as the principals, i.e. highlighting proper nouns of documents and programs in order to seek further information from the school board on the professional learning opportunities. Then the interview was coded for themes, words, categories associated with adversity and resiliency strategies, either aligning with the principals' responses or contradictory to their opinions.

#### Confidentiality

A high level of confidentiality was maintained throughout this research project's process. The researcher maintained all aspects of the ethics application as approved from the school board and university, maintained security of the signed consent forms, transcripts, communication files, and anonymity of participants. To help ensure anonymity of the participants, no demographic data were collected (such as gender, age, school location, years' experience) in light of the sample size, study's design and purposes, and in order to maintain the safest of sharing environments through potentially 'emotional' subject matter and identifiable stories.

A code identifier was assigned to each subject so their identity is reserved as confidential e.g. P1, P2, P3 etc. In Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, all participants (both the male and female principals and superintendent) are referred to as *she* to ensure the clearest of understanding for the reader. The participants were assured anonymity and their transcribed responses were sealed and kept in a secure location and as per the ethics application at which time they will be destroyed after five years.

## Summary

This chapter provided detailed information on the approach to research conducted in this study. The research findings are detailed in Chapter Four.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the data analysis. The findings of the participant responses (principals and superintendent) were juxtaposed with document evidence obtained from the school board to provide for the purpose of triangulation. The chapter begins with a re-statement of the research purpose, research questions, and methodology, and then outlines the results related to each research question.

#### Purpose of the study and research questions

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to gather, examine, and define school leadership ‘adversity experiences’ of elementary school principals in an Ontario school board. This qualitative study examined how principals use resiliency strategies to manage adversity in the course of their school leadership. Lastly, the study examined supports, professional learning, and/or programs specific to the Ontario context that exist for principals experiencing adversity. The research questions included:

1. What school related experiences do elementary school principals define as school leadership adversity (forms, types, and levels of intensity)?
2. What resiliency strategies do elementary school principals use to manage adversity in their school leadership?
3. What supports, professional learning, and/or programs specific to the Ontario context exist for principals experiencing adversity?

#### Review of methodology, research type and design

An exploratory case study that relies on a qualitative design was used to gather data associated with school leaders’ experiences surrounding adversity and resiliency. The study used semi-structured, one-to-one interviews that documented experiences and strategies of principals to manage identified leadership adversities and perceived success or lack of success of their shared resiliency strategies. Data have been compiled about programs, professional learning, and/or supports available for leaders to develop their

resiliency and the leaders' perceptions surrounding the responsibility of the development of resiliency in leaders. Throughout this chapter, all participants (both the principals and superintendent) are referred to as *she* to ensure the clearest of understanding for the reader and buttress anonymity.

### Population and size

The population of this study included fifteen elementary school principals and one superintendent of education in the same Ontario school board. The sample of principals and superintendent was taken from volunteers to a recruiting email. All the participants at the time of interviewing were current employees of the Ontario school board. The participants were interviewed between December 2, 2015 and January 29, 2016 at a location of their choosing. The one-to-one interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, then the transcripts were read and approved by the participants and seven participants, who returned their transcriptions to the researcher with edit corrections (such as removal of formal names, spelling corrections, and additional resource suggestions). Two participants, upon further reflection after their interview, sent the researcher an email with further information to an answer from their interview. That information was cut and pasted into their edited transcript for data analysis. Each participant was assigned the identifier P1, P2, P3 etc. for the principal participants from the order in which they were interviewed, and S1 was assigned to the superintendent participant.

### Demographic information

No demographic data i.e., gender, location, years' experience or school size etc., that could be used to identify the participants were intentionally gathered during the study. Further, investigating leadership adversity experience and resiliency strategies along gender, location, or school size lines were beyond the scope of the study. Due to the small sample size and the sensitive nature of the topics being explored and possible identifiable stories, and to maintain a safe sharing environment, the protection of their identity was of utmost importance during the study. Some participants were cautious to use names during their interviews, and through the transcription confirmation some participants removed identifying information from their transcript in order to maintain anonymity for themselves or others in their responses.

### Observations and further interview information

During the sixteen one-to-one interviews, field notes were taken by the researcher on each participant's individual interview protocol sheet while the participants were speaking and being audio recorded. The questions were not provided to the participants ahead of time except for one participant who felt they would be more prepared for what was indicated in the Letter of Information as a potential emotional response on the part of the participants to the study.

While the principal's Letter of Consent indicated no known or anticipated risks or discomfort would be associated with participating in the study, the interview could have been stopped at any time by the participants if they experienced any discomfort. It is noted that during a pilot interview in April 2015 prior to the commencement of this study, the trial participant required a tissue due to the content they had shared, so the researcher was prepared for potential emotional reactions during the interviews. Hence, during the study's interviews, eight of the sixteen participants were observed or expressed they were getting "emotional" while responding to some of the questions. During the interview, it was observed by the researcher that two participants required a moment to pause, four sought a tissue, and one took a five-minute break due to emotional nature of the content they were sharing. Although the participants had been informed that they could stop the interviews completely, none of them elected to do so. Four of the sixteen participants were observed or expressed that they were angry about the events they were describing during their interview. Two were observed hitting their hand down on the table to emphasize their point of view. Three participants expressed they were nervous at the beginning of their interview because they wanted to "do a good job sharing," and one was observed to be mildly shaking and acknowledged they that they were "very nervous" due to not being aware of the specific questions being asked. Six participants subsequently presented me with professional resources they referred to in their interview.

### Analysis of the data

The interview questions that guided the semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with the participants in the study were designed with the intent of identifying themes emerging from the data related to principals' understanding of their adversity

experiences, their resiliency strategies, and the supports available to develop their capacities and to manage adversity in their roles. Using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) systematic approach to code the qualitative data, open coding was used to generate initial concepts from data, then axial coding to link concepts into conceptual families, and finally selective coding to formalise relationships into theoretical frameworks. The superintendent's responses and the documents from the board were then added to compare and contrast the principal responses.

### Findings

The participants in the study stated a variety of definitions and examples of school leadership adversity; shared numerous strategies that principals perceive as resiliency; and outlined supports, professional learning and/or programs principals felt may have contributed to principals' development and/or made suggestions for further support. The themes are reported with supporting statements from the participants and documentation obtained from the school board. The semi-structured interviews represented thirteen total questions (nine with sub questions as found on the interview protocols) that fell under the three research questions along with an opportunity to ask the researcher questions or comments related to the study as the final question.

In Table 1, the three research questions and interview questions are listed in bold and labelled 1, 2, and 3. The right hand columns present a summary of all of the broad findings from the three data collection sources: principals, superintendent, and documents. It illuminates the alignment or misalignment of the three data sources responses in the study. After Table 1, each research question and the interview question's data are presented with citing from the three data sources.

<b>Research Question #1. What school-related experiences do elementary school principals define as school leadership adversity?</b>			
<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Principals (n=15)</b>	<b>Superintendent (n=1)</b>	<b>School Board, Ministry, or Organizational Documentation</b>
Definition of adversity	- Challenging - Event - Relationships	- Challenging - Unexpected	

	- Unexpected		
Examples/Sources of adversity	- Conflict with Stakeholders	- Conflict with Stakeholders	
What makes something an “adversity”?	- Challenging - Relationships - Personal impact	- Challenge - Relationships	
What makes adversity “trying”?	- Relationships - Competing Demands - Emotions - Affects student learning	- Relationships - Competing Demands	
How does adversity affect principals?	- Time - Physically - Emotionally - Relationships	- Time - Physically - Emotionally	
What did principals learn from adversity?	- Don’t take it personally - Walk away - Recognize limits - Practice humility	- Don’t take it personally - Walk away - Set limits	

**Research Question #2. What resiliency strategies do elementary school principals use to manage adversity in their school leadership?**

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Principals (n=15)</b>	<b>Superintendent (n=1)</b>	<b>School Board, Ministry, or Organizational Documentation</b>
Definition of resiliency	- Challenging situation - Bouncing back - Being positive	- Challenging situation - Positive proactive approach	- Challenging situation - Adapt well - Bounce back
Resiliency strategies	- Colleagues - Be positive - Physical Activities - Humour/Fun at work	- Set Limits - Physical Fitness - Social Life - Confidence	

**Research Question #3. What supports, professional learning, and/or programs specific to the Ontario context exist for principals experiencing adversity?**

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Principals (n=15)</b>	<b>Superintendent (n=1)</b>	<b>School Board, Ministry, or Organizational Documentation</b>
Identified helpful supports	- Time with Colleagues	- Emotional Intelligence	- TERT - EAFP



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Look at role positively</li> <li>- Some professional learning offerings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mentoring</li> <li>- New Admin Program</li> <li>- Crucial Conversations</li> <li>- SOIP</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Crucial Conversations</li> <li>- Emotional Intelligence</li> <li>- ADR</li> <li>- Cognitive Coaching PQP</li> <li>- New Admin Program</li> <li>- Mental Health documents</li> </ul>
Identified needed supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Time with Colleagues</li> <li>- Mental health offerings</li> <li>- Individual Differentiation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cognitive Coaching</li> <li>- Mental Health</li> <li>- Wellness</li> <li>- Balance, Flexibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lieu Day</li> </ul>
Influential people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Colleagues</li> <li>- Family/Friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Colleagues</li> <li>- Family/Friends</li> </ul>	
Time spent confiding/week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 20 min to 25 hours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Quite a bit”</li> </ul>	

**Table 1 – Summary of the findings by research question**

Research Question 1

**What school related experiences do elementary school principals define as school leadership adversity?**

The interview data yielded information regarding school leadership adversity. When responding to interview question 1, “Thinking of your experiences as a school principal, how do you define school leadership adversity?” participants utilized the word “challenging” most often. It appeared thirteen times in the participants’ responses along with “event,” “relationships,” and “unexpected” appearing thirteen times combined. Curiously, along with principals’ definitions of adversity, they shared their opinion of the types of adversity that principals face. For example, P12’s definition framed leadership adversity as difficult due to numerous facets of the role:

I think school leadership adversity, are those challenges that we face. Things that may be unexpected that we, entering a role, entering a situation, entering a school, and then suddenly, unbeknownst to you, things are starting to come at you. Some real challenges. Difficult situations, that you have to meet head on, and, either be defeated by them, or take them on.

S1 also outlined principals' adversity as challenging and unexpected but made a distinction between "normal challenges" versus "unexpected adversities." S1 described principals' normal challenges as "challenges that come with the role of principal". For example, a teacher not meeting performance expectations, mental health issues, an irate parent, plus others demands of the job. She shared that "unexpected adversities" are bigger events that may not be predictable, such as a tragedy for a family, a loss of a child, a gross misconduct of a staff member leading to a criminal investigation, or a violent incident. Along similar lines of adversity being unpredictable, P3 felt adversity is a "catastrophic event" with a student or a family" and further described adversity as "all sorts of things that happen that are way beyond our control".

The concept of adversity being challenging, and another definition outlining different types of adversity, was seen in P8's definition that defined two kinds of adversity: "situational" and "systemic." She felt situational adversity involves kids or a certain situation that arises. The systemic type of adversity, in contrast, has to do with regulations and rules that principals must follow. She indicated both can be very challenging for a school principal. Systemic adversity was also found in P2's definition:

You have a staff member that you need them to change their program but the union gets in the way and won't allow you to do what you need to do so that they can be successful. Systemic adversity where you want to do something specifically in your building for the betterment of your students but because of the systemic red tape or process or whatever the case may be, you're told no, even though it's good for kids and a good idea.

Therefore, the principal participants' and the superintendent's definitions of leadership adversity introduced the concept of different types of leadership adversity experienced by elementary principals, and yet similarly framed the experiences as challenging.

When responding to interview question 2, "What are some examples of school leadership adversity that you have faced?" participants' examples described numerous conflicts with stakeholders in their role. These conflicts were between themselves and staff, parents, school community, or the board of education (system). P2 stated the quality and nature of potential areas for adversity to occur are astronomical. P13 shared that principals are faced with adversity every single day between leaders and all their

stakeholders, and it often results in times of high or intense emotions. Table 2 lists the sources of adversity identified from the data with examples from the participants' interviews.

<b>Source of adversity</b>	<b>Example of adversity</b>
<b>Staff</b>	Teacher and ECE not getting along Teacher resistant to change Staff members with mental health challenges (x2) Unsuccessful performance appraisal Staff member sabotaging all ideas Exhausted teacher
<b>Parents</b>	Complaining about other students being 'bad' Wanting to fail a student Thinking their kids are perfect Unaware how to support their child at school or in the community Unhappy with way bullying incident was being handled (x2) Thinking school is not meeting the needs of their child
<b>System</b>	Proposed idea to help students that is turned down by board Union getting in the way of administration helping a teacher Agencies not supporting a student and putting back into regular class Lack of system support for high needs student Demands of board asking for tasks to be done that are unreasonable in sheer quantity and/or nature Staffing the school difficulties (reg. 274) Going through the Accommodation Review Process (ARC) Having to move from school to school
<b>School Community</b>	Misunderstandings surrounding the new Phys-ed Health curriculum Home and School versus School Council (x2) Socioeconomic needs not being met Disrespectful actions of community toward administration (x2) School Council finances
<b>Personal</b>	Diagnosed with chronic illness Death of family member Not becoming the successful job applicant

*Table 2 – Sources/examples of adversity*

The principal adversity examples found in Table 2 demonstrate the challenging and conflict aspects of adversity with numerous stakeholders. Further elaboration is

offered by P9 who described that her most recent adversity experience was with teaching staff, particularly with a staff member who seems to have a goal of sabotaging any kind of [programming or event] idea, [or] any kind of change.

P9 described another common form of adversity faced by principals, as:

When a parent feels like the school is not providing what the child needs or when the school is not keeping the child safe in the parent's opinion. And the hardest one is when you disagree and you think that the school is providing what it should, and the parent can't see it, and wants to criticize and argue, and doesn't seem to want to work with you to make things better.

This idea of principal adversity experiences falling under various forms of conflict was also found in the superintendent's examples of school leadership adversity. S1 listed conflict with parents, staff, school community, and adversity with the system.

Remarkably, P12 used the word "challenging" for leadership adversity examples such as angry parents, exhausted teachers, and the demands of the board, but framed them in a different light. "I find my strength is problem solving, so those kinds of adversity issues, although they are there, they don't seem to really challenge me or worry me or take the job to a point where it's unhappy." She admitted that what she finds challenging and stressful is trying to mediate between teachers and staff who do not want to collaborate. P3 shared she has been lucky because she has not had to manage too much adversity but recognizes the role of principal is to cope with adversity even if you "didn't create the adversity or you didn't cause it."

Therefore, the principal participants' and the superintendent's examples of leadership adversity demonstrated adversity experiences are conflict-based with a variety of key stakeholders and may contain elements school leadership adversity experiences being challenging.

When responding to interview question 2b, "Tell me more about why you feel [the example from question 2a] was an adversity?" participant responses reiterated the challenging aspects of leadership adversity, the importance of understanding relationships, and how the experience impacted them personally. P7 stated that it made

them feel like a failure and put them “into a bit of a slump.” P8’s response framed relationships as critical in their role and through an event or experiences of adversity. She shared an important priority that principals have to attend to which is build relationships with students, staff, parents, and board personnel, and in the course of doing so, has felt attacked. P8 told a story of facing a particular challenge and reaching out to one of their superintendents for support, but because she didn’t receive a response from her superintendent “it was a very, very lonely time.” P11 also expressed being verbally attacked in one particular circumstance, but that she didn’t know from where the attack originated. She didn’t know how to effectively defend herself, and it seems that leaders recognize adversity when they are in a situation that makes them feel as if they need to defend their character and decision-making, even when the “adversity” is unknown or unclear.

P6 stated that the role of principal carries with it the responsibility to manage all the relationships in the building in order to lead. She shared:

When a teacher, for example, is dealing with a mental health issue, it affects the building, so I’m responsible. And it’s not a give and take and a positive relationship. Sometimes it’s challenging, sometimes frustrating, and sometimes there’s conflict. And to me that’s adversity, when you have those pressures and the negative stuff.

In a related vein, P5 described her frustration through adversity because everything that she stood for as a principal was being met with great disdain, distrust, and threats from her stakeholders. These adversity challenges and frustrations, particularly related to the tension between feeling both responsibility for everyone in the school and feeling a lack of control are highlighted in P2’s response:

It’s adversity because you’re supposed to be the person in charge, the buck stops with you. But that really isn’t the case when you face these adverse situations because you’re not in control. You don’t have control over staffing issues because of reg. 274 or because of the union involvement. You don’t have control over the student issues because ultimately the parent is the one who’s driving the bus. You don’t have control over issues regarding your facility because there’s always another policy or a process or reason why you can’t do some of the creative or innovative things you want to do at your school. You’re stuck in the middle between a system that is too big to recognize what needs to be done to help kids and the kids who need your help.

Taking a different approach to the issue of staff and adversity, S1's response classified adversity examples as a loss or a challenge for the administrator. S1 stated examples such as a loss of sense of school community or, sense of trust within the context of, a relationship that principals are trying to build, and therefore challenges that that principal has to overcome in order to regain trust to help move the school forward. Therefore, the participants' responses highlighted aspects of leadership adversity as 'trying' because it requires principals to overcome many different types of complex interpersonal and relationship-building challenges, even those over which principals feel they may have limited control.

When responding to questions 2c, "What was the trying part [of adversity experiences]?" responses highlighted the importance of relationships when it comes to managing adversity which often involves competing demands, a variety of emotions, and the potential for negative impacts on student learning. P1's expressed that emotions may be felt on both sides of a particular adversity challenge because the trying part is the frustration with a parent or a staff member who is dissatisfied or disappointed about not getting their own way. P9's response highlighted how principals feel frustrated through adversity:

I think it has to do with [that] you're obliged to always take the high road, so sometimes you can't say what you really feel. You're not allowed to even have feelings about a situation. You have to be always objective even when someone is attacking you personally, attacking your credibility and making a personal attack instead of focusing on the issues and trying to make things better when it seems to be their goal to bring you down, and not to allow you to work with them.

P2 stated that adversity is trying because of the "complete and utter lack of control in the role where you were promised you're going to be the boss and realizing you're not the boss." Others similarly expressed the trying part of adversity is that principals are the type of people who want to help others and yet it felt to P2 that no options were available. One participant claimed that she felt stressed because of the way people spoke about them. P3 highlighted the critical consequence adversity can have on not only student learning but also staff well-being: "If people are traumatized, or upset, or preoccupied, it

impacts their learning. And you know we're here for student achievement, anything that impacts their [student and teacher] well-being is going to impact their learning and the teacher's ability to focus.”

S1 stressed the critical need for building relationships while competing demands are an important factor associated with principals' leadership adversity:

The trying part is always trying to maintain the relationship piece, so that even if somebody, an individual or a group, doesn't like the decision, they can understand the rationale. They can understand your intent and they can understand that they may not recognize it if you're acting in the best interest of an individual child, but then you are acting in the best interest of the whole school. And sometimes the trying part is getting them from an individual perspective to see it as you're not acting for an individual. You're acting for the whole school and there's often competing demands.

S1's description of the challenges of balancing decision-making for the benefit of individuals and the whole school implied the importance of maintaining positive relationships as well as emotional balance during adversity as “trying” for all those involved, as described by other participants.

When responding to questions 2d, “How did [adversity] affect you, your work, and others?” the participants emphasized that time, as well as physical, emotional, and relationship dimensions were all affected. Participants noted that adversity negatively affected the principals' time. P3 describes adversity as time-consuming: “that's pretty well all I thought of for about a week.” P4 described adversity as circular: “we're exhausted; we're going around in circles.” P8 described an adversity challenge that would go “on and on for twenty minutes, an hour, two hours.” P14 shared that, in times of adversity, she often needed to work late nights and go to the school on weekends.

The participants shared that during periods of adversity they experienced an increase in their stress levels, loss of sleep, developed health-related ailments, and a sense of self-doubt. Doubting one's ability as a leader was found in two principals' responses. P15 claimed it affected them because self-doubt was discouraging and disheartening. Prior to the adversities, she thought she would be good at handling adversity because she felt she had good people skills, was smart, and could navigate it. It subsequently made

her question whether she had made the right decision and if she had the right skill sets to be a competent leader.

P5 also questioned her ability:

I wasn't able to have 'my tools' work that had worked for me in the past [they were] no longer working; it caused me to really question my ability as a leader. And what it kept going back to, I was unable to find that pathway forward so that I could continue to do my job and meet the needs of the school, and in particular the children. I started doubting myself. I started to question my ability that I should be able to go into any environment and I should be able to manage myself and be able to be the agent of change.

It is notable that the word "stress" appeared ten times in the principal responses regarding the effects of adversity on principals. This stress was described as manifested physically through losing weight and sleep, ending up with a compromised immune system, and feeling energy depleted both during and after an adverse event or experience. Other physical descriptors by P9 framed their body's response to the experience as "hard to breathe, and hard to think." The principals' physical drain was also observed by S1 who stated it is due to the principal role being exhausting as well as work intensive. Moreover, because some principals work until nine at night, S1 observed, the stress affects principals' own family life as well.

The emotional toll that adversity has on principals was described by P2 as "feeling on a constant basis like you're being set up for failure." P3 stated that, in one case, the emotional toll has affected their performance for about a week, and "preoccupied" them in terms of wondering how she could change and do better next time. S1 recognized this emotional response and the toll it may take on the well-being and performance of principals, when principals feel as if they are being verbally attacked all the time.

Surprisingly, while thirteen of the principals responded with how the adversity negatively affected them, two principals shared that their experience, strengths, and capacities for dealing with the difficult situation results in being less negatively affected than others. P6's responded:



I think I'm really good at recognizing what those dynamics are, and what the heart of the issue is. So I don't necessarily take it personally, not that I'm saying it doesn't affect me at all, I don't go home and think about it, I'm not thinking about it on the weekend when I'm doing dishes, I deal with it, and because I can rationalize to myself, it's really not you, it's not overwhelming in that sense.

P12 also shared that she does not take the strain caused by adversity as personally as others might:

You know I'm pretty patient, it reminds me daily just to be patient and to remember that we're here for the kids, and at the end of the day we want to make sure that they walk out of here happy and they've done their best on the day, and they've accomplished whatever they've needed to accomplish. I think it's just how I am. I wouldn't say passive, but calm, you know I don't get too rattled about anything. And I think I'm sort of lucky that way.

Therefore, the participants' explanations of how adversity affects leaders illuminated aspects of how time, physical, emotional, and relationships are all affected, through the tolls it take on leaders will vary from person to person.

When responding to questions 3, "What did you learn from [example] adversity experience?" all of the principals shared that they had learned something from adversity that contributed to their leadership. Their responses detailed the need for principals to not take adversity experiences personally, be able to walk away from it, recognize their limits, and practice humility. P1 stated she has learned to listen actively to other points of view, not be egocentric in their beliefs, then go home and reflect about what is really best for students. P2 observed she has learned what issues are worth fighting for, and when she has to let things go noting that "you learn to swallow a little bit of your pride and expectation because if you don't, you will just continue to be disappointed." P13 indicated she has learned there are "good people" that have been through similar situations that which she can ask questions and it is okay to show vulnerability with people that can be trusted. P9 shared that her key learning is one of hope because, as she put it, "the worst stuff always ends. It never goes on forever." She shared that when she is coaching someone through a difficult situation, she will say "in a day's time, in a week's time, in a month's time, all this is going to be a memory. You'll look back and

think, oh, that was hard but now it's not." P13 similarly expressed that with adversity experiences she has learned "this too shall pass," P7 and P8 stated "you can only do what you can do," and P6 stated "it's just one of those things some people love you, some people not so much." Participants clearly indicated that lessons from adversity experiences include the value of relying on trusted individuals, the temporal nature of problems, and the need to accept what cannot be changed.

Themes of seeking to understand others' views and accepting one's own limits were reiterated by the superintendent participant. S1's response stressed that with experience, principals learn not to take challenges personally when push back or negativity from others comes from their need to express what their feelings and needs are. S1 also shared that principals need to learn to walk away from the situation once they know that they have done what they can do and not to feel personally responsible to be everything to everyone. S1 also shared that principals need to learn to set limits for themselves about how much principals are going to work. S1 acknowledged that some administrators may come in early and leave at a reasonable time while another may want to take their own kids to school but then stay late.

Thus, the principal participants and the superintendent's explanations highlighted the variety and intensity of learning that principals' experience through adversity experiences and to practice not taking difficulty personally, walking away, recognizing limits, and being humble.

**Summary of findings for Research Question 1:** "What school related experiences do elementary school principals define as school leadership adversity?" The principals and the superintendent participant described leadership adversity as a challenging event that affects relationships, and was sometimes unexpected. Their examples of adversity often contained a conflict with one or a variety of stakeholders such as staff, parents, the system, or school community. In order to classify something as an adversity, the participants frequently used the terms *challenging* and *relationships* and the principals added that they experienced personal impact from the adversity. Both the principals and the superintendent felt that adversity is "trying" because it affects

relationships, especially in terms of competing demands. The principals expanded their description to include emotions and the possible effects on student learning.

Adversity affects principals in a multitude of ways. It affects their time, relationships, and physical and emotional well-being. While S1 did not acknowledge the relationship element, she did express how the other factors would affect the principals' family time and how the experiences would limit the community building piece that principals are supposed to focus on. S1 reported that principals learn through adversity experiences to not take it personally, walk away, and recognize their limits. The principals stated the same learning, and added that the role of principal is humbling.

### Research Question 2

#### **What resiliency strategies do elementary school principals use to manage adversity in their school leadership?**

When responding to interview question 4, “What does resiliency means to you as a system leader?” responses highlight the abilities principals have to deal with a challenging situation, rebounding from negative effects, and staying positive. Ten times the word ‘bounce’ is mentioned in the principal responses. P2 described resiliency as “your ability to bounce back, your ability to get up off the mat.” P13 stated that not only do she bounce back from adversity but become even stronger. P14 stated the sense of bouncing back to them means getting up every day and coming back to work and living with a positive focus.

Other positive strategies for principals dealing with adversity is described P3 as the following: “to be positive you have to see the silver lining, and you have to be able to understand that with every failure comes an opportunity to learning something.” P10 used a metaphor akin to that of ‘bouncing,’ stating that principals need to have the core strength “to ride the waves and stay afloat and be able to see beyond the storm.” P11 referred to a need to keep pressing through and look at the positives.

P8 stressed the importance of not only recovering but the need to move forward from adversity:

I think resiliency means picking up and moving on, and proceeding forward, which I think we do as school leaders and, because we have no choice, there's always the next day. And I think it's accepting that there's a part in my soul that's always going to be a bit bruised and hurt, and despite that, turning with optimism to the next moment, the next day, the next student, the next family that's going to be walking through our doors.

The concept of moving forward is also found in P11's definition, who stated she keeps trying to move forward, and despite any setbacks, there's going to be things that come and you just have to work past it and keep going. Complementing the principals' responses, S1 stressed the ability to deal with a challenging situation and using a "positive proactive" approach in order to not have a "long-term negative impact on yourself, your career, or your ability to work with other people."

P7's response introduced a school board document entitled *Bounce Back...Again* found on the school board website under Student Mental Health. The fifty-seven page resource *Bounce-Back...Again* was created by the Student Support Leadership initiative, which is a partnership in the school board's local counties made up of fifty school and community agencies creating supports to enhance mental health and wellbeing programs and services for children and youth. P7 indicated that when she thinks of resiliency she looks at the *Bounce-Back Document* and literally equates the word *resiliency* with being able to bounce back. When she is faced with a situation that is adverse, she wants to be able to come out of it and continue to move forward and to not wallow in it or remain in a "funk."

In 2014 this document was provided as a resource from their board to both elementary and secondary schools so schools could engage their students in a mental health week. The week's theme was *resiliency* and the document offered a definition of resiliency as, "the ability to thrive during both good and challenging times, and adapt well to stress or adversity. It is the ability to bounce back" (p. 1).

The document is divided into four sections and provides resources for schools, parents, caregivers, and school communities including the definition of stress, inspiration quotes, websites, stories that promote resiliency, and classroom lessons plans/activities all under the umbrella of supporting students' mental health and wellbeing. P7 has

highlighted how she used the document with students, incorporating it into the lessons on bouncing back from adversity:

It's one of my favourite documents and we use it with kids who are bullied or kids who face mental health challenges. It has a lot of resources to how to bounce back. And it's the same thing when I think about kids and I'm always telling them that you have to be like a rubber ball and sometimes when things hit you, you need to let them bounce off of you and go forward. So to me a resilience person is somebody who doesn't absorb those problems and become them and somebody who can get past it.

What are the ways that principals "bounce back"? P6 shared a perspective on separating one's job from one's life by reiterating the importance of balance and family time. P6 felt very good at separating their life from their job. That is, P6 recognized that this is a job, and one's life is more important than their job. Therefore, the participant responses and the board document both emphasized the need for principals to not only manage adversity experiences but also to rebound from those experiences to become even stronger.

When responding to interview protocol question 5, "What resiliency strategies do you use in the face of adversity?" nine of the fifteen principals shared that their colleagues were a crucial resiliency strategy. P10's stated she has some reliable colleagues to be able to vent with, share stories, or debrief a familiar experience in their past that they have handled. P15 also recognized the importance of their colleagues noting she has a big support system of friends and colleagues that she calls often. She shared that what really works for her in terms of a coping strategy is talking to different people who do not think the way that she does.

Nine of the fifteen principals shared that one of their key resiliency strategies is to be positive or optimistic to balance adversity experiences. P7 stated "I'm very intentional about trying to be happy sometimes even when I am not." P9 indicated she used positive self-talk. P12 shared she does things that make her happy, and tries to laugh a lot. She surrounds herself with happy people and acknowledged that she is a "half-full kind of person." She tries not to be negative even when she is sad.

Six of the fifteen principals, or just over one-third of participants, shared a variety of physical activities they use as a resiliency strategy which include: walking, yoga, art, knitting, and working out at a gym. They reported that these activities gave them time away from the educational setting. P8 acknowledged that she had a really hard time fitting it into their schedule so she does “other things that are calming.”

Five of the fifteen principals claimed the need for humour and fun at work to manage adversity. P6 stated she has fun at work and P2 stated she uses humour pretty much exclusively. P14 shared she received feedback from people appreciating that she tried to use humour as much as she could acknowledging she hears lot of people laughing in the school.

Two principals shared that they “deny,” “tuck things away” or “turtle” as a strategy. P7 stated “I have a very strong ability to tuck things away really, really far away. I don’t know if that’s a positive strategy but it’s truthful. I just deny it.” P7 described how intentional she is at appearing happy even when she is not. She stated that she may dress in a way that makes her feel successful and acknowledged she thinks about “clichés” referencing acting a certain way may make you feel and believe you are more successful than you appear. P13 also shared a strategy, “I tend to turtle. That’s not a very good descriptor, but when I’m really at my limit, I internalize things.” She described colleagues recognizing she has not reached out to them or others enough for support therefore P13 will try to pay more attention to her own needs and work through some of the stressors that are bothering her.

S1’s comments paralleled some of the principals’ responses and may help explain the need for principals to have a positive mind frame and to choose more productive strategies over others. S1’s advice is to:

Use things like setting limits, their own personal physical fitness stress management, meditation, yoga, and other fitness pieces. That they would have a social life beyond school, it could be family, it could be friends, it could be a commitment to having social interactions that are outside of school. And having some other outlet, but also having an understanding about the role. They need to feel confident and competent in what they do.

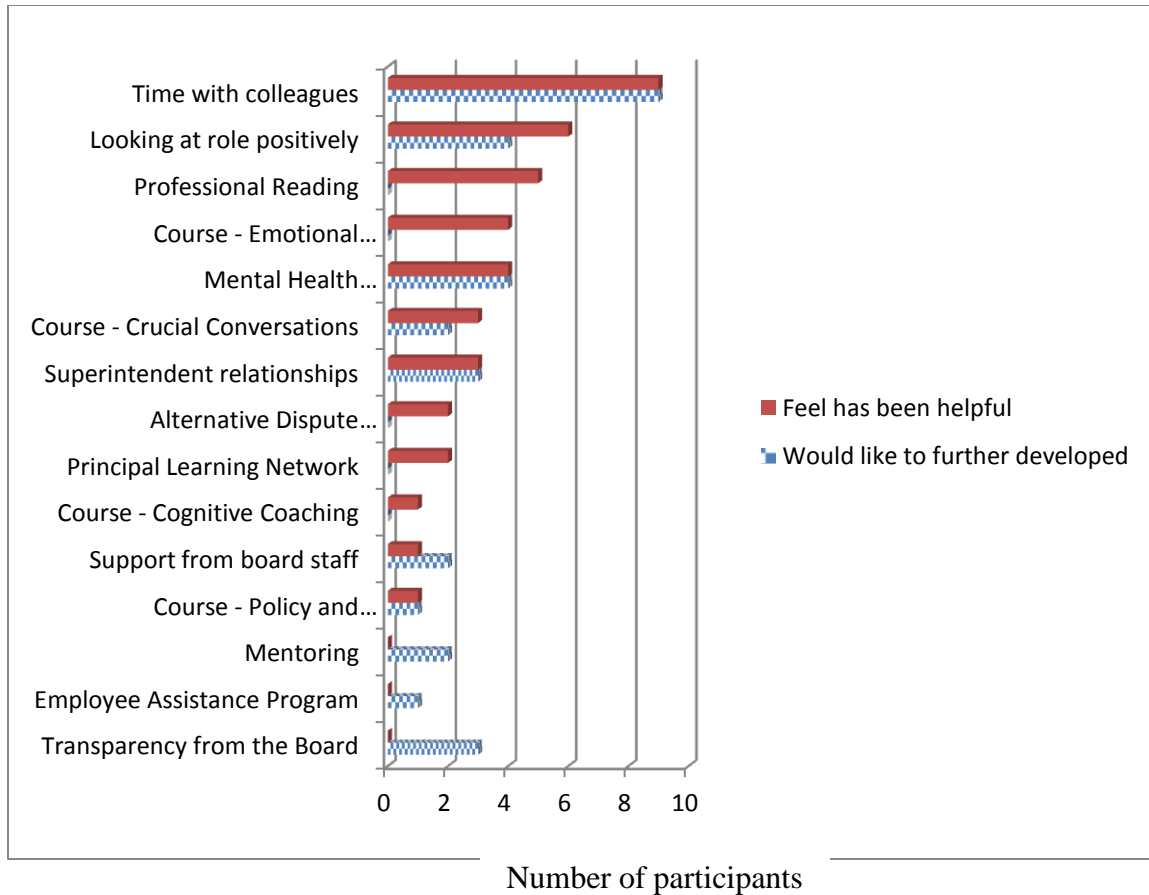
The principal participant responses and the superintendent comments highlighted the need for a variety of resiliency strategies including collegial supports, choosing to have a positive outlook, participating in physical activities, and finding humour/fun at work. Reports of internalizing and dismissing problems as coping strategies were accompanied with feelings of guilt and shame.

**Summary of findings for Research Questions 2:** “What resiliency strategies do elementary school principals use to manage adversity in their school leadership?” The principal and the superintendent participants’ definition of resiliency comprised when being a challenging situation, the need to “bounce back,” and being positive. Their examples of resiliency strategies are time with their colleagues, remaining positive, keeping physically active, and having fun or finding humor at work. The superintendent listed setting limits, physically fitness, having a social life, and confidence as strategies she feels principals utilize.

### Research Question 3

**What supports, professional learning, and/or programs specific to the Ontario context exist for principals experiencing adversity?**

Table 3 displays the principal participant responses, in terms of type and frequency, to interview question 6, “What has been the most helpful professional learning, support and/or training for you when it comes to facing adversity?” and interview question 7, “What professional learning, support, and/or programs would you like to receive to manage adversity and develop resiliency?”



**Table 3 – Supports, professional learning, and/or programs for principals**

The most prevalent response identified by the principals in relation to work-related domains was “time with colleagues” both as a strategy principals categorized as helpful and that they wished happened more often. P7’s explained that she turns to their colleagues in times of adversity, or to develop resiliency, because talking to other principals who have made it through it or who have “bounced back” is helpful. She identified several other supports in the form of personnel who she feels are helpful, for example, senior administration because she felt “they had my back.” P1 agreed and identified as helpful not only colleagues but also board staff and their superintendent:

The first thing that came to mind was the support that we have from own colleagues, so having that group of people that you can call to get that support and information from. Often for me because a lot of the adversity and challenges in a school is around special needs students or behavioural pieces, for me it would be my superintendent, my special education learning coordinator, and the mental health team.



P9 acknowledged their superintendent as supportive because she never tried to tell principals what to do in these situations, only ask for more information so the principal could process out loud what she thought. Their superintendent also asked really good questions, and was always available. She acknowledged having the superintendent agree that what she was facing was extremely hard and it wasn't their lack of skill or experience contributing to the problem helped them. She felt validated, and the support on the part of the superintendent helped her confidence to not to be afraid of the adversity experience.

P4 also reflected on the need for a variety of personnel in school buildings and more support from senior administration would help them because the role has changed from being educators and leading instructional practice to one was more multifaceted. P4 stated, “we have become judges, police officers, counsellors; family therapists...let us focus on educating students and have knowledgeable professionals take on the demands not related to education.” According to P4, the kinds of personnel who would be helpful as: a support counsellor, a psychologist, a psychiatrist, educational assistants, and a full time vice-principal all to assist with workload.

By contrast, P5 shared that she does not reach out to personnel at the board of education or her superintendent due to potential backlash:

From a support point of view, I tend not to reach out to the Board of Education in terms of SOs. I find if you reach out and show any sign of need, weakness etcetera you're going to end up in a school of 87 [one of the smallest in the board] and you're not going to find yourself in a school of 500 plus, because you are seen as someone who can't manage.

She shared why it is important to feel safe communicating with senior administration: the school board is the key component when school leaders find themselves in a situation where there is adversity. She stated that principals should be able to go to the superintendent and have conversations with them, and the superintendents respond to vocalized concerns not as a sign of weakness but as an opportunity for professional development. P2 also identified the importance of developing a superintendent relationship and a suggestion to improve the “school visit”:

While I understand the instructional program is important, school visits need to be far more than that. I need to know that my supervisor knows who I am, knows what I need, knows what I've done, what I've been through, where I'd like to go. In eight years, none of those conversations have ever happened. My supervisors have been very nice and very cordial but wouldn't know me from a hole in the head and I think that's where we've lost the plot.

Throughout the interviews, certain professional readings and resource material were identified by the principals as being helpful to them in their role and through adversity experiences. The principals shared that they use these resources as reference when in difficult situations or as P15 shared, "for a quick energy boost."

Professional learning experiences and supports were shared by the participants. These professional learning experiences and/or supports identified are either school board- designed and delivered professional learning options, a purchased program from an outside organization, or a designed and delivered program by another organization. Table 4 summarizes the opportunities by title, length, cost, and topics.

<b>Professional Learning Opportunity</b>	<b>Provider</b>	<b>Length of Program</b>	<b>Cost to Participants</b>	<b>Topics</b>
<b>Crucial Conversations</b>	Vital Smarts (US)	2 days	None	Creating alignment, agreement, and fostering open dialogue around high-stakes, emotional topics
<b>Emotional Intelligence</b>	School Board	Several sessions	None	EQ360 EQi and various emotional intelligence topics
<b>Alternative Dispute Resolution</b>	Stitt Feld Handy Group (Canada)	4 days	Yes	Learning to settle disputes via neutral evaluation, negotiation, conciliation, mediation, and arbitration.
<b>Cognitive Coaching</b>	Thinking Collaborative (US)	8 days	None	Develop trust and rapport and an identity as a mediator of thinking Utilize conversation structures

				Develop teachers' autonomy and sense of community Develop efficacy Apply support functions and coaching tools Distinguish among forms of feedback Use data to mediate thinking
<b>Principals Qualification Program</b>	Ontario's Principal Council	Two parts of 125 hours each with a 60 hour practicum	\$990 each	Collaborative Inquiry Human Resources Interpersonal Skills School Operations Special Education Protecting Our Students Managing School Resources Co-creating an Inclusive School Decision Making Building Relationships
<b>New Administrators Program</b>	School Board	Once per month of first year in role	None	Health and Safety Culture for Learning School Councils Supervision of Staff Hiring/Staffing Special Education Business Services EQAO Mental Health and Wellness Business Media Relations Crucial Conversations 2-days
<b>Principal Learning Networks</b>	School Board	About 3 times a year	None	Individual sharing of leaders' "problems of practice" or "leadership inquiry" with 4-6 colleagues using a feedback protocol for support
<b>Supervisory Officer Internship</b>	School Board	Multi-year program with	None	Enhance understanding of the day-to-day operations of

<b>Program (SOIP)</b>		training and work experiences		departments and how they align to achieve vision Gain practical experience in the duties and responsibilities expected of supervisory officers through involvement in activities
<b>Mental Health Workshops</b>	School Board	Multiple offerings	None	Various topics on mental health for schools and students
<b>Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP)</b>	Homewood Health	Depends on staff members' needs	Minimal	A confidential, professional counselling and wellness service that provides support for employees and their dependents. Access to counsellors, lifestyle and specialty services, plus an online health library. Support for issues relating to mental health, health management, and achieving greater personal and workplace well-being
<b>Lieu Day</b>	School Board	Up to 5 per year	None	Days are granted in recognition of the work regularly done above and beyond the regular duties of the position

**Table 4 – Supports, professional learning and/or programs for principals – summary**

Further mental health professional supports were provided to the researcher during document perusal. One example is that the school board has a team of volunteer professionals comprised of principals, counsellors, and school board or community liaisons called “T.E.R.T” (Traumatic Events Response Team) who are available to assist school communities in the event of a death or suicide. A document provided to schools and administrators provides information, strategies, communications, and further

resources to assist schools with grief and dying. While none of the participants referred to this document or team specifically, it was offered through the board's Mental Health lead facilitator as vital support in times of tragedy at school sites.

P1 identified professional learning experiences provided through the board's mental health team as valuable because it made them think about mental health and different perspectives. She attended principal professional learning sessions that discussed resiliency for students and allowed them to recognize the stresses that their students' families may face, and the stresses that colleagues may face supporting families who experience mental health challenges. These mental health workshops for administrators provided the participants with a document created by the Ministry of Education entitled *Leading Mentally Healthy Schools* (2013). The one hundred and twenty-six page resource was created by school administrators, for school administrators in Ontario, with the support of mental health professionals and Ministry of Education in Ontario staff. This document is available in hard copy and online as part of a suite of resources offered by the Ministry. It contains information, support documents, checklists, and diagrams for schools to support student and staff mental health.

During document perusal by the researcher, it was uncovered that only one page referred explicitly to the mental health of administrators and described the importance of maintaining a well-balanced approach to work and family life and to model the ideals for their staff and students. The single page listed some self-care suggestions for professionals, i.e. creating a strong support network made up of other administrators with regular check-in; establishing clear boundaries with respect to time, personal engagement, and professional duty; connecting and reflecting with colleagues throughout the day; modeling a commitment to maintain balance by taking breaks and allow for healthy nutrition; exercising daily; being aware of the impact long work hours have on mood, interpersonal relations, and general health; and building strong teams and delegate with confidence (p. 79).

In contrast, P2 shared that no formal learning on developing resiliency has been seen as helpful to principals and she perceived the professional learning offered to be “superficial”:

In terms of the most helpful professional learning, I would say I have not had any professional learning on dealing with resiliency that’s had any real meaning or real advocacy. The workshops that we’ve had on wellness or whatever are very superficial, are very one-offs and it’s almost like the board is checking a box, we’ve done a wellness thing. But there’s no long-term commitment or focus on building resiliency in school leaders.

Likewise, P15 shared that the principal’s qualification program did not prepare her for what she has encountered in their role. P15 explained that the program teaches aspiring school administrators logistics and legal aspects “but when you have four parents sitting in your office and they are verbally abusing each other, there’s nothing in the manual that stated, here’s how you field this one. I’m not sure there’s a lot out there in terms of training and professional development that prepares you.” Therefore, the principal participants provided a variety of opinions regarding the value of professional learning contributing to their success in the role of principal or their development of resiliency to manage adversity.

When S1 was asked what she felt has been helpful to principals to develop resiliency and manage adversity she was not sure if the board offers enough to identify challenges, build on strengths or fill gaps. But, her response did touch on numerous learning opportunities such as Emotional Intelligence, mentoring, New Administrators Program, and for their more experienced principals the board of education offers a Supervisory Officer Internship Program (SOIP). S1 identified challenges associated with enrollment into the SOIP program because some people are reluctant to take the program because they do not want to be a superintendent or be seen publicly on the superintendent track. Further, when asked what supports, professional learning, and/or programs principal should receive to develop resiliency and manage adversity, S1 shared the introduction of Cognitive Coaching. She also reflected on the need for some wellness pieces and principals to take their “lieu days”.

Next, S1 suggested the system needs to recognize and model the importance of balance for its principals. She shared that the system needs to be aware of the demands of the job still have high expectations for work, but allow some flexibility in what that work looks like. S1 also acknowledged the importance of understanding mental health as a huge component of the principal role in terms of dealing with kids, staff, and parents. As well, she stated that principals probably need more tools and a greater understanding of what that looks like and how to handle situations. This reflection aligned with principal responses regarding the need for mental health supports, professional learning, and personnel to support principals through adversity experiences. P6 shared that it would enhance their ability to deal with the conflicts that exist with staff and parents:

As far as dealing with staff, and with parents, I'd say that the mental health PD we've been getting recently has been really helpful in understanding not only the types of disorders that we're seeing now, or the types of stresses that staff are under, but the resources that are available. In fact I've used them for staff, and helped staff find some of the resources that we've been learning about. It's just seems to be an ever-growing issue.

P11 summarized the need for differentiated opportunities, recognizing individuality, and that "one size fits all" scenarios may not support principals through adversity. She felt that she is not sure if anybody can be trained to be able to deal with adversity. P11 thought it is very personalized so it would need to be differentiated for whomever depending on what are their needs. Further, she identified it could be a resource, or developing networks within different areas for people to be able to go and feel comfortable and touch base if that is how the individual best deals with adversity and builds a resilience.

Lastly, P2 summarized the need for identifying individual strengths and opportunity areas and that professional learning is not what she feels is needed to develop resiliency:

As a board specifically, our issues all come down to relationships and respect. And I think that our board has spent too much time with its eye off the ball and we need to do far more in terms of getting to know our school leaders, getting to recognize our school leaders' strengths and needs and being able to appropriately support school leaders in their development as school leaders.

This information demonstrated that while a vast variety of opportunities exist for the principals in the form of supports, professional learning, and/or programs, what one principal considers valuable another may not. Also, determining if resiliency and adversity are addressed specifically in any of these opportunities was not found.

When responding to interview question 8, “Who have been the most influential people who have helped you through adversity?” 5 responses were prevalent. Table 5 displays the identified person in the left-hand column and the number of times that person was mentioned by all principal participants in their response to question 8 in the right-hand column.

<b>Influential person identified</b>	<b>Number of Times Mentioned</b>
Administrative Colleagues (i.e. same designation)	14
Family	6
Teacher	2
Professional Support/Doctor	2
Superintendent	2

**Table 5 – Identified influential people for principals**

Fourteen of the fifteen principals mentioned their colleagues as influential. P2 summed up the need for an extended peer group “I think as an administrator and a school leader right now in (our board), if you are not able to create, cultivate and foster a positive peer group, you will not be successful in this role.” S1 agreed that collegial relationships are their most important person to seek advice and help through adversity: “I would think that the biggest support is probably colleagues, who understand the demands of the job and can offer advice, support, that non-judgmental kind of venting ear.”

Two principals mentioned their superintendent as their influential person, S1 framed why others may not view them in that supportive light, and shared it will vary depending on who the superintendent is:

Much as we would like principals phoning superintendents, some will readily do that and feel confident that they can have that venting session with their superintendent and that it's truly a call of support and network and awareness of what's going on in the school because we can't help if we



don't know what's going on. Not everybody's willing to do that because they feel that call to a superintendent will be a judgement so-and-so is not coping well in his school.

P4 expressed their experiences of superintendent support by sharing “I’m trying to think of how many SOs I’ve worked with, let’s say six, I think, one has been fully supportive. I’m not including the one I’m currently working with but in the past I think one has been supportive, listening, and understanding”.

Friends, family, or a teacher were mentioned by eight principals as their support system as mentioned by P14, “my kids, my family because my kids have always been a good anchor for me. Because they keep you real and they help you. That smack across the face of reality. That is such a good mirror piece.” P7 reflected on their parent’s influence, “truthfully, it goes way back before work and I have parents who are highly optimistic. They have always been very supportive of me and their attitude is that so I think it’s one that I’ve always grown up with”. P15 stated some of the people who get them through their roughest times are not board employees. They’re family members; they’re people who were outside of it, because sometimes she needs a fresh lens. She continued and shared “because of the level of adversity that we face in our job every day you need to have that fresh lens. And I think it’s good to have people that understand where you’re coming from, but it’s also good to see it from an outsider’s lens”. Lastly, P9 and P14 acknowledged a teacher on staff as being influential due to their qualities they admire such as: remaining patient, being able to empathize, and being really good listeners.

Principals accessed other principals in order to debrief, chat, or vent. Many participants reflected on daily phone calls before, during, and after work to their colleagues consisting of short five to ten minute conversations with some lasting up to an hour. Principals shared that they bonded over breakfast, lunches, and drinks after work with their colleagues. P3 shared that she catches up while completing staffing interviews, two principals shared they debrief while walking or running with a principal colleague, and one principal shared that the conversations take place while driving to and from home.

Therefore, the participant responses highlighted the collegial influence during adversity, family supports, and potential lack of a supporting influence from a superintendent during difficult times.

When responding to interview question 9, “How much time per week do you confide in this person about things?” responses fell anywhere from twenty minutes a week to five hours a day [if a principal has an administrative partner in the same office]. Some of the participants claimed they go for breakfast, or for a beverage Friday after work P9 stated it depends on the situation, “because when there are things that are really intense much more frequently than when things are going smoothly.” P1 framed the difficulty in finding the time to spend confiding in others, “I don’t think a very large amount of time. I’m wondering if you add up those ten minutes pieces if you’d get to an hour in a week. I feel bad for my husband because he probably has to listen to more of it but I would say an hour at the tops.” P4 expressed when and how these conversations are taking place, “I would say probably between 30 and 60 minutes a day. So you’re looking at between five and ten hours a week. Sometimes this includes phone calls after hours and on weekends.” P2 who claimed “five hours a day” stated the largest amount of time to confide in others as their time frame. She shared that she considers all the time she “bounces off ideas off other people” consists of a large part of her day, every day.

These experiences aligned with S1’s perspective of the amount of time principals spend confiding in others:

I would say quite a bit. I know that many of our principals have a network of good colleagues that they have after work informal gathering for a cup of coffee or a drink or the monthly dinner with friends. Certainly, even when we can bring people together for meetings, the opportunity to come together for half an hour before for coffee or two, sneak away for ten minutes during a break and have that conversation. Certainly, when we have meetings, people are still lingering afterwards. They're often finding a quiet place to have a conversation with a colleague, either to problem solve or just to touch base.

Therefore, as with the support, professional learning and/or programs available to the principals, the need to confide in a trusted friend and the amount of time devoted to these interactions varied depending on each individual principal, situation, and need.

**Summary of findings for Research Questions 3:** “What supports, professional learning, and/or programs specific to the Ontario context exist for principals experiencing adversity?” In response to research question three, the principals listed time with their colleagues as the most frequent, important, and vital support. They also shared that they need to look at their role positively, and shared some resources and pieces of professional learning that have added some value to their growth. Some principals mentioned that no training or learning would completely support them and they chose not to reach out to others through adversity because of potentially being seen as weak. The superintendent provided a wide lens from the board’s perspective of numerous professional learning opportunities for principals but admitted, given current demands of the role, that not enough is being done. The documents obtained from the board provided information and outlines for a variety of learning opportunities for leadership development through workshops and programs both locally developed and delivered or purchased from outside organizations.

A slight difference was found when participants were asked what they would like to receive as support, professional learning, and or programs. While the principals shared more time with colleagues, mental health learning, and the opportunity to develop individually, the superintendent agreed with more mental health programs but shared Cognitive Coaching, balance and flexibility is needed. The superintendent also shared that principals should use their lieu days.

Alignment in responses was apparent when the participants were asked about who they confided in regarding adversity: principals and the superintendent identified principal colleagues, friends, and family were vital for support in times of adversity. A notable difference was seen when asked how much time principals spend with their confidante or influential person, responses ranged from twenty minutes a week to up to nearly five hours a day.

As a final question to conclude their interviews, the principal participants were asked if they have a leadership mantra or quote that resonated with them, or is inspirational. Several noted that their signature line on their email has a certain phrase,

they gestured to a resource or poster in their office as a leadership reminder, shared a passage from a book, or recounted a story that they use to inspire themselves. Several shared popular quotes such as:

- “To the world you may be one person, but to one person you may be the world”
- “Whenever possible be kind, and it is always possible”
- “Knowledge can get you from A to B, creativity can get you everywhere”
- “Education is not filling a pail but lighting of a fire”
- “Just keep swimming”
- “Life is either a daring adventure or there’s nothing”
- “Trust is the antecedent of all learning”
- “I will act as if what I will do will make a difference”

The quotes, resources, stories, or mantras allowed the principal participants a frequent reminder about their purpose, goals, and values related to educational leadership.

Lastly, one participant shared the importance of church and the relationships felt between the messages delivered there and their experiences at work. For example, she expressed the strong message “it’s not about you it’s about serving other people”. So, she uses the phrase “I want to serve you well” in times of adversity which P9 suggested catches some people by surprise but allows for people to feel like they are in control. Hence, for those who find it meaningful, spirituality can play a role in re-affirming values that directly support leaders and leadership.

### Summary

This chapter presented the findings of this study’s data using the three research questions to organize the presentation. Several themes with supporting statements were found after careful review by the researcher. In particular, adversity was found by the participants to be challenging, and unexpected events while in conflict with stakeholders. Adversity impacts principals in a multitude of ways and is trying. Principals have learned numerous methods to manage adversity and use resiliency strategies such as bouncing back, being positive, talking to colleagues, and physical fitness regime. Participants identified colleagues and their family as important support systems and wished they had more opportunities to spend time talking with other principal colleagues. Numerous programs, professional learning, and/or supports were identified either offered

by the board of education or outside organization but the direct links to developing resiliency and manage adversity were not noted by the participants.

Chapter 5 includes the discussion and key findings of the study, and Chapter 6 includes the study's conclusions and recommendations for action.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

This chapter provides a discussion of the findings from Chapter 4. The chapter begins with a review of the study, a summary of the findings, and then provides answers to the research questions and their relationship to literature. Following this discussion are the strengths and limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with a summary.

#### Review of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to gather and explore elementary school principal adversity experiences, discover their resiliency strategies, and uncover supports, professional learning, and/or programs available to administrators in an Ontario school board. The context of this study included fifteen elementary school principals and one superintendent of education in one Ontario school board. The sample of principals and superintendent was taken from volunteers who responded to a recruiting email. All the participants were current employees of the Ontario school board. No demographic data i.e. gender, location, years' experience or school sizes etc., regarding the participants were gathered during the study.

Data were gathered associated with school leaders' experiences surrounding adversity and resiliency through semi-structured one-on-one, audio recorded and transcribed interviews. The interview questions that guided the interviews were designed with the ultimate intent of developing themes surrounding principals' understanding of their adversity experiences, their resiliency strategies, and supports available to develop their skills to manage adversity in their roles. The interviews were professionally transcribed. The themes discovered after interviewing the participants were reported and presented as findings in Chapter 4 and will be discussed by research question in this chapter.

### Summary of the findings

**Summary of findings for Research Question 1:** “What school related experiences do elementary school principals define as school leadership adversity?” The principals and the superintendent participant described leadership adversity as a challenging event that affects relationships, and was sometimes unexpected. Their examples of adversity often contained a conflict with one or a variety of stakeholders such as staff, parents, the system, or school community. In order to classify something as an adversity, the participants frequently used the terms *challenging* and *relationships* and the principals added that they experienced personal impact from the adversity. Both the principals and the superintendent felt that adversity is “trying” because it affects relationships, especially in terms of competing demands. The principals expanded their description to include emotions and the possible effects on student learning.

Adversity affects principals in a multitude of ways. It affects their time, relationships, and physical and emotional well-being. While S1 did not acknowledge the relationship element, she did express how the other factors would affect the principals’ family time and how the experiences would limit the community building piece that principals are supposed to focus on. S1 reported that principals learn through adversity experiences to not take it personally, walk away, and recognize their limits. The principals stated the same learning, and added that the role of principal is humbling.

**Summary of findings for Research Questions 2:** “What resiliency strategies do elementary school principals use to manage adversity in their school leadership?” The principal and the superintendent participants’ definition of resiliency comprised when being a challenging situation, the need to “bounce back,” and being positive. Their examples of resiliency strategies are time with their colleagues, remaining positive, keeping physically active, and having fun or finding humor at work. The superintendent listed setting limits, physical fitness, having a social life, and confidence as strategies she feels principals utilize.

**Summary of findings for Research Questions 3:** “What supports, professional learning, and/or programs specific to the Ontario context exist for

principals experiencing adversity?” In response to research question three, the principals listed time with their colleagues as the most frequent, important, and vital support. They also shared that they need to look at their role positively, and shared some resources and pieces of professional learning that have added some value to their growth. Some principals mentioned that no training or learning would completely support them and they chose not to reach out to others through adversity because of potentially being seen as weak. The superintendent listed five professional learning opportunities for principals but admitted, given current demands of the role, that not enough is being done. The documents obtained from the board provided information and outlines for a variety of learning opportunities for leadership development through workshops and programs both locally developed and delivered or purchased from outside organizations.

A slight difference was found when participants were asked what they would like to receive as support, professional learning, and or programs. While the principals shared more time with colleagues, mental health learning, and the opportunity to develop individually, the superintendent agreed with more mental health programs but shared Cognitive Coaching, balance and flexibility is needed. The superintendent also shared that principals should use their lieu days.

Alignment in responses was apparent when the participants were asked about who they confided in regarding adversity: principals and the superintendent identified principal colleagues, friends, and family were vital for support in times of adversity. A notable difference was seen when asked how much time principals spend with their confidante or influential person, responses ranged from twenty minutes a week to up to nearly five hours a day.

#### Answering the research questions and discussion

**Research Question 1: What school related experiences do elementary school principals define as school leadership adversity (forms, types, and levels of intensity)?**

***Answer: Challenging and trying events***



In the Ontario school board, examples of adversity contained a conflict with a variety of stakeholders such as staff, parents, school community or the system. From the findings, participants provided details to why the role of principal is difficult, demanding, and challenging as found in studies and literature that also illuminated the job of principal as complex and hard (March & Weiner, 2003; Leithwood, 2012; Mulford, 2012; Pollock et al., 2014; Maulding et al., 2012).

Even forty years ago, Culbertson (1976) identified sources of adversity for administrators which interestingly aligned with this study's identification of the stakeholder or types of adversity principals today must manage. First he stated "declining enrollment" can be seen as staff cutbacks, school closings, and a general shift from growth to one of decline. Then Culbertson outlined "diminished resources" as a source of adversity for administrators similar to our study who framed it as the lack of human resources while he shared dismissal of personnel, increased class size, lower staff morale, and mounting public criticism are prevailing. In addition, Culbertson shared the "loss of confidence" contributing to administrators' adversity because the public is skeptical of leaders in both public and private institutions. Lastly, he stated that "accountability" forces administrators into uneasy circumstances when responding to demands and expectations of performance. Adversity not only stems from the negative tone of these themes but in the difficulties acquiring information to respond to them.

Pankake and Beaty (2005) identified common themes among their study's participants regarding the sources of their challenges. The three major sources of challenges identified were – rejection for a leadership position, community conflict, and undermining superiors. These examples aligned with stories of adversity experiences by this study's elementary school principals. Very interestingly, the Pankake and Beaty (2005) studies' identified adversity experiences at different age and stages of life and that their participants experienced while they still experienced adversity, the sources had changed. Later stage careers of retirement reported their adversity sources stemmed from personal health issues and the loss of family members. Both these examples are also shared by this study's participants.

While this study provided examples of the types of adversity experiences and with whom principals are in conflict, Begley (2008) used the term “dilemmas” to describe conflicts situations that principals encounter. Specifically, Begley presented information under the description of “themes or context of dilemmas” and “sources of dilemma”. Begley described these dilemmas or conflict situations as experiences where consensus cannot be achieved rendering the traditional notion of problem solving obsolete. Begley claimed administration must now be satisfied with responding to a situation since there may be no solution possible that will satisfy all. Very similar to this study’s findings, his study described principal challenging situations with the system because of policies that were rigid and negatively influenced the principals’ autonomy, principals’ desires to do what they perceive is right for students, conflict with parents, community members, and dealing with incompetent staff. Friedman (2002) found parents, system initiative overload, teachers, and other staff contributed to principal role stressors.

***Answer: Day-to-day, chronic, or crisis events***

The data in this study revealed that elementary school principals identify with different types of school leadership adversity namely everyday adversity which are the chronic experiences that are part of the day-to-day rigor of the role, or a crisis which may be unpredictable. These types of adversity align with the literature of Smith and Riley (2012) who identified a school crisis as involving a wide range of stakeholders, time pressures, little warning, a degree of ambiguity of cause and effects, and creating a significant threat to organizational goals. Konnikova (2016) used the terms chronic and acute to describe threats that people face. She uses her terms to frame challenge’s intensity and its duration. “Acute stressors” have high intensity and the stress resulting from “chronic stressors” might be lower but it has both a repeated and cumulative impact. (p. 2). Pollock et al. (2014) also used two terms to classify and describe the types of challenges principals would face as “subjective” (i.e. apathy and lack of trust) and “objective” (i.e. lack of time and turnover). Both the principals and the superintendent participants acknowledged a sense of small versus bigger events that create challenges for them.

Bernier (2015) did not support the notion of “significant adversity” because she believed adversity is not necessarily about big things. She suggested in many ways adversity is a series of “tiny paper cuts” that leaders experience every day. A collection of all the small things that get in the way is what contributes to leader exhaustion but becoming adaptive to all the little situations adds up to help principals more easily manage the big circumstances. Begley (2008) described principals’ dilemmas as interpersonal or intra-personal depending on whether the dilemma involves more than one person or was essentially an internal struggle experienced by one person. Importantly, Begley (2008) noted that dilemmas which are deemed intra-personal are more frequently sorted out by the principal alone without seeking the opinions or supports of others.

***Answer: Something that may cause stress***

While this study tried to broadly maintain a sociology perspective, the psychological aspects of resiliency and adversity are apparent and realistic given the stress felt by participating school leaders. The principal participants mentioned stress numerous times throughout their interviews related to their role and shared stress as one of the physical effects from their school leadership adversity. The principals also mentioned the feeling of loneliness and disappointment with decisions made by the board and the lack of personnel to support them and ‘high needs’ students. This aligned with Garcia (2005) who stated that school districts that downsize support from consultants, assistant superintendents, and other officials, leave principals feeling overwhelmed and alone. Nishikawa (2006) labeled the inability to cope as burnout due to high levels of stress from day-to-day situations of roles, workload, pace, and interpersonal conflicts. Pollock et al. (2014) also suggested that organizations such as school boards need to support principals to manage the stress and emotional toll found in their work. Lastly, Friedman (2002) found principals who felt that their leadership was challenged or rejected by stakeholders were highly stressed and eventually burned-out. Friedman identified unreasonable demands from parents, parents’ rude behavior, and the overload that those parents inflict upon the principal, weak teachers performance, overload, and inadequate performance from other school staff as the dominant stressors. Those

stressors perceived by Friedman's (2002) principals aligned with the sources of adversity found in this study as conflict with parents, staff, school community, and the system.

***Answer: Adversity is not always a bad thing***

While Friedman (2002) found that unreasonable demands from the school community, unsatisfactory teachers, incompetent support staff, and workload were identified by principals as role stressors the participants in this study found positives and strengths through challenging experiences. Participants in this study reflected on the humility found through their adversity experiences and the learning, they acknowledge this can frame tough times as a positive for principals. Schachter (2015) outlined a simple technique for leaders to adopt daily to check their "humility-to-ego" ratio. Schachter reminded leaders that one's ego can get in the way of empathy and listening both of which are critical to learning. Schachter stated it will not be easy to look closely at one's mistakes or failures when the ego gets in the way. Schachter encouraged leaders to seek feedback on their open-mindedness, listening, empathy, and humility which will allow for the best thinking and ideas from themselves and others to rise to the top. Kusy and Essex (2007) indicated that recovering from adversity is the new leadership capacity and this recovery is what distinguishes successful leaders from the unsuccessful ones. They use mistakes as key builders to improve their organizations as well as their own careers.

Konnikova (2016) stressed the importance of framing adversity as a challenge because "you become more flexible and able to deal with it, move on, learn from it, and grow" (p. 6). Konnikova reminded us that if you see adversity as a threat or traumatic event it will become a persistent problem. Konnikova stated that you will become inflexible and may become negatively affected. Sherman (2012) outlined key questions to ask yourself after a negative experience which can help you move forward and build resilience: what happened and why did it happen, what are the consequences of this experience, what can I learn from the situation, and how can I apply the lessons learned to the future? Sherman (2012) asked professionals to share their experiences so that those they mentor can be provided with powerful lessons. Lastly, Culbertson (1976) stated that while adversity produces unpleasant and possible glum perceptions,

administrators must address this reality in a new way and learn to use it constructively. Culbertson stated that adversity establishes a climate which encourages change, can be seen as a transition state, generates many immediate demands and responses, and possibly reduces inefficiencies.

**Research Question 2: What resiliency strategies do elementary school principals use to manage adversity in their school leadership?**

*Answer: Strategies that not only help principals bounce back but thrive*

Principals in the study reflected on how they have grown through adversity experiences. These reflections aligned with Planché (2013) who stated that resilient leaders adapt to their circumstances in order to move an organization forward. Resilient leaders have inner resources which make it possible for them to regroup, reframe, and refocus on the core work of schools – learning. She reminded principals why they need to be reflective, “leaders who are reflective and who have learned how to listen and observe well can respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively to challenges as they arise (p. 2). Patterson (2001) outlined five resilience strengths designed to help leaders think about what they do. Patterson claimed there is no magic checklist for strengthening resilience but there are points to guide your direction. Patterson stated that it is not so much what you do, it is how you think about what you do that makes all the difference. Patterson suggested moving forward both personally and professionally during difficult times by being positive, stay focused on what you care about, remain flexible in how you get there, act rather than react, and apply resilience-conserving strategies during tough times. Patterson (2001) concluded by sharing that people do not choose to be non-resilient. Some leaders referred by Patterson chose not to do what it takes to become resilient and leaders must accept the responsibility to move ahead in the face of adversity to create a more resilient world for their organizations.

Maulding et al. (2012) also reminded leaders that being resilient typically has a profound and positive impact on teachers and school culture which enhances student achievement. This type of positive impact was seen decades earlier in Culbertson’s (1976) study concerning leaders who use adversity constructively-they demonstrate high

commitment and numerous leadership talents. Culbertson suggested, for example, that a leader can help others see the potential in circumstances which at first may appear bleak. Unhappy or unpleasant circumstances can help create a climate for change and press for a move to achieve a new vision. Lastly, Culbertson recognized that the circumstances of today could be a springboard for new and inspiring leadership of tomorrow.

***Answer: Strategies that can be learned***

While some of the participants mentioned that they were predisposed to using resiliency strategies such as optimism, humor, and happiness, most claimed they wanted time and opportunities to develop further strategies. This sense of resiliency development is found in Christman and McClellan (2008) who indicated that some people think it can be taught and others think it is personality or a character trait. Kerfoot (2001) stated “adversity builds leaders if they have the capacity to reframe the event into a learning experience” (p. 292). Nishikawa (2006) used the term “thrive” to describe resilient leaders as those that in the middle of pressure and change, practice thriving and not just surviving when faced with multiple demands. “Thriving is characterized by a growth experience as a result of the adversity and the individual demonstrates strengthened resilience after enduring hardship” (p. 28). Bandura (2009) stated resiliency training must be built by training leaders to manage failure so that it is informative rather than demoralizing. Steward (2014) felt that resilience had grown through the experience of doing the job and recommends paying greater attention to the importance of developing resilience in leadership development programs making use of techniques such as meditation, mindfulness or awareness and learned optimism. Lastly, Seligman (2006) outlined a method for people to develop resiliency while Patterson (2007) identified several strengths that help leaders move ahead in difficult times. Patterson noted that when adversity strikes, resilient leaders accurately assess current and past reality, they refuse to be deterred by obstacles and shift their focus to the positive possibilities, remain true to their personal values, have a strong sense of self-efficacy, invest their energy wisely, and act on the courage of their convictions.

One resiliency theory found (Richardson, 2002) that personal and interpersonal strengths can be accessed to grow through adversity. Richardson indicated that there are

internal and external qualities that help people to cope with or bounce back in the wake of high-risk situations or after setbacks. Moreover, Richardson shared qualities such as being socially responsible, adaptable, tolerant, achievement focused, and a good communicator. Richardson described the acquisition of resilient qualities as a process and a person passing through numerous stages therefore some may acquire skills in a matter of seconds while others may take years. Similar to this study's findings in which the participants felt their experiences aided in how well they approached adversity experiences and developed resiliency, Begley (2008) acknowledged that when principals in his study consciously and explicitly applied approaches and interpretations to convert "dilemmas" to "tensions" the speed, certainty, and quality of responses to challenging situations significantly improved.

***Answer: Containing elements of collegial support***

Colleagues in principal roles played a major part in the participants' reflections on their success through adversity or as their main resiliency strategy. Principals calling and talking to a principal colleague through adversity and spending time with them outside of the work day aligns with Nishikawa (2006) who found that colleagues are critical to thriving in the face of adversity. Christman and McClellan (2008) also identified collegial relationships as an important element to grow stronger. Alison (2012) described a resilience practice as cultivating networks before the challenges come. Alison claimed it was important for school leaders to be continually nurturing a network of support from fellow educators. Lastly, Ledesma (2014) suggested relationships are an important factor for individuals facing adversity. Ledesma claimed that whether the support is a relative or caring individual the critical factor is the social resource. "Individuals who have handled adversarial experiences the best were those who had the presence of a close confiding relationship during trying times and emphasized the significance of relationships in their ability to be resilient" (p. 5).

***Answer: Having an optimistic disposition***

Being optimistic in leadership roles and through adversity was a common resiliency strategy among the participants. This attitude and/or disposition heavily aligned with the literature on the need for principals to be optimistic. The OLF (2013)

identified optimism as an effective personal leadership resource for school leaders. Importantly, the OLF reminded principals that although they use optimism to help manage adversity it may not be successful with all sources,

Optimistic leaders expect their efforts to be successful in relation to those things over which they have direct influence or control but not necessarily to be powerful enough to overcome negative forces in their organizations over which they have little or no influence or control; they are realistic as well as optimistic (p 50-51).

Patterson (2001; 2007) outlined a way to become a resilient leader as being positive about the future. Day (2014) listed being optimistic as an indicator of resilience while Carney and Parr (2014) defined resilience in education as coping with life's disappointments, challenges, and pain and listed the resilient trait as being optimism. Christman and McClellan (2008) and Bernier (2015) identified components and factors of resiliency with optimism being one. Sherman (2012) stated "resilience means keeping positive thoughts; staying aware of your individual gifts, talents, and strengths; and encouraging yourself to keep moving forward" (p. 30). While Allison (2012) claimed being optimistic is a practice of resilient leaders, Boss and Sims (2008) found that emotional regulation can complement self-leadership to enhance the process of recovering from failure and the most salient cognitive strategies to help move people toward recovery are managing beliefs and assumptions, and engaging in self-talk.

Helpfully, Luthans et al. (2006) discussed how optimism differs from resilience. Luthans et al. stated that resilient people are better prepared than optimistic people to overcome adversity because optimists may not delve into the true meaning of the adversity and may brush it off. Luthans et al. stated that resilient people take a strategic and rational approach to adversity and therefore are better suited to adapt and overcome it then go beyond the normal level of performance. Day (2013) claimed resiliency and optimism must go hand in hand because poor leaders may be resilient and survive without changing or improving. Resilience without a moral purpose, without being self-reflective and learning to change and continue to improve is not enough. Resilience cannot therefore be easily considered in isolation from trust, hope, moral purpose or optimism.



***Answer: Containing elements of physical activity***

Harvey (2007) listed being positive as a factor that fosters the development of resiliency but she also mentions physical health such as medical care, exercise, adequate sleep, and positive stress control. Harvey stated that the more resiliency approaches and habits someone develops as a general rule, the better their ability to handle adversity encountered in life. Like numerous participants in this study that used physical activity to manage their adversity Farmer (2010) claimed school leaders need healthy mechanisms such as a balanced exercise program and healthy diet. Farmer suggested leaders can practice taking time away from the immediate problem to renew their energy and to increase their chance of overcoming adversity; leaders can also link positive thoughts and purposeful actions to their personal missions. Lastly, Farmer suggested that a supportive professional network such as an effective mentoring program which allows for reflection and dialogue serves as a healthy coping mechanism and builder of resiliency.

**Research Question 3: “What supports, professional learning, and/or programs specific to the Ontario context exist for principals experiencing adversity?”**

***Answer: Numerous but, everyone’s needs are unique***

Literature provided perspectives on the how leaders should, or could, develop resiliency. Similar to our participants, some research indicated it is the responsibility of the organization and some literature agreed with some of the study’s participants who stated no professional learning will help in the face of adversity or developing resiliency. “Developing resilient leaders is today’s organizational necessity and becoming resilient is a leader’s personal imperative” (Planche, 2013, p. 4). Allison (2012) suggested using leadership coaching as a vehicle to develop resilience and asking powerful questions during coaching sessions. Garcia (2005) stated that structured and intensely focused professional development becomes imperative if districts are not only to maintain their depleted leadership pool but also to sustain their ongoing reform efforts.

Similar to the results of this study that demonstrated differing opinions on the usefulness of professional learning, Christman and McClellan’s (2008) participants were

also of two minds: some were not certain that educational administration or educational leadership programs foster resiliency development because they were not confident that resiliency was a “caught” or “taught” characteristic/trait/phenomena. Another felt that networking was too empty or simplistic of a response or strategy and suggested the use of literature, research, and issues surrounding resiliency. However, another participant in their study stated that there should not be a “one-size-fits-all model” and that professional development and personal growth should allow for various approaches such as: immersion experiences in leadership preparation courses, reflection and analyses, and mentorship.

***Answer: Numerous but, you need to have strong professional relationships with your school board and superintendent***

Lyons and Murphy (1994) found principals need to have the opportunity to discuss their own leadership practices, failures, and successes in an environment free from fear or threat where they receive encouragement and support matches with both the positive and negative examples provided in this study. While some principals mentioned their superintendent as being helpful and supportive through adversity, others mentioned they did not feel they contributed to their success and were judgemental towards them. Nishikawa (2006) listed “involved superintendents” as one of the many ways districts can support their administrators along with a positive climate of trust, recognize and celebrate successes, have clear expectations, professional learning, and support principals autonomy and decision making in schools. She stated that leaders should have access to trusted peers and colleagues, time to reflect and collaborate with professionals and opportunities for less social isolation and more partnerships. Pankake and Beaty (2005) identified actions to address adversity as having a unique area of expertise to be of value to the organization, looking for mentors, support through family, seeking answers through reflection, and refocusing on the reason for entering education. Bandura (2009) agreed with the idea of having supportive organizations to develop resilience in their leaders. In explaining the need for a supportive environment, Bandura claimed “Resilience must also be built on training in how to manage failure so that it is informative rather than demoralizing” (p. 185).

Steward (2014) expressed why the climate of education is critical to leadership and eventually for student learning,

What is required to sustain and strengthen strong and confidential leadership is a change in the climate within which education operates, from one which is fiercely judgemental to one which acknowledges that the challenges of education cannot be isolated from the challenges of society, and provides the resources necessary to support headteachers [principals] in their relentless pursuit of providing the best education possible for every child. (p. 66)

Luthans et al., (2006) adopted a similar stance and stated organizations need to create a culture of trust and mutuality between themselves, their leaders, and the individual employees. To foster this culture they stated organizations need to provide social support. This sense of trust was also found in Luthans et al. (2006) who stated proactively resistant organizations won't have a need for resiliency by creating and developing trust and reciprocity between the organization and its leadership and the individual employee. To develop such cultures Luthans et al. described a positive employee-employer contract that involves the implicit exchange of social support, promotion prospects, and job satisfaction in return for commitment and positivity.

Finally, Boss and Sims (2008) identified principals' supervisors (managers) as having a significant impact on the way failure of principals is viewed and that supervisors can influence how the process toward recovery is enacted. Boss and Sims listed coaching, counseling, teaching principals of emotional regulation, and self-leadership as skills and abilities to enable their followers to cope in their professional and personal lives. Managers are also in a position of controlling resources and can modify a situation for the better. Importantly, managers can assist employees to better understand their emotional responses helping to shift the focus from the potential impact on someone's self-esteem.

***Answer: Numerous supports exist but they may not be easily assessible or accessed***

Some principals indicated that no training would support them and they chose not to reach out to others through adversity because of potentially being seen as weak.

Pollock et al. (2014) found that it may appear that principals have supports from a variety

of organizations but they do not appear to offer principals any significant support for their daily work. First they found that principals felt they didn't have enough support through support staff to manage school-level issues such as mental health. Second they found principals indicated the lack of support systems available to assist with the daily rigors of the job. While Pollock et al. (2014) found twelve organizations to support principals they stated that principals may be unaware or too busy to access them.

To support Pollock's et al. (2014) observation that principals may be unaware or unable to obtain support or professional learning information, communication by the researcher was required with eight different providers. The researcher reached out to the school board's professional development department for information on their New Administrators Program, Supervisory Officer Internship Program, and Crucial Conversations® information, a website for Cognitive Coaching®, a superintendent of student achievement to obtain lieu day, Principal Learning Networks information, a superintendent of student achievement to obtain Emotional Intelligence information, the Ontario Principals Council website for the Principal Qualification Program, the ADR Ontario site for the Alternative Dispute Resolution workshops, communicated with the board's Disability Management team for documents associated with the Employee and Family Assistance Program, and numerous members of the board Mental Health team and website for TERT and workshops. This aspect of searching for information may inhibit some principals from participation.

Steward (2014) in her study listed six practical steps in which the government and society should create a climate of support for headteachers [principals]: raise the profile of emotional intelligence, have resilience in leadership development programs, develop a new approach to promoting well-being, provide coaching for headteachers, and guard against the impact of constant and rapid changes in policy. Luthans et al. (2006) suggested organizations must develop both proactive and reactive programs to develop resilience in their employees. Smith and Riley (2012) stated that school systems should use scenarios from actual school based crisis in interactive on-line modules which may be a highly effective place to start. Planche (2013) claimed it is vital that administrators "are

able to be part of a supportive professional network which helps buffer the constancy of challenge and change” (p. 3).

***Answer: Numerous supports exist but principals like to spend time with their principal colleagues***

Principals respected and appreciated talking with other colleagues regarding leadership complexities. Kumar (2014) explained that connectedness is a key attribute to resilience. “Resilient individuals see connections and accept help from others who care about them. They reciprocate this support and try to help others in times of need. Belonging to social groups that are mutually supportive helps build resilience” (p. 3). Interestingly, while this study provided a solid basis of principals relying on their colleagues through adversity or as a key resiliency strategy, Pollock et al. (2014) found that only some principals reported having high or very high levels of interaction with other principals. However, when asked about strategies to cope with an emotionally draining day but numerous indicated “talking with colleagues” as their mechanism (p. 26). Ledesma (2014) stressed a key factor in building a leader’s ability for resiliency is to ensure a social network of support in times of need. Nishikawa (2006) found that leadership need to be able to have access to trusted peers and colleagues, time to reflect and collaborate with professional peers and colleagues, and transformational development opportunities that demand less social isolation and more partnerships.

Having a variety of perspectives is also helpful to leaders. Patterson (2007) insisted that principals sustain a base of caring and support during tough times. Patterson stated that the life of a principal is a lonely place to be particularly during stressful times but that resilient leaders surround themselves with trusted confidants who they can turn to during these troubled times. Patterson continued that in order to get a full picture regarding the reality of leadership, seeking multiple perspectives, not just the perspectives of the people who see reality through one lens may be painful at first but will help prepare a more resilient response and develop a higher tolerance for ambiguity and complexity. Relationships with mentors or others in their professional lives were also identified in Pankake and Beaty (2005). Participants described close relationships

helped the administrators see themselves as capable and competent and many times pushed them to pursue positions they would have allowed to pass.

### Discussion summary

The discussion on the findings of this study revealed that elementary school leadership adversity is challenging and trying, can take the form of day-to-day, chronic, or crisis events with a variety of stakeholders, may contribute to principals' stress, but may not always be seen as negative. Secondly, resiliency strategies that elementary school principals used to manage adversity are ones that help them bounce back and thrive in such circumstances can be learned, and may contain elements of collegial support, optimism, and/or physical activity. Lastly, there are many supports, professional learning and/or programs for elementary school principals to manage adversity and develop resiliency but principals may have their own unique needs, relationships with their school board and superintendent may or may not be seen as supportive, and supports may not be easily accessible or accessed.

### Limitations of the study

#### **Limitations**

The participants in this study are employed in the same Ontario school board and this may mean that conclusions can be drawn about leadership in this school board only. While the literature presented in Chapter 2 showed that leadership differences can be expected with roles, gender, location, and other forms of demographical data, when applying findings from this study to other research, it is important to acknowledge these potential and relevant differences.

Only principals from elementary schools were participants in this study therefore, the conclusions drawn in this thesis may only be applicable to those in schools not deemed "secondary" or "high school".

All participants in this study were selected through a recruiting email and were volunteers. It can be expected that the participants were open to reflecting on educational issues, such as leadership adversity, resiliency, and professional learning, and the findings described might be limited by this selection of participants.

### Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the findings of the study and provide answers to the research questions alongside the literature on school leadership, adversity, and resiliency. Unpacked answers in relation to the literature provided answers to the research questions with supporting statements and literature which drive the conclusions found in Chapter 6.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

#### Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the study, which includes the problem, the purpose of the study, research questions, research methodology, findings, and conclusions. Also, recommendations for practice are presented along with recommendations for further research based on feedback from the elementary school participants as well as research conclusions.

#### Summary of the study: Research questions

The research categories for this study included leadership adversity, resiliency strategies, and organizational supports for elementary school principals to manage adversity and develop resiliency strategies. The research questions were:

1. What school related experiences do elementary school principals define as school leadership adversity (forms, types, levels of intensity)?
2. What resiliency strategies elementary school principals use to manage adversity in their school leadership?
3. What supports, professional learning, and/or programs specific to the Ontario context exist for principals experiencing adversity?

#### Purpose of the study

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to gather, examine, and define school leadership ‘adversity experiences’ of elementary school principals in one Ontario school board. This qualitative study examined how principals use resiliency strategies to manage adversity in the course of their school leadership. Lastly, the study examined supports, professional learning, and/or programs specific to the Ontario context that exist for principals experiencing adversity.



## Methodology

The design of this study was a qualitative, exploratory case study. This holistic, single-case study's unit of analysis was elementary school principals' resiliency strategies to manage adversity experiences in an Ontario school board. In order to gather data associated with school leaders' experiences surrounding adversity and resiliency, the case study saw semi-structured one-on-one interviews with elementary school principals in one Ontario school board and a superintendent of education responsible for the supervision of elementary school administrators. The interviews documented principals' experiences and strategies to cope with their identified leadership adversities and their utilized resiliency strategies. Lastly, data was compiled about programs, professional learning, and/or supports available for leaders to develop their resiliency and the leaders' perceptions surrounding the usefulness of the supports.

The context of this research included fifteen elementary school principals in one Ontario school board and a superintendent of education responsible for the supervision of elementary administrators.

The data collection instruments for this study were semi-structured interview protocols (Appendices G and H). The questions asked specific questions surrounding their leadership adversities and descriptions of the events, questions regarding the participants' strategies to deal with the adversity, and knowledge from the participants on the current professional learning, programs, and/or supports available to leaders to develop resiliency strategies. The procedure for the study was first, semi-structured, one-on-one, interviews with fifteen elementary school principals then, an interview with a superintendent of education and finally, documents referred to during the interviews by the participants were gathered from the Ontario school board on school leadership adversity and programs, supports and/or professional learning for their administrators to develop resiliency. The data were analyzed using a modified version of a constant comparison (Glaser, 1965), were namely, coding for links, comparisons, themes, vocabulary, and patterns in the school leaders' adversity examples, resiliency strategies, and opinions on the helpfulness of resources for the school board.

## Conclusions

The conclusions identified include:

1. Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that elementary school principals experience school leadership adversity that is challenging, unexpected, and conflict. This conflict may incorporate stakeholders: self, staff, parents, school community, and the board of education.
2. It is concluded that elementary principals who participated in this study rely heavily on their principal colleagues, optimism, and physical activity as resiliency strategies in the face of leadership adversity. The time spent with their colleagues to discuss adversity experiences varies by principal and by situation.
3. Numerous supports, professional learning, and/or programs exist for principals which they feel may or may not contribute to the development resiliency and help manage adversity experiences.
4. Superintendents can have both a negative and positive role during time of school leadership adversity and in the development of principal's resiliency. The relationship and support varies by principal and by situation.
5. School boards have an impact on principals' adversity experiences and development of resiliency based on the findings of this research and need to support resilience development by providing opportunities for collegial support and interactions, and making certain the superintendent is accessible, especially when a principal is dealing with a significant adversarial situation.
6. Substantial financial savings may be noted by school boards and principals' organizations if creative initiatives for principals to access other principals could be established so there could be a culture of "we're in this together" and further strengthen trust with each other.

## Recommendations for action

This study has demonstrated that elementary school principals utilize a variety of resiliency strategies to manage school leadership adversity. As well, there exists a variety of internal and external organizational supports available to school principals to manage adversity experiences and develop resiliency. The findings of this study relate to

the literature on adversity and resiliency in so far as the job of principal has adversity, needs resiliency strategies, and it can and should be developed. The findings suggest that resilient principals demonstrate a variety of strategies to address adversity experiences. In order to recognize the individual needs of principals and to create a climate where adversity is managed and resiliency is developed in school leaders, the following are recommendations that emerged from the study for school boards, school leaders, and aspiring leaders:

For Ontario school boards:

1. ***Engage principals to talk and learn with other principals:*** Design opportunities for principals to gather with their colleagues and discuss adversity experiences and continue to support differentiated opportunities recognizing the importance of collegial relationships for administrators in formal and informal ways to develop resiliency strategies.
2. ***Investigate and re-evaluate current “best practices” available for principals:*** The study found multiple professional learning opportunities available to principals but the direct link to developing resiliency was not clearly found. Explicitly stating the development of resiliency strategies or methods to manage adversity in board created or purchased programs would enhance principals’ decision making to participate in programs.
3. ***Re-examine the superintendent/principal relationship:*** The study illuminates the different and unique relationships that principals maintain with both superintendents and their school board. Examine relationships that currently exist between administration and their supervisors with a view to further strengthening trust between them and survey communication and/or contact methods which principals feel are supportive. Then share those successful practices with all.
4. ***Provide opportunities for principals to develop resiliency strategies:*** Elementary school principals need opportunities to identify and/or develop their resiliency strategies and investigate the vast amount of professional learning, supports, and/or programs available in and outside their school board to manage adversity and develop

- resiliency. Then, identify options that suit their current need and support development of those options.
5. ***Centrally locate a repository of supports, professional learning, and/or programs:*** School boards can investigate all the professional learning available and offered to leaders and create an easy method to access this information. For example, have a key contact responsible for the professional learning of principals, create an on-line document or website listing all the professional learning, and/or have professional learning syllabuses available to principals when they are creating their annual learning goals.
  6. ***Incorporate resiliency learning in leadership development programs:*** School boards can investigate and incorporate adversity experience discussions and resiliency strategy development in professional learning of their leadership development programs to expose future leaders to strategies they may not have developed or learned in their currently roles. This may lead to a built up base and understanding of the experiences future leaders may face and will allow for the incorporation and understanding of the need for self- reflection prior to entering the role of principal.
  7. ***Analyse the principal hiring process:*** Investigate opportunities to identify principal candidates' resiliency strategies in the face of adversity experiences prior to being promoted to school leader.
  8. ***Support further research:*** The findings from this study provided a platform for discussion in the school board to investigate further research associated with the role of school principal, adversity experiences, the complexity of the role of school leader, and supports available.

For principals:

1. ***Not just talk but learn from and with other school leaders:*** Investigate and develop relationships with fellow administrators in a variety of locations to discuss adversity experiences and the role of principal in formal and informal ways. Make connections to deconstruct critical events and develop strategies to emerge from events with a positive perspective and various experiences for future occurrences. Maintain contact with fellow professionals to discuss adversity.

2. ***Investigate where resiliency is being taught:*** The study illuminated multiple courses, workshops, programs, and professional learning available to principals. Principals can investigate the vast amount of professional learning, supports, and/or programs available in and outside their school board to manage adversity and develop resiliency.
3. ***Develop and use resiliency strategies:*** Principals need opportunities to identify and/or develop their resiliency strategies then utilize them in during various experiences. Principal need to take the opportunity to be self-reflective after adversity experiences to ask themselves how did things go, how can they do things better, what can they try next. Then talk/debrief with their colleagues and/or superintendent because they were once a principal too.
4. ***Develop strong and trusting relationship with superintendents:*** While the study illuminated the varied kinds of relationships principals have or do not have with superintendents, principals need to recognize the superintendent's supportive role and therefore, principals need to create the conditions to establish a respectful and trusting relationship.
5. ***Support further research:*** The findings from this study provided a platform for discussion amongst principals to investigate further research associated with the role of school principal, adversity experiences, the complexity of the role of school leader, and supports available.

For aspiring school leaders:

1. ***Develop networks:*** Find opportunities and take advantage of school board workshops, initiatives, and opportunities to work collaboratively with administrators or aspiring leaders in order to understand the complexity of the role and develop the collegial support and relationships prior to entering a leadership role.
2. ***Investigate where resiliency is being taught:*** Aspiring leaders can investigate professional learning, supports, and /or programs available outside the educational section and examine the use of resiliency strategies in the public section to learn from lessons elsewhere.

3. ***Incorporate resiliency strategies in present role:*** Aspiring leaders can evaluate what resiliency strategies they are using to be successful in their current role while managing difficult events and then identify and/or develop further strategies through professional learning, supports, and/or programs available in and outside their school board to manage adversity.
4. ***Support further research:*** The findings from this study provided a platform for aspiring leaders to investigate, support, and participant in further research associated with the role of school leader, adversity experiences, the complexity of the role of school leader, and supports available.

For the Ontario Principals' Council and other principal organizations:

1. ***Enhance course, program, conference, and professional learning agendas and outlines:*** The study illuminated multiple courses, workshops, programs, and professional learning available for leaders but the direct link to developing resiliency was not explicitly stated. Ensuring the organization's on-line tools, agendas, and course outlines clearly list the learning goals of each program to enhance leaders' decision making to participant in programs.
2. ***Investigate "best practices" in other school boards and provinces:*** Organizations can investigate all the professional learning available and offered to leaders through the province and country and share the "best practice" learning with all school boards so they may enhance what they are currently delivering or developing to support administrators adversity and resiliency strategies.
3. ***Continue to support further research:*** The findings from this study provided a platform for organizations to investigate and support further research associated with the role of school leader, adversity experiences, the complexity of the role of school leader, and supports available.

#### Contribution to knowledge

This research has contributed to the provincial landscape of understanding and recognizing school leadership adversity and, more importantly, resiliency strategies to manage it. This unique and novel research is vital to the development of leaders because

it highlights “the way successful leaders use positive and negative situations as learning opportunities and the strategies they implement in addressing adversity” (Pankake & Beaty, 2005, p. 175). The authors suggested that often it is adversity or failure incidents that leaders experience that usually make them stronger.

This Ontario-based research offered information into the ways school leaders use negative situations as learning opportunities and the strategies they implement in addressing adversity. Given the primacy of principals in leading schools, school boards need to recognize the support needed for their leaders during times of adversity. Planche (2013) noted that it is critical that leaders become resilient in order to focus on the core work of schools – learning. Planche described resilient leaders as those who appear to have resources which make it possible to regroup, reframe, and refocus. Failure can often be viewed as part of the learning process, and to be successful education leaders must learn to use failure as a tool and not a roadblock. School boards can support their leaders by providing them with structured opportunities to reflect on their challenges and reframe “failures” as opportunities for learning and building resiliency.

This study suggested Ontario school boards and the Ontario Principals’ Council examine their current supports for their school-based leaders, and make recommendations for further supports that may actually have little or no financial cost associated with them due to the fact principals mainly want to talk to other principals. This “principal talking time” could have not only great financial savings for school boards and principal organizations but provide principals with the emotional support they indicated they require through adversity experiences. Lastly, this research’s contribution potentially paves the way for other researchers, using further designs, to move fully understand various angles of this topic.

#### What’s missing in the data?

Had principals’ time not been an important consideration, it would have been valuable to gather further stories and comments regarding strategies that the participants feel have not been successful at helping them cope with adversity. Having a collection of

“what not to do” stories may prove valuable to leaders, aspiring leaders, and school boards when designing or discussing adversity and resiliency strategies.

Also, pertinent discussion could have been obtained regarding “worst case scenarios” for the school leaders. By asking the participants their opinion as to what is the worst that could happen to you if you did not use effective resiliency strategies may help prepare future leaders with knowledge about the importance of practicing numerous strategies. A further advantage would allow the school board to hear their leaders’ perspectives on perceived failures in their role.

Lastly, it would have been useful to have the participants reflect on what they are doing to change the perception of the role being seen in a negative light or as difficult. With an expectation to be developing future leaders and sharing the positive aspects of the role, and knowing that a shortage of applicants to administrative roles is upon us, having participants reflecting and taking ownership to change the opinion of staff exploring administrative roles would prove valuable to themselves, boards of education and future leaders.

#### Suggestions for further research

This study was exploratory in nature and the researcher discovered that there was a need to examine elementary school principals’ adversity experiences and use of resiliency strategies along with investigate supports available to principals. This information will give principals, school boards, and the Ontario Principals’ Council insights into the experiences of principals and their strategies they use to manage in their role. Based on this study and the literature on adversity and resiliency, the researcher suggests the following areas for further exploration. These include:

1. This research could be replicated with a greater number of subjects and in other geographical areas to evaluate the extent which the findings may be extended to other contexts.
2. This research could be replicated with exploration of the impact of demographic data i.e. gender, age, location, years experiences etc. These factors may play a role in principals’ use and understanding of resiliency strategies and adversity experiences.



3. This research could be extended to the secondary panel (high school) to explore what similarities and differences in adversity experiences and resiliency strategies exist for secondary administration. Elementary principals may handle different types of issues than do principals at the secondary level and therefore seeking their experiences could contribute to the understanding of adversity and development of resiliency for all types of leaders.
4. Exploration of further understandings related to the relationship between school principals and superintendents and their role in assisting principals managing adversity experiences and develop resiliency.
5. Exploration and analysis of the availability and success of resiliency professional learning programs for principals
6. Exploration and analysis of the principal hiring process to discover ‘best practices’ in identifying principal candidates’ resiliency strategies in the face of adversity prior to being promoted to school leader.
7. Exploration of further understanding related to the relationship between principals and vice-principals, as school teams, contributing to adversity management and resiliency development.

#### Final remarks – The Crustacean Manifestation

This study was a first of its kind to shine a light on elementary school leadership in an Ontario school district so far as adversity experiences and the resiliency strategies principals use to manage it. The information gathered is resourceful and adds value to the study of leadership. Since this was an exploratory case study, there are still many allied questions that could be asked which are associated with principals’ adversity experiences and their resiliency strategies. I believe in the power of ‘growing like a lobster’ and, although principals and school boards are not soft, mushy animals that live inside a shell, both school boards and principals may experience pressure and feel uncomfortable in roles requiring them to cast something off that’s not working and produce or look for new strategies that fit.

Yes, leading a school or organization is hard, even the lobster repeats the casting off and growing phases in their life numerous times. We know the stimulus for lobsters

to be able to grow is that it feels uncomfortable, so we need recognize and accept that times of adversity may also be signals for growth and if we use adversity properly, it can be a trigger for growth.

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A Ethics Approval from Western University



Western  
Research

Research Ethics

### Western University Health Science Research Ethics Board NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Pamela Bishop  
**Department & Institution:** Education, Western University

**NMREB File Number:** 106930

**Study Title:** Success Amidst Adversity: How do elementary school principals in one southwestern Ontario school board use resiliency strategies to manage adversity in their school leadership?

**Sponsor:**

**NMREB Initial Approval Date:** July 31, 2015

**NMREB Expiry Date:** July 31, 2016

#### Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Revised Letter of Information & Consent	Superintendent	2015/07/07
Other	Superintendent Interview Guide	2015/07/30
Other	Principal Interview Guide	2015/07/30
Recruitment Items	Email Principal	2015/07/30
Recruitment Items	Email Superintendent	2015/07/30
Revised Western University Protocol		2015/07/30
Revised Letter of Information & Consent	Principals	2015/07/30

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000947

Ethics Officer, on behalf of Riley Hinson, NMREB Chair or delegated board member

Ethics Officer to Contact for Further Information

<input type="checkbox"/> Erika Basile ebasile@uwo.ca	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Grace Kelly grace.kelly@uwo.ca	<input type="checkbox"/> Mina Mekhail mmekhail@uwo.ca	<input type="checkbox"/> Vikki Tran vikki.tran@uwo.ca
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*This is an official document. Please retain the original in your files.*

Western University, Research, Support Services Bldg., Rm. 5150  
London, ON, Canada N6G 1G9 t. 519.661.3036 f. 519.850.2466 www.uwo.ca/research/ethics

## APPENDIX B Email invitation - Superintendent

Superintendent of Education,

I am inviting you as a superintendent of education and supervisor of elementary school principals to participate in my doctoral research project as a participant. Involvement in the study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any point. You are invited to participate in a semi-structured, face-to-face, audio recorded interview that would last approximately 60 minutes at a location of your choosing.

My research study is investigating how elementary principals use resiliency strategies to manage adversity in their school leadership.

Being a school leader is complex because it features higher amounts of ambiguity, risk, tensions, dilemmas, and uncertainty. Challenges facing leaders are becoming increasingly multifaceted. Prior research shows that adversity is “a disappointment, unexpected or catastrophic outcome, accident, poor performance, failure to learn, poor communication, interpersonal relationships, financial loss, and scandal” (Hino and Aoki, 2012). The Ontario Leadership Framework (2013) lists resiliency as a vital resource that enables leaders to cope in high levels of complexity without giving up and to effectively enact leadership practices. The OLF defines resiliency as “being able to recover from, or adjust easily to, change or misfortune, and being able to thrive in challenging circumstances” (p. 22).

If you have any questions about the study or if you would like to participate in this study, please contact me using the contact information below.

Regards,

Catherine Zeisner  
Ed.D. candidate & researcher  
Althouse College, Western University  
London, Ontario

## APPENDIX C Email invitation - Principals

Principal,

I am inviting all elementary principals in the system to participate in my doctoral research project as a participant. Involvement in the study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any point. You are invited to participate in a semi-structured, face-to-face, audio taped interview that would last approximately 60 minutes at a location of your choosing. I hope to have a sample size of up to 15 principals involved in the study.

My research study is investigating how elementary principals use resiliency strategies to manage adversity in their school leadership.

Being a school leader is complex because it features higher amounts of ambiguity, risk, tensions, dilemmas, and uncertainty. Challenges facing leaders are becoming increasingly multifaceted. Prior research shows that adversity is “a disappointment, unexpected or catastrophic outcome, accident, poor performance, failure to learn, poor communication, interpersonal relationships, financial loss, and scandal” (Hino and Aoki, 2012). The Ontario Leadership Framework (2013) lists resiliency as a vital resource that enables leaders to cope in high levels of complexity without giving up and to effectively enact leadership practices. The OLF defines resiliency as “being able to recover from, or adjust easily to, change or misfortune, and being able to thrive in challenging circumstances” (p. 22).

If you have any questions about the study or if you would like to participate in this study, please contact me using the contact information below.

Regards,

Catherine Zeisner  
Ed.D. candidate & researcher  
Althouse College, Western University  
London, Ontario

## **APPENDIX D Participant Letter of Consent - Superintendent**

**Project Title:** Success Amidst Adversity: How do elementary school principal in one Ontario school board use resiliency strategies to manage adversity in their school leadership?

**Principal Investigator's Name:** *Dr. Pam Bishop, Faculty of Education, and Western University*

### **Letter of Information - Superintendent**

#### **1. Invitation to Participate**

My name is Catherine Zeisner and I am a doctoral student from the Faculty of Education at Western University. I am writing to you to invite you to participate in a research study that examines the ways in which elementary school principals use resiliency strategies to overcome adversity in their school leadership.

You have been invited to participate in this study because you supervise elementary school administrators who are in an unparalleled position to offer meaningful insights on leadership adversity and resiliency.

#### **2. Purpose of the Letter**

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information required for you to make an informed decision regarding participation in this research.

#### **3. Purpose of this Study**

The *purpose* of this exploratory case study is to gather and examine experiences shared by fifteen elementary school principals in an Ontario school board in the face of their school leadership adversity. The study seeks to examine how principals' use resiliency strategies to manage adversity in their school leadership. Lastly, the study will examine any professional learning, programs, and/or supports that exist in the school board for school and aspiring leaders to develop resiliency strategies to manage adversity in their school leadership.

#### **4. Inclusion Criteria**

A superintendent of education working in a supervisory capacity with elementary school principals in the Ontario school board is eligible to participate in this study. Only participants who give consent to be audio recorded will be included in this study.

#### **5. Exclusion Criteria**

The following criteria will be used to exclude participants:

1. Individuals who are not a superintendent of education supervising principals in an elementary school in the Ontario school board are not eligible to participate in this study.

2. Individuals who do not consent to be audio recorded will not be considered for this study.

## **6. Study Procedures**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to join me in a personal interview. You will be asked questions about leadership adversity school leaders have experienced and the resiliency strategies they used to handle the experiences. I am interested in stories and any supports received throughout the experiences. It is anticipated that the entire interview will take up to 60 minutes of your time. The interview will be conducted in private, at a location of your choosing, and will be recorded using a digital voice recorder. The interview will be transcribed and all names or personal identifiers will be removed to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity.

Finally, in order to obtain information about school board supports, professional learning, and/or programs, I will request authorization to access some relevant policy documents, such as brochures, bylaws, bulletins, newsletters and other relevant school/board documents that may offer information on supports and/or programs available to school leaders. No personal or identifying information will be considered in the analysis.

## **7. Possible Risks and Harms**

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study. The interview can be stopped at any time should you experience any discomfort or fatigue.

## **8. Possible Benefits**

Participants will benefit in that they will have the opportunity to reflect about their experiences and contribute to the Canadian landscape of understanding and recognizing school leadership adversity and more importantly, strategies to develop leaders' resiliency. This information is vital to the development of leaders and helpful in our understanding of resiliency and may offer "insights into the way successful leaders use positive and negative situations as learning opportunities and the strategies they implement in addressing adversity" (Pankake & Beaty, 2005, p. 175).

## **9. Compensation**

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research.

## **10. Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on your professional career.

## **11. Confidentiality**

All data collected will remain confidential and accessible only to the investigators of this study. If the results are published, your name will not be used. If you choose to withdraw from this study, your data will be removed and destroyed from our database. While we will do our best to protect your information there is no guarantee that we will be able to do so. Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

## **12. Contacts for Further Information**

If you require any further information regarding this research project or your participation in the study you may contact Principal Investigator's Name: Dr. Pam Bishop, Faculty of Education, and Western University and/or Catherine Zeisner

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Research Ethics

## **13. Publication**

If the results of the study are published, your name will not be used. If you would like to receive a copy of any potential study results, please provide your name and contact number on a piece of paper separate from the Consent Form.

## **14. Consent**

A consent form is included with this letter. If you wish to participate in this study, please sign it and return it to Catherine Zeisner.

*This letter is yours to keep for future reference.*



## Consent Form

**Project Title:** Success Amidst Adversity: How do elementary school principals in one Ontario school board use resiliency strategies to manage adversity their school leadership?

**Principal Investigator's Name:** *Dr. Pam Bishop, Faculty of Education, and Western University*

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Participant's Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Consent for Audio recording: YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

Person Obtaining Informed Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX E Participant Letter of Consent – Principals**

**A Project Title:** Success Amidst Adversity: How do elementary school principal in one Ontario school board use resiliency strategies to manage adversity in their school leadership?

**Principal Investigator’s Name:** *Dr. Pam Bishop, Faculty of Education, and Western University*

### **Letter of Information – Principals**

#### **1. Invitation to Participate**

My name is Catherine Zeisner and I am a doctoral student from the Faculty of Education at Western University. I am writing to you to invite you to participate in a research study that examines the ways in which elementary school principals use resiliency strategies to overcome adversity in their school leadership.

You have been invited to participate in this study because as an elementary school administrator you are in an unparalleled position to offer meaningful insights on leadership adversity and resiliency.

#### **2. Purpose of the Letter**

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information required for you to make an informed decision regarding participation in this research.

#### **3. Purpose of this Study**

The *purpose* of this exploratory case study is to gather and examine experiences shared by fifteen elementary school principals in an Ontario school board in the face of their school leadership adversity. The study seeks to examine how principals’ use resiliency strategies to manage adversity in their school leadership. Lastly, the study will examine any professional learning, programs, and/or supports that exist in the school board for school and aspiring leaders to develop resiliency strategies to manage adversity in their school leadership.

#### **4. Inclusion Criteria**

Principals working in elementary schools in the Ontario school board are eligible to participate in this study. Only participants who give consent to be audio recorded will be included in this study.

#### **5. Exclusion Criteria**

The following criteria will be used to exclude participants:

1. Individuals who are not principals in an elementary school in the Ontario school board are not eligible to participate in this study.

2. Individuals who do not consent to be audio recorded will not be considered for this study.

## **6. Study Procedures**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to join me in a personal interview. You will be asked questions about leadership adversity you have experienced and the resiliency strategies you used to handle the experiences. I am interested in your stories and any supports you received throughout your experience. It is anticipated that the entire interview will take up to 60 minutes of your time. The interview will be conducted in private, at a location of your choosing, and will be recorded using a digital voice recorder. The interview will be transcribed and all names or personal identifiers will be removed to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity.

Finally, in order to obtain information about school board supports, professional learning, and/or programs, I will request authorization to access some relevant policy documents, such as brochures, bylaws, bulletins, newsletters and other relevant school/board documents that may offer information on supports and/or programs available to school leaders. No personal or identifying information will be considered in the analysis.

## **7. Possible Risks and Harms**

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study. The interview can be stopped at any time should you experience any discomfort or fatigue.

## **8. Possible Benefits**

Participants will benefit in that they will have the opportunity to reflect about their experiences and contribute to the Canadian landscape of understanding and recognizing school leadership adversity and more importantly, strategies to develop leaders' resiliency. This information is vital to the development of leaders and helpful in our understanding of resiliency and may offer "insights into the way successful leaders use positive and negative situations as learning opportunities and the strategies they implement in addressing adversity" (Pankake & Beaty, 2005, p. 175).

## **9. Compensation**

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research.

## **10. Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on your professional career.

## **11. Confidentiality**

All data collected will remain confidential and accessible only to the investigators of this study. If the results are published, your name will not be used. If you choose to withdraw from this study, your data will be removed and destroyed from our database. While we will do our best to protect your information there is no guarantee that we will be able to do so. Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

## **12. Contacts for Further Information**

If you require any further information regarding this research project or your participation in the study you may contact Dr. Pam Bishop, Faculty of Education, and Western University and/or Catherine Zeisner

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Research Ethics

## **13. Publication**

If the results of the study are published, your name will not be used. If you would like to receive a copy of any potential study results, please provide your name and contact number on a piece of paper separate from the Consent Form.

## **14. Consent**

A consent form is included with this letter. If you wish to participate in this study, please sign it and return it to Catherine Zeisner

*This letter is yours to keep for future reference.*

## Consent Form

**Project Title:** Success Amidst Adversity: How do elementary school principals in one Ontario school board use resiliency strategies to manage adversity their school leadership?

**Principal Investigator's Name:** *Dr. Pam Bishop, Faculty of Education, and Western University*

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Participant's Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Consent for Audio recording: YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

Person Obtaining Informed Consent: Catherine Zeisner

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX F Interview Protocol - Superintendent**

**Project title:** How do elementary school principals in an Ontario school board use resiliency strategies to manage adversity in their school leadership?

**Researcher:** Catherine Zeisner – Supervisors: Dr. Pam Bishop and Dr. Elan Paulson (Supervisory Committee Member)

### **Purpose of the study:**

1. Gather and examine experiences of elementary principals about their school leadership adversity.
2. Examine how principals' use resiliency strategies to manage adversity.
3. Examine any professional learning, programs, and/or supports that exist for leaders to develop resiliency strategies to manage adversity in their school leadership.

### **Thank you for participating in this semi-structured interview.**

The key issues and topics to be explored in our discussion are school leadership adversity and resiliency. The job of school leader is complex because it features higher amounts of ambiguity, risk, tensions, dilemmas, and uncertainty. Challenges facing leaders are becoming increasingly multifaceted.

Prior research shows that adversity is “a disappointment, unexpected or catastrophic outcome, accident, poor performance, failure to learn, poor communication, interpersonal relationships, financial loss, and scandal” (Hino and Aoki, 2012). The Ontario Leadership Framework (2013) lists resiliency as a vital resource that enables leaders to cope in high levels of complexity without giving up and to effectively enact leadership practices. The OLF defines resiliency as “being able to recover from, or adjust easily to, change or misfortune, and being able to thrive in challenging circumstances” (p. 22).

Our discussion should take about 60 minutes. I will be audio-recording our conversation and you can ask me to stop the recording at any time. I will also be taking notes during our interview. You can also ask me questions anytime throughout this process. The audio recordings will be kept in a safe in my home and your identity will not be disclosed. I will be using a coding system.

Here are the questions/topics we will be exploring in our discussion:

1. **Thinking of the experiences of elementary principals, how do you define leadership adversity?**
2. **What are some examples of adversity that your principals have faced?**
  - **Tell me more about why this is adversity.**
  - **What is the “trying” part?**
  - **How did it affect them, the school board, others?**
3. **What did they learn from this experience?**

4. What does 'resiliency' mean to you?
5. What types of resiliency strategies do your principals use?
6. What has been the best professional learning, support, or training for your principals when it comes to facing adversity and managing resiliency?
7. What professional learning, support, or training should your principals receive to manage adversity and develop resiliency?
8. Who have been the most influential people who have helped your principals with adversity?
  - How much time per week do you think they confide in this person about their school leadership?
9. Are there any questions you have for me?

Thank you for your time and candor.

## **APPENDIX G Interview Protocol - Principals**

**Project title:** How do elementary school principals in an Ontario school board use resiliency strategies to manage adversity in their school leadership?

**Researcher:** Catherine Zeisner – Supervisors: Dr. Pam Bishop and Dr. Elan Paulson (SCM)

### **Purpose of the study:**

1. Gather and examine experiences of elementary principals about their school leadership adversity.
2. Examine how principals' use resiliency strategies to manage adversity.
3. Examine any professional learning, programs, and/or supports that exist for leaders to develop resiliency strategies to manage adversity in their school leadership.

### **Thank you for participating in this semi-structured interview.**

The key issues and topics to be explored in our discussion are school leadership adversity and resiliency. Your job as a school leader is complex because it features higher amounts of ambiguity, risk, tensions, dilemmas, and uncertainty. Challenges facing leaders are becoming increasingly multifaceted.

Prior research shows that adversity is “a disappointment, unexpected or catastrophic outcome, accident, poor performance, failure to learn, poor communication, interpersonal relationships, financial loss, and scandal” (Hino and Aoki, 2012). The Ontario Leadership Framework (2013) lists resiliency as a vital resource that enables leaders to cope in high levels of complexity without giving up and to effectively enact leadership practices. The OLF defines resiliency as “being able to recover from, or adjust easily to, change or misfortune, and being able to thrive in challenging circumstances” (p. 22).

Our discussion should take about 60 minutes. I will be audio-recording our conversation and you can ask me to stop the recording at any time. I will also be taking notes during our interview. You can also ask me questions anytime throughout this process. The audio recordings will be kept in a safe in my home and your identity will not be disclosed. I will be using a coding system to ensure your anonymity.

Here are the questions/topics we will be exploring in our discussion:

1. **Thinking of your experiences as a principal, how do you define leadership adversity?**
2. **What are some examples of adversity you have faced?**
  - **Tell me more about why you feel this was an adversity.**
  - **What was the “trying” part?**
  - **How did it affect you, your work, others?**
3. **What did you learn from this experience?**
4. **What does ‘resiliency’ mean to you?**



5. **What types of resiliency strategies do you use in the face of adversity?**
  6. **What has been the most helpful professional learning, support, or training to help you manage adversity and develop resiliency strategies?**
  7. **What professional learning, support, or training would you like to receive to manage adversity and develop resiliency strategies?**
  8. **Who have been the most influential people who have helped you through adversity?**
    - **How much time per week do you confide in this person?**
- Do you have a mantra that you use or live by with regards to your leadership?**
9. **Are there any questions you have for me?**

Thank you very much for your time and candor.

## APPENDIX H - Email request for documentation

Hello \_\_\_\_\_,

Attached you will find a letter from your research and assessment department allowing me to conduct my research project "Success Amidst Adversity: How do elementary school principals in an Ontario school board use resiliency strategies to manage their school leadership adversity?"

The study consists of 3 data collection methods. First to interview elementary school principals, second to interview a superintendent of education, and thirdly, to gather documents from the school board referred to during the principal/superintendent interviews regarding principals supports, professional learning and/or programs to develop resiliency and understand adversity.

Since your website indicates that you are the team (leader, supervisor, superintendent) for the [school board's] \_\_\_\_\_ Department, I am writing to you today to request documents referred by the participants during the interviews. Are you able to provide documents or information your board has for the following:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
5. Any further support your department has for principals to develop resiliency strategies to help with their leadership adversity.

Thank you in advance

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Catherine Zeisner  
Ed.D. Candidate & researcher  
Faculty of Education, Western University  
London, Ontario

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# Catherine Zeisner

## EDUCATION

- Edd in Educational Leadership** **2016**  
Western University, London, ON, Canada  
*Dissertation title:* How elementary school principals in an Ontario school board use resiliency strategies to manage adversity in their leadership  
*Committee:* Bill Tucker, Dr. Elan Paulson, Dr. Pam Bishop (Chair)
- Masters - Education** **2007**  
Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, NSW, Australia
- Certificate in Adult Education** **2000**  
St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, NS, Canada
- Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies - Education** **1993**  
University of Maine, Presque Isle, ME, USA
- Bachelor of Arts - Kinesiology** **1991**  
Western, University, London, ON, Canada

## ADMINISTRATION

- Principal (at school sites)** **2013-present**  
*Thames Valley District School Board, London, ON*
- All the responsibilities of the principal which include; student success, preventing disruptive behaviour, promoting positive learning environments, curriculum leader, and networking
  - Guide and support associate teachers and teacher candidates through practicum experiences; assisting with understanding curriculum, assessment, lesson planning, classroom management; complete thorough evaluations outlined strengths and areas for continuous improvement
- Principal (as Learning Supervisor)** **2011-2013**  
*Human Resources – Staff Development Thames Valley District School Board, London, ON*
- Led a department who oversaw school board wide NTIP initiatives, new administrator conferences, leadership track workshops, support staff leadership, professional reading program, facilitated the associate teacher development program, planned annual occasional teacher conferences, leadership monthly workshops with guest lecturers, and annual OPC/TVDSB Principal conferences
  - Relationship building opportunities with ETFO, CUPE, NTIP teachers, occasional teachers, parents, community of schools, Faculties of Education, and community support groups

**Vice-Principal** **2008-2011**

*Thames Valley District School Board, London, ON*

- All responsibilities of the vice-principal which include; student success, parent liaison, member of Home and School and School Councils, administrative tasks such as: duty scheduling, timetabling, supervision of staff, technology leader, member of joint learning network teams with Family of Schools, host literacy and numeracy family nights, fundraise, character education, and safety

**Teacher** **2000-2008**

*Thames Valley District School Board and Ministry of Education, London, ON*

- French, Intermediate, ADHD classroom and Learning Support teacher at numerous school sites

**Facilitator/Instructor**

*University of Western Ontario, London, ON*

- Classroom Management: Faculty of Education - Pre Service **2016**
- Additional Qualification courses: Reading 1 and Intermediate Additional Basic **2008**

**PUBLICATIONS**

Chapter in *Exploring the Impact of the Dissertation in Practice* – Valerie Storey(ed.) **2016**

*Piloting Supporting Documents for Associate Teachers* – Ministry of Education **2012**

*The Impact of Authentic Learning Simulations on Student Learning* – Charles Sturt **2007**

**CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**

“Success amidst Adversity” – Table - Robert McMillan Symposium, London, ON **2016**

“Facilitating Effectively” – TVDSB Staff Development, London, ON **2010-2014**

“Student Voice in Meetings” – Presenter – TVDSB, London, ON **March 2013**

“The Challenge of Advocacy” Presenter - ESL/ELD Group, Stratford, ON **Nov. 2012**

“Dealing With Difficult People” Presenter – TVDSB, London, ON **April 2012**

“Dealing with Conflict” Presenter – TVDSB Director’s Forum, London, ON **Nov. 2011**

“Considering our Problem of Practice” – TVDSB DIA Team, London, ON **Dec. 2011**

“Developing Literacy Skills” – Think Literacy Ontario, Niagara Falls, ON **2006**

**HONORS AND AWARDS**

Associate Teacher Award of Excellence, Faculty of Education, Western University **2006**

**PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

Ontario Principal Council (OPC)