Roots of Collaborative Inquiry and Generative Dialogue for Educational Leadership

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The twin processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue underpin two closely aligned and increasingly influential school leadership development programs, one in Alberta, Canada, and the other in New South Wales, Australia. This paper focuses primarily on the Australian program, the character of which has been strongly influenced by its Canadian predecessor. Of interest in the paper is the nature of the foundations of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue, and the relationship of these processes to an expressed need for better leadership development in the Australian school sector. David Townsend and Pam Adams, who are principally responsible for generating a school leadership development model based on the use of both collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue, have sought to show how these two processes should function seamlessly, but there is more to be said about the nature of their relationship. This paper seeks to throw more light on the integral role played by generative dialogue in empowering collaborative inquiry in the context of school leadership development.

Les processus jumeaux de l'enquête collaborative et du dialogue génératif sous-tendent deux programmes de développement du leadership scolaire étroitement alignés et de plus en plus influents, l'un en Alberta, au Canada, et l'autre en Nouvelle-Galles du Sud, en Australie. Cet article se concentre principalement sur le programme australien, dont le caractère a été fortement influencé par son prédécesseur canadien. Il s'intéresse à la nature des fondements de l'enquête collaborative et du dialogue génératif, ainsi qu'à la relation entre ces processus et le besoin exprimé d'un meilleur développement du leadership dans le secteur scolaire australien. David Townsend et Pam Adams, qui sont les principaux responsables de la création d'un modèle de développement du leadership scolaire basé sur l'utilisation de l'enquête collaborative et du dialogue génératif, ont cherché à montrer comment ces deux processus devraient fonctionner de manière transparente, mais il y a plus à dire sur la nature de leur relation. Cet article vise à mettre en lumière le rôle intégral joué par le dialogue génératif dans l'autonomisation de l'enquêt

Recent research about the importance of the role played by effective school leadership in contributing to improved learning outcomes for students has given rise to an increased global awareness of the need for school sectors to invest more heavily in school leadership development (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). There has in the past been an assumption that models of leadership and leadership development derived from non-school sources, whether in the bureaucracy of the state, the disciplined world of the military, or the corridors of corporate capitalism are capable of providing valuable insights for application in schools. This assumption is no longer accepted as

being soundly based. The purpose of schools is different, and the culture of schools is unique. Models of leadership professed by charismatic contributors to an ever-expanding literature on the topic tend to fall flat when put to the test within a school environment. Rarely are the prescriptions advanced by the many contributors to this literature problematized in the context of a school (Eacott, 2017). As Spillane (2006) has observed, the common response in schools is "I know all that. Tell me how!" (p. 7). In response, school leaders often find themselves in leadership seminars being given generic solutions for generic problems. The style of delivery is typically in the form of what Adams and Townsend have described as being a "telling curriculum" (Adams & Townsend, 2016, p. 4).

It is against this background that the leadership development processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue, as advanced by Adams and Townsend (2016), have attracted strong support, first in Alberta (in Canada), and more recently in New South Wales (in Australia). These processes engage school leaders in an active process of discovering answers to the key questions facing them and their school community. They represent a major reversal of traditional approaches to school leadership development. Evidence of their effectiveness in contributing to leadership and school improvement is steadily accumulating (Townsend, 2015; see also other papers in this *Special Issue*).

This article is written against a background of engagement by the authors in the delivery of the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement, which was inspired by the writings of Adams and Townsend, and which sought to implement the processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue across a large cluster of public schools in the coastal region of northern New South Wales (Chaseling et al., 2016, 2017). As participant observers in the Initiative, we now seek to address the task of exploring the roots of both of these processes, and then examine how key elements of each merge in this new and distinctive model for leadership development in schools. The conceptual framework we adopt is that of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006). This perspective acknowledges that professional responsibilities may be undertaken variously by those who do not have a strict line management role. The focus, therefore, is upon the processes through which leadership is enacted in practice, by various actors working formally and informally at different levels of responsibility within a defined network. Important here is the effectiveness of the network, rather than the effectiveness of specific actions taken by designated leaders. This perspective seems particularly relevant to the context within which collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue have been introduced and applied within the framework of the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement.

In Australia, teacher registration at the designated level of "Leader" requires an ability on the part of the individual concerned to meet a set of prescribed professional standards which assume a high level of leadership skills across a wide range of domains (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2017). Lately, in this regard, there has been a growth of interest in transformational leadership and instructional leadership as applied in school settings (Campbell et al., 2019). Indeed, a recent issue of the long-running journal *Australian Educational Leader* included various articles that specifically addressed classroom practices but did so from a leadership perspective. Gaps remain, however, in the extent of empirical knowledge about the links between school leadership and student achievement, which is surprising in light of the wealth of data now available from standardized nationwide testing of student achievement, principally in literacy and numeracy through the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). There is also a tendency in Australia for school leaders and, even more so, for authorities responsible for school systems, to cycle through different leadership approaches,

looking to make an impact on teacher professional development and student achievements but seldom having sufficient resources to achieve an impact likely to produce sustained benefits. This situation is contradictory. On the one hand, there is enormous energy invested in new approaches to leadership, whereas on the other hand there is little evidence available that any of these approaches have ever made much in the way of a continuing positive difference. This situation is unlikely to be unique to Australia and the ongoing urge for impact is of the sort attempted to be addressed by "leadership for learning" (Hallinger, 2009, p. 9). Admittedly the combined processes of generative dialogue and collaborative inquiry, as adopted by the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement, could potentially become one more leadership development fad. We have an obligation, therefore, to examine these processes carefully before making claims of significant effect.

Collaborative Inquiry

Collaborative inquiry has been practiced to varying degrees in Australian school settings, though more in the form of action research. Because of a more general familiarity with the concept, it will be discussed first, and before addressing the process of generative dialogue.

The roots of collaborative inquiry are in action research, where the emphasis is upon the sequence of actions as one works on a research question, developing proposed action steps, then implementing, while collecting evidence for analysis and reflection, before recommencing the cycle. Collaborative inquiry differs in that its emphasis is upon the participants as co-investigators. Although interest is in addressing a school-based or classroom issue with a focus upon student learning (Donahoo, 2013), the specific inquiry might be prompted by a school improvement strategy, and so the needs of administration or the particular system are often significant. David Townsend and Pam Adams, in replacing the term action research with collaborative inquiry in their work with teams of teachers in schools in Alberta, sought to better describe the process as experienced by participants. For Townsend and Adams, "collaborative inquiry occurs when a group of individuals commit to exploring an answer to a compelling question, through a cyclical process of experimentation, purposeful action, and public reflection" (Townsend & Adams, 2008, p. 55).

Although the roots in action research are clear in many studies of collaborative inquiry, the latter requires both a working with others as well as the distinctive insights that may thus emerge. So close are the two structures that collaborative inquiry might be seen as a re-emphasis upon the single cycle that is the core of the action research process. Langer and Colton (2005) proposed a collaborative inquiry cycle consisting of four stages: observing and gathering information, analyzing and interpreting the information, planning, and then acting. Sinnema and colleagues (2011), on the other hand, simply explained that the process of collaborative inquiry consisted of certain steps of collaboratively making decisions and taking actions. The process begins with the identification of the problem to be solved and the setting of the goals to be achieved, followed by the design and implementation of an intervention. Finally, the collaborative inquiry circle is closed with collaborative reflection on the results of the implementation, and with deciding on the required actions. Winkelman (2012) also presented collaborative inquiry as a process which includes four main stages: identifying a focus question, gathering the data, analyzing the data, and then making action decisions based on the data.

In all these overviews, the research sequence is prominent, in contrast to the role of the group being subordinated or at least implicit. Subsequently, Donahoo (2013) described a four-stage,

cyclical, collaborative inquiry model involving a group framing of the problem; collecting evidence; analyzing the evidence; and, finally, sharing and celebrating a new understanding. The importance of Donohoo's characterization of collaborative inquiry is the focus on the group process itself as being equivalent to the action research steps. The team works collaboratively together to ask questions, develop theories of action, determine the necessary steps, and gather and analyze evidence in order to assess the impact of its actions. The cyclical process ends up with sharing and celebration, in which the group's human needs are clearly foregrounded.

Whether stated or implicit, group process is an important aspect of collaborative inquiry in that it helps to build a community amongst its members. The social interactions within an organization help to create shared meanings and encourage people to learn from, and to commit to, one another in the manner of the theory of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Forming a shared sense of inquiry-based identity, members thus become committed to a knowledge domain, or to a shared endeavor, which goes beyond the specific tasks of the inquiry. They regularly interact and engage in shared information, activities and discussions, and they help each other, based on mutual respect, engagement and trust (Wenger et al., 2002). It is a process which enables members to learn from each other.

It has been argued that such collaborative action research supports the creation of a community of practice, even among different stakeholders in education (Mitchell et al., 2009). This diversity in community is important in that it suggests that a group's professional effectiveness can take precedence over hierarchical or supervisory structures. Also, as teachers become familiar with research and its potential to improve classroom issues, so too, to some degree, they become members of a research community, addressing and exploring larger educational issues (Cantalini-Williams et al., 2015), with all the professional benefits and confidence which that entails.

From the school leadership perspective, Emihovich and Battaglia (2000) have examined the development of collaborative cultures of inquiry. From interviews with practitioners, they proposed that it was the shared contribution among all the participants in collaborative inquiry that is the important and necessary component. This transcends organizational or hierarchical roles: "The knowledge base generated from collaborative research must be perceived as one that is mutually developed, where theory not only informs practice, but is shaped and reconfigured as a result of practice" (Emihovich & Battaglia, 2000, p. 227). Based upon such shared ownership, they made the early claim that school leadership cultures have the potential to provide the scaffold for more meaningful reform in education.

The potential benefit for students is often claimed in research studies. Collaborative inquiry, for example, has been stated to be the most promising strategy for enhancing teaching and learning (David, 2008/2009). However, rather than being convincingly present, the student benefit is more often tantalizingly prospective. Predominantly, the focus is kept upon teachers, having, for example, a shared vision and acting with confidence in judgements based on sound data (Nelson et al., 2010). Even more specifically concerning teachers, collaborative inquiry was presented as both a personal and interpersonal way of thinking, learning, and knowing by placing reflection at the center of professional practice (echoing Schon, 1983), and enabling teachers to observe data from multiple perspectives (Samaras, 2011). Highlighting the collaboration and associated reflective practice, Kelly and Cherkowski (2015) found considerable benefits for professional socialization and collegiality. Clearly these scholars and their professional informants see an on-going need for collaborative inquiry for the enhancement of professional work.

So, with such clear promise, what challenges remain when educational leadership is involved? As a process, collaborative inquiry largely remains silent on management issues such as hierarchies, managerial power, and supervisory roles. Following Foucault's linking of power, knowledge, and subjectivity (Foucault, 1982), unequal power in school settings is likely to be accompanied by unequal understandings and access to knowledge, as well as to differing priorities being emphasized. Such inequalities and differences can affect who is in the team, as well as whose values are to be matched and applied: the issues to be investigated, the choice of method, what aspects are appropriate for reflection-based follow-up, what counts as success, and for whom. With the addition of potentially confounding factors such as ethical dilemmas, change processes, social justice, and emotional responses, there may be pressure for the participant with less power merely to choose to comply. Thus, the overall process may look misleadingly smooth to the leader or in a report, despite some participants choosing not to risk exposing their professional opinion to their supervisor.

Of course, open communication is presented as the means by which we can address all such problems, yet this is not so readily achieved. In a comprehensive review of leadership practices in Australian schools, Timperley (2015) argued that there was a need to have far more "professional conversations" (p. 6) of the kind that might result in a sound basis for understanding and integrating diverse points of view about matters of professional practice. She observed, however, that there was a gap in this regard which was impeding appropriate and effective leadership across the Australian school sector. From the United States, Shields and Edwards (2015) also made the same general point, observing that dialogue had a potentially important role to play in promoting meaningful and positive professional relationships within schools, as well as in promoting more effective educational leadership.

Generative Dialogue

Generative dialogue is a type of professional conversation where an active and committed listener assists a professional colleague to develop a new perspective on an area of personal professional challenge. Rather than being simply a discussion, generative dialogue is a clearly structured conversation where the whole is purposeful, shaped towards generating new ideas, and does so through being respectful of the colleague's professional competence (Petta et al., 2019; Townsend & Adams, 2008, 2016). Where generative dialogue differs from either mentoring or coaching is in its mode of discussion.

The notion of generative dialogue has deep conceptual roots developed from the counselling profession. In its earliest form, Adler's person-centered approach to clinical psychology proposed that individuals were generally capable of developing insight and understanding regarding those aspects of their personal psyche that had been giving rise to feelings of personal distress. Adler asserted that, under guidance from an appropriately trained counsellor, individuals were capable of contributing to their own healing process (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Subsequently, Rogers (1959) developed a distinctly client-centered approach to counselling which was intended to enable individuals to develop the kinds of insight and understanding referred to by Adler. According to Rogers, there were three foundational attributes of successful client-centered counselling: genuineness, unconditional positive regard, and empathetic understanding on the part of the counsellor. Later Rogers (1969) greatly broadened the scope of application of his approach by proposing that these same attributes should characterize the way a teacher facilitates student learning. In other disciplines, the one-to-one model of generative dialogue has been

applied across a range of professional contexts including business and adult education. Importantly, it is now applied in school-leadership projects in Alberta and in Australia (Petta et al., 2019).

Mainly due to its variety of application in different disciplines-contexts, there is not a single overarching well-accepted definition of generative dialogue. Instead, there are various descriptions of the practice, and these share a number of characteristics in common (Petta et al., 2019). Arising from work in adult education, Gunnlaugson (2006) described generative dialogue as a "comprehensive and integrated practice of conversation that cultivates ways of knowing and ways of being that serve the development of new knowledge and the transformation of adult learners" (p. 2). The emphasis was placed on process in order to separate generative dialogue from mere conversation. The importance of meta-awareness, rather than simply thoughts, was also emphasized to support the notion of a developmental process: "Through meta-awareness of our knowing, which is distinct from being merely self-conscious, the learner is subtly changed by this process" (Gunnlaugson, 2006, p. 14). And so, a tentative claim is made explicit for generative dialogue's potential to support Adlerian change.

Researchers from the area of business studies explained further the management of the actual process of generative dialogue (Palmer et al., 2007). They identified three key factors: the paying of close attention; a sense of curiosity linked to asking questions; and a sense of coherence with a larger process (use of previous meeting minutes, reflection upon the process, etc.). They looked to the emergence of the plural "we," instead of the singular "I," as a marker of success in the collaborative thinking process.

Based on their school improvement projects, Townsend and Adams (2009) referred to generative dialogue more broadly as a practice with "the potential to create and sustain organizational learning while providing increased opportunities for collaboration, recognition, and celebration" (p. 138). Their account provides insights regarding the strong bond between the processes of generative dialogue and collaborative inquiry. Moreover, they explicitly linked the overall process with the broader studies of leadership and its roots in business and administration.

Counselling education next provided the context for a theoretical study based on the dialogical self (Moir-Bussy, 2010). Here meta-awareness was stressed, as well as the growth of points of contact and relationships between all involved. A slowing down of the dialogue was recommended, and, when combined with silences within the sessions, still moments were seen as powerful reflective opportunities, potentially leading to a higher-level awareness. This perspective overlaps with the concept of transformational learning and, in particular, its focus on changing "sets of fixed assumptions and expectations … to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58).

Even more recently, counselling psychology provided insightful comment about limiting imbalances of power. Where Adler and Rogers set the field with acknowledgement of the subject's contributory agency, now not only should the subjects feel competent and capable, but they should also be treated as "the editors-in-chief of the meaning for their lives" (Strong et al., 2015, p. 606), that is, they should be in command of their agency for change. This approach prioritizes the judgement and responsibility of the subject, even with the inequalities of power in counselling psychology settings. In educational leadership settings, even though all participants are professionals, with generative dialogue the same primacy of the subject is supported.

In summary, generative dialogue is a controlled process that clarifies, supports, validates, and encourages. It has strategies that move one beyond discussion or reflection into the area of meta-

awareness, as well as strategies for limiting the inhibiting pressures of hierarchies or of unequal knowledge. In professional contexts, generative dialogue is a process for enhancing respect for all participants' professional identity, voice, agency, and development (Petta et al., 2019).

Conclusion

There are strong recent moves in Australia, but also more widely, to support the professionalism of educators including through the application of professional standards for school leaders (AITSL, 2017). However, the gulf preventing ready achievement of this empowering aim appears to be in a lack of supporting detail on appropriate communication. For example, Hargreaves and O'Connor's *Collaborative Professionalism* looked to a broad "mutual dialogue" including "difficult conversations" and being "always up for a good argument" (2018, pp. 114, 138). Nolan and Molla (2017) concluded that a teacher's professional capital comes through mentoring. The distribution of leadership across a school assumes both an outstanding level of communication as well as good will on the part of the school leader. For those with less power it must necessarily mean some uncertainty, and so their adoption of independently empowered action towards improved student learning can be only partial.

Yet it is generally understood that to be part of a profession one must have "autonomy to make informed discretionary judgements" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 80). This condition requires considerable confidence and certainty. It would seem that generative dialogue offers a way to help the subject to clarify their professional aims, skills, and even their identity. Based on this core there is more independent empowerment, whether in action or in advice—finding the ways to speak truth to power. The process can even be replicated informally. The repeated practice of generative dialogue does itself provide some sustained modelling of process, which in turn has the potential to make such acknowledgement and respect key characteristics of participants' professional discussions with their other colleagues. When such communication then moves into collaborative inquiry there is potential for effectiveness beyond what is achievable by a sole professional operating confidently but independently.

Where studies of collaborative inquiry have been largely silent on the nature of its necessary communication, the structured approach of generative dialogue is well placed to perform that communicative role. Indeed, the literature on generative dialogue, in describing its support for the follow-up action phase, occasionally moves partly into the area of collaborative inquiry. The bringing of the two together—generative dialogue and collaborative inquiry—is the distinctive feature of Townsend and Adams' now two-decades'-old work towards the establishment of a successful school leadership development model in Western Canada (Adams, 2016; Adams & Townsend, 2016; Townsend, 2015; Townsend & Adams, 2008, 2009). It offers a framework for the application of emerging insights into curriculum, teaching, or educational support and also offers a way to accommodate system-wide or hierarchy policy imperatives. Although the combined generative dialogue and collaborative inquiry approach clearly offers support for professional identity and agency, when it goes beyond the individual to be enacted in networks, then its group-based impact would seem to have considerable power to effect positive educational change.

Acknowledgement

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