

Collaborative Inquiry and School Leadership Growth: An Australian Adaptation of an Albertan Approach

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This article introduces an Australian adaptation of an approach to supporting school leadership and improvement pioneered by educationalists David Townsend and Pam Adams, from Alberta, Canada. Referred to as the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement, the adaptation involved school leaders, academics, and government officials who combined to implement the twin processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue at about sixty primary and secondary schools across the North Coast region of New South Wales, Australia. The initiative appears from all reports to have been both well received and highly impactful, including in terms of improved student performance. This issue of the AJER offers an exploration from an Australian perspective of the principles underpinning the two processes. It also presents case studies from an Australian setting of the impact of these processes on school leadership and improvement.

Cet article présente l'adaptation australienne d'une approche de soutien à la direction et à l'amélioration des écoles mise au point par les pédagogues David Townsend et Pam Adams de l'Alberta, au Canada. Connue sous le nom de North Coast Initiative for School Improvement, cette adaptation a impliqué des leaders scolaires, des universitaires et des représentants du gouvernement qui se sont associés pour mettre en œuvre les processus jumeaux d'enquête collaborative et de dialogue génératif dans une soixantaine d'écoles primaires et secondaires de la région de la côte nord de la Nouvelle-Galles du Sud, en Australie. D'après tous les rapports, l'initiative semble avoir été à la fois bien accueillie et très efficace, notamment en termes d'amélioration des résultats des élèves. Ce numéro de l'AJER propose une exploration d'un point de vue australien des principes qui sous-tendent les deux processus. Il présente également des études de cas d'un contexte australien de l'impact de ces processus sur la direction et l'amélioration des écoles.

The need to ensure that students achieve the best educational outcomes is an ongoing challenge for all educators and education managers. Many drivers of success in school improvement have been identified, four being considered as most important: the level of intrinsic motivation for improvement, especially on the part of teachers; the strength of commitment to continuous instructional improvement; the existence of teamwork; and the presence of a sense of “all-ness” in terms of the level of agreement about a coherent and inclusive approach to school improvement (Fullan, 2014). This latter notion resonates with Hattie’s articulation of *collective teacher efficacy*. Although not directly focused on school improvement per se, collective teacher efficacy is said to strongly influence student achievement (Hattie, 2018).

Achieving collective teacher efficacy has been an important policy driver in reform proposals for running schools in Australia. In 2008, Australia's federal and state Ministers for Education issued a joint statement titled *The Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008). This statement acknowledged the crucial role played by school leadership in achieving improvements in the quality of teaching in Australian schools:

School principals and other school leaders play a critical role in supporting and fostering quality teaching through coaching and mentoring teachers to find the best ways to facilitate learning, and by promoting a culture of high expectations in schools. School leaders are responsible for creating and sustaining the learning environment and the conditions under which quality teaching and learning take place. (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 12)

How, then, might quality teaching and learning—and by implication, improved student outcomes—be achieved in schools? Many perspectives have been advanced in this regard. The individual and collective capacity of teachers to promote student learning has been identified by some researchers as being of critical importance (Stoll et al., 2006). Others have referred to the importance of *visible learning*, meaning the kind of learning that occurs when teachers empower students to become their own teachers (Hattie, 2009, 2013; Hattie & Clarke, 2018). Yet others have supported the need for more evidence-based approaches to professional practice (Dinham, 2008), or have identified the critical role played by the quality of school leadership (Townsend & Adams, 2009). Whatever the perspective, there is consensus that building teacher capacity with a focus on classroom practice provides a realistic approach to improving student outcomes. In this regard, Albertan educationalists David Townsend and Pam Adams have long advocated a professional growth strategy that focuses explicitly on achieving a positive and measurable impact on student learning outcomes. They valorize school leaders who engage with purposeful, structured, reflective, respectful, visible, and collaborative professional growth programs.

The views of Townsend and Adams are distinctly pragmatic. They advance the view that school leaders can drive their own professional growth. Regardless of claims made about the essential skills, knowledge, and attributes of successful school leaders (see, for example, Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Department of Education [DoE], 2015a; Government of Alberta, 2019), visible leadership and modelling have been shown to be important in positively shaping school culture, school improvement and student success (Hattie, 2013; Hattie & Clarke, 2018).

In Alberta, modelling and sharing underpin the processes of professional learning by school leaders (Adams, 2014, 2016; Petta et al., 2018; Townsend & Adams, 2008, 2009). Evidence is emerging from some school districts in Alberta that school leaders who engage with collaborative professional growth processes, and who ensure that this learning is highly visible to the school community, contribute to consistent school improvement (Leinweber et al., 2018). It is this approach to school improvement that provides a focus for exploration in this *Special Issue* of the *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*. The exploration occurs in the form of reports of outcomes achieved as a consequence of an adaptation of the Albertan experience in an Australian setting. This adaptation, referred to generically as the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement, is described from different perspectives in each of three case studies included in this *Special Issue*, supported by two articles engaging the conceptual undercurrents of the approach. The following overview serves as a brief introduction.

The North Coast Initiative for School Improvement

In 2013, academics from the School of Education at Southern Cross University, working with a Canadian academic David Townsend, began a discussion about building a new professional learning community across schools in the North Coast region of New South Wales, Australia. This learning community eventually became known as the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement. Formally launched in March 2015, the community comprised a large cross-section of leaders from public schools in the North Coast region, together with local officials from the State Department of Education and a small group of committed academics from Southern Cross University. The goal was to implement across the North Coast district the model of school leadership being employed by Townsend and his colleagues to achieve school improvement and improved student outcomes in the Province of Alberta. Featuring prominently in this model were the twin processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue, the first of which borrowed heavily from the methodology of action research, and the second of which likewise borrowed heavily from models of humanistic psychology and counselling. There was clear evidence that these processes had facilitated significant improvement in school leadership and learning outcomes in Alberta (Adams, 2014, 2016), and so were considered to be well worth seeking to implement in the context of public schooling in Australia.

Although the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement explicitly drew upon the research of Townsend, Adams, and their colleague Carmen Mombourquette, it was the close and energetic relationship between Townsend and the Australian team that catalyzed the process. Australian-born educator, academic, and educationalist David Townsend has worked in teacher education, leadership training, and school development for more than five decades. His expertise and passion in these areas has culminated in the development of many initiatives such as the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement. His work has been predicated on the need for stronger school leadership that is directly tied to demonstrable student improvements. At a practical level, he has harnessed generative dialogue within a collaborative inquiry approach to drive positive outcomes in teacher engagement, student learning, and school leadership development. While engaged with the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement, he contributed directly to facilitating the development of local school leadership and to encouraging school leaders to undertake further studies and personal research projects (Baker et al., 2018; Campbell et al., 2019; Chaseling et al., 2016, 2017). His influence is now evident in more than one hundred schools in the North Coast region of New South Wales.

The new learning community's name—the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement—echoes an earlier Albertan initiative, the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement. The Albertan initiative, which was funded over a twelve-year period by the provincial government in Alberta, gave rise to projects in school districts that focused on professional growth within district and school leadership teams through the adoption of a process of collaborative inquiry (Adams, 2014, 2015; Townsend, 2015). At its heart, collaborative inquiry focused on achieving a measurable positive impact on student learning.

Why did a productive collaboration between educators in Alberta and in New South Wales flourish? In 2013, when Townsend shared with colleagues from Southern Cross University his experiences of working in schools and educational districts across Alberta, a reform process was gaining momentum within the school education system in the State of New South Wales. New policy platforms, articulated through three key documents—*Great Teaching, Inspired Learning*

(Bruniges et al., 2013); *Our Reforms* (DoE, 2015b); *Local Schools, Local Decisions* (Government of New South Wales, 2019a); and *Every Student, Every School* (Government of New South Wales, 2019b)—were being announced, as were new approaches to school planning, school resourcing, teacher professional learning, and teacher accreditation. There was also a keen interest in what was happening within the school education system in Canada, not only because of parallels between the two countries in terms of language, geography, and community diversity, but also because of the global standing of school education systems in Canada, especially Alberta’s system. Southern Cross University’s School of Education was also committed to establishing a closer working relationship with local school leaders, given the success of various small initiatives in this regard over the previous decade. Marilyn Chaseling, then Deputy Head of the School, introduced Townsend to a small group of local school leaders in late 2013. The synergy between what Townsend reported and what the school leaders were looking for was palpable. A newly designed Master of Education program was announced, providing expanded opportunities for experienced school leaders to explore systematically issues related to their professional responsibilities. A substantial number of research reports about school leadership issues were subsequently produced (see, for example, Baker et al., 2018; Campbell et al., 2019).

A two-day conversation in 2013 between Townsend and school leaders that was hosted by Southern Cross University helped to define future developments. The parallels between the two educational jurisdictions—New South Wales and Alberta—were clear to all, as was the need to achieve school improvement by means of the further professional development of school leadership teams. Townsend’s argument that the success of this professional development should be explicitly linked to improving student learning outcomes, demonstrable through quality evidence, was readily accepted. There emerged a realization that, by becoming more purposeful and systematic in seeking to achieve learning goals for students, then school leaders could potentially have a significant positive impact on their colleagues, as well as on the culture of their respective schools. This realization was consistent with evidence reported more widely about how a functional school leadership team can have a positive transformational impact on the culture of a school (Brinson & Steiner, 2007; Hoy et al, 2002; Leinweber et al., 2018). Under this ethos, functional teams, supported by professional growth plans, required clearly expressed and widely shared goals in order to have a positive impact on student learning outcomes.

Schools in Alberta had adopted an unofficial motto of functional teams as “People of good will who work purposefully towards the achievement of agreed goals.” This expression resonated strongly with sentiments expressed in the New South Wales educational reform document *Great Teaching, Inspired Learning*:

Great teaching doesn’t just happen. Teachers need to be developed, supported and rewarded to create the inspired learning that will develop lifelong capacities in students. Teachers need the capabilities to collaborate with and learn from others, assess their own practice and respond to feedback, and leverage technology to improve student learning. (Bruniges et al., 2013, p. 6)

Townsend, Adams, and their colleagues, in working on supporting school leadership and improvement in Alberta, had introduced the twin processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue. Collaborative inquiry, an adaptation of action research, was said to take place 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). In practical terms, a school leadership team commits to having regular

meetings facilitated by an external team usually comprised of a district office official, a university academic, and a principal from another school, at which the team develops a guiding question that relates to strategic goals and then reports routinely on evidence of success in seeking to address the guiding question. The importance of having a guiding question is pivotal to the success of the process (Chaseling et al., 2016). The external team contributes to the process by returning routinely to the same three questions: what have you done since we last met in relation to your guiding question? what have you learnt from this activity and what evidence can you share with us? and what will you do between now and our next meeting? (Townsend & Adams, 2009, pp. 140-1).

Within these meetings, the conversational process needing to be implemented is referred to as generative dialogue. Adams (2016) identified four principles that underpin generative dialogue: modelling positive regard, encouraging autonomy, describing rather than judging, and listening. Townsend and Adams (2016) expanded on the basic communication skills that the external team members should employ when engaging in generative dialogue. These skills were said to include (a) having a positive regard for the participants, (b) encouraging participant autonomy, (c) suspending judgment, (d) avoiding criticism or gratuitous praise, (e) limiting controlling responses, (f) effective listening and paraphrasing, (g) extension and perception checking, and (h) encouraging reflection and responsibility. A conceptual analysis of six dominant models of generative dialogue across four disciplines (including education) has determined that the process of generative dialogue respects and supports the professionalism and judgement of individual leaders (Petta et al., 2018). Furthermore, by offering leaders the opportunity for meta-awareness, generative dialogue becomes transformational because it enables individuals to frame problems realistically and with an ongoing sense of purpose.

The North Coast Initiative for School Improvement has now been active for the past six years. Progress summaries have previously been published (Chaseling et al., 2016, 2017), and this *Special Issue* brings the reporting process forward. The group of participants has remained relatively stable, including over 100 members of leadership teams from as many as sixty primary and secondary schools across the region, together with a small group of Department of Education officials based in the region, and up to as many as 12 members of academic staff from Southern Cross University.

The sustainability of the Initiative is due in large part to the commitment of the school leadership teams who have voluntarily committed time to having regular meetings at which members address, individually or collectively, their guiding questions and the ways in which evidence related to these questions can be obtained and documented. In the background, there has also been a small coordinating group, mainly comprised of academic staff members at Southern Cross University, but also including several leading school principals and several Departmental officials, which has met regularly to discuss issues emerging and ways of maintaining the momentum. Several of the members of this coordinating group are authors of the papers included in this *Special Issue*.

One key member of the coordinating group has been David Silcock, an experienced secondary school principal who for an extended period from 2014 held the position of Professional Learning Coordinator for the North Coast Region Secondary Principals Council, a role that included acting as a resource person for the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement. While writing a thesis in which he explored the role of executive teachers in nurturing teacher collaboration in classrooms (Silcock, 2016), Silcock drafted various support documents for the Initiative (North Coast Initiative for School Improvement [NCISI], n.d.). Regarding collaborative inquiry, he

described collaboration as purposeful professional work, linking collaborative practice to professional growth plans. Its advantages were said to include addressing professional isolation amongst school leaders, allowing school leaders to be visible learners in their school environment (Hattie et al., 2015), and creating an environment that nurtures trust and curiosity (Cherkowski & Walker, 2018; Hayes & Filipović, 2018). The authority that participants bring to the collaborative inquiry process is identified through the power of professional and intellectual curiosity (Adams, 2016; Adams & Townsend, 2016).

It may reasonably be asked what it is that drives a continuing and widespread interest in the processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue. In practical terms, these processes are attractive because they are grounded through the use of a guiding question to direct the search for school improvement and an enhancement of learning outcomes for students (Chaseling et al., 2016, 2017). A monthly cycle of meetings ensures that there is both collegial pressure and collegial support to make progress. At a more abstract level, the processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue are professionally liberating. Paulo Freire (2001), the eminent Brazilian educator and philosopher, recognized that an inherent and cultural system of oppression keeps workers trapped in positions of subjugation, demanding a fundamental ethos of compassion of educational endeavors (Boyd & Grant, 2019). Through a teaching methodology that empowered the uneducated to be able to articulate critical thoughts, the people he called the oppressed were able to understand how they were being exploited, and that through embracing a sense of solidarity and an awareness of their power, they might not only transcend their limitations but also re-educate their oppressors. In this way, they might ultimately revolutionize the social system, creating more respect and love, and less violence, between humans. Seen from this perspective, collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue are ways in which school leaders can create an opportunity to rise above the everyday routine of management responsibilities, giving themselves time to ask the professional questions that they have decided are important, and work cooperatively to identify the evidence they need to be able to assert the value of selected professional practices.

In his various presentations to participants in the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement, and in many of his articles, Townsend has acknowledged Freire's influence on his conception of the processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue. Others whose influence he has acknowledged include Lowe (1962), Adler (see Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956), Rogers (1959, 1969) and Dreikurs (Ferguson, 2001). Senge's (1990) book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization*, has also been acknowledged to be influential, especially in terms of the applicability of Senge's five disciplines to the practical task of achieving school improvement. These various sources may be seen to underpin Townsend's distinctive style when engaging with a group of school leaders for the purposes of facilitating collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue. In an attempt to explore this style in a systematic manner, one of the authors in this *Special Issue* (Boyd), together with an experienced school leader (John Baker) from the North Coast region, observed closely while Townsend facilitated a dialogue with the principal of small rural primary school in the North Coast region. What was observed was later described by Boyd and Baker in their meeting notes as a "long and detailed, seemingly smooth and gentle, yet unrelenting, discussion." In seeking to assist the principal to arrive at a guiding question for a collaborative inquiry, Townsend took her through the highs and lows of her professional responsibilities, her aspirations and her fears, and several attempts at giving expression to a guiding question. In an unpublished account of their personal reflections on the experience, Boyd and Baker summarized their observations as follows:

- Shape and structure: *cyclical*, wave, spiral, with the interview appearing to comprise several waves of intensity, content, focus; *directionality*, moving forward, hence the spiral shape; *highs and lows*, increased-decreased pressure, pressure on-off; *cycling* between the big picture and micro-detail; *cycling* between principles, concepts, daily *evidence* and statements of action; *timing* appeared to be controlled; and continual *return* to the goal, reaffirming the goal.
- Content: *clarity* of target, clarity of process; *focus* on direction, always towards the singular aim, but allowing some fluidity, allows for change, to get there; *contributing* ideas, providing labels; *drawing out* key words at key moments; *drawing out* the evidence; *talking up* the evidence; and *questions*.
- Behavior: *acting*; possibly deliberate use of notes and pencil as *props*; use of *pauses*, “thinking”; *language*, “What I hear you say ...”, personal, all about you, “What would you do?”, “What would you accept as evidence?”; *body language* important, controlled, varied, deliberate, invitational; *directing*, yet giving the Principal ownership of all ideas; and kept *returning* to “How would you know?”, “Is that the goal?”

As recorded in their meeting notes, Boyd and Baker concluded by developing an aphorism to capture the approach: that Townsend’s work reflected the relentless in pursuit of clarity and continuous improvement and refinement of achievements. This relentless pursuit was cyclical—goal→evidence→reiterate goal→quality evidence→goal →etc.—repeated with increasing practicality.

Papers for the *Special Issue*

The opening paper, entitled *Roots of Generative Dialogue and Collaborative Inquiry for Educational Leadership*, by Robert Smith, Koralia Petta, and Christos Markopoulos, forms a bookend to the later account by Boyd regarding the seven powers that appear to be intrinsic to the works of Townsend and Adams. The authors focus specifically on the conceptual foundations of the terms *collaborative inquiry* and *generative dialogue*. In doing so, they offer a reminder that these contemporary approaches to improving school leadership and outcomes have a rich lineage.

In the first evidence-based paper, *School Leaders’ Perceptions of Participating in the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement*, Tracey Durham, Marilyn Chaseling, Wendy Boyd, and Alan Foster explore the theme of leadership development through participation in collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue. This paper reports in detail on interviews with leadership teams from five schools participating in the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement. Evidence is provided regarding the gains felt to have been achieved by school leaders through their exposure to the processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue. All of the participants reflected on an increased sense of confidence in their ability to engage more authentic forms of accountability, and to influence their colleagues positively. Some participants in this investigation were also convinced that their engagement with these processes had contributed to an improvement in student learning outcomes at their schools.

The next evidence-based paper, Brad Shipway and Marilyn Chaseling’s *An Alberta Approach to School Improvement in an Australian Rural School*, reports on the impact of a sustained effort over a three-year period to utilize collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue for the purposes of achieving an improvement in student literacy and numeracy achievements. The school’s success in achieving the intended improvement is reported by Shipway and Chaseling to have

been explicitly acknowledged by the New South Wales Department of Education. The school participants in the Albertan approach to leadership growth attributed entirely the value-adding outcome to their participation in collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue. Shipway and Chaseling document in detail teacher reports of enhanced professional development as a result of their engagement with these processes.

In the following paper, entitled *Uplifting School Leadership—Enabling Structures and Processes: The Seven Powers of the Townsend/Adams Approach*, Bill Boyd presents an analysis of the structure of the processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue, using what he refers to as seven powers that appear to be intrinsic to the Townsend and Adams approach to supporting school leadership and improvement. These seven powers are identified as the power of teams, the power of relationship, the power of the process, the power of inquiry and reflection, the power of collaboration, the power of modelling, and the power of narrative.

The *Special Issue* closes with another evidence-based paper, in which Boyd draws upon insights obtained from an engagement with collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue at a small rural school in the North Coast region of New South Wales, and reflects on the viability of employing the seven powers as an analytical framework for documenting the impact of these two processes on school leadership and improvement. Entitled *Uplifting School Leadership and the Townsend/Adams Seven Powers: A Study of Leadership Growth in a Small Rural Primary School in New South Wales, Australia*, the paper provides a narrative account that is rich in detail of the experience of professional growth for a school leader as the result of an engagement with the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement. The paper documents the positive effects of carefully constructed and managed teams, professional relationships and processes, and inquiry, reflection, collaboration, modelling and narrative in supporting professional development.

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