

Uplifting School Leadership—Enabling Structures and Processes: The Seven Powers of the Townsend/Adams Approach

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This article reviews the work of two Albertan educators, David Townsend and Pam Adams, in their application of collaborative inquiry to improving school leadership. Collaborative inquiry is essentially a professional practice that has yet not been comprehensively theorized. This article seeks to lay some foundations for a theorization of the practice by identifying structures and processes that appear to underlie the remarkable success of applications of the practice in several school districts in Alberta, Canada. The emerging mode is one that envisages seven powers: 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. These powers appear to underpin much of what has been written about the ways in which collaborative inquiry has become a powerful force for leadership development in Alberta, and more recently in the State of New South Wales in Australia.

Cet article examine le travail de deux éducateurs albertains, David Townsend et Pam Adams, dans leur application de l'enquête collaborative pour améliorer le leadership scolaire. L'enquête collaborative est essentiellement une pratique professionnelle qui n'a pas encore été théorisée de manière exhaustive. Cet article cherche à jeter les bases d'une théorisation de la pratique en identifiant les structures et les processus qui semblent sous-tendre le succès remarquable des applications de la pratique dans plusieurs districts scolaires de l'Alberta, au Canada. Le mode émergent est celui qui envisage sept pouvoirs : le pouvoir des équipes, le pouvoir des relations, le pouvoir du processus, le pouvoir de l'enquête et de la réflexion, le pouvoir de la collaboration, le pouvoir de la modélisation et le pouvoir du récit. Ces pouvoirs semblent sous-tendre une grande partie de ce qui a été écrit sur la manière dont l'enquête collaborative est devenue une force puissante pour le développement du leadership en Alberta, et plus récemment dans l'État de Nouvelle-Galles du Sud en Australie.

This article addresses the nature of collaborative inquiry, as developed and espoused in the works of David Townsend and Pam Adams. Collaborative inquiry is a professional practice that seeks to achieve improvements in school leadership, within a context of improving the learning outcomes of students in a school setting. Its success in this regard has been widely reported not only in Alberta, Canada, where the practice was first applied and developed, but also more recently in New South Wales, Australia (see, for example, Adams, 2014, 2015, 2016; Adams & Townsend, 2016; Chaseling et al., 2016, 2017; Townsend & Adams, 2008, 2009). The success of the practice

in contributing to leadership development rests strongly on the creation of a deep and sustained communication relationship involving school leaders, education managers, and faculty staff members. This relationship is achieved through the inculcation of communication practices developed and refined by David Townsend, Pam Adams, and their colleague, Carmen Mombourquette, using a pedagogical process referred to as generative dialogue (McCorquodale, 2015). Adams has demonstrated that the practice of collaborative inquiry facilitates significant improvements in school leadership and student learning outcomes (Adams, 2014, 2015, 2016). Importantly, it is predicated on a view that the only real signifier of improved school leadership is improved student outcomes. Townsend (2015) summed this up by noting that, although change can happen very quickly, improvement can take much longer. Improvement must apply to the deeper culture of the school: any work done on improving school leadership is first and foremost “concerned about the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical needs of every student [and] nothing really happens until it happens for a student in a classroom” (p. 81).

Although the success of the practice can now be clearly demonstrated, the wider acceptance of the practice within a global education community requires more attention to be given to explaining its underlying conceptual constructs. The conceptual influences on the practice have been reported in various works by Adams and Townsend, but, at least to date, there has not been a theorization of the practice. This article seeks only to lay some foundations for such a theorization.

Collaborative inquiry seeks first and foremost to be transformational, as defined by Sun and Leithwood (2012), as well as by Day and Sammons (2013). Townsend offered an opportunity to observe that aspect of the practice in a report he produced on a three-year (2013–2015) project implemented with funds from the Province of Alberta across all schools in the Red Deer Public School District in Alberta. His report (Townsend, 2015) documented extensively both the transformational intent and the transformational outcomes of the project. The term *transformational* abounded throughout the report, appearing even in the accounts provided by individual participants. Townsend also recorded evidence that leadership teams became more functional, and that school leaders’ capabilities developed significantly. Importantly, he recorded the presence of an increasingly clear focus on the needs of every student, an outcome he ascribed directly to the adoption of the practice of collaborative inquiry. In short, the report allowed Townsend to assert that the Red Deer Public School District Project demonstrated how public education can be transformed through the sustained adoption of a model of collaborative inquiry.

In seeking to adopt this approach in another educational jurisdiction, the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement in New South Wales, Australia, has also sought to achieve a transformational set of processes and outcomes. The project team (Chaseling et al., 2017), in seeking to obtain a better understanding of the practice of collaborative inquiry, identified parallels with action research, but noted that collaborative inquiry attached immense importance to the elaboration by a school leadership team of a “compelling question” intended to provide a unifying reference point for the implementation of a process of discovery of relevant facts and insights. As Townsend and Adams (2008) explained, “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” (p. 55). The Australian project team also noted the central role played by a practice with roots in humanistic counselling, referred to as *generative dialogue* (Scharmer, 2003), whereby those engaged in collaborative inquiry were assisted to explore systematically their investigative journey and the personal and institutional relevance of everything being discovered.

The dual concepts of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue have underpinned a number of school and school leadership growth and improvement projects in school jurisdictions in Alberta, including Livingstone Range School Division (Townsend & Adams, 2008), Rocky View Schools (Adams, 2014), Chinook's Edge School Division (Adams, 2015), and Red Deer Public School District (Townsend, 2015). The model developed features a continuing interaction between a school's leadership team and a team of educators who are from outside the school itself, for example, the district education manager, another school leader, and a faculty member from a university. This combination is preferred because it brings different perspectives and areas of expertise to bear on the dialogue. The external team members visit each assigned school on a monthly basis to provide leadership support using collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue methods.

The North Coast Initiative for School Improvement in New South Wales has sought to replicate this approach. As reported recently (Chaseling et al., 2016, 2017), the approach has been widely accepted and seen to be effective across more than 60 participating primary and secondary schools located in the North Coast region of New South Wales. The question is, then, what makes the practice of collaborative inquiry successful?

Success Conditions

The practice of collaborative inquiry as an approach to uplifting school leadership is fundamentally pragmatic. There is even a sense about it that suggests it is inherently simple. In reality, however, it is a subtle professional practice, the success of which depends heavily on the synchronization of a number of elements that require flexibility, persistence, and a strong sense of focus in their deployment. In one of his articles about collaborative inquiry, Townsend (2015) introduced the idea of "powers," specifically the "power of teams" (p. 74), the "power of modelling" (p. 75), the "power of conversations" (p. 37), the "power of the question" (p. 46), and the "power of enabling structures" (p. 60). Adams (2015) also referred to power when discussing collaborative inquiry, as in "the power of professional partnerships" (p. 26). Both scholars referred also to the processes and structures that enable the development of school leadership (Townsend, 2015, p. 74) and are the "conditions most likely to promote and support effective professional learning" (e.g., Adams, 2014, p. 6). It is possible to conceive of these processes, structures, and conditions as also constituting "power," and this analogy is appealing because collaborative inquiry is invariably referred to within the relevant literature as being "empowering."

This paper, therefore, seeks to identify the enabling structures and processes, and asks whether they can usefully be described as "powers." In a follow-up article in this *Special Issue*, the speculation is run through the lens of a study in New South Wales of a small rural primary school in which school leadership development occurred in an unusual way. For the moment, however, the aim is to develop what might be described as a taxonomy of collaborative inquiry. In this regard, the following caveat from Schulman (2002) regarding taxonomies is worthy of note:

What is important about these taxonomies is that they are indeed heuristics. They help us think more clearly about what we're doing, and they afford us a language through which we can exchange ideas and dilemmas. They point to the mutually interdependent facets of an educated person's life of mind, of emotion, and of action. They are powerful in these ways as long as we don't take them too seriously, as long as we don't transform mnemonic into dogma or heuristic into orthodoxy. (p. 42)

To begin, seven conditions have been identified by Adams (2014) as being most likely to promote and support effective professional development through professional learning. These conditions are: (a) *Sustained rather than episodic*: professional development requires a commitment to sustained learning rather than learning by means of a single event or a series of loosely related events; (b) *The value of shared responsibility*: participants are more likely to engage in and take ownership of the process and experience of professional learning if there is an ethos of shared responsibility, as opposed to an obligation to engage; (c) *Here rather than there*: site-embedded professional learning is more sensitive to context and need, and thus more likely to be applied into professional practice; (d) *Differentiated rather than mass-produced*: differentiated and personalized approaches to professional learning honors individual needs and contexts; (e) *Inquiry-based rather than didactic*: professional learning based on inquiry is considered essential to the process; (f) *Collaborative rather than competitive*: collaborative approaches “honor the contributions of all members’ learning that is focused on achievement of personal professional and team goals” (Adams, 2014, p. 41); and (g) *Shared rather than private*: countering a trend towards isolation among educators, collaborative cultures harness the power of shared purpose in refining and improving practice.

Later, Adams (2015) identified five “essential conditions and behaviors necessary for school leaders and central office administrators to most effectively plan, initiate, and sustain professional learning for themselves and others” (p. 1). These were (a) *Focus all work on student learning*: according to Adams, the importance of this condition cannot be overstated because an emphasis on learning for all must permeate an entire school, with all employees prepared to ask and answer questions; (b) *Collaborate, collaborate, and then collaborate some more!* Adams noted participants’ preference for the power of collaboration, especially in professional learning, though also observing that a “distinction should be made between collaborative *learning* time, collaborative *work* time, and collaborative *social* time; more of the first, but some of all” (p. 2); (c) *Construct multiple communication structures to build relationships and trust*: relationships and successful communication are said to lie at the heart of transformation, with a culture of trust, created and nurtured by educational leaders, being essential in building social capital; (d) *Align the learning of all educators in the organization*: the idea of working alongside one another is identified as an essential condition for school-wide transformation of learning, implying that there should be flattened decision-making hierarchies, and that teachers and leaders shown own and have a shared responsibility for professional learning; and (e) *Appropriately fund the time and space required for instructional leadership*: professional learning through collaborative approaches to inquiry requires time and requires an appropriate level of funding support.

When reporting on his experience of Red Deer School District project, Townsend (2015) referred to a number of “enabling structures and processes” (p. 74) that in his view had contributed to the success of the project. Two of these were singled out as being of particular importance. The first concerned professional growth plans, which had been adopted by the District as the primary documentation supporting leadership growth. These plans became increasingly significant as the project progressed. They were said to provide the means whereby the participants could engage in “identifying a goal, creating a guiding question, developing strategies, and articulating measures in the model of collaborative inquiry” (p. 74). This insight reinforced Townsend’s appreciation of the importance of having a structure provided by unifying, enabling, and continuing documentation. The second concerned what Townsend identified as *the power of teams*, that is, the development of a high-functioning leadership team, which Townsend considered to be fundamental to success:

A most valuable finding ... has been that the effectiveness of the district leadership team had a real impact on the effectiveness of school-based teams ... [,] effective district teams encouraged greater effectiveness in school leadership teams [and,] in turn, effective school leadership teams were more likely to help promote the creation of more effective teams of teachers and others who have direct impact in classrooms.” (p. 74)

The power of teams lay, Townsend (2015) suggested, in their ability to convey expectations to school teams through showing rather than telling. He proposed processes that ensure team effectiveness, that is, a team “made up of people who work productively together to achieve agreed upon goals” (p. 75). These were identified as follows. (a) *Site visits to schools*: the regular and predictable presence of a leadership group in the participants’ place of work lies at the heart of Townsend’s practice. This worked, Townsend suggested, because “leaders who show up when they say they’ll show up model respectful behavior, promote a sense of expectation, and convey a message that the people they are visiting are entitled to their time and presence” (p. 75). The visits added a greater sense of accountability than could emails or phone calls, conveying an “unambiguous message” about the importance of the work, and contributing to knowledge, the sharing of skills and the strengthening of networks. (b) *Monthly administrator professional learning*: regular meetings allowed administrators to learn more about educational leadership. (c) *The power of modeling*: modeling by senior staff was considered by Townsend to be essential in influencing educator behavior. Beyond skill development it influenced educator attitudes. Townsend noted the impact of modeling as a significant unanticipated outcome of the work. (d) *Professional learning*: being engaged in professional learning became a professional responsibility, with evidence of the positive effects of the leaders increasing their professional reading, participating in conferences and workshops, and networking and sharing of new ideas. (e) *Trust and mutual respect*: participation in the process signaled trust. Continuing participation grew trust. Townsend claimed that “very high levels of trust and mutual respect characterized relationships among school leaders and district leaders in Red Deer Public Schools” (p. 76), building further opportunities for positive interactions, sharing, and support. (f) *Innovation*: although the project was seen to be something new and different, and perhaps appealing on that basis, it was understood to be of use to participants. It enhanced confidence in meeting or exceeding relevant professional competencies. Other innovations included: challenging leaders “to commit to their professional practice in a public way” (p. 77); offering opportunities for “goal-setting, professional learning, collaboration and goal-achievement while simultaneously developing essential leadership skills and contributing to the leadership of learning in schools” (p. 77); creating organizational horizontality and an ethos of shared responsibility, and fostering stronger teams and more productive professional partnerships; long-term regular school visits; and including school leaders in external teams for other schools.

A Distillation: Seven Powers for Successful School Leadership Growth

This collation of perspectives on elements of success by the key actors requires to be systemized to be transferrable. From a review of Townsend’s and Adams’ reports, the following broad categories emerge. The labelling mirrors the language employed by Townsend and Adams.

The Power of Teams

The centrality of teamwork is evident throughout the work of Townsend and Adams. The conditions identified by Adams (2014), for example, return repeatedly to the importance attached to collective endeavor: key terms include “shared responsibility,” “collaborative,” and “shared.” Here, five essential conditions and behaviors included an exhortation to “Collaborate, collaborate, and then collaborate some more!” and to advocate alignment of “the learning of all educators in the organization” (Adams, 2015, p. 10). Townsend also focused directly on “the power of teams,” noting that developing a high-functioning leadership team was essential to success. In his report (Townsend, 2015) on the Red Deer School District project, Townsend listed six processes to ensure the effectiveness of a team. The power of the team cannot be stressed enough in this work.

The Power of Relationship

Although it may be argued that relationships are inherent in a team, it is the nature of the relationships that appears to bring power to the process. Both Townsend and Adams value horizontal relationships, relationships of mutual regard, and respect. Although they do not specifically discuss this matter, it seems evident in their writing that they eschewed hierarchical or vertical relationships. Adam’s identification of the value of shared responsibility, for example, reflected this attitude, as does both her and Townsend’s advocacy of all leadership development being conducted within the participants’ schools. They championed the importance of differentiated and personalized approaches to professional learning. Of course, Adams’ lauding of collaborative over competitive processes inferred equity across the community. Professional development amongst school leaders with the specific aim of improving student learning, designed to align the learning of all educators in the organization, signified a preference for horizontal relationships. Townsend considered the creation of organizational horizontality and the ethos of shared responsibility to be responsible for the growth of stronger teams and increasingly productive professional partnerships.

The Power of the Process

Embedded in the works of Townsend and Adam is a focus on the importance of process. Each was explicit in stating that process is important, and that control of process is essential. Importantly, the process needs to be to be continuous and sustained. Adams (2014), for example, identified the first of seven conditions deemed most likely promote and support effective professional development through professional learning to be that the professional development should be “Sustained rather than episodic.” Importantly, processes need to be geographically and contextually relevant, and require commitments of time and resources. Adams, again, articulated these qualities in her conditions: “Here rather than there,” and “Differentiated rather than mass produced.” Although the process may be common, its application requires tailoring to particular needs and circumstances. Underlying successful process are relationships and communication. They lie, according to Adams, at the heart of transformation. Good process engenders a culture of trust and social capital. Townsend asserted, for example, that continuing participation signals and grows trust. Good communication should be complex: highly interactive, focused on people, articulating the interplay between policy and practice, and transparent.

The Power of Inquiry and Reflection

Adams drew attention to the importance of the work being “Inquiry-based rather than didactic.” Inherent in this condition is the need for personal reflection. These are distinguishing characteristics of both Townsend’s and Adam’s work. The power of inquiry and reflection provides a unifying, enabling and continuing strand in their work. School leaders are guided to find the answers they require in order to enhance the performance of their school and their pupils. Inquiry opens with the seemingly simple question, “In what way ...?”. Clarity of focus is essential. For Townsend and Adams, it is simple. It cannot be overstated: all work is focused on student learning. All employees must, Adams (2015) asserted, “be prepared to ask and answer the questions: ‘To what extent am I ensuring that all students are learning’ and ‘How do I know the ways I am impacting student learning?’” (p. 2). Furthermore, Townsend and Adams each used this approach in their own self-review. They both asked the question, “In what ways does the implementation of a comprehensive and coordinated professional learning plan impact organizational change, teaching practice, and student learning outcomes in Alberta schools?” (Adams, 2014, p. iii; Townsend, 2015, p. 5). In pragmatic terms, the power of inquiry and reflection was evident in the adoption of a professional growth plan, providing participants a framework for growth through its identification of “a goal ... a guiding question ... strategies, and ... measures in the model of collaborative inquiry” (Adams, 2014, p. 74).

The Power of Collaboration

Adams (2014) kept returning to the value of shared responsibility, the importance of the collaborative rather the competitive, and learning being shared rather than private. In 2015, she captured this value in one of her “essential behaviors,” exhorting the need to “Collaborate, collaborate, and then collaborate some more!” (p. 9). The emphasis on collaboration arises from a belief that participants who collaborate will engage better with and take more ownership of the process of learning and the experience of enhanced learning. This articulation of a shared purpose of refining and improving practice thus “honor[s] the contributions of all members’ learning that is focused on achievement of personal professional and team goals” (Adams, 2015, p. 41). Collaboration has important implications. It demands alignment of all school staff, a school-wide transformation goal, the flattening of decision-making processes, and enabled ownership, responsibility, and acknowledgement of the collective endeavor.

The Power of Modelling

For Townsend, the specific processes themselves are not as important as their predictable and reliable implementation. This point is articulated most cogently in his discussion of the role of school visits, together with his emphasis on regular and predictable leadership school visits being at the heart of his practice. Regular and predictable visits modeled respectful behavior, which in turn validated expectation of, and entitlement to, the leaders’ time and presence. He also asserted that the power of modeling by senior staff is essential in influencing educator behavior, especially in moving beyond skill development to positively influencing educator attitudes.

The Power of Narrative

Interestingly, despite observations reported about its importance by participants in the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement (Chaseling et al., 2016, 2017), very little was said about the value of narrative in the various reports by Adams and Townsend. They drew extensively, however, on participants' narratives in their reports, providing potent evidence for the level of engagement and growth experienced by these participants. In seeking to identify the powers driving success, it seems necessary to include narrative at this stage.

Conclusion

This paper presents a framework for the application of collaborative inquiry in school leadership activities, explicitly embedded in the mode of pragmatism that characterizes Townsend's and Adams' school leadership work. Bearing in mind Schulman's (2002) caveat that taxonomies are merely heuristics, and that we should neither take them too seriously nor transform them into orthodoxy, it is suggested that the framework of seven powers may provide a useful lens through which to evaluate the practical efficacy of school leadership development based on collaborative inquiry. In a follow-up paper in this *Special Issue*, Boyd applies this lens, demonstrating its potential. In closing, however, I return to Shulman for a reminder of the caution with which such a heuristic should be used: "A system of categories," Shulman reminded us,

is an attempt to simplify and order a complex and chaotic world [... whose] unavoidable price ... is to make some views salient whereas others fade into the background. That is why all such systems need to be used with a combination of reverence and skepticism. (2002, p. 44)

Although the Seven Powers for successful school leadership growth presented here appear to have validity, they should be used with care in our search for insight into the ways things work in the growth of quality delivery in education.

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