

School Leaders' Perceptions of Participating in the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement

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This investigation concerns school leaders' perceptions regarding the efficacy of a leadership development initiative implemented across schools in the North Coast region of New South Wales, Australia. Based on an Alberta school improvement process, the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement sought to achieve leadership development and improved learning outcomes through use of the processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue. Five schools were selected for an exploration of experiences within the Initiative. Accounts provided by the interviewees pointed strongly to the achievement of positive outcomes. The participants referred particularly to benefits in the form of increased leadership confidence and capability. Success factors underpinning the Initiative include: the twinning of collaborative inquiry as a process for improving professional practice with the process of generative dialogue to achieve more effective conversations, and; the nature of the Initiative, itself, where, facilitated by a visiting leadership team, professional colleagues meet monthly for deep discussion about professional issues they share.

Cette enquête porte sur les perceptions des leaders scolaires concernant l'efficacité d'une initiative de développement du leadership mise en œuvre dans les écoles de la région de la côte nord de la Nouvelle-Galles du Sud, en Australie. Basée sur un processus d'amélioration des écoles de l'Alberta, la North Coast Initiative for School Improvement visait à développer le leadership et à améliorer les résultats d'apprentissage en utilisant les processus d'enquête collaborative et de dialogue génératif. Cinq écoles ont été sélectionnées pour une exploration des expériences au sein de l'initiative. Les comptes rendus fournis par les personnes interrogées ont mis en évidence l'obtention de résultats positifs. Les participants ont notamment fait référence à des avantages sous la forme d'une confiance et d'une capacité de leadership accrues. Les facteurs de réussite qui sous-tendent l'initiative sont les suivants : le jumelage de l'enquête collaborative en tant que processus d'amélioration de la pratique professionnelle avec le processus de dialogue génératif afin de parvenir à des conversations plus efficaces, et la nature de l'initiative elle-même, où, sous la direction d'une équipe de direction invitée, des collègues professionnels se rencontrent tous les mois pour discuter en profondeur de questions professionnelles communes.

Globally there is a high level of expectation of continuous improvement in school systems regarding both teacher effectiveness and student learning outcomes (Gurria, 2016; LeTendre & Wiseman, 2015). In Australia, pressure in this regard has intensified over recent years because of

concern about a decline in the country's standing in the triennial Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) surveys (Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development, [OECD], n.d.). Australia continues to achieve above the OECD average in these surveys, but it is evident that there has been a slippage over time, relatively and absolutely, in the performance of young Australians in the areas of scientific, mathematical, and reading literacy. The decline has been most evident among young people from backgrounds of socioeducational disadvantage, who tend already to be clustered in the low-performance bands (Hetherington, 2018).

In 2011, against this background, the largest Australian school system, the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education, introduced reforms intended to improve the quality of teaching and learning at public schools across the State. One of these reforms, as documented in *Local Schools, Local Decisions* (New South Wales Department of Education, 2011), gave school principals more decision-making autonomy, and hence a higher level of personal accountability for the exercise of effective school leadership.

This reform provided an opportunity for the inception of a North Coast Initiative for School Improvement, a voluntary alliance of educators from northeast New South Wales, whereby NSW Department of Education school leaders, and academic staff members from Southern Cross University teamed up to embark on a leadership improvement process inspired by the achievements of David Townsend and his colleagues from the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada. The North Coast Initiative for School Improvement has been fully explained elsewhere (see Chaseling et al., 2016; Chaseling et al., 2017). In brief, the Initiative required, as in Alberta, monthly visits by a leadership team to each of the participating schools. The leadership team ideally comprised at least two people, including an academic staff member, a NSW Department of Education school leader, or a senior school leader from a different school. During a leadership team visit, the senior leaders within the host school were encouraged to engage in the processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue for the purposes of exploring a compelling question of importance to the school's senior leaders. The process followed closely the model reported by Townsend and Adams (2014), except that participation was entirely voluntary, and did not involve an entire school jurisdiction. Prior to engaging in this work, all participants attended a formal induction. Here, the goal of the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement was explained, and the processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue were modelled for participants.

The Importance of Leadership

Leadership is fundamental to school improvement (see, for example, Garmston & Wellman, 2016). The importance attached to leadership within public schools in NSW has received a huge boost over recent years as new policies and processes such as *Local Schools, Local Decisions* (NSW Department of Education, 2011), *Great Teaching, Inspired Learning* (NSW Department of Education, 2013), and the *School Excellence Framework* (NSW Department of Education, 2017) have been announced, giving school principals not only more authority but also more responsibility. Principals of public schools must now comply with an Australian Professional Standard for Principals, produced by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2014). This Standard prescribes, amongst other things, that school principals should exercise leadership in teaching and learning, professional development, the implementation of change-management processes, and engagement with relevant stakeholders from the wider community. These requirements have been devised in light of a developing body of research which

demonstrates the importance of school leadership to the attainment of better learning outcomes for students. Leithwood et al. (2008), for example, documented on the basis of a comprehensive literature review the extent to which school leadership “matters greatly in securing better organisational and learning outcomes” (p. 12). Recently, they have reinforced this conclusion in an updated review of the available evidence (Leithwood et al., 2019).

Identifying optimal leadership practices can, nevertheless, be challenging, as Neumerski (2012) has explained. Finding ways to measure the characteristics and behaviors of leaders may seem straightforward, but understanding how leaders behave in specific contexts is another matter entirely. We know, however, that school leaders influence student learning through their impact on teachers at a school (Waters et al., 2003). We know also that, for teachers, “meaningful learning is slow and uncertain” (Imants & van Veen, 2010, p. 570). The aim of the research reported in this paper was to provide insights about the perceived impact of the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement to enhance leadership through the processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue.

Collaborative Inquiry and Generative Dialogue

A major focus of the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement was the development of a capacity within schools for the effective exercise of the processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue. Townsend, Adams, and Mombourquette (Adams, 2014; Townsend, 2015; Townsend & Mombourquette, 2017) have demonstrated that collaborative inquiry was effective in enhancing instructional practices and in influencing how educators think, talk about, and value learning in schools. The process is said to provide support and mutual encouragement for school leadership teams, as well as contributing to a “de-privatization of educators’ professional learning” (Townsend & Adams, 2014, para. 5). According to these researchers, collaborative inquiry impacts on a school’s culture by building a sense of identity and belonging, as well as by creating a stronger sense of shared responsibility for addressing educational challenges. Within the framework of the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement, the process of collaborative inquiry began when school leaders, with assistance from a small visiting leadership team, attempt to transform one of their student learning goals into a guiding question, starting with “In what ways and to what extent ...” (Chaseling et al., 2017, p. 165). In subsequent meetings, the focus then involves a three-question conversation framework: (a) What have you done to address your guiding question? (b) What have you learned from these activities and what evidence do you have? and (c) What will you do next in relation to your guiding question? (Townsend & Adams, 2009). This format has been found to align well with a NSW Department of Education requirement that all its principals, executives, and teachers record annually their professional goals, the strategies they intend to employ to achieve those goals, and the evidence they will draw upon to show progress being made. The school principals are also obliged to ensure the implementation of this professional development process within their schools (NSW Department of Education, 2015).

Collaboration was found to be closely linked to shared leadership and capacity building (Bidulock et al., 2008). According to Townsend and Adams (2014), collaboration occurs when “teams of educators commit to exploring and answering compelling questions about their professional practice” (para. 4). Research suggests that a collaborative inquiry model of professional learning can improve classroom practice (Adams, 2014; Townsend & Adams, 2009, 2014) because it is a means of professional development that engages teachers “in joint inquiry about teaching as a means of shifting practice” (Butler et al., 2004, p. 437). Collaborative inquiry

recognizes the role of ongoing professional learning and provides a systematic process for educators to engage in shared inquiry, reflection, and dialogue (Donohoo, 2013). Reeves (2008) reported that teachers engaging in sustained collaborative inquiry had a direct and measurable impact on student achievement, as well as an effect on the professional practices of their colleagues and a reinforcing impact on the adoption of new professional practices.

Generative dialogue, which is manifested through the communicative processes of inquiry and reflection, was central to the collaborative inquiry process used in Alberta schools by Townsend and his university colleagues (Townsend & Adams, 2016; Chaseling et al., 2017). Townsend and Adams (2016) maintained that generative dialogue involved the habits of mind and interpersonal skills that include positive regard, encouraging autonomy, suspending judgment, avoiding criticism, limiting controlling responses, effective listening, reflection, encouraging responsibility, reciprocity, maintaining focus, and avoiding personal anecdotes. It is the kind of communication that takes place between educators when they engage in facilitating the emergence of personal and professional insights through listening attentively to one another without resorting to the provision of advice or the expression of judgment (Sice et al., 2008). When generative dialogue practices were engaged, school leaders must develop trust and respect for the values, beliefs, and opinions of others (Townsend & Adams, 2016). In short, they must respect each other's professionalism (Petta et al., 2019). Generative dialogue practices empower participants to support and encourage one another.

Research Design and Methods

This investigation sought to provide insights about the perceived impact of the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement, using case study approach to collect data. To inform the investigation, five schools participating in the Initiative were selected on the basis that they would provide a cross-section of the around 60 public schools that were actively engaged with the Initiative. The leaders of these five schools were invited to share their experiences of using the twin processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue over a two-year period. These were schools where the sequence of monthly visits had been routinely implemented by a visiting leadership team.

In 2017, the principals of the five schools agreed to be interviewed about their experiences. At three schools, the principals wished to include another member of the school's leadership group in the interview process for the sake of contributing richer data to the investigation. Two of the five schools were regarded as being large schools within the NSW primary education sector. Each had an enrolment of more than 500 students. These schools also had a non-teaching principal and a defined school leadership team. Two of the schools were smaller, each with between 330 and 400 students, but each also had a non-teaching principal and a defined school leadership team. One school was relatively small, with an enrolment of 70 students, and a principal who had a teaching as well as a leadership role.

Following Yin's (2014) advice, a conversational style of interviewing was adopted, this being the most likely way of setting the participants at ease and obtaining their views authentically. The participants were initially contacted by telephone to explain the purpose of the investigation. An interview schedule was sent to them so that they could reflect on the matters of interest to the investigation before being interviewed. Following normal practice for interviewing (Kaiser, 2009), the participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and that they would be deidentified in reporting of the data as L1, L2, L3, L4, L5, L6, L7, or L8. Most of the interviews

were held after school hours, this being the preferred time for the participants, and in an office at their respective school.

The questions in the interview schedule were mostly open-ended, intended to elicit details of each participant's experiences with the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement. Of particular interest were matters concerning (a) why each participant had become involved with the Initiative, (b) what their perceptions were of its benefits and challenges, (c) how well the processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue had contributed to their leadership capability, and (d) what their feelings were about the long-term impact of these processes on school improvement and better learning outcomes for students.

To achieve trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) recommended procedures were implemented by the researchers. These included member-checking, where each participant reviewed the recorded interview transcripts for accuracy and also commented on the themes to emerge from the data analysis; triangulation, where claims made by the participants were checked for accuracy by investigation additional sources of information; and prolonged engagement, where the interviewer spent extended periods of time at each of the five site schools for the investigation with a view to obtaining a better appreciation of the context of information provided in the interviews. The interview transcripts were then analyzed following Glaser and Strauss's (1967) procedures with a view to identifying emergent themes.

The investigation received approval by the Human Ethics Committee at Southern Cross University. It was also approved within the framework provided by the NSW Department of Education's State Education Research Application Process (SERAP).

Findings

Three broad themes emerged from the data. The first concerned the benefits and challenges of participation in the North Coast Initiative. The second concerned the effectiveness of collaborative inquiry as a self-reflection strategy to improve professional practice. The third broad theme concerned the value of generative dialogue as a conversation strategy. Table 1 provides an overview of the three themes and of various sub-themes.

Benefits and Challenges of Participation in the Initiative

All the participants commented positively on their experiences of the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement. They referred repeatedly to the benefits of collaboration and sharing, capacity building, and team formation. One participant commented, for example,

At one time, everyone was pretty much, "This is my room" and "This is the way I do things." With the structures we have put in place now they actually come and say, "Can we be given some extra time?" "Is there any time for us to work together on this?" Once that never happened. I think they have seen the benefit of sharing and collaboration too. It actually makes their lives a lot easier (L1).

In a similar vein, another participant, who had recently been appointed as a principal, referred to a shift to "seeing how people have moved from a culture of complaints to having professional dialogue about learning and growth" (L8). Another participant, who was well placed to observe directly the impact of the Initiative on her colleagues because she had a teaching as well as a leadership role, reported that she and her teaching colleagues had subscribed to the same guiding

Table 1

Participant Perceptions of the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement

Themes	Sub-themes
Benefits and Challenges of Participation in the Initiative	<p>Leadership growth, capacity building, collaboration, changed practice, the formation of teams</p> <p>Aligned with the NSW Department of Education's 2015 Performance and Development reform</p> <p>Opportunity for meaningful time with colleagues with whom they might not otherwise have spent time</p> <p>Initial feeling of inadequacy that participant would not be as effective as the 'coach' from Alberta</p> <p>Scheduling meeting times for participants</p> <p>Minute-taking in meetings</p> <p>No challenges, only benefits</p>
Collaborative inquiry meetings as self-reflection time to improve professional practice	<p>A scheduled time to plan, reflect and become energized</p> <p>Participation voluntary and an opportunity for authentic accountability</p> <p>Scaffolded, structured and action-driven meetings</p> <p>Catalyst for regular reflection and action</p>
Generative dialogue as a conversation strategy	<p>Visiting leadership team listened attentively, but did not give advice, therefore, participants took responsibility for their own actions and learning</p> <p>Modelled generative dialogue to their staff. Generative dialogue now embedded into school structures</p> <p>'Generative dialogue' now integrated into school language and conversations</p>

question as a basis for working as a whole-school team to improve student literacy and numeracy outcomes. She commented that the adoption by the team of a collaborative inquiry process has enabled all concerned to construct meaning collectively and collaboratively: “[We are] all ... on the same page ... we all agree because we all understand the approach” (L4).

The participants also referred frequently to the extent of alignment between the process of collaborative inquiry and their obligations as prescribed by the Department of Education's policy on performance development and planning. They explained that the Department required them to set annual goals and developmental strategies, with evidence having to be collected about their success in achieving these goals. They reported that having the skills to develop a guiding question, as prescribed by the process of collaborative inquiry, enabled them to meet the Department's requirements efficiently and cooperatively.

A source of widespread satisfaction was the extent to which the Initiative had encouraged the participants to spend meaningful professional time with their colleagues, not only during their monthly meetings with the members of the visiting leadership team, but also from week to week. They referred also to the excitement created through being able to interact professionally with David Townsend and colleagues from Alberta, as well as with other school leaders across the

North Coast region and with Southern Cross University staff members. A representative comment here was “To engage with school leaders from another country, listen to their stories, and compare with what we’re doing, was pretty overwhelming. It lets us see what’s possible and that we’re not alone” (L6). Another participant stated

I’d like to acknowledge the positive impact of working with our Director in a collegial rather than an accountability model, university staff, and two principal colleagues, one from a large secondary school, and the other from a small rural school—and their shared desire to guide and support (L7).

When asked to identify challenges, only two participants expressed any concerns. One described having a strong initial feeling of inadequacy in the face of what was being expected: “At North Coast Initiative symposia, we’d see David Townsend talk about the approach and model an interview. When we practiced, we weren’t as good as David ... but the more we tried, the better we got” (L7). The other identified the scheduling of meetings to be a challenge, given the varied nature of the commitments of one principal who was both a participant and part of the visiting team for five schools who chose to meet together. His solution was to schedule two-hour breakfast meetings twelve months in advance. His bigger challenge, though, was said to be the difficulty of keeping records of points made in meetings: “With six to eight people talking, there are a lot of words! We were fortunate because our academic [visitor] kept the minutes” (L3).

About Collaborative Inquiry

A recurrent theme in the interviews was the value of the collaborative inquiry aspect of the Initiative in terms of its contribution to personal leadership effectiveness. A widely expressed sentiment was that, whereas schools are busy places, everyone made time to take part in the monthly meetings with their visiting leadership team. Participants explained that these meetings provided them with a scheduled time within which to reflect on what they had achieved since their last meeting, to make plans, and to become more energized as they worked towards achieving the monthly goals they had set for themselves. As one of the participants stated, “It’s like, wow ... I’ve achieved so much in that time. I’ve surpassed the goals I had planned for the 30 days” (L2). Another commented: “I’ve seen changes because I’ve been persistent in chasing and getting goals achieved in the school” (L8). Another, who was the principal of the largest of the five schools, reflected “No-one is making me attend, but the fact that I am going to talk again in a month, my own professional sense of self actuality, drives that I do something” (L7). He was explaining here that the meetings provided him with an opportunity for authentic accountability, where he became accountable both to himself and to the members of his leadership team.

Various participants observed that the process of engaging in collaborative inquiry through monthly meetings was different from what they often experienced in meetings where commitments were made but where there was a lack of follow-through. They described collaborative inquiry meetings as being better scaffolded, more structured, and much more action-oriented, principally because they were underpinned by documented guiding questions, or a single guiding question in the case of one school. One of the participants explained the situation this way: “The structured meetings are based around your initial question which was about you ... having that accountability ensures that things get done” (L4). Another participant explained that, through an engagement with collaborative inquiry, she was now working smarter, and not harder: “[I make] decisions with consideration of what the impact will be. I am also conscious of collecting

evidence as I go, so I can see the impact of what I've been doing" (L8). Another participant reported that "The benefits [of the collaborative inquiry approach] have been tenfold because it's helped to shift the things we wanted to change and do. It keeps you on track" (L1).

When participants were asked how they would explain to others the benefits of the monthly meetings, a majority of responses focused on the role played by the meetings as a catalyst for regular reflection on practice and for follow-through regarding intended action. One participant who had many years of experience as a principal commented, for example, that "a highlight is certainly the opportunity to reflect professionally, in a scaffolded and structured way, on your journey as a leader" (L3). Another principal explained that the meetings ensured that all participants "follow through with their actions and are therefore more accountable in achieving their set goals" (L7).

About Generative Dialogue

The process of generative dialogue has been comprehensively explained elsewhere (Sice et al., 2008; Townsend & Adams, 2016; Petta et al., 2019), as well as in other papers included in this *Special Issue*. The onus for modelling it fell mainly to the visiting leadership team members, whose questioning techniques deliberately focused on assisting school leaders to reflect deeply on their actions and achievements with respect to whichever guiding question was the focus of their process of collaborative inquiry. The visiting leadership teams were also required to model a capacity to listen attentively, to encourage elaboration, and to assist with clarification, but to avoid giving advice or making suggestions. Hence, school leaders participating in the monthly meetings were at all times required to take charge of their own actions and learning experiences.

All the participants commented favorably on the extent to which this manner of engagement had assisted them to achieve what were often referred to as "light-bulb" moments. A representative comment here was that

[The questions asked] gave me a capacity to explore a few things I don't know I would have come up with by myself. By really focusing on a particular area, and being guided through questioning techniques and approaches, I have developed thinking which has resulted in very clear actions I might not otherwise have considered (L7).

This participant, and many of the others, referred also to the style of questioning as being "authentic" and "respectful." There was a widely held view among the participants that they never felt they were being put on the spot in any way because of the questions asked. One reason for this reaction may well have been that the visiting leadership team members always asked the same questions at each monthly meeting, that is, about progress made, evidence to share, and plans for the next month.

The style of engagement modeled by the visiting leadership teams was reported to have had an influence on how the participants themselves related to colleagues in their schools. All five of the site schools advised that generative dialogue was now being consciously practised in school meetings. Three participants, from different schools, explained, for example, that the term, "generative dialogue," was now well understood by teaching staff members at their schools (L1, L2, & L3), and two of them advised that they consciously applied the technique during their monthly meetings with staff members who reported to them (L1 & L2). For all participants, generative dialogue was found to be a new conversation strategy with a wide range of

transferability. One participant declared, for example, “Now I have the language of support and self-awareness of what I need to do when having discussions with staff” (L8). Another reflected that generative dialogue was all about “asking appropriate questions to guide someone to have ownership of their learning,” while at the same time resisting the urge to “jump in and provide the answer” (L7).

Discussion

The findings throw light on three dimensions of the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement. The first of these concerns the use of collaborative inquiry as a process for improving professional practice. The second concerns the value of generative dialogue as a basis for achieving better communication within leadership groups in schools. The third concerns the overall impact of the Initiative. Each of these matters is now addressed.

It was evident from the findings that the process of collaborative inquiry had a significant impact on principals and other school leaders from their schools because of the need for professional learning to be structured and personalized around a guiding question. At four of the site schools, the process of devising this guiding question was individual for each participant. At the remaining school, that is the smallest of the five schools, all of the teachers worked with the principal to devise a single guiding question. The structure of the guiding question, “in what ways, and to what extent,” became a unifying focus for discussion at the monthly meetings with the visiting leadership team. It also reportedly provided the anchor for a cycle of continuous improvement within each of the five schools included in the investigation.

Collaborative inquiry induced, it appeared, a strong sense of camaraderie among the participants in the monthly review meetings. It also resulted in the production of a documented record of progress being made, because at each meeting one of the members of the visiting leadership team would keep the minutes of the meeting, while the other member took responsibility for leading the conversation. A further outcome was that it required all professional learning to be made more transparent, or, as Townsend and Adams (2016) have described it, “de-privatized.” This situation resonated strongly with Nelson’s (2008) claim that “in schools where learning communities develop an inquiry stance, practice is de-privatized as teachers and administrators work collectively to understand how to improve learning for all students” (p. 552). It was consistent also with similar accounts provided by the Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development (OECD; 2014, p. 163).

The success of collaborative inquiry appeared to benefit significantly from the fact that a visiting leadership team attended each of the site schools on a monthly basis. The team’s involvement required school leaders to reflect critically on what was important to the school and then to devise a guiding question capable of generating sustained professional learning.

The process of generative dialogue was also reported to be instrumental in contributing to leadership development. The process of structuring each monthly meeting around the same three questions, with members of the visiting leadership team listening attentively and refraining from either offering advice or interjecting in discussion, provided a forum for the school leaders to develop confidence in reflecting critically and constructively on issues affecting their performance and their school’s success in achieving better student learning outcomes. As Townsend and Adams (2016) have reported, telling teachers what to do takes away “some of their freedom to determine for themselves the most appropriate course of action” (p. 12). When Townsend and Mombourquette (2017) undertook a three-year school-improvement project in the Northern

Lights School Division in Alberta, a key underpinning assumption was that it was more effective to model desired behavior than to tell teachers what to do. Put another way, modeling is an essential dimension of this school improvement work: “Modeling as a teaching strategy is demonstrably powerful. In this Project, it was assumed that excellent modeling by central office leaders was a prerequisite to excellent modeling by school leadership teams” (Townsend & Mombourquette, 2017, pp. 4-5). Modeling a form of professional communication in which listening is regarded as being every bit as important as being heard was reported to have had a profound impact across all five site schools in the investigation, so much so that, as reported earlier, references to generative dialogue had begun to become embedded in everyday professional conversations at the schools.

This finding supports claims made by Townsend and Adams (2016) about the value of generative dialogue as an effective strategy for encouraging educators to reflect candidly on their performance with a view to creating opportunities for personal and professional growth. They pointed out that generative dialogue meetings need to be conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust and reciprocity. Furthermore, feedback to participants must be given in a non-threatening way, while any criticism, judgement, or gratuitous praise needs to be avoided. By all reports, the process of generative dialogue, as modeled by the visiting leadership teams for all five site schools, was implemented in ways that complied with the guidelines suggested by Townsend and Adams.

In general, the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement was agreed by all participants to have made a significant contribution to opportunities for leadership growth, school capacity building, collaboration, the adoption of change, and the formation of stronger school-based leadership teams. Each of the eight participants reported that their capacity to provide leadership in learning had been greatly enhanced. They also reported an improvement in their capacity to engage staff members in their schools to take more responsibility for implementing school improvements. They noted that the staff members in their schools had begun taking more responsibility for their own decision-making. This finding resonates with a report by Reeves (2008) about the positive impact of collaborative inquiry on professional practice within a school setting.

Many of the participants observed that it had been fortuitous in having the support received through the Initiative at about the same time as the NSW Department of Education had directed that all public-school principals should implement a performance and development process within their schools. The Department’s requirement for annual goal setting and for the collection of confirmatory evidence of goal achievement aligned perfectly with the process of collaborative inquiry, as advocated within the framework of the Initiative. As has been noted elsewhere (Chaseling et al., 2017, p. 171), the new employer-mandated requirement came to be seen not as an imposition but as an opportunity to be embraced and deployed. The Initiative was seen to have provided the participants with a set of tools that enabled them to respond quickly and constructively to the Department’s new requirement.

The value of the role played by the Initiative in providing a context for improved networking across the participating schools, as well as with regional Department of Education managers and with colleagues from the University, is difficult to quantify, but the participants in this investigation expressed their conviction that this role had been an important dimension of the overall success of the Initiative. Having access to reports about a similar initiative in Alberta, and having opportunities to interact personally with David Townsend and various of his Canadian colleagues, added greatly to an overall sense of being better networked.

Conclusion

This investigation was motivated by a desire to throw light on the perceived impact of the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement on school leaders actively engaging with the processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue. Using an case study approach to data collection, the experiences of school leaders from five public schools were documented and analyzed by the authors. These schools were selected because they comprised a fairly representative cross-section of the around sixty schools in the North Coast region of NSW that since 2015 have become active participants in the Initiative.

In general, the findings reflect well on the success of the Initiative. The school leaders whose experiences have been reported in this paper expressed a high level of satisfaction with the processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue in terms of the impact of these processes on their professional development as school leaders, as well as in terms of a range of school improvements. In particular, these processes acted as a catalyst for engaging in higher order thinking about professional practices in their schools and about their role in supporting beneficial change to achieve better learning outcomes for students. Importantly, the processes encouraged transparency, mutual regard, and a commitment to team engagement among the school leaders selected for investigation. When professional colleagues came together in monthly meetings facilitated by a visiting leadership team, they began to develop a capacity for engaging in deep discussion about professional issues of shared interest. The meetings were, therefore, seen to provide a relatively unique opportunity for professional growth. In this regard, the use of generative dialogue as a conversation process was critical because it engendered a culture of trust and a sense of empowerment. The participants reported that the effect of this experience on the community of teachers in their respective schools was palpable. Guiding, rather than directing, became the prevailing leadership style, which was reported to have resulted in more teamwork and an increased willingness to identify and address those aspects of a school's performance that were in need of more attention.

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