

# An Alberta Approach to School Improvement in an Australian Rural School

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*This article reports on the experiences of teachers at a small rural school located in the North Coast region of New South Wales in Australia who participated in a school improvement project based on an approach developed over many years by David Townsend and Pam Adams in Alberta, Canada. The project involved monthly meetings between the teachers at the school, including the school's Principal, and an external leadership team who facilitated the meetings employing the processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue. All participants were volunteers in the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement. Over three years, the school achieved a significant improvement in its literacy and numeracy outcomes, thereby attracting acclaim from the Department of Education in New South Wales for the excellence of its achievements. The teachers at the school attributed this success to a school improvement model based on the Alberta approach, and transported to the Australian context known as the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement. The processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue were said to have taught them ways to engage with evidence, to create professional space for deep and critical self-reflection, to improve their daily work efficiency, and to promote more student autonomy in learning.*

*Cet article rapporte les expériences des enseignants d'une petite école rurale située dans la région de la côte nord de la Nouvelle-Galles du Sud en Australie qui ont participé à un projet d'amélioration de l'école basé sur une approche développée depuis de nombreuses années par David Townsend et Pam Adams en Alberta, Canada. Le projet prévoyait des réunions mensuelles entre les enseignants de l'école, y compris le directeur de l'école, et une équipe de direction externe qui facilitait les réunions en utilisant les processus d'enquête collaborative et de dialogue génératif. Tous les participants étaient des bénévoles de la North Coast Initiative for School Improvement. En trois ans, l'école a amélioré de manière significative ses résultats en matière de lecture, d'écriture et de calcul, s'attirant ainsi les éloges du ministère de l'Éducation de Nouvelle-Galles du Sud pour l'excellence de ses réalisations. Les enseignants de l'école ont attribué ce succès à un modèle d'amélioration de l'école basé sur l'approche albertaine et transposé au contexte australien, connu sous le nom de North Coast Initiative for School Improvement. Les processus d'enquête collaborative et de dialogue génératif leur ont appris à s'appuyer sur des preuves, à créer un espace professionnel pour une autoréflexion profonde et critique, à améliorer l'efficacité de leur travail quotidien et à promouvoir une plus grande autonomie des élèves dans leur apprentissage.*

A North Coast Initiative for School Improvement was established in 2015 in the North Coast region of New South Wales. It came about as the result of conversations between Australian-born Alberta educator, David Townsend, eight Southern Cross University academic staff members, and

six senior education managers from the New South Wales Department of Education. Aligned with Townsend and Adams' school improvement work in Alberta, the Initiative was designed to assist school leaders to build their leadership capabilities with the ultimate aim being the improvement of student learning outcomes. As in Alberta, small external leadership teams were established for the purposes of regularly visiting participating schools to support school leaders in crafting a guiding question for school improvement. These teams also promoted use of the twin processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue (Chaseling et al., 2016; Chaseling et al., 2017). Collaborative inquiry, an adaptation of action research, takes 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, 2009, p. 55). During regular monthly meetings at participating schools, the visiting team members routinely posed three questions intended to achieve a momentum for improvement in whatever direction had been decided by the school leaders themselves. These questions drew upon the model proposed by David Townsend and Pam Adams (2009; 2014), as follows:

- What have you done since we last met in relation to your guiding question?
- What have you learnt from this, and what evidence can you share with us?
- What will you do between now and our next meeting?

The conversations that external leadership teams modelled during these meetings used generative dialogue principles of having positive regard for the participants, encouraging participant autonomy, suspending judgment, avoiding criticism or gratuitous praise, limiting controlling responses, effective listening and paraphrasing, extension and perception checking, and encouraging reflection and responsibility (Townsend & Adams, 2016).

Unlike the Alberta approach involving whole school jurisdictions, including Livingstone Range School Division (Adams & Townsend, 2006), Rocky View Schools (Adams, 2014a), Chinook's Edge School Division (Adams, 2014b), Red Deer Public School District (Townsend, 2015), and Northern Lights School Division (Townsend & Mombourquette, 2017), the approach adopted in the North Coast Initiative was that schools volunteered individually to participate. In mid-2015, over 60 school leaders (including principals and other members of school leadership teams) made a commitment to participate in the project for a period of three years. By February 2016, a further 40 school leaders, including the four staff members who contributed to this case study, joined the project.

Participation was not only voluntary but also free of charge. The North Coast Initiative did, however, receive two grants from the NSW Department of Education for a total of \$110,000. These grants were used to fund conferences, seminars, and workshops for as many as 6,000 participants, as well as to cover travel costs for expert speakers and to establish professional networks among the participating teachers in the region. Visiting team members for the participating schools were drawn from a pool of academics at Southern Cross University, as well as from experienced New South Wales Department of Education school principals and senior managers. Wherever possible, each team was comprised of one person employed by the Department of Education and one person employed by Southern Cross University.

In February 2016, the teaching principal of Rous Public School, a small primary school located in a rural area of the North Coast region, volunteered to receive regular visits from one of the external leadership teams. The school had only three teachers and one special learning assistance teacher. A schedule of monthly meetings was organized to take place before school for 75 minutes on the first Tuesday of every month. The format of the meetings followed closely the model from

Alberta. Some differences included that the school leadership team was declared to include all four staff members and that the two visiting leadership team members were both academic staff members from the University, on account of there being no Departmental employees available to attend.

### **Design and Method**

The question addressed in this article is, *What were the evolving experiences of Rous Public School teachers as they engaged in the Alberta approach to leadership growth for school improvement?* To address this question, the researchers adopted a case study design.

Yin's (2018) seminal volume on case study research explained that a case should be selected as a research unit when the researcher wants to investigate "a contemporary phenomenon ... in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. 15). In contrast to Yin, Stake (1995) advanced a social constructivist form of case study since "most contemporary qualitative researchers hold that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered" (p. 99). Constructivist approaches to case study research seek to understand the multiple competing perspectives of individual agents. This approach to case study research can, however, have a tendency to reduce powerful social processes to an aggregation of individual and subjective systems of meaning (Vincent & Wapshott, 2014). The result is that any form of causality or structural processes can be denied on the basis of contextuality and subjectivity. Our approach to case study research sought to find a balance between identifying causal structures and valuing the subjective realities of individual social agents. Vincent and Wapshott (2014) explained how a critical realist approach to case study research can steer a middle path between the poles of empiricism and constructivism because it is simultaneously interested in the emergence of subjective meaning systems and how such meaning systems "combine to inform collective social processes, as entities or institutional mechanisms in themselves" (p. 150).

### **The Site**

Rous Public School, the site for the present investigation, is nestled in farmland six kilometers from the nearest village stores and 23 kilometers from the town of Ballina on the coast of the Pacific Ocean in northern New South Wales. The century-and-a-half-year-old school building is the focal point for a local community of approximately 80 persons. There is an enrolment of about 75 students, which means that the Principal, Pauline, is actively engaged in teaching as well as providing leadership. As Principal, she is responsible for the management, organization, administration, and supervision of the school, but 80% of her time is devoted to teaching. The other teachers at the school include Kelly-Rae, who is responsible for a Kindergarten/Year 1 group, Brad, who is responsible for a Year 2/3 class, and Marg, who provides special learning assistance across all year levels. In addition, there are part-time and visiting teachers employed fractionally to contribute to music and science teaching, library services, and student counselling. There are also several office staff members.

Rous Public School was considered to be well suited to the conduct of an investigation involving case study research because of the following attributes.

### **A Small School**

The school provided an opportunity to examine the impact of the process of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue in a setting where there were few of the social and relational complexities often found in larger schools. Townsend and Adams (2016) have emphasized the significant impact resistant staff members can have on implementing such a process across a school, as well as the desirability of working with teachers who participate willingly. The Principal and teaching staff members of Rous Public School expressed a high level of enthusiasm about joining the North Coast Initiative in February 2016. The School offered a unique opportunity to study the implementation of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue in a setting that would be free of the effects of staff resistance to the process.

### **No Staff Turnover**

All members of staff at the School remained engaged with the Initiative over the period since 2016.

### **Engaged as a Whole-School Team**

The school was unique in that the staff learned and implemented the collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue processes together as a team. They attended the same introductory seminars, democratically chose a research focus for the whole school, and collectively presented the results of their efforts at North Coast Initiative symposia and seminars.

### **A Middle Socioeconomic Status**

The school's Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2018a) value of 1019 for 2018 indicated that the Rous Public School was very close to the median for all Australian schools in terms of its socio-educational profile.

### **A Rural School**

The Australian Government has identified a concerning gap between the performance of urban and rural students (Piccoli, 2014). A key aspect of this gap is said to be the quality of the availability of professional development opportunities for teachers at rural schools. As Halsey (2017) stated, "timely access to high quality, relevant, regular and affordable professional development is crucial for building and sustaining [teacher] effectiveness" (p. 5).

The combination of these attributes made Rous Public School highly suitable for the purposes of analyzing the impact of collaborative inquiry. According to Flyvbjerg (2006), a suitable setting for the purposes of conducting case study research should have "strategic importance in relation to the general problem" (p. 229). In this regard, the attributes of Rous Public School made it ideal.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

For this case study, data was collected from a variety of sources including (a) minutes and notes distributed to all participants for the first three years of meetings that occurred for 75 minutes

before school on the first Tuesday of each month (2016-2018); (b) publicly available data from the Australian Government's *MySchool* site (ACARA, 2018b) about the school's National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results; and (c) two in-depth 60-minute group interviews with the Principal and her three staff members, one in 2017 and a second 12-months later. The interviews elicited staff perceptions of the impact of the Initiative in their school: specifically, of its benefits and challenges, of the impact on them as a team of the processes of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue, and of the long-term impact on student outcomes. Examples of questions asked were

- As a result of your participation in the North Coast Initiative, what developments, if any, have you found in your:
  - Own professional identity?
  - Professional relationships with staff or colleagues?
- What more could the North Coast Initiative do to help you in your growth as a leader?
- The ultimate goal of the North Coast Initiative is student improvement. Within what framework do you expect to see demonstrable improvements in student learning? Could you please elaborate?

Qualitative data such as meeting minutes and interview transcripts were analyzed using a constant comparative method to identify emergent themes (Johnson & Christensen, 2017), assisted by the use of NVIVO (Version 12) qualitative data analysis software (QSR, 2018).

Throughout the three years of the case study, data collection and data analysis were conducted simultaneously. This strategy was based on Stake's (1995) argument that where close attention and high value are being given to the experiences of the participants, then it is not possible to chart the course of the study in advance.

Credibility of the data was addressed in two ways. Firstly, both qualitative and quantitative data from the monthly visiting team meetings, internal school testing, and external Departmental data were triangulated. Secondly, the three-year duration of the monthly team meetings, driven by the guiding question, allowed for observations over an extended period. Each month's meetings were summarized in the form of minutes, and the minutes were then sent within a few days to all participants to enable member checking. Any corrections were agreed upon by the team at the next monthly meeting. Dependability of data was addressed through stepwise replication during the coding of meeting and interview transcripts (Chilisa & Preece, 2005), and by using an inquiry audit after data collection (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Data confirmability measures included the member checking of emergent themes in the qualitative data with the school Principal, as well as by maintaining an audit trail of analysis methods. Details of the school's socioeconomic context and the specific logistical changes made when implementing collaborative inquiry contributed to the replicability and transferability of the data.

### **Implementing Collaborative Inquiry and Generative Dialogue**

The participants were aware that the implementation of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue at their school was part of a wider research program examining the applicability of Townsend and Adams' Canadian approach to Australian schools. At North Coast Initiative symposia between 2016 and 2018, it was often explained how different schools had adapted or modified particular elements in the implementation of these processes, including with respect to

the membership of visiting teams and the frequency of meeting schedules. The staff at Rous Public School also implemented some adaptations. Ahead of each monthly meeting, the Principal would send an email to all participants in which she would summarize what the teaching staff members had done over the previous 30 days. This summary gave the visiting leadership team members time to refresh their memory of the guiding question, and to begin to think about the role they might play in the next meeting. It also gave the teaching staff members time to consider the strength of any evidence they would bring to the next meeting with the visiting team. During each monthly meeting, one visiting team member would chair the discussion, and the other recorded the conceptual flow and specific minutes of the meeting for all to see in real time on the electronic whiteboard. This approach allowed all participants to keep track of both the logistical and conceptual aspects of the process. After the meeting, minutes were checked by both visiting team members before being returned to the school team.

The staff at Rous Public School made one specific adaptation that was different to how other schools participating in the Initiative were implementing the process. Seeking to exploit the potential of their small size from the outset, the staff all chose to operate with a single guiding question that applied universally, that is, one guiding question that simultaneously addressed the professional development of individual members of staff and was relevant to the staff team members as a whole. Thus, a whole-of-school guiding question was established, something that other schools in the North Coast Initiative only decided to do after many months or even years of learning and refining the process. In some cases, schools engaged in the Initiative never used a whole-of-school guiding question.

A professional development goal expressed initially by the participants from the School concerned the need to raise the level of ranking being attained by students on NAPLAN and other similar tests. They expressed their goal as follows: “For all class teachers to develop a deep understanding of the cluster markers on the continuum (literacy and numeracy) to inform teaching practice and have the greatest impact on student learning.” Early in 2016, resulting from discussion with the visiting team members, a focused guiding question was generated: *In what ways and to what extent does our deeper level of understanding of the cluster markers on the literacy and numeracy continua ensure the greatest impact on teaching and learning?*

When Departmental initiatives were introduced prior to using collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue, the staff members would normally take an individual approach to implementation and compliance. This situation meant that the teachers’ first attempt at implementation saw the initiative being interpreted differently by teachers responsible for different year levels. There was, therefore, an inevitable level of discontinuity in the process of skills development as students progressed from one class level to the next. Once the staff members engaged with the collaborative inquiry process, they approached the implementation of the K-10 Literacy Continuum as something that required a coordinated whole-of-staff understanding. They spent many meetings examining how each understood the Continuum, and then determining how it might be applied to the work samples of students at different year levels. Not only did this discussion achieve a better alignment in perceptions of the Continuum, but it also moderated the treatment of students’ work as they progressed through the grade levels in the school. The Principal, Pauline, explained that “Evidence from discussions and use of proformas across classes ensure staff are focusing on continua for assessing and future planning. The development of class proformas provides evidence of continuity across stages in teaching and learning.”

Engaging in collaborative inquiry also assisted the staff members to align their professional judgements about students’ work. Once this alignment occurred, the staff members were then

better able to encourage students themselves to use some aspects of the language of generative dialogue in the classroom. The teachers started explicitly discussing with the students their current progress through the Learning Continuum, and the importance of providing evidence they were achieving at a particular level. In response, the students began assuming more ownership of the learning process and they became more autonomous in locating where their achievements were located with respect to the Literacy Continuum.

Staff members brought the language and principles of generative dialogue into their classrooms and used it with their students. With its focus on thoughtful conversations that encourage participants to be reflective and problem-solve their own learning (Townsend & Adams, 2016), the staff members introduced a metacognitive approach (Larkin, 2009) to learning. Students were constantly being encouraged to engage in the process of thinking about their own thinking, in the very same way as their teachers had done when they were engaged in the process of collaborative inquiry.

## **Findings**

This investigation examined the evolving experiences of Rous Public School teachers as they engaged in an Alberta approach to leadership growth for school improvement. Seven main themes emerged from the data analysis: improvements in student outcomes, using evidence in new and powerful ways, deep professional collaboration, pride in achievements, fresh eyes and lateral thinking, assumed competence, as well as increased motivation and a more sustainable work-life balance. Each theme will be discussed in turn below.

### **Improvements in Student Outcomes**

Within 12 months of engaging with collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue, Rous Public School began to see significant developments in the academic performance of its students. Over the three years since 2016, it consistently performed above the state average in terms of standardized literacy and numeracy testing, and it performed better than other schools belonging to the same socio-educational advantage band. According to the Department of Education's "value-added" data, measuring learning growth after adjustment for demographic factors, Rous Public School students in Years 3 to 5 demonstrated a marked improvement in absolute as well as relative terms. Learning improvement data for Kindergarten to Year 3, for example, had moved from "delivering" in 2015/16 to "sustaining and growing" in 2017/18 (P. Campbell, personal communication, June 11, 2019).

The School's internal literacy assessment data also showed an increased number of students across all year levels being able to exceed the average annual improvement rate in attainment levels in reading and spelling. Table 1 shows these increases with respect to the reading age of Year 6 students across a range of measures. On the basis of the School's achievements, Pauline was one of three principals selected by the NSW Department of Education in 2019 to talk to public school principals from the north eastern region of the State about how her school had improved and transformed ("What School Principals Will Talk About At Forum This Week," 2019).

### **Using Evidence in New and Powerful Ways**

In interviews conducted over the course of the three-year engagement with the teachers, the

Table 1

*Year 6 Literacy Achievement\**

Student	Chronological Age	Word (Single Word Reading Test)	Accuracy	Reading Rate	Comprehension	Growth Over 12 months
A	12.0	11.09+	11.11	12.03	12.11+	=
B	11.09	11.09+	12.10	12.00	12.11+	+12 months
C	11.11	No data	11.04	11.07	11.01	+9 months
D	12.07	11.09+	12.10	12.08	12.11+	+12 months
E	12.03	11.09+	12.10	12.11+	12.11+	=
F	12.06	11.09+	12.03	10.00	12.11+	+2 years 5 months
G	12.01	8.01	9.02	7.07	11.08	+4 years 3 months
H	12.06	No data	11.07	11.04	12.11+	=
I	11.10	11.9+	13.02+	12.11+	12.11+	=
J	12.05	7.07	8.03	8.01	11.08	2 years 10 months
K	11.07	11.09+	11.00	9.07	11.01	+2 years 3 months
L	12.07	11.09+	12.10	10.09	12.11+	+2 year 8 months
M	12.09	7.08	8.06	7.05	10.00	+6 months

Key: Above 12 months; within 6 months age; below 6 months; below 12 months

\*13 students in Year 6: Letters A to M represent all Year 6 students in the class.

teachers reported that one of the most significant features of the collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue processes was the continual cycle of gathering, evaluating, and using evidence about both their teaching and their professional development. The second of the three main meeting questions specifically addressed this matter: *What have you learnt from this, and what evidence can you share with us?* These questions elicited a need to focus on issues of evidence: what counts as evidence? And what do different sources of evidence indicate? Teachers also reported that the iterative focus on evidence encouraged them to continually seek useful evidence during their normal workday.

It took some time for teachers to expand their thinking about what might constitute evidence. When they first began the process, most conceptualized evidence in terms of simple forms of quantitative data, such as a student's NAPLAN score, or school attendance records. As the teachers began to engage in collaborative inquiry, their understanding of evidence expanded to include other forms that were as rigorous and reliable. Teachers began, for example, to see the value in documenting the various conversations they had with parents because they realized that the systematic recording of these conversations could be a valuable data source for gauging how the community perceptions of the school may have changed. The teachers also became more systematic in their collection of student work samples as evidence to demonstrate learner progression with respect to particular curriculum outcomes. As Pauline, the Principal, commented, "It's quite timely to focus on evidence because everything's evidence now ... we were wanting to work on how we show evidence?"

As a result of the staff continually looking for evidence to bring to the meetings, the use of



evidence-based thinking started to spread to their professional reflections outside the meetings. After a period of time, the staff even started to teach the students themselves how to gather evidence to demonstrate their learning. Pauline explained that “Where is the evidence for that?” had become a familiar catch-cry across the school as both teachers and students discussed the learning process.

In one instance, a student who was trying to move up a reading level made the claim to Marg, the special learning assistance teacher, that he knew how to use the apostrophe of possession. Marg congratulated him and asked what evidence he had to support this claim. Unable to produce any on the spot, he returned the next day and found Marg in the middle of a staff meeting. Banging on the window from outside, the grinning student held up his book. “I’ve got it! I’ve got the evidence to show you I need to go up.”

This specific focus on identifying and gathering high-quality evidence permeated the thought processes of staff and students to such an extent that it entered the vernacular of the school and was incorporated into jokes between staff. When a staff member related the events of a particularly heroic weekend sporting performance, the others good-naturedly jibed, “Yes, but where is the *evidence* to support your claims?”. Gathering evidence was now seen as a normal, habitual activity. Pauline explained, “We come with evidence and we can share our evidence not only with the visiting team but also with one another and that’s a great opportunity.”

### **Deep Professional Collaboration**

From the start of their engagement with the North Coast Initiative, Pauline invited the school’s teaching staff members into the collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue process, rather than running it at an executive level within the school. This would prove to be a unique aspect of the Rous Public School experience.

The staff members reported that the regularity of the visits by the visiting team had two effects. First, they kept staff focused, knowing that the next meeting was approaching and evidence would be expected. Second, they helped staff members to understand the wider importance of their work. By regularly attending the school, the visiting team members were affirming the value and importance of the teachers’ aspirations. Pauline commented: “Having our meetings with the academics...made sure that we stayed focused on addressing our guiding question.”

The teachers identified one of the most empowering aspects of the process to be the willingness of the visiting team members to invest time and effort in their school by offering practical help. The simple act by other professional educators taking an ongoing interest in the progress of the school made staff members feel they were doing important work: “I think the visiting team’s support has been an overwhelming highlight. At the end when they ask, “what can we do to support you?”, how often does that happen, and when do you ever hear that question?” (Pauline).

Pauline drew a clear distinction between visits from Departmental supervisors and visits by the visiting leadership team members. The staff members reported that they felt they were able to be much more reflective and self-critical about their work with the visiting team because these people were not part of the line management structure of the Department. The teachers also felt that they were able to identify and deconstruct weak spots in their work without fear of these issues resurfacing in their annual performance review process. The academics noticed that once the staff realized the confidentiality of the dialogue, their willingness to engage with long-term complex problems increased dramatically. As Pauline reported,

If it is just the educational [Department] people coming in and supporting you, you might find it a little bit more judgmental. With the university people, there is that step away from the school. The generative dialogue approach seems to make everyone feel at ease. It's a non-judgmental approach.

Indeed, the teaching staff members began to engage in critical self-reflection to such a degree that the visiting team members felt obliged to intervene from time to time. In many instances, the academics had to remind the teaching staff members that what happened in the School was also being affected by external social and political forces over which the teaching staff members had little effective control.

### **Pride in Achievements**

The teachers reported that deep professional collaboration allowed them to see more clearly the achievements and victories they and their students had experienced as a team. Visibility of progress and achievement was emphasized each month through the regular meetings as each staff member in turn responded to the sequence of questions: *What have you done? What is your evidence? What will you do next?* As the staff created a shared understanding of what was occurring in the school, they reported becoming more comfortable in sharing with their colleagues the stories of their achievements and the issues they faced. The same frank collegial sharing also helped them to strategize regarding what they would do next.

A developing pride in their achievements had a positive impact on the school's public profile in the region, and this was evidenced in several ways. Encouraged by the principal, the staff jointly planned and presented their achievements at various North Coast Initiative symposia comprised of teachers from larger schools across the region. The principal and a staff member presented at a July 2016 North Coast Initiative symposium, showcasing their school to educators from New South Wales and Alberta. Various combinations of staff members have continued to contribute in subsequent years to key presentations in North Coast Initiative symposia.

### **Fresh Eyes and Lateral Thinking**

The visiting team comprised two academics who focused on process and lent the work academic credibility: that is, that ideas, inquiry, and evidence are valued, and that failure is an acceptable part of research, and can generate valuable insights (Chaseling et al., 2016). As mentioned above, the staff members from Rous Public School reported being able to be more critical in assessing their own work because the visiting team members were not part of the management structure of the Department. Similarly, the staff members reported they benefited from the fresh eyes of the visiting team members when meetings were conducted. Because the visiting team members were neither paid by, nor embedded in, the culture of the Department, the questions they were able to ask during the meetings often revealed hidden structures and mechanisms in the school that were constraining the teachers and students.

In particular, the visiting team was able to interrogate the efficacy of long-standing practices and, through their questioning, raise the possibility of approaching the learning process in different ways by using implication and consequence probes as previously mentioned. Although it did not appear this way to the visiting team members, the teachers often mentioned how they appreciated the visiting team's lateral thinking, that is, their ability to look beyond the obvious

(de Bono, 2015). This dynamic has been linked by Townsend to the work of Acheson and Gall (1997), who explained how another set of eyes formed outside the local situation can illuminate, or mirror, aspects of the environment that those embedded in it may be unable to see.

It is important to note that these fresh eyes were only looking at and commenting on the reflections provided by the teachers. Consistent with the process, the visiting team assiduously avoided telling the staff what they should do to solve their problems, nor did they make any moral or value judgements on the actions and assumptions of the staff members. In this regard, Pauline's comment is informative:

The academics are independent people coming in with no knowledge of our children or us and sometimes we don't have that opportunity ... Sometimes we're a bit hard on ourselves. But the visiting team gives us the confidence through our meetings to go further. I think it is beneficial to have at least one academic from the university involved because they are coming in with fresh eyes. They've got that broader knowledge. They can support us by asking those questions that help us ask, "where to next?"

### **Assumed Competence**

The staff members explained that the collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue process clearly conveyed the underlying assumption they were competent professionals who already possessed the ability to solve their own problems. Previous experiences of professional development had often required the staff members to travel away from the school to attend workshops and learn about the latest strategies that may or may not be directly related to the particular needs of their school. In contrast, the collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue process provided the participants with the opportunity to systematically reflect in a collegial way to generate solutions for themselves. Brad, the Year 2/3 teacher, explained that his experiences of reform in a previous small school had positioned him as an "outsider," with the limited role of implementing pre-determined "solutions" handed down from above. At Rous, Brad felt that the collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue process forged the staff into a collegial team who were able to systematically generate their own authentic responses to the school's issue: "This year it's been so much more purposeful because it's been a collaborative approach, not you on the outside looking in." In response to Brad, and expressing a view along similar lines, the Kindergarten/Year 1 teacher, Kelly-Rae stated,

Just listening to Brad I'm thinking it has *really* been a collaborative process. I feel like it's a bottom-up model, not Pauline [the Principal] coming in and saying, 'This is what we are doing and you need to have this done by this week.' *We* feed it and *we* want to do it.

At first, the assumption that the Rous staff members already possessed the means to solve their own problems was such a large change from previous forms of professional development that they reported initially feeling a little bit lost. With the benefit of some hindsight, however, they began to realize that a period of trial-and-error was a necessary part of taking control of their professional reflective processes. For example, some staff members were taken aback during the first few meetings by the prospect of choosing their own guiding question for the collaborative inquiry, expecting instead that either the Principal or the academic visitors would give this to them. Nevertheless, this feeling of being unsettled, and of not really knowing what was expected of them, quickly evaporated as they began to see the power of their increased autonomy in

directing their own professional development. Kelly-Rae reflected on this: “I think at the start I didn’t have a clear idea of what it was that we were doing, or I missed it. I wasn’t sure of the purpose ....”

### **Increased Motivation and a More Sustainable Work-Life Balance**

An unexpected effect of the professional collaboration being reported here was that the professional reflections of the participants developed a level of depth and rigor sufficient to enable more complex and recalcitrant problems to be addressed and resolved. These problems were in many cases an outcome of procrastination. It took many months of meetings before the staff members felt comfortable enough to start raising what they saw as the school’s most serious problems. Once this occurred, however, and once they began to address these issues systematically, they reported having more time to think, to engage, and to take the next steps in their professional projects. They described a cycle whereby (a) critical self-reflection generates the strategies to deal with a complex problem; (b) the strategies are trialed and refined; (c) the complex problem is addressed, ameliorated, or “eased”; (d) more time is cleared for on-going critical self-reflection; and (e) more strategies are generated to address the next problem on the list, and so on.

Within a relatively short amount of time (three to four months of visits), the staff no longer felt that the meetings were extra work, but that they were instead a better way of doing the work that was most important to them. Beyond simply making their existing work more sustainable, staff also claimed that participation in the meetings was intrinsically reinvigorating. The meetings routinely revealed different ways of approaching work tasks, and they threw light on better ways of meeting existing Departmental curriculum requirements. Pauline spoke for all staff members when she commented:

The staff feel that there hasn't been extra work. It improves their work. We could put in anything we wanted to develop, like the Visible Learning ... It will happen as long as we understand that we have to go through a process of collaborative inquiry/generative dialogue. We are discovering things, providing evidence, questioning evidence, and working out where to go next. When we understand all that, and we have the meetings, we have time to discuss those things.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This article has endeavored to convey how a small group of rural teachers engaged with Townsend and Adams’ collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue process and worked together to improve their school. After three years of implementing the principles of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue, the teachers all claimed it was the definitive factor in the school’s improvement in professional development, school-community engagement and most importantly, student academic outcomes. When taken together, the voices of the teachers were emphatic that process is an effective way to structure the professional relations and interactions of school staff. There are also indications that when staff engage deeply with the process, its key principles and concepts had the ability to be distributed throughout other domains of the school, structuring the interactions and learning of the whole organization. The staff began using the reflective language of generative dialogue with the upper primary classes, with the framework of “what have you done?”; “where is the evidence for that?”; and “what are you going to do next?”

being used as a way for students to assume more autonomy over their learning.

The teachers' engagement with the process increased their professional capacity by creating a critically reflective space that was not possible with other forms of Departmental compliance-based professional development. This space made it possible for them to analyze their work systematically, clarify their most important issues and sustain an ongoing professional dialogue that synchronized their efforts to achieve the school's goals. A hallmark of this critically reflective professional space was a simultaneously rigorous and collegial approach to asking each other key probing questions about the nature of their work.

The teachers also reported that the process allowed them to more deeply understand each other's roles within the school, along with their respective professional strengths and challenges. As a result, they claimed that the process had added value and meaning to their work and increased the school's sense of purpose and direction as they worked more effectively as a team.

As they developed their skills in the process, they became more confident and willing to take strategic risks with their learning and that of their students, supported as they were by the visiting team. Although not every initiative that emerged from the process was immediately effective, the structure of the process established a regular generate–implement–evaluate feedback loop that had increasing levels of positive impact upon the quality of the learning in their classrooms.

When they reflected on the effects outlined above, the staff explained that process had the power to establish a positive cycle of confidence in their combined professional ability, as their engagement deepened, and critical self-reflection became a habitual part of their professional identity. Although this cycle was described in a variety of ways, the main features consisted of five components:

1. Critically reflecting on the forms of evidence they could gather to show the progression of their “guiding question.”
2. Seeking out and employing a wide range of data sources to demonstrate definitive gains in student academic performance, leading to:
3. Staff and students taking pride in and celebrating their combined achievements which, in turn, led to:
4. Staff offering this evidence as part of the Departmental External Accreditation process, which in turn led to:
5. Their Director citing the systematic use of the collaborative inquiry/generative dialogue process as evidence of the school's quality learning environment for students.

Finally, a potential challenge of the collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue process was the issue of staff turnover in such a small school. With the small number of staff, the process was adopted quickly and efficiently. The resultant systematic collegiality and development of trust and solidarity meant that by the end of the first year the staff became a very tight-knit group, with their own distinctive culture, language, and humour based on the concepts of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue. Should a new addition to this tight-knit staff who might not be used to the open collegiality and peer critique be added, they might initially find the culture challenging to assimilate into. Similarly, with the process permeating the culture of the school to the level of the students themselves using the language of evidence, a new member of staff unfamiliar with teaching in ways consistent with evidence-based, autonomous learning could find their previous teaching approaches challenged. This is an issue the school will soon be navigating because enrolments have increased, resulting in the appointment of a new staff member.

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