

Introduction

Collaborative Inquiry and School Leadership Growth: Introduction to Special Issue

William (Bill) E. Boyd, Martin Hayden

Southern Cross University

This *Special Issue* seeks first and foremost to extend, conceptually and empirically, an understanding of the nature of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue as processes that contribute to leadership development in a school setting. Most of the literature to date on these processes comes from Alberta in Canada and focuses on educational leadership development in that Province. One way to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of such processes is to investigate their relevance and efficacy in different cultural and organizational settings. The opportunity to conduct such an investigation was made possible through a remarkable coincidence of events that resulted in the creation of a significant leadership development project in Australia, the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement. The Initiative established a long-term school leadership program around collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue in a large school district in the North Coast region of New South Wales in Australia. The Initiative was conceived in 2013 and formally established in 2015. It then gained enormous momentum, involving as many as one hundred members of leadership teams from over sixty primary and secondary schools in the region. The Initiative also actively engaged regional officials from the New South Wales Department of Education and twelve academics from Southern Cross University. The insights to emerge from this experience provide a rich basis for appraising the nature of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue as processes capable of energizing and sustaining school-based leadership development. This *Special Issue* primarily focuses on sharing these insights with a broader community of school leaders and scholars.

A secondary consideration in assembling the *Special Issue* is the need to place on record, and celebrate, the achievements of the many educators who contributed to the North Coast Initiative. From the start, the Initiative was sustained by practitioner enthusiasm and commitment. It exemplified the notion of a community of practice, described by Wenger et al. (2002) as a group of people who “share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion for a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 7). The common ground was a commitment to school improvement and the quality of student learning. A sense of community was fostered through monthly meetings with other school leaders and attendance at workshops and conferences organized by and for school leaders in the North Coast region. The community was supported by means of the sharing of information and experiences through emails, bulletins, and a website. Occasional visits from Alberta by Dr. David Townsend and his colleagues, including some who were school principals, augmented the development of a group

identity. That so much was achieved in so short a space of time was remarkable. It was an experience of what Adams et al. (2019) referred to as building from within: “of identifying, locating, and highlighting the people and practices that presently exist within schools and districts, and creating the support structures and processes that grow effectiveness of the type that develops an internal locus of control” (p. 1).

Collaborative inquiry is the process utilized to facilitate leadership development and an ethos that sustained the highly impactful North Coast Initiative. The tools of generative dialogue made communication within and across the group of participants collegial, respectful, and productive.

So where to now? The Covid pandemic, starting in early 2020, has brought the Initiative to a halt. At the time of writing, the pandemic continues to create havoc in the school sector in New South Wales. When it passes, will the Initiative regain momentum? Hopefully, it will. In the meantime, however, school principals have had to bring all their leadership skills to the fore to drive sustainability in a disrupted school system (Chaseling et al., 2020; Paredes et al., 2020). Another positive sign of the longer-term impact of the Initiative is the extent to which more than a handful of school principals who participated in the North Coast Initiative are now engaged in doctoral studies exploring specific aspects of collaborative inquiry and generative dialogue as approaches to leadership development in schools.

The articles included in this *Special Issue* are not the first to be written about the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement. Nor will they be the last.

References

- Adams, P., Mombourquette, C., & Townsend, D. (2019). *Leadership in education: The power of generative dialogue*. Canadian Scholars.
- Chaseling, M., Paredes, J.-A., & Boyd, W. E. (2020). Schooling in a time of disruption: The impact of COVID-19 from the perspective of five New South Wales (Australia) secondary principals. *Education in the North*, 27(2), 152-174. <https://doi.org/10.26203/xt08-dx83>
- Paredes, J.-A., Chaseling, M., & Boyd, W. E. (2020). Online learning in a time of COVID disruption? The experiences of principals from New South Wales rural and disadvantaged primary schools. *Education in the North*, 27(2), 175-195. <https://doi.org/10.26203/9bzb-2w21>
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R. A., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice*. Harvard Business School Press.

Bill Boyd is an Emeritus Professor at Southern Cross University. He is a founding member of the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement. His involvement has been as an active research member of the team, and a mentor for other team members. He advises the project on research design and ethics. He has long engaged teaching and learning research and has been an active academic mentor for educators.

Martin Hayden is an Emeritus Professor of Higher Education at Southern Cross University and a founding member of the North Coast Initiative for School Improvement. He was Head of the School of Education when David Townsend first came to visit Southern Cross University. In that capacity, he provided foundational support for the establishment of the North Coast Initiative.